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# Understanding Well-Being Among Black Female Student Activists Attending Predominantly White Institutions: A Narrative Inquiry Approach

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UNDERSTANDING WELL-BEING AMONG BLACK FEMALE STUDENT ACTIVISTS  
ATTENDING PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY  
APPROACH

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

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2020

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This dissertation is dedicated to Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery. Rest in power. While they are no longer with us physically, they live on in the many of us who will never forget them and strive to make change and seek justice.

## ABSTRACT

As engagement in activism continues to increase on campus and nationally, a paucity of research exists on the experiences of Black student activists attending PWI and their well-being. Narrative inquiry was utilized in this study to better understand the lived experiences of two Black student activists. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both participants to gain in-depth narratives of their experiences engaging in activism on PWIs. A narrative thematic approach was used to analyze the results. The findings suggested that the Black student participants experienced benefits (increased sense of belonging and racial cohesion) and consequences (activist burnout and decreased academic performance) related to their engagement in activism on PWIs. This study assisted in developing a deeper understanding of how Black students' engagement in activism on PWIs impacts their well-being. Implications for practitioners include increasing awareness of the potential detrimental effects that Black students experience while attending PWIs, especially when engaging in activism. Future research is needed to explore potential gender differences for Black student activists and their well-being on PWIs.

*Keywords:* Black students, activism, well-being, PWI

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Collegiate studies are inherent with their own challenges, such as financial and time management. However, for racial minority students, there are often additional stressors such as experiences of racial discrimination at the individual level and systemically throughout an institution (Szymanski, 2012). While there have been strides to address these issues since the 1960s, challenges impacting racial minority students' academic performance and overall wellness continue to be a source of stress today (Franklin, 2015).

Currently, at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), Black students face challenges on their campuses, inside and outside the classroom. Coping strategies, both positive and negative, vary among these students. One specific, effective coping skill is becoming involved in social action and activism. Student activists may choose activities to assist in navigating racial discrimination at PWIs. At times, participation in activist activities has been thought to decrease or moderate the effects of racism (DeBlaere et al., 2014; Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016).

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Researchers have previously found that racial discrimination is related to increases in physical and psychosocial distress in Black students at PWIs (Pieterse, Carter, Evans, & Walter, 2010). Also, Black students frequently have lower graduation rates than Whites and other minorities, as listed in the report, such as Hispanics and Asians (NCES, 2013). Many argue that a source of these lower graduation rates is the increased stress due to racism on PWIs. The process of how Black students choose to respond to this stressor varies (Chavous, 2000; Carter, 2007).

Student activists may participate in various forms of collective action or activism, ranging from mentoring and letter-writing campaigns to protests and boycotts (Szymanski, 2012; White-Johnson, 2012). There is a call for research to identify the role that Black college student activism has in promoting well-being in response to the psychological stress of racial discrimination on PWIs (Grayman-Simpson, 2012; Szymanski, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of the study is to provide a qualitative analysis of activism in response to the psychological stress of racial discrimination on PWIs as experienced by Black students. Specifically, this study will explore coping strategies and support employed by two Black students to mitigate the potential effects of racial discrimination by engaging in the process of campus activism. Based on an understanding of these students' experiences, I will offer an analysis of adaptive practices used to address racial discrimination and the effects of participation associated with engagement in socio-political activism for Black students at PWI.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Activism* is a deliberate act to promote and influence change, either socially or politically (Szymanski, 2003). For instance, activities can include protests, strikes, boycotts, marches, writing letters or meeting with elected officials, writing editorials in newspapers, informing others of issues through community groups, and volunteering time or money to a social cause (Szymanski, 2003). Specifically, activism among Black individuals is often focused on decreasing or eliminating the detrimental effects of racism and enhancing life for Black people, as individuals and their communities (Szymanski, 2012).

An *activist*, therefore, is a person who engages in collective activities consistent with activism, essentially promoting and influencing a social or political cause that has some degree of risk (Rupp & Taylor, 1999). In addition, *racism* is a belief of belonging to a superior group of people coupled with actions that show prejudice toward and discriminate against people who belong to another group as individuals, institutions, or cultures (Jones, 1972, 1997; Neville & Pieterse, 2009). *Racial climate* refers to attitudes, behaviors, and practices, that reflect acceptance or rejection of racial diversity in an institution, which influence the way people may interact (Chavous, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Pieterse et al., 2010).

*Perceived racism* describes one's subjective experience of discrimination or prejudice (Clark, Anderson, Clark, and Williams, 1999). Clark et al. (1999) contended that there is a tendency to minimize or discount perceptions of racism as being stressful because they contain a subjective component, which is in contrast to widely accepted other self-reported stressors, such as job strain and life events. Further, *discrimination* is defined as a cynical or dismissive act toward a specific individual or group of people because of their perceived social value (Jones & Carter, 1996).

*Stress* is described as a physical and psychological interaction between a person and the environment, to determine whether events are desired and positive or unwanted and negative (Clark, 2007). *General coping responses* are described as strategies that are usually employed to handle stressful events or stimuli (Clark et al., 1999). They further describe *racism-specific coping responses* as insights and actions to lessen the psychological effects of perceived racism.

## **Conclusion**

After many years of racial discrimination and tireless struggles within the United States (US), numerous activists have been engaged in work to improve access to higher education at all institutions, as well as eliminate racism within these institutions (Franklin, 2015). Despite these efforts, racial discrimination is present on college campuses and poses physical threats, such as high blood pressure, and psychological threats, such as anxiety and depression, to an individual's well-being. It is important for counseling psychologists to understand how Black students negotiate through these challenges and assist students in developing campus activism as a potential coping strategy to promote positive well-being.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Racial minority college students, especially at PWIs, continue to experience detrimental effects on their psychological and physical well-being due to pervasive and persistent racial discrimination (Hussain & Jones, 2019). Despite over half a century's worth of effort to improve campus climates, change has been slow. Black students on college campuses have been studied, often in quantitative research, examining indicators for enrollment and attrition (Davis, 1994; Strayhorn, 2013). The reason for this type of research is the declining enrollment in Black males in colleges and universities (Davis, 1994). In contrast, from a qualitative perspective, not much is known about Black students' experiences at colleges and universities (Davis, 1994). However, little research has been done to understand the role that Black college student activism has in promoting well-being in response to the psychological stress of racial discrimination. Further, the researcher encouraged future studies to discover strengths and achievements, rather than focusing on the negative and harmful effects associated with PWIs, as has been reported historically (Harper, 2015). The proposed study will explore the lived experiences of Black students' engagement in activism its impact in promoting well-being in response to the psychological stress of racial discrimination at PWIs, via narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013). This chapter reviews the existing body of literature and research in the areas of Black activism, Black college students' experiences at PWIs, Black students' physical and mental well-being, Black students' academic achievement, Black students' sense of belonging, Black students' sense of support, and activism/collective action as a protective factor. Additionally, detailed

explanations of previously conducted research will be provided as they guided the development of the qualitative inquiry.

### **Historical Roots of Black Activism**

In 1915 Carter G. Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) and its associated publication, *The Journal of Negro History (JNH)*. The April 1916 issue of *JNH* documented support and appreciation of this magazine by readers stating it contained scholarly articles of then-current facts that were rarely known of Black history (Franklin, 2015). The *JNH* became a pivotal forum for Black educators and researchers to discuss issues facing Black people, in general, and also their education.

Black scholars' and psychologists' activism, such as advocating for the appropriate meaning of various intelligence test results in the educational system, was critical to dismantling racism at all levels in the US. Many of these researchers' findings were instrumental and cited in the ruling of the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the case of *Brown versus the Board of Education* (Franklin, 2015). In addition, these professionals and researchers greatly assisted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in their efforts to abolish racial segregation. After *Brown v. Board of Education*, another publication, *The Journal of Negro Education* enlarged its readership from scholars and policymakers to include school administrators and faculty who were impacted by voluntary and court-ordered school desegregation (Franklin, 2015). While these changes toward social justice opened the door for Black students to access the same educational settings as White students, challenges still are affecting Black students, such that there was a continued need for college campus activism.



## **College Campus Activism**

College campus activism was a response of students to gain the attention of university administration and especially, elected legislative officials, to impact socio-political change (Hope, Velez, Offidani-Bertrand, Keels, & Durkee, 2018; Linder, Quaye, Stewart, Okello, & Roberts, 2019). Several researchers provide accounts of the Black student movements on college campuses in the 1960s to present, and the changes that happened as a result of their efforts (Anderson & Span, 2016; Broadhurst, 2014; Kinchen, 2014). The start of Black American Studies in various universities in the 1960s and 1970s was a result of student and faculty activism. Since then, some African American/Black Studies students and others have participated in socio-political activism because they are often focused on the struggles within the university to maintain these programs in response to budget constraints and questions of legitimacy by administrators and faculty (Brown, 2007). Despite strides in adding African American/Black Studies to the university curriculum, the challenges continue in order to maintain these programs, resulting in the continued need for socio-political activism.

Despite the many years since desegregation, recent efforts have been made to acknowledge the historical and troubling relationship between post-secondary education and slavery. For example, some colleges and universities in the eastern region of the US thrived on Black slave labor prior to abolition. For instance, recent information was uncovered about actions in 1838 by Georgetown University's administration in which 272 enslaved Black people were sold to provide essential financial resources to the university (Swarns, 2016). Since 2014, this awareness resulted in events on more than 80 college and university campuses, in which formal demands were made for administration to own its past practices and to enact policies to

improve the current educational climate for racially diverse students, including Black students (Anderson & Span, 2016).

### **Black Students' Experiences at PWIs**

Today there are essentially two major types of academic environments. These are commonly referred to in the literature (Allen, 1992; Berger & Milem, 2000; Rose & Firmin, 2012) as either PWIs or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). PWIs have been defined as systems primarily run by Whites for Whites (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). Historically, numerous PWIs have denied the admission of Black students to their campus more than they have provided them the opportunity to enroll (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). For instance, Sollors, Titcomb, and Underwood (1993) noted that the first Black student to graduate from Harvard was Richard T Greener in 1870. The college was founded 234 years prior to this milestone in Black civil rights in academia.

White students, faculty, administration, alumni, and others at various institutions protested against Black student admission, and were occasionally violent (Goldstone, 2006; Kammen, 2009; McCormick, 1990; Trillin, 1964; Williams, 2001; Williamson, 2003). On the campus of the University of Alabama in 1963, as Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway barring entry to two Black students, the Alabama National Guard, with orders from President Kennedy, removed Wallace and escorted Vivian Malone and James Hood to register for classes (Clark, 1993).

Following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the legislature mandated that schools and postsecondary institutions desegregate. As a result, Black student enrollment increased in post-secondary institutions (Franklin, 2015). Nonetheless, little to no effort was devoted toward creating a welcoming, inclusive, and culturally responsive campus environment at that time. In

response, many Black students attending PWIs protested to have their needs met, asking for an increase in ethnic studies curricula, cultural centers, and faculty of color.

An extensive body of research examines the racial issues that Black students confront at PWIs. Older reviews, such as Cunnigen (1981) and Sedlacek (1987) reviewed the 15 and 20 years' worth of literature that existed in this area. Similarly, both researchers found that many of the studies focused on Black undergraduates' interactions with negative campus racial climates.

Fleming's (1984) *Blacks in College* is one of the most widely cited studies pertaining to Black college students. She examined the experiences of 2991 students at seven HBCUs and eight PWIs, spanning three academic years from 1977 through 1979. Specifically, data was collected regarding blood pressure, illness reports, racial stress levels, racial identity, and career interests and was analyzed by racial identity, gender, and institutional racial composition. Ultimately, she found that Black undergraduates experienced higher levels of racial stress and intellectual isolation at PWIs than same-race peers at HBCUs.

A turning point in the U. S. occurred during the 1960s when the government and society responded to the civil rights movement by making extensive changes to address the inequities imposed on Black people for decades (Allen, 1992). One of those changes during the 1960s was significant increases in the number of Black students attending PWIs. Over 30 years later, subsequent researchers like Allen (1992), Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, and Green (2004), Davis (1994), and Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) found comparative results to Fleming's (1984) and Berger and Milem's (2000) studies. These studies will be described in greater detail shortly. Specifically, researchers (Allen, 1992; Berger & Milem, 2000) discovered that Black undergraduates at HBCUs had higher levels of satisfaction, engagement, and academic self-concept and a lower likelihood of being harmed by a racial stressor when compared to their

Black peers at PWIs. Ultimately, these scholars concluded that PWIs are less capable to meet the academic environment needs of Black students in comparison to HBCUs.

Similarly, Black peoples' experiences have been shown to vary between institutional settings which counters the notion that Black students would have challenges and issues at any college or university. Berger and Milem (2000). explored 273 Black college student's self-concept which included three domains: psychological wellness, academic, and achievement orientation. Participants were from eight church-related colleges in which six were PWIs (16% of the sample) and two were HBCUs (84% of the sample) with 67% being female and the average age was 22.3 (Berger & Milem (2000)).

The first factor of self-concept and psychosocial wellness consisted of six items: emotional and physical health, social and intellectual self-confidence, understanding of others, and cooperativeness. When attempting to predict psychosocial wellness, Black student attendance at an HBCU was the strongest predictor of psychosocial wellness (Berger & Milem, 2000). Significant positive predictors of psychological wellness included academic support from faculty, same race contact, and collaborative learning. Berger and Milem (2000) expressed caution concerning the considerably smaller sample size of students attending PWIs than those attending HBCUs. This encourages the need for additional research on Black students' psychosocial wellness at PWIs.

In another study, 1800 Black students (928 from HBCUs and 872 from PWIs) participated in a qualitative research study to identify the differences in college experiences (Allen, 1992). Participants responded to a mailed survey over a 3-year period from 1981 to 1983. Most applicable to this research was that college composition was an important factor that was

associated with social involvement, specifically students attending PWIs reported lower levels of social involvement (Allen, 2000).

While choosing to focus on Black male college students, Davis (1994) discussed how, historically, studies of this specific population focused primarily on quantitative measures for enrollment and attrition, consequently, little information is available on their qualitative experiences. Black male participants were the population for this study because of the social and economic challenges facing this group as well as their declining rates of enrollment (Davis, 1994). Davis (1994) chose to compare Black students attending HBCUs and PWIs using a subset of the data from Nettles survey of 4,094 college students from more than 30 colleges and universities in the Mid-Atlantic and southern states. A sample of 742 Black males, 55% attending HBCUs and 45% attending PWIs, was included in this research (Davis, 1994). The findings were that Black students attending HBCUs earned better grades and viewed their institution as providing greater institutional support (Davis, 1994).

In another study comparing 147 Black undergraduate students at a large, midwestern, public PWI and 134 Black undergraduate students at large, southern, public HBCU participants completed a mail-out survey (Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004). The survey was designed to examine whether the relationship between race, gender, and institutional context may influence academic self-evaluations, academic experiences, and academic achievement among Black college students (Chavous et al., 2004). In general, the researchers contend that racial stereotypes may influence Black men and women in different ways depending on their academic and institutional contexts (Chavous et al., 2004). The researchers recommend additional research to examine belonging and fit for Black students based on their individual perceptions and institutional policies, practices that influence their perceptions (Chavous et al., 2004).

Continuing to examine the perceptions of Black college students on PWIs and HBCUs, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) conducted a qualitative study of 15 Black students at a PWI and 19 Black students at an HBCU, both located on the East Coast. The data was collected during four focus groups and 10 individual interviews. The researchers divided the findings into two themes. The first theme addressed campus involvement and experiencing support. Black students who attended an HBCU consistently reported the campus experience as being supportive and having meaningful interactions with peers and faculty, whereas the opposite was reported for students attending a PWI. The second theme focused on the students' energy levels as being enhanced or decreased by interactions on campus. Black students at PWIs refer to themselves as seemingly and uncomfortably speaking for all Black people when commenting in classrooms as a result they shared that their energy was diverted from their studies (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). The researchers contend that personal and institutional support systems are necessary to build confidence in Black students to enhance their energy towards attaining academic goals (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

In an attempt to gain a richer understanding of Black students' experiences at PWIs, Rose and Firmin (2012), conducted a qualitative study to gain a better understanding of how Black college students maintain their cultural traditions while living and learning in an environment that was in a PWI (Rose & Firmin, 2012). The sample consisted of 13 Black students (7 females and 5 males), from a rural University located in the Midwest, where 94% of the total enrollment (3,000) identified as White/Caucasian. Following transcript analysis, five major constructs were consistent across participants. Specifically, interacting with the majority culture, White, personal identity, social pressures to conform, positive aspects related to participants' campus experiences, and suggestions toward improving multicultural experiences on their campus.

Furthermore, all participants identified family, friends, mentors who provided them with the support that they needed (Rose & Firmin, 2012).

Further highlighted, minority students in this study reported no engagement in efforts to change the culture of the campus. However, they expressed a desire for change to occur. Additionally, this study was limited by pulling participants from one university. The researchers proposed that future studies should continue to explore the experiences of Black students in the Midwest and other parts of the country (Rose and Firmin, 2012).

As just described by Rose and Firmin (2012), while students expressed a desire for change, they chose not to participate in campus activities to change the culture of the college. An understanding of the campus environment may shed some possible reasons. The racial climate can be affected by many factors on a macro or systemic level and micro or interpersonal level. In the academic environment, specifically the classroom, Sue, Lin et al. (2009) explored difficult dialogues on racism that are often in response to microaggression triggers. Racial microaggressions are defined, whether intended or unintended, as short, everyday verbal or nonverbal encounters that communicate hostility and insults to a specific group of people (Sue et al., 2007). These negative encounters affect the psychological well-being of the recipient (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). In a qualitative study of 14 participants (3 men and 11 women), ranging in age from 23 to 47, were assigned to two focus groups, to explore student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions regarding difficult discussions on race in the classroom. The focus groups were guided using semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited through several means, such as posted flyers, classroom invitations, word of mouth, and a website. The data was assigned to one of three groups: racial microaggressions as precipitators of

difficult dialogues, reactions to difficult dialogues, and instructor strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009).

Several limitations were reported such as the focus groups not having the same number of participants in each group that mirrored the composition for race and gender, participants being highly educated, and their selection was based upon their acknowledgment of experiencing difficult racial dialogues in the classroom. Also, the participants only addressed classroom interactions with White faculty causing the researchers to speculate that faculty members of color might yield different perspectives from their students. Because of this belief, the researchers recommended additional studies were indicated to observe the reported interactions between students and more diverse faculty representation in the classroom and how that might influence difficult discussions on race (Sue, Lin et al., 2009).

### **Impact on Physical and Mental Well-being**

Perceived racism is believed to be a stressor, aptly termed as racism-related stress (Carter, 2007). A pioneer of stress theory, Hans Selye (1946), addressed the stress response in human beings as impacting both the physical and mental health of the individual. Specifically, racism-related stress can be perceived by the individual as stressful, yet researchers are striving to identify the nature of the association between this stress and negative physiological and psychological events (Carter, 2007; Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2011).

As a consequence of pervasive and persistent discrimination, many Black males perceive their environment as stressful which leads to their hypervigilance of microaggressions and macroaggressions (Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, Curry & Allen, 2016). This constant stressful state can result in racial battle fatigue which impacts the individual's health, psychologically and



physically. Racial battle fatigue is the collective psychological and physiological effects of racial micro and macro aggressions on racially marginalized and oppressed people (Smith, 2009).

In their qualitative study of 36 self-identified Black male undergraduate and graduate students ranging in age from 18 and 25 from seven historically White institutions, Smith et al. (2016) used purposive sampling through referrals and membership in Black student organizations. Through the use of three open-ended questions, these researchers identified five coping strategies participants used to adapt to racism such as processing, self-care, confrontation, counter spaces, and public responses. Public responses were collective actions and support to show that experiences are not isolated events rather that they are pervasive (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Such public responses may include participation in campus activism. The connection with feelings of support, belonging, and safety was identified as being instrumental in their academic and social survival (Smith et al., 2016).

### **Physical Well-being**

Physical well-being is linked to a variety of factors to include types of stressors. Calvin et al. (2003) described how the stress of institutional racism can lead to health care disparities between Black and White Americans, noting its negative impact on cardiovascular outcomes such as blood pressure. These researchers contend that there is a need to better understand the reaction to this psychophysiological stressor by identifying potential mediating and moderating factors of racism and cardiovascular disease (Calvin et al., 2003). One possible factor mitigating stressors includes psychological well-being since stress is often manifested physiologically with elevated blood pressure, a commonly monitored risk factor for heart disease.

To further understand the relationship between racial discrimination as an environmental stressor for elevated blood pressure, 40 Black college students (19 males and 21 females), age 18

to 25, at a midwestern public university, participated in a study by Hill, Kobayashi, and Hughes (2007). Individuals were excluded from participating for severe high blood pressure, the use of cardiovascular medications, and the use of tobacco products. Participants were assessed using the Perceived Racism Scale, measures the perceived frequency of exposure to racism within the past year and during the participant's life, which results in four subscales related on the job, in academic settings, in the public setting such as housing, and in racists statements from Whites (Hill et al., 2007).

Perceived racism in the academic environment was significantly positively related to both daytime and nighttime elevations in diastolic blood pressure, the denominator in a traditional blood pressure reading (Hill et al., 2007). Essentially, the participants who reported higher perceived frequencies of racial discrimination in academic settings had higher diastolic blood pressures. The implication of this finding is that perceived racial discrimination may be an environmental stressor that results in increased blood pressure. Hill et al. (2007) recommended additional research to measure coping responses and the moderating effects of context. Often well-being is impacted not only physically but psychologically. The following section will describe this connection in detail.

### **Mental Well-being**

Research exclusively related to Black student activists at PWIs, psychological wellness, and racism are limited. However, Pieterse, Carter, Evans, and Walter (2010) examined 289 racially diverse college undergraduates at a PWI in the mid-Atlantic region of the U. S. The race of the participants was 55% White or European American, 15% Black or African American, and 23% Asian or Asian American with 39% male and 61% female. While the findings do not support an association between racial discrimination and trauma-related symptoms, the

researchers recommend that additional studies strive to understand variables that may moderate this association (Pieterse et al., 2010).

More recently, Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, and Garcia (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of 144,246, Black male and female subjects of all ages from under 13 to over 18 years, to identify the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being. The researchers examined correlational data which measured perceived racial discrimination and psychological well-being. The specific areas that constituted well-being for this study were self-esteem, depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and life satisfaction. In addition, potential moderators affecting that relationship were examined. These researchers focused on perceived discrimination that was viewed by the individual as being pervasive, which is occurring frequently in various constructs throughout their daily lives, as opposed to an isolated event (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). Individuals are more likely to experience negative effects on well-being with pervasive discrimination. Pervasive discrimination is likely to be viewed by the minority groups as exclusion and rejection by the dominant society (Schmitt, et al., 2014; Schmitt, Branscombe & Postmes, 2003). The overall finding across all age groups was that the pervasiveness of perceived discrimination had harmful effects on psychological well-being. The moderators examined were group identification, social support, and coping strategies, specifically engagement and disengagement coping strategies. While these researchers were not able to analyze these moderators meta-analytically because there was not enough variance to be able to assign codes adequately. Although the researchers maintained that ingroup identification, perceived availability of social support, and engagement-type coping strategies served as moderators and protective factors against racial discrimination (Schmitt et al., 2014).

The effects of racial discrimination have been observed with racial minority students on college campuses. In a study of 12 counseling centers located within seven public, Midwest PWIs where Black people accounted between 9% to 14% of the undergraduate students, 1555 clients' archival data was analyzed for perceptions of racial discrimination and its association with emotional, relationship, and academic difficulties (Chao, Mallinckrodt, & Wei, 2012). There were six categories that grouped the level of distress from current perceived racial discrimination from extremely to not at all. Ten percent of the participants endorsed perceiving racial discrimination as being in the highest category, "extremely," and notably 16% of the participants endorsed the second-highest category, "quite a bit" (Chao et al., 2012). The researchers' main goal was to determine which problems these students presented in the initial counseling center intake as co-occurring with racism-related distress. Their findings varied by gender. For Black students, the presenting problem with the greatest frequency was irritability and anger (Chao et al., 2012). The greater the rating of distress from perceived racial discrimination, the more distress on other presenting problems. For instance, irritability and anger were reported in 59% of the Black males who experienced "extremely" and "quite a bit" of distress (Chao et al., 2012). In contrast, 83% of the Black females who experienced "extremely" and "quite a bit" distress reported procrastination. Chao et al. (2012) contended that these findings illustrated the impact of institutional racism experienced by Black students at the PWIs included in the study.

While this study's sample does not solely represent Black college students, it has relevance to this study. Studies in which Black adults are participants provide some relevant information regarding racial discrimination, and physical and psychological health and well-being. In an attempt to quantify the relationship between racial discrimination and ordinary stress

to psychological health symptoms among 520 Black adults (277 female, 243 men), ranging in age from 18 to 79, researchers requested the participation of Black individuals who resided in 10 randomly selected neighborhoods in California to participate in a survey (Klonoff, Landrine, & Ullman, 1999). Five symptoms were measured: somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, and anxiety. Racial discrimination was a powerful predictor of psychiatric symptoms for Black people, than general stressors and contextual factors such as age, gender, social class, education, and generic stressors. The researchers recommended that future studies examine the coping mechanisms of Black people related to racial discrimination (Klonoff, et al., 1999).

Another qualitative study explored the individual's perceptions of personal rewards related to involvement in the Black community (Grayman-Simpson, 2012). A sample of 50 Black adults, determined by their phenotypic features, male and female and represented ages 18 and over, with one-third belonging to one of three developmental stages (young, middle, and older adulthood) from the Mid-Atlantic region of the U. S. provided written responses when asked to identify the personal benefits of involvement with the Black community. The perceived rewards were sorted into four categories with the majority of responses being assigned to the category of social well-being (Grayman-Simpson, 2012). Social wellness was described as creating and witnessing the change in others, essentially noting the ability to effect and see positive change. Grayman-Simpson described the weakness of this research as relying on hand-written, open-ended questionnaires from participants which established breadth, rather than obtaining greater depth with interviews. Hence this researcher recommended further qualitative studies using semi-structured interviews or focus groups to provide an in-depth examination of

the relationship between Black community involvement and subjective well-being (Grayman-Simpson, 2012).

In a larger, 13-year study from 1979 to 1992, researchers examined the relationship between perceptions and experiences of racism and the physical and psychological health status of 623 Black people in a National Survey of Black Americans (Jackson et al., 1995). Their findings varied greatly based on the specific year studied. The researchers concluded that future studies need to examine the possible factors related to racism and the health status of Black people, for they contend that racism, at a minimum, is an additional problem that Black people confront every day (Jackson et al., 1995).

Further, Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 66 studies, published between January 1996 and April 2011, which examined the associations between racism and mental health among a total sample size of 18,140 Black Americans. These authors reported a positive association between perceived racism and psychological distress, which means as the perceived incidences of racism increased, the signs of psychological distress increased (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2011). Perceived racism adversely impacts the mental health of Black people (Pieterse et al., 2011). The researchers recommended additional studies to identify with greater specificity the influence of certain types of racism on the mental health of Black people (Pieterse et al., 2011).

Also, some researchers conceptualize experiences of racism within a trauma framework (Carter, 2007; Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2010). Individuals who experience racism often feel powerlessness and shame (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006). Researchers speculate that racism may account for some of the health disparities between Black and White Americans since there was a relationship between perceived racism and self-reported depression and anxiety

(Pieterse et al., 2011). In a study of 289 racially diverse college undergraduate students from a large PWI in the mid-Atlantic region of the U. S., with 15% identifying as Black, participants completed questionnaires related to discrimination and stress (Pieterse et al., 2011). The researchers noted a positive association between perceived incidences of racism and discrimination and self-reported psychological distress. As the number of perceived incidences of racism and discrimination increased, so did the level of psychosocial distress among Black participants (Pieterse et al., 2011).

Exploring psychological distress, from a different perspective, was the focus of another study conducted at PWIs. Here researchers explored the relationship between perfectionism, self-esteem, and depression among a sample of 219 Black students (105 females and 114 males) from two large public universities in the Mid-Atlantic and southern regions of the U. S (Elion, Wang, Slaney, & French, 2012). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 43, self-identified as Black, Biracial, African, Multiracial and other, and participated in various Black student organizations. Perfectionism was measured in three dimensions, high standards, order, and discrepancy. The category of high standards was defined as the standards and expectations an individual set for his or her performance. Order is a term given to a measure of an individual's desire for orderliness and neatness. *Discrepancy* was the difference between an individual's expectations as measured by high standards and order and perceived performance. In other words, *discrepancy* is the failure to meet an individual's expectation set for self (Elion et al., 2012). The researchers identified a significant positive correlation between *discrepancy* and depression, meaning that as the greater the difference between an individual's expectations of self and perceived performance, the greater the level of depression (Elion et al., 2012). Also, the researchers reported a negative correlation between *discrepancy* and self-esteem, meaning that as the level of

discrepancy rises, the lower an individual's self-esteem becomes (Elion et al., 2012).

Interestingly, self-esteem was impacted when an individual perceived failing to reach a self-imposed goal. In the following research, self-esteem is related to racial identity development.

### **Impact on Racial Identity Development**

Additional studies have been conducted to examine identity, specifically related to race and interest in activism. Several other researchers postulated that individuals who possess higher levels of positive racial identity often show greater interest in socio-political action (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). The research by Szymanski and Lewis (2015) is described in greater detail in the Activism/Collective Action as a Protective Factor section. Furthermore, individuals with higher internalized pro-Black identities are more likely to display appreciation for other diverse cultural groups.

In a study related to self-esteem focused on Black females, specifically to examine racial identity and body image. This qualitative research studied, based on grounded theory, was conducted at a PWI in the Northeast U. S. among 34 Black females examining attitudes of body image and racial identity (Hesse-Biber, Livingstone, Ramirez, Barko & Johnson, 2010). The lived experiences of these undergraduate and graduate students were sought about their environments prior to and during their college years. Participants reported their race in various ways, such as African American/Black, Black, Haitian (and other nationalities), and biracial.

Based on the participants' reported conceptualizations of their racial identity, four general categories emerged. These categories were labeled White Enough, Black and Proud, Floater, and Bridge Builder. To be assigned as an individual to the White Enough category, the Black female self-identified primarily with the White culture, were reared in predominantly White neighborhoods, attended predominantly White schools, and with body images that closely align



to White counterparts (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). Members of the Black and Proud category identified closely and focused on perceived perfect Black physical characteristics, such as skin color, hair, and body image. These women are more likely protected from White Western norms of beauty (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). To be assigned to the Floater category, Black women essentially perceived themselves as being a combination of not Black enough and not White enough. These women tended to keep their racially diverse friends apart from each other, with their self-esteem being contingent upon experiencing affirmation from each group (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). The fourth group Bridge Builders, were reared in diverse neighborhoods, did not align with any specific race or culture, accepted by both Black and White communities, high level of self-confidence and body image, and attempted to build connections between their friends of diverse backgrounds (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). Participants had varying levels of self-esteem and body satisfaction. The researchers assert that Black females on a PWI tended to become vulnerable to White western norms of beauty and dissatisfaction with body image. Interestingly, some participants shared that when they were in college that they experienced a heightened awareness of their racial identity due to the perceived lack of diversity (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). Additional research was recommended to seek a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of people of color at PWIs. For instance, researchers could study the self-imposed stress that some Black women place on themselves to assimilate into the campus culture on a PWI for their body image or peer group approval may serve as racism-related stress that impacts these women on a daily basis.

### **Impact on Academic Achievement**

Institutions of higher education are concerned about their completion rates and attrition rates for it impacts not only their financial bottom line but also their reputation in the academic

community, their partnership with the corporate world, and society by graduating talented and well-educated individuals to contribute to society. For the academic year starting in 2006, the rates for degree completion within four and five years for first-time, full-time Black male students were 15.6% and 29.8% respectively compared with the White male students' completion rates of 42.6% and 55.2% respectively (NCES, 2013). For first-time, full-time Black female students during this same period, the rates for degree completion within four and five years was 23.7% and 38.4% respectively compared with the White female students' completion rates of 47.3% and 61.7% respectively (NCES, 2013). These figures illustrate the disparity between graduation rates between Black and White males and females.

To provide a similar comparison to two other major racial minorities in the U. S., the graduation rates for Hispanics (the term used in the report) and Asians will be reported here. For the same academic year starting in 2006, the rates for degree completion within four and five years for first-time, full-time Hispanic male students were 24.9% and 41.4% respectively compared with the Asian male students' completion rates of 41.5% and 61.42% respectively (NCES, 2013). For first-time, full-time Hispanic female students during this same period, the rates for degree completion within four and five years were 32.5% and 49.0% respectively compared with the Asian female students' completion rates of 50.6% and 67.9% respectively (NCES, 2013). These figures illustrate the disparity between graduation rates between Hispanic and Asian males and females. A review of these figures revealed that the Black students' graduation rate, within four and five years, for both males and females is lower than for other minorities, specifically Hispanic and Asian students (NCES, 2013).

In an attempt to provide guidance for increasing the likelihood of degree completion by students of color, Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) contended that a feeling of belonging

is positively associated with the intent to pursue degree completion. Hausmann et al. (2007) conducted a study at three separate intervals throughout the year at a large PWI in the mid-Atlantic region, 545 Black and White full-time, first-year college students ages 16 to 21 years, were investigated to determine whether a student's sense of belonging was related to the student's intent to persist in degree completion.

Participants were assigned to one of three groups with two as control (one receiving gifts of any kind, with or without university insignia and the other receiving no gifts) and the third group receiving an intervention aimed to enhance the student's sense of belonging to the university. There were no differences in the findings of each of the two control groups. An increased sense of belonging was observed in students who reported more academic integration, while students who reported less academic integration experienced a decrease in the sense of belonging. White and Black students varied in the effect of peer support on their sense of belonging. White students experienced a faster decline in a sense of belonging with more peer support. In contrast, Black students with more peer support experienced an increase in their sense of belonging over time. The statistical significance of the intervention, designed to improve a sense of belonging, was minimal. However, the researchers contend that the intervention did improve a sense of belonging and is a low cost and simple way to increase a sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007). One of the limitations was participant sampling in which all the first-year 254 Black students were included in the study along with a random sample of the 291 White students.

Following with the sense of belonging and degree pursuit on college campuses, Museus, Yi, and Saelua (2017) reported that a sense of belonging was significantly correlated for all the variables in the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) Model which Museus (2014)

developed. Essentially the CECE Model measures two variables, cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness. Cultural relevance is described as the extent the students believe that their culture is valued on their specific campus, such as by having faculty, staff, and peers who understand their backgrounds and experiences. On the other hand, cultural responsiveness is described as the extent that programs and policies effectively address or respond to the needs of a diverse student population, such as by valuing teamwork, cooperation, and mutual success (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). Museus et al. (2017) were cautious about the findings for non-White groups because of their small sample size. A limitation of this study was with the statistical analysis, they divided the groups into two categories, specifically, White and all other racial groups which included people who identify as Asian, Black, Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Others. In their study with a total population of 499 students, Black students represented 5% of the participants. A sense of belonging is an important component to consider, particularly for racial minority students to persist in pursuing a college degree. Other coping styles in response to racial discrimination may either assist or hurt the student's efforts while attending a PWI. The next section will elaborate on these coping strategies.

### **Coping with Racism-Related Stress**

The choices of coping styles are many and varied. The next study will focus on a couple of negative coping behaviors. The impact of racial discrimination, specifically examining alcohol use and sexual activity, among 228 Black undergraduate male and female college students between the ages of 18 and 25 was examined by Metzger, Cooper, Ritchwood, Onyeuku, and Griffin (2016) in a large PWI in the southeastern region of US. Black students included in the sample self-identified as Black to include biracial students (Metzger et al., 2016; Dennhardt & Murphy, 2011) with more than 74% of the participants being female. Racial discrimination was

quantified using the 18-question daily life experiences scale to assess the occurrence of racial discrimination and everyday experiences (Harrell, 2000; Metzger et al., 2016). Alcohol use was measured by the frequency of drinking and binge drinking. Risky sex was defined by the number of different sexual partners within their lifetime. Co-occurring risk behaviors are defined as engaging in sexual activity while being under the influence of alcohol. Participants in the alcohol risk category reported significantly more frequent occurrence of racial discrimination than students who identified as abstainers from alcohol, sexual activity, and co-occurring risk behaviors of alcohol and sexual activity (Metzger et al., 2016). The researchers contended that alcohol use was an attempt to cope with racial discrimination and subsequent feelings of limited control and efficacy (Brody et al., 2010; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Metzger et al., 2016). In addition, researchers have noted relationships between experiences of racism and discrimination and alcohol use among Black people (Landrine, Klonoff, Corral, Fernandez, & Roesch, 2006; Borrell, Roux, Jacobs, Shea, Jackson, Shrager, & Blumenthal, 2010).

In another study of racial discrimination, another coping behavior and psychiatric symptoms were explored. Landrine, Klonoff, Corral, Fernandez, and Roesch (2006) explored racial discrimination and its relationship to cigarette smoking and psychiatric symptoms in 1569 adult participants, in which one-half were college students and 11.1% identified as Black. Black people reported more frequent discrimination than the other two minority groups in the study, Latinos and Asian Americans (Landrine, et al., 2006). The researchers reported that racial minority individuals who experienced a high incidence of discrimination were 2.3 times more likely to smoke than those who reported a low incidence of discrimination (Landrine, et al., 2006). Also, racial discrimination was strongly related to psychiatric symptoms, such as

depression and anxiety, and current cigarette smoking for racial minorities (Landrine, et al., 2006).

Again, several coping behaviors were studied related to perceived racial discrimination and the use of cigarettes and alcohol. The relationship between perceived racial discrimination and smoking and alcohol use was examined in 6680 adults, of which 1839 were Black individuals, who participated in a multi-ethnic study of atherosclerosis (Borrell et al., 2010). The findings for Black adults were that a higher incidence of racial discrimination was significantly associated with smoking and heavy drinking (Borrell et al., 2010). The researchers reported that these behaviors, smoking and alcohol use, may be used as coping mechanisms by those individuals experiencing discrimination (Borrell et al., 2010).

The differences observed between males and females' choice in coping behaviors were explored. In a study of 312 Black college students (137 females, 76 males), Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, and Cancelli (2000) explored the effects of racism and choice of coping styles. In general, females preferred an avoidance coping style, which was also found to be significantly related to self-esteem and life satisfaction (Utsey et al., 2000). For both males and females, seeking social support was a frequently cited coping style for racism-related stress (Utsey et al., 2000).

Another variable, academic performance and its relationship to racial discrimination were examined in the following study. Greer and Brown (2011) examined the use of coping behaviors to lessen the effects of minority status stress on general levels of perceived stress and academic performance among Black students at a large PWI in the Midwest and an HBCU in the Eastern region of U. S. Two hundred and two Black undergraduate students, ranging in age from 18 to 48 year with approximately two-thirds being female and one-third being male. Minority status stress

is inversely related to interconnectedness and spirituality. Essentially, when minority status stress was high then interconnectedness with others was low. Consequently, the researchers (Greer & Brown, 2011) contend that academic performance decreased as minority status stress increased, and as avoidant efforts, such as sleeping, alcohol use, and substance use, increased.

As a result, Greer and Brown (2011) recommended that changes need to be made to improve the racial atmosphere on campuses which may decrease or ease the level of stress experienced by Black students. It is not surprising that Black students have taken the lead with activism activities on university campuses to improve the campus environment because of the inequities that they experience. The disparity in gender representation was cited as a limitation, calling for examining greater numbers of Black males to increase understanding of their experiences in college. Additional research was recommended to identify the influences that coping efforts have on the Black student's psychological health and academic performance (Greer & Brown, 2011).

In contrast to the previous research, a coping style that may have a positive impact was examined with a sample of Black male college students. Attitudinal and perceptual traits, such as grit, have also been shown to increase Black male college students' success at PWIs (Strayhorn, 2013). According to Strayhorn (2013), the sample of Black males attending four-year college at PWIs was selected from the data obtained in a larger research study, specifically examining Black males at a variety of post-secondary, degree-granting, institutions, to include 2-year and 4-year programs at HBCUs and PWIs as well as online programs. For this study, 140 Black male college students attended a large, public PWI in southeastern U. S. were selected (Strayhorn, 2013). Solely, grit accounted for more predictive validity than standard measures of academic success, such as high school grade point average and ACT score. The construct of grit was

defined as a propensity to pursue challenging long-term goals with passion and perseverance. Conversely, factors associated with influencing Black male college student attrition can be combined into the three categories of environmental, social, and psychological (Strayhorn, 2013). Environmental factors are related to a student's feeling of belonging, which can be enhanced through participation in the academic and social activities on the campus or decreased by systemic processes that deny or limit access to supportive opportunities. The category labeled social refers to having meaningful and supportive interactions with diverse students, faculty, and staff, in addition to participating in campus activities and organizations. Finally, the third category, psychological refers to the student's cognitive and behavioral attributes (Strayhorn, 2013).

Strayhorn (2013) explored two research questions. First, what is the relationship between grit, as defined by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, (2007), and Black male college student's grades? Second, controlling for age and potentially confounding variables, does grit add incremental predictive validity toward explaining grade more significantly than standard measures? The sample consisted of 140 Black male students who were enrolled full time at a large public PWI, located in the southeastern part of the US. First-generation college students accounted for 61% of the sample. The vast majority, 86%, resided in on-campus residence halls.

Pertaining to the first research question, a positive association was reported with grit and academic outcomes for Black males at PWIs. That is, having a higher level of grit was associated with a higher level of academic grades. Regarding the second research question, findings from the study supported that academic achievement was more positively predicted in challenging domains by grit than talent. Indeed, these findings extend the relevance of grit research and its use with more populations, than previous research that focused primarily on White



adolescent/adult samples. Strayhorn (2013) stressed the need for future studies that continue to examine Black college students and the relation between grit and engagement, and other constructs. In the following section, activism and collective action are explored for its value as a protective factor in response to racism-related stress.

### **Activism/Collective Action as a Protective Factor**

The following researchers examine participation in activism as a protective factor to the negative effects of discrimination among 533 college students, who identified themselves as primarily Black or Hispanic/Latino (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016). Participants, recruited from five PWIs in the Midwest, were examined for participation in two specific programs, #BlackLivesMatter and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, to determine if there is a relationship between political activism and racial discrimination (Hope et al., 2016). The findings supported that Latino students experienced a positive, proactive coping response to the negative effects of discrimination; the same was not observed with Black students. Since the research was targeted to two specific advocacy programs, the researchers recommend that future research explore a variety of activism activities to gain more insight into its effects on mitigating the impact of racial discrimination on psychological health (Hope et al., 2016).

In addition, researchers have long studied the role of organizational involvement and campus activism among Black students at PWIs. In another one study, 164 Black college students (46 males, 118 females) at a PWI in the Southeastern U. S. researchers to examine the relationships among racial identity, the participant's perceived fit at the university, and their social participation in various organizations and organizational involvement on the campus, (particularly ethnic group activities), among 164 Black college students (46 males, 118 females) at a PWI in the Southeastern U. S. (Chavous, 2000). Organizational involvement was measured

in two ways. First, participants provided the names of organizations in which they belonged to by creating a list. Second, the participants noted, with an asterisk, the organizations that were predominantly Black in membership. The mean participation in total organizations was 2.09 with a range from zero to five. The mean participation in groups, whose members are predominantly Black, was 1.02 with a range from zero to four. (Chavous, 2000). Predictors of participation in groups were that students who came to college from neighborhoods with fewer Black people reported involvement in more non-Black organizations. The converse was not supported by the research. In other words, students attending college from racially homogeneous neighborhoods did not become involved in more Black campus organizations (Chavous, 2000). The most significant finding, according to Chavous (2000), is that the way in which a student thinks about their race accounted for the difference in social integration and hence collective activities at PWIs.

Continuing with this theme, White-Johnson (2012) examined 303 self-identified Black college students' racial identity and experiences with racial discrimination to determine their attitudes and behaviors regarding involvement in collective action. Members who identified with a specific racial group, who perceived themselves as marginalized when compared to other groups, were more likely to participate in collective activities to benefit their social community (White-Johnson, 2012). The participants were from three PWIs in the midwestern region and two HBCUs from the Mid-Atlantic and Southern regions of the U. S. The average age of participants was 20, with the majority being female at 81.2% (White-Johnson, 2012). Further, the majority of the participants believed that Black people should be involved in activities that help their race, with more than 50% of the sample reporting involvement in at least one type of collective action activity (White-Johnson, 2012). Participants from PWIs reported more collective action

behaviors than their counterparts at HBCUs. White-Johnson (2012) suggested that racial discrimination experiences may be a catalyst for involvement in collective action and stressed the need for future research to strengthen this area. Specifically, identifying the use of a qualitative methodology to investigate more deeply and determine other ways that Black individuals engage in collective action to benefit their communities.

Another study continued to examine Black activism and race-related stress and racial identity among a sample of 185 Black, male and female, undergraduates at a large PWI, with 93% identifying as Black/Black and 7% as biracial/multiracial (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). The findings were that exposure to racial discrimination was related to more engagement in Black activism (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). These researchers recommended additional studies to examine various forms of racism and their relationship to activism to determine if some specific forms of racism, such as individual, institutional, and cultural are more predictive of activism (Utsey, 1999; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). In addition, Szymanski and Lewis (2015) recommended that researchers explore if involvement in activism serves as a protective factor for Black people between racism and psychological distress.

Interestingly, the perceptions of pervasive discrimination are essential to motivate minority groups to form collective activities to protest discrimination (Foster, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although pervasive discrimination negatively impacts well-being, individuals who participate in collective activities may increase their sense of empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 1999) and may also enhance their psychological well-being (Cronin et al., 2012; Outten, Schmitt, Garcia & Branscombe, 2009). Thus, engagement in activism can act as a buffer or protective factor against the negative effects of discrimination.

Research regarding collective action or activism as a moderating or protective factor for Black college students at PWIs is limited. However, DeBlaere et al. (2014) examined a sample of 134 sexual minority women of color, ages 19 to 75, with 40% being Black, about their discrimination experiences, psychological distress, and the protective function of collective action. A significant finding was that collective action tended to buffer the link between heterosexist experiences and psychological distress. In addition, participation in lower levels of collective action did not buffer this link, rather, perceived heterosexism positively predicted distress. No other significant relationships were found (DeBlaere et al., 2014). These researchers conclude that collective action could be a useful activity for sexual minority clients, while also recommending additional research is needed to understand the role of collective action in promoting mental health with diverse participants (DeBlaere et al., 2014).

The reasons that Black people participate in activism were studied by Szymanski (2012) to determine if the perception of racist events and individual coping styles were predictive of involvement in Black activism. Szymanski (2012) described the nature of activists based on her web-based study of a national sample of 269 Black men and women ranging in age from 18 to 79 years. Because Szymanski found that there was a lack of published instruments to assess Black activism, she modified the Involvement in Feminist Activism Scale (Szymanski, 2004), changing “feminist” to “African American.” Three coping styles, reflective, suppressive, and reactive, were studied along with a self-reported number of racist events in the past year to predict Black activism. When individuals use a reflective coping style, they engage in behaviors in a systematic way to change their external environment, and their cognitive and affective processes to resolve stressful life events. Individuals choosing a suppressive coping style tend to use

avoidance and denial when dealing with life's challenges. Finally, individuals using a reactive coping style tend to respond with strong emotions and impulsivity (Szymanski, 2012)

Findings indicated that the number of racist events, a reflective coping style, and the interaction between these racist events and a reflective coping style significantly predicted participation in Black activism. A suppressive coping style was negatively related to Black activism. Finally, there was no relationship between reactive coping style and Black activism (Szymanski, 2012). Individuals, experiencing increased exposure to racist events and social inequality, maybe fueled with more concern for the well-being of the Black community and work toward social justice (Szymanski, 2012). Finally, the researcher recommended that future studies examine if Black engagement in activism protects against the harmful relationship between distress and racism (Szymanski, 2012). This research, coupled with Black students' lower graduation rates than other minorities and threats to physical and psychological well-being related to perceived racial discrimination, leads to the purpose of the study described in the following section.

### **Purpose of Study**

Until PWIs change at a systemic, institutional level, Black students would benefit from continued efforts to improve coping and protective factors to buffer against the inevitable racial minority stress at PWIs. An example of this includes activism or engaging in collective action. The review of the literature illustrated the gaps in the understanding of the process that Black students employ to cope with the distress of racial discrimination, such as engaging in campus activism.

Throughout the literature review, researchers have revealed that Black people have experienced racial discrimination for centuries in the US from the time that slaves were bought

and sold, to the present, where Black people continue to face racial discrimination and to strive to achieve equality in a system that protests that everyone is equal and consequently, should have equal access, for instance to housing and education. Unfortunately, this is still the case, as racial discrimination is described as pervasive on several levels. Racism can be described as pertaining to three main areas that impact racial minority people's lives: individual, institutional, and cultural (Utsey, 1999; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). Essentially, every aspect of their lives is impacted in some way by racism, from brief encounters with various forms of microaggressions, all be they are subtle and often referred to as unintentional, but not to the member of a racial minority. These messages, verbal and nonverbal, are strong and harsh reminders of their present reality. Also, there are macro-aggressions which are system-wide messages containing yet again subtle, yet powerful, messages of discrimination and a lack of value to members of racial minorities.

From a social justice and counseling psychology perspective, the issue is how psychologists can assist Black student activists in their quest to improve their learning, living, and social situation on PWIs. First, through the use of semi-structured interviews with Black student activists, factors will emerge that will identify the role of college student activism has in promoting well-being in response to racial discrimination at PWIs. The inclusion criteria to participate in this research is that a student identifies as Black, is a college student at a PWI, and participates in some form of collective action or activism on campus.

By utilizing narrative inquiry, this study will explore the experiences of Black students who engaged in socio-political activism at PWIs (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry was selected for this research because it provides for a rich, in-depth exploration of the participants' lived experiences. The goal of using a narrative thematic approach is the ability to identify the

themes that emerge from the analysis of semi-structured interview data and provide a connection to the existing research (Riessman, 2008). Further, the goal of this study is to provide recommendations for mental health providers and suggestions of areas for future researchers to pursue.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHOD**

This chapter describes the qualitative methodology used to explore the research questions of this study and raise awareness of Black student activists' experiences of well-being at PWIs. In addition, the participant selection criteria, data collection procedures, and data analysis process are discussed. This chapter concludes by presenting the steps to maintain trustworthiness and researcher-as-instrument.

#### **Narrative Inquiry**

Simply stated, "Narrative inquiry is a way of studying people's experiences, nothing more and nothing less" (Clandinin, 2013, p.38). The complexity lies in the process of conceptualizing and analyzing the in-depth lived-experiences shared by the participants. Clandinin (2013) emphasized the importance of creating a safe space for both the participant and the interviewer when engaging in the narrative inquiry method.

Narrative inquiry differentiates itself from other methodologies by emphasizing the concurrent exploration of *temporality*, *sociality*, and *place* throughout the research. Attending to these areas creates a three-dimensional space that is essential to the conceptual framework of this methodology. Brief descriptions of all three are provided to better understand their importance (Clandinin, 2013). First, temporality attends to point in time such as past, present, and future in relation to the people, places, and things being explored. A philosopher, Carr proposed that "we are composing and constantly revising our autobiographies as we go along" (1991, p. 76). Thus, the stories we create and the meanings we attribute with experiences are not fixed. Both can be



altered over periods of time. Second, sociality refers to the simultaneous attention devoted to social and personal conditions by the narrative researcher (Clandinin, 2013). Social conditions refer to the external conditions that the individual experiences. Examples of social conditions include family, language, institutions, culture, and society. Personal conditions refer to the emotions, morals, and aesthetic reactions of the participants and the researcher (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative researchers acknowledge and attend to shifting of focus the internal and external conditions of the participant and themselves.

The third component of narrative inquiry, place, represents “specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.480). Simply put, “all events take place some place” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.481). Combined with the other two dimensions, this approach provides an opportunity for a rich formulation of the narrative being explored.

Highly relevant to the topic of this study, Riessman (2008) notes the ability of stories to mobilize individuals or provide the foundation for collective action that is focused on social change. Qualitative research, itself, is considered part of social justice practice if the study promotes equity and participation with underrepresented groups who are at risk for acts of social justice (Lyons et al., 2013). The use of direct quotes in narrative inquiry research and this study increases the participant’s chance to be heard, thus empowering a member of a socially oppressed group. Caine et al. (2018) identify multiple ways that narrative inquiry, specifically, can be identified as social justice practice, as well. For example, narrative inquiry emphasizes highly relational and transactional interactions during the interview process, thus talking about social justice issues or practices impacts both the participant and the researcher.

## Participants

Creswell (2013) notes that narrative research typically focuses on one or two participants for each study. Following this guideline, the sample size for this study consisted of two participants. Both students attended a PWI in the northeastern region of the US at the time that the initial interviews which occurred in the Fall of 2018. The participants were recruited through an email sent to their NAACP Chapter requesting their voluntary participation in this study. Both were eligible to participate in this study, because they met the selection criteria of being 18 years of age or older, identify as Black, speak fluent English, be currently enrolled at a PWI, and engaged in socio-political activism that addressed racial discrimination on their campus within the last year. Proceeding the screening process, participants scheduled times to virtually discuss informed consent. Part of the consent consisted of disclosing my racial identity as a White man and providing them with the option of being interviewed by a Black psychologist if they did not feel as comfortable being interviewed by me. The purpose of this consideration was intended to minimize the potential negative impact of race-of-interviewer-effects and increase trustworthiness. Especially when discussing the subject of race, Black participants may be less forthright in their responses to a White interviewer (Davis, 1997; Samples, 2014). Since the 1970s, sociologists have “debated whether White researchers, given African Americans’ general distrust of Whites, could establish the kind of rapport necessary for conducting effective research among African Americans” (May, 2014, p.120). Both participants were agreeable to me conducting their interviews. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequences to them. Compensation was offered in the form of a \$30 Amazon gift card or donation to a charity of their choice for the first interview and an additional

\$30 for a follow-up interview. Participant's consent was provided verbally and by signing and returning electronic copies.

## **Procedure**

### **Data Collection**

All interviews were conducted over the web-based program, Zoom. The initial interview with each participant lasted for approximately one hour and followed a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix A). The prompts were designed to be open-ended to offer participants the freedom to share their experiences in a way that is meaningful to them. A follow-up interview was conducted with both participants to gain clarification about the experiences they shared and to ensure that each voice is accurately heard. Additional questions were also posed to the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. The follow-up interviews lasted from 1-2 hours. Following the initial interviews, both participants were assigned a unique number to label their recording, transcription, and related documents. After each interview, the researcher transcribed the recording and excluded any of the participant's identifiable information. The researcher reviewed the participant's comments and made minor edits to improve readability while not changing the meaning of what the participants shared.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the transcription process, the narrative thematic approach as outlined by Riessman (2008) was used to analyze the transcriptions. This four-step approach was selected because the identification of themes creates a more holistic and detailed understanding of the participants' experiences engaging in activism at a PWI. In the first step, all of the transcriptions were thoroughly read with the purpose of obtaining a general understanding of the experiences.

In the second step, a word document was created for each participant with their demographic information. Each transcript was examined individually, then drafts of the participants' narratives were composed. During this step, transcripts were read multiple times to identify preliminary codes and make notes. In particular, I focused on comments and stories related to the participants' experiences with their well-being and engagement in activism at a PWI. Sentences and paragraphs that were especially powerful or descriptive of the experiences were added to the participants' corresponding word documents. These sections were used as quotes and headings in the following chapters to ensure the participants' voices were accurately presented.

In the third step, I analyzed the sentences, paragraphs, codes, and notes collected in the word documents to identify potential themes. To prevent fragmentation of the data (Riessman, 2008), the transcripts were referenced to analyze the sentences and paragraphs in the greater context in which they were shared. This step increased my confidence and understanding of the excerpts as they related to the larger narratives, before proceeding to the final step.

In the fourth, and final, step, I reviewed the previously identified excerpts to select which would be used in this paper. Following a close examination of the themes and transcripts, I decided to emphasize the stories the participants shared that best depicted their lived experiences as Black student activists attending a PWI. Both participants shared stories about their lives before college, which increased my understanding of their lived experience. However, this information does not directly describe their experiences attending a PWI and will only be included in the participants' introductions. Additional restrictions included stories that were outside the scope of this study.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry refers to the validity of a study. Specific criteria were recommended by Morrow (2005) to maintain trustworthiness. Particularly relevant, suggestions regarding *reflexivity*, *purposeful sampling*, and “*researcher-as-instrument*” were utilized in the present study. Successful reflexivity includes *monitoring of self* and *bracketing* of assumptions and biases. Patton (2005) described the qualitative design strategy, purposeful sampling, as being most appropriate for studying people. This method of sample selection provides power to the research by selecting information-rich individuals who know much about the specific area of inquiry. The purpose of the sample is to select participants who can provide in-depth insights (Patton, 2005).

In order to successfully monitor self and assumptions in qualitative research, the researcher must identify four criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I addressed these criteria throughout the research process to ensure trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005, Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). First, credibility was addressed to ensure plausible results are derived from the data. This researcher emailed each participant a draft of their narrative account and requested their feedback regarding how accurately it conveyed their lived experience. In addition, I engaged in peer debriefing and consistency checks, an ongoing exploration of my personal biases, and reviewed my reflections. Before each interview, during the process of data analysis, and participating in the debriefing process, I bracketed any personal assumptions and biases by engaging in open reflection, either verbally or in a personal journal (Morrow, 2005).

Next, I addressed the criteria of dependability which examined the consistency of data collection and analysis throughout the entire process through the use of direct methods, such as

auditing the process and product of the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, I worked to ensure dependability by providing an in-depth description of the methods used by providing an accounting of the steps and decisions made throughout the research process so that the study may be replicated (Shenton, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Establishing dependability was essential to be able to have transferability. Transferability refers to the ability to apply the findings from one context to another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, transferability was contingent on this researcher providing a detailed description of the content and context of the interviews.

Finally, it was important to maintain confirmability in this study. This criterion mandates that I concentrate on integrity throughout the entire research process. In order to achieve this, I was attentive to using a systematic process for recruitment and interviewing. At the completion of each interview, I wrote self-reflective notes and transcribed the interviews. These processes allowed me to maintain necessary confirmability throughout this study.

#### **Researcher-as-instrument statement.**

Prior to using the qualitative method, narrative inquiry, I addressed several major areas in an attempt to identify and manage relevant biases, assumptions, and expectations. Specifically, Morrow (2005) refers to this disclosure as the researcher-as-instrument statement. The following is my researcher-as-instrument statement.

I am a 36-year-old, White, male, lower-middle-class, doctoral student who has benefited greatly from the inherent privileges associated with my identity. This study echoes my commitment to be a better ally and advocate for change by engaging in self-reflection and, more importantly, using my privilege to promote social justice. I remember witnessing some of the experiences of my Black peers who engaged in socio-political activism after incidents of racism occurred on campus. Their efforts and resilience in response to these incidents were

inspirational. At the same time, I was sickened, saddened, and angered by the hate and threats to their well-being and safety. I will never fully comprehend the experiences of being Black in American or engaging in socio-political activism as a Black student at a PWI. What I do know is that it is immensely important that Black voices be heard, and systemic changes occur. For the majority of my life, I have been ashamed of being White because of the way members of my race have, and continue to, hurt members of the Black community for whom I care greatly. This study, along with other social justice-related actions, are steps toward me redefining and accepting my racial identity. Ultimately, I am striving to do my part to change the culture of racism that was created by White people to one that is more inclusive and equal.

### **Intersectionality.**

Ultimately, the lived experiences of these participants are complex and nuanced as they are impacted by the multiple aspects of their identities. In addition to race and gender, this includes ability status, ethnicity, relationship status, sexual identity, religion, education, career, and socioeconomic status, to name a few. During the interview process these aspects of their identity and mine interact and impacted how information was communicated and understood by both parties. Similarly, this impacts how I analyze the narrative accounts as I strive to understand their experiences through the lens of my identity.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

In this chapter, I introduce the two participants by sharing co-composed narratives of their experiences as Black student activists at a PWI. I selected the pseudonyms after reviewing the contributions and efforts of Black women activists in US history. Final approval for the use of both pseudonyms was acquired by the participants. To maintain the uniqueness of their experiences, each participant's story is presented in a separate section. Reading the individual narratives provides the reader with an opportunity to understand the different experiences of the participants. Quotes are used to maintain the voice of the participants. Together, their stories convey how their well-being is impacted by what they have experienced as Black student activists attending a PWI.

#### **Participant Stories**

##### **Daisy**

Daisy was born and raised in a small town in the northeastern US. She is the oldest child of three. She has two sisters; one is approximately two years younger and the other sister is approximately seven years younger. She described having a “good relationship” with her sisters.

Daisy reported that both of her parents identified as Black. She recalled that her parents did not know how to support her and that it was a “constant issue.” Daisy described them as being “emotionally unavailable” and “unreliable.” In response, she noted having difficulty asking them for help and attempted to cope on her own. She reported that her parents divorced when she was an upperclassman in high school. Daisy reported seeking the support of her mother



in college. Daisy described her mother as a realist and appreciated this quality because her mother could help her acknowledge certain parts of “reality.”

Prior to attending a predominantly White Catholic high school, Daisy recalled enjoying the public schools she attended. She appreciated the diversity of the students and felt more welcome. Daisy recalled feeling additional stress during high school and college related to the higher socioeconomic status of many students. She noted that it was already “tough” on her to not fit in racially at these PWIs and the class differences added to her difficulty to belong. Coming from a lower SES background compared to her peers made her feel “very inadequate.” At the time of the interviews, Daisy was a 19-year-old, female, sophomore, political science major at a PWI in the Northeast.

### **Septima**

Septima was born and raised in a suburb outside of a major US city in the Midwest. She described the area as “White suburbia.” She is the youngest of two children. Her brother is about 4 years older. She described the relationship with her brother as being “good.” Daisy reported that her parents are married. She said that her father identified as Black and mother identified as White.

Daisy stated that her parents attempted to protect her from the “structural aspects of racism” but not the interpersonal. She noted that her father experienced racism, especially when growing up in the South and he did not want his children to experience similar incidents. Daisy noted that she never really talked to her parents about areas related to politics or race. She noted that she would talk to them about “issues with friends or boys.” She said she does not confide in them a lot.

Prior to high school, Septima reported attending mostly White elementary and middle schools. She was certain that she experienced racism during these years of her education but could not remember certain incidents. Septima recalled always being self-motivated to succeed as a student. Prior to college, she shared never being pursued by boys and “always knew that it was a symptom of me being black.” Septima was a 21-year-old, female, senior, political science major at a university in the Northeast. The following section presents each participant’s unique experiences.

### **Participant Narratives**

#### **Daisy**

##### **Familial interactions.**

Daisy was born and raised in the northeastern US. She recalled having a “good” and “normal relationship” with her two younger sisters. Daisy described that: “my parents were just not being emotionally available really for most of my life. My parents are African so of course, there's this stigma and like you just deal with on your own and like therapies for the weak or whatever.” Daisy stated that she did not talk to her parents about the racism she experienced prior to college. She indicated that her relationship with her parents became more strained when she learned of their decision to have her attend a predominantly, White, Catholic High School. She could not understand their rationale for sending her to this High School and felt like they were attempting to punish her.

##### **High school experiences.**

She attended a very racially homogeneous, White, Catholic High School, where she was the only Black student in a graduating class of 100. She experienced racism on her first day, hearing a student say the N-word. The majority of the racism she experienced in high school was

experienced as microaggressions. At the time they occurred, she did not know how to identify what she experienced as microaggressions nor how to respond. Daisy shared that: "I didn't want to get my parents involved because I didn't want them to have to deal with the situation and then getting involved, and I just didn't want things to spiral out of control. I was just like, well, if I just ignore this altogether, then that takes care of it, which it definitely didn't." She described that the "stress of not knowing how to deal with it" was more significant than the stress of experiencing racism.

When starting high school, Daisy recalled experiencing "really bad migraines" for the first time in her life. She was examined by three different doctors and had multiple MRIs to help diagnose the issue. One neurologist concluded that she had clinical depression, due to Daisy's additional symptoms of sadness, increased isolation, weight-loss, insomnia, feeling inadequate, and irritability causing significant clinical distress. Daisy then engaged briefly in therapy and found it to be beneficial. Specifically, she noted learning how to better articulate and process her emotions, rather than suppressing and "not dealing" with them. Prior to her Junior year, she "felt totally ostracized." Daisy credits seeking out friends who better reflected her experience and values for improving her sense of belonging.

### **Adjusting to a PWI.**

Initially, she did not identify the university as a PWI because it was more racially diverse than her high school and one of the primary reasons that she chose to enroll. As time passed, Daisy began to notice a divide between Black students and the rest of the student population. The school's responses to race-related incidents during her freshman year made her feel that Black students were not valued, welcomed, or appreciated on campus. She believed that the University

said they cared about diversity, but they appeared to be disingenuous as their actions did not support these claims.

She stated that, as a Black person, she is very familiar with experiencing racism. However, it still “shocks” her and makes her feel angry when it happens. The “turning point,” as she described it, occurred during the Spring semester of her freshman year. An incident of racism on campus occurred and was documented and shared over social media. Daisy described that a White student posted a video of himself going on a “spiel” and “saying the N-word” and it got a lot of attention. She recalled feeling “really mad” after seeing the video and “extremely awkward” and “very uncomfortable” seeing the student on campus.

Daisy recalled feeling “upset” when the racist incident on campus occurred because it was the one thing she “dread” occurring during her college experience. She was scared to accept that incident occurred and attempted to minimize the situation by thinking, “It can’t be that bad.” She began seriously questioning if she belonged at the university. Daisy recalled thinking, “Should I be here? Is this really the place for me when every couple of months something is happening?” She felt increased stress and isolation. Some upper-classmen appeared “very apathetic” to the situation which added to her distress and decreased sense of belonging. She recalled tweeting the university about the incident, which unintentionally increased media coverage about the incident. To cope with the stress related to the race-related incident and how it was addressed, she credits the “really long conversations” with her mother over the phone. She also noted spending a lot of time talking with friends. Daisy found it emotionally reassuring to know who supported her and what others’ thoughts were about the situation. Similarly, she spoke highly of her relationships with faculty, noting that they are more reliable, caring, and supportive

than the administration. She highlighted that some professors will take time to speak with students individually or discuss the events on campus during class.

However, Daisy described the incident of racism as a “huge distraction” that made it “very hard to concentrate and focus, especially when it came to school.” She reported feeling paranoid, targeted, stressed, very self-conscious, angry, and uncomfortable. Daisy noted feeling more frustrated by the response of the University administration than with the racist incident. They released a statement, noting that they do not condone the behavior and are always striving for diversity and inclusion, which was not sufficient. She recalled that it was “super difficult” to contact the staff and administration to express her concerns. Daisy recalled thinking, “Okay, so you really don't care about me and how I feel about my experience.”

#### **Engagement in activism.**

As a result of the university administrators’ response, Daisy came to the conclusion that she will have to take action herself and not rely on the administration to improve the experiences for Black students. Her first actions were to interview students and write a story for the POC student newspaper to bring attention to the situation as it appeared that the “university was trying so hard to bury” the incident. Second, she decided to join the NAACP chapter on campus. Daisy provided the following examples of her engagement in activism as a member of the NACCP chapter: signed and promoted a petition that advocated to improve the sense of community and belonging for Black students on campus, met with members of the university administration to improve hiring and retention practices for professors of color, and helping the school of international studies on campus to decolonize their educational materials.

### **Benefits of engagement in activism.**

Daisy reported experiencing an increase in her sense of hope and decrease in her experience of stress by participating in activism on campus. Additionally, Daisy reported that engaging in activism aligned with her values and increased her sense of agency. She experienced an increase in her mood and attributed this to having an active role in improving her surroundings rather than passively expecting change to occur. She credits activism in repairing her sense of belonging and noted feeling most comforted and supported particularly by other Black students. Daisy described how “refreshing” and “surprising” it was to see the allyship of non-Black, and especially White, students and faculty that was appropriately supportive and did not make the situation about themselves. Her belief that the student body, in general, cares about one another, was being repaired. Daisy stated that focusing her thoughts and efforts on improving the situation for future Black students helped her manage feelings of anxiety related to engagement in activism.

Daisy shared that she never engaged in activism prior to attending her university. She stated that activism has “opened her eyes” and taught her a lot. Specifically, she felt more prepared and confident to address another situation if it arises. Daisy noted the importance of being in a position where she can be a resource for future underclassmen. She acknowledged that engagement helped by reducing her stress and anxiety related to racism on campus. Daisy noted feeling motivated to create a place where everyone feels “comfortable, safe, and valued” and is confident in her ability to help create positive change. During her sophomore year, Daisy became increasingly more involved in campus activism. She expressed feeling “confident in my abilities and that I am capable. So that was a boost to my self-esteem” as she was completing tasks related

to campus activism. Daisy stated, “Now that I think about it, I used that activism as a coping method.”

### **Costs of engagement in activism.**

While engagement in activism did not affect her sleeping or eating habits, she did report feeling “lots of anxiety” as she feared “potential backlash from the University” or “making the situation worse.” Additionally, she began to feel more stress in relation to discovering “...how our school works, I realized there's a lot of issues. I think once you kind of peel back the layers, you're like, there are so many problems, and so then that's why you want to deal with them all." Combined with her increased confidence and desire to improve the countless problems at school, she described her workload rapidly increasing from one task to multiple. She added that: “the work never really feels like it's totally finished. Even if you accomplish some goal, you know that there are eight other things that have to be dealt with, too. So, it's just overwhelming." Daisy shared that balancing her course work and activism responsibilities became increasingly more challenging. Her grades declined during the Fall semester of her sophomore year as she was not able to devote enough time to school. She barely maintained the GPA required to retain her scholarship. Activism began to negatively affect her “attention span and concentration” and increased the amount of time and energy to get her work done. Daisy said, “at the same time I sacrificed so much because of that, my social life, my friends did not see me.”

### **Re-evaluating level of activism engagement.**

A staff member, who she viewed as a mentor, was “a really big advocate for making sure that you take care of yourself when you're being an activist because it can be really emotionally and mentally taxing, and its volunteer work, and it's not like you're getting paid or anything like that." Following the guidance of her mentor, Daisy stated that she is not afraid to decline offers

to engage in activism. She shared her decision to step down from her position in the NAACP chapter after her sophomore year. While she cares about the chapter and is proud of what she accomplished, “it got to a point where it was just way too exhausting mentally and emotionally and even physically for me to keep doing this.” Daisy emphasized the importance of knowing that there are many ways she can still engage in activism on campus.

### **Re-evaluation of White allyship.**

To conclude the follow-up interview, Daisy shared her current position on White allies on campus: “I set the bar, very low. Whether it was my White peers or White faculty, I was like, if you're not being racist to me, then you're great, and I realized that that's not good enough anymore. To me now, it's like if you're not anti-racist. And if you're not true, if you're not consistent with the things that you claim to believe in and care about then, that's the problem. I realized there are certain things that White people just should not do and that just aren't okay, and we shouldn't set the bar so low. I have learned a lot about that.”

### **Septima**

#### **Familial interactions.**

She was raised in a “White neighborhood” near a major city in the Midwest and noted that her mother identifies as White and her father identifies as Black. Septima added that her father was raised in the South and was aware of the effects of experiencing racism. Therefore, Septima’s parents wanted her and her older brother to remain “protected from the structural aspects of racism” as long as possible. As a result, Septima described herself as “pretty naive” prior to college. When discussing talking with her parents, Septima shared that she would be more inclined to talk with her parents about issues with her friends and boys, but far less likely if the topic was political or racial in nature. She was uncertain of the reason for this distinction.



### **High School Experiences.**

Her first day in high school, she was called the N-word by two boys. Following this explicit experience of racism, Septima recalled that the majority of the racism she experienced came in the form of microaggressions. At that time, she did not have “the tools or language” to identify microaggressions and racism. Instead, she recalled thinking: “This is happening because I’m Black.” When discussing coping, she said, “I didn't really know that there was anything to heal from because it just kind of seemed like this is the default of how I was supposed to be treated.” Septima added: “I just kind of internalize a lot of that and just kind of accepted it.”

Including Septima, there were only one or two Black female students in her high school graduating class. In response, Septima described that the majority of her “stress came from wanting to fit in.” She made multiple efforts to belong. One example included straightening her hair daily to “appear more White.” She attributed boys not asking her out, “as a symptom of me being Black.” She described that: “Everything about me seemed to be about race, which I think fueled a lot of my self-hatred at the time.”

### **Adjusting to a PWI.**

Septima identified the amount of scholarship money the PWI offered her as the primary factor in her decision to enroll. She shared two major differences between her high school and PWI experiences. First, Septima noted there are more Black students who attend the PWI than her high school. Septima stated that her roommates and floormates were Black and the surrounding community allowed more access to “Black things.” Second, she noted having more space to find her “niche on campus.”

Establishing a sense of belonging was a significant focus during her freshman year. “I was very unsure of where I belonged and it's part of the reason why I absolutely hated the

university during my freshman year.” Initially, she had White and Black friends on campus. However, as ongoing racism occurred on campus, her perceptions of White students began to change and she viewed the campus as being “very segregated.” Septima found the lack of action from White students who claim to be allies in response to racism to be frustrating. “So, Black people, we have to stick to ourselves.”

Septima recalled: “I was a freshman when the first racial incident happened which completely shaped my experience and what work I do on campus.” She described that the incident happened to another Black female freshman while sitting in her dorm room. She noted that symbolic racial objects were thrown into her dorm room and racial slurs were yelled and written on the dry erase board on her door. To cope with the stress related to racism, Septima shared that she: “tried to get off campus as much as I could.” She credits being involved in the surrounding community and a nearby HBCU for having more of a positive influence on her than attending a PWI. For example, she “saw a lot of other Black women have similar hair textures and still be confident. I just wear my hair naturally every day which is cool.” Septima stated that spending time at the HBCU provided her with “a sense of safety, to just be a Black student. I didn't have to worry that someone's going to say something dumb about race or invalidate your experience or your existence.”

### **Engagement in activism.**

In response to the initial incident of racism, the upperclassmen helped her, and other freshman organize “smaller protests” to raise awareness of this injustice. Septima stated that this was her first experience protesting. She expressed that, “the power that came out of it was really cool and I think getting to come together as a community, obviously under really shitty

circumstances, but that part was interesting. Also, the reasons why we were protesting seemed immediate and more out of survival.”

Septima indicated that the university president’s initial response to the incident did not sufficiently address the situation nor provide justice. Following the burning of the US flag at a combined protest in support for the female student who was harassed and Anti-Trump, the national news coverage greatly increased. Septima recalled that a second email from the president of the university appeared to be more concerned with the school receiving negative press than for the student who was harassed on campus.

Later in her freshman year, Septima joined the NAACP Chapter on campus, as the Secretary, in part because a friend requested. At the time, the chapter was “relatively inactive” and prior to attending the university, she did not know the chapter existed. A month after joining, a similar racial incident occurred to another Black female on campus. Septima stated that the perpetrators “had nooses around campus and were harassing her online through alt-right websites and stuff like that and sending her death threats.” Septima identified the challenges of organizing during finals week, as she and other students were focused on exams. In addition to being very time consuming and energy-draining, she and others “were trying to get extensions on papers and work with professors to have time to also stand up for ourselves.” Meanwhile, “the administration at our school was very unresponsive and pretty apathetic.” The collective action of the students brought national media attention to the incident which they leveraged for positive change on campus over the next four years.

### **Benefits of engagement in activism.**

During her sophomore year, Septima increased her involvement with the NAACP and activism efforts on campus. “I feel [campus activism] kind of dictated where I do belong.” She

added: “In the Black community, I feel very much so accepted because of the work I have done.”

Septima said: “I have kind of changed campus for the better in my opinion. So, a lot more administrators and other students respect me for that.”

As a senior, Septima felt more confident in who she is and her ability to create change. She attributes this to her many experiences addressing racial inequality, acquiring an increased understanding of what happens on campus, and her current standing as a leader in the NAACP Chapter. Septima indicated her ability to now assess the impact of each incident of racism, individually, before she responds. She also laughs more to cope, especially in response to things that are out of her control. When the opportunity presents itself, she attempts to leverage an incident of racism to advocate for changes with the administration.

#### **Costs of engagement in activism.**

She described feeling additional stress related to “having to be hyper-involved because there were so many issues and now, I was using my tools to solve those issues. I think a lot of it was feeling overwhelmed.” She “gained 30 pounds” and was unable to understand the reason for this at the time. The amount of sleep she received decreased from “7-9 hours” per night to “4-6 hours.” She experienced a period of three consecutive nights when she did not sleep because she was planning. “It was crazy. I seriously will never value sleep more than I do now.” When discussing her energy level during this period, Septima said: “I’ve kind of blocked that out of my memory because there is so much to do. I feel like I just kind of kept going because there was literally no other option.”

Septima highlighted her sense of obligation when she noted that, “I didn’t want to let the responsibility fall or put that on someone else.” She did not seek medical services during the school year and was examined by a doctor while she was home for the summer. Septima

explained that she felt like she was “dying,” but the medical providers responded by telling her that she was fine and that is probably stress. Septima expressed feeling relieved that she survived that period of her life and vowed to not be in a similar situation in the future.

When discussing stress related to racism and activism, she stated: "It's one thing to experience racism and it's another thing to experience it and try to work against it, in the sense that you have to prove your legitimacy to people and prove that your existence is worthy of not having to experience racism...I think in a lot of ways, it's more stressful because there's two battles that you're fighting now." Septima said, “It definitely adds a lot of stress, but I feel like it's kind of worth it for sure.”

#### **Re-evaluating approach toward engagement in activism.**

Septima described that: “sophomore year, I just said “yes” to every opportunity” and “it was definitely a hard lesson to learn that it's okay to just pick up a few things that make you happy and that you enjoy doing.” Septima noted: “I definitely take more time to just relax and tell myself, you know, that's okay, this email or this event can wait, it's not the end of the world.” Some of the ways she identified relaxing include watching Netflix, taking time to be by herself, and using facial peel-off masks more often.

By junior year, Septima recalled feeling completely comfortable in her own skin. She shared that while she found a significant part of her identity and a group of people who she felt connected with at the PWI, she believed her college experience would have been greatly improved if she attended an HBCU instead. She believed that her experience would have been more carefree and fun if she attended an HBCU, as the majority of her time on the PWI is devoted to activism and advocating.

**Racial cohesion.**

Finally, Septima shared: “I think I believe activism is worth it, regardless of the stress and burden, because I cannot prioritize my feelings over the masses of Black people who are struggling, too. In my mind, I don't see myself as inherently being more important or deserving more attention to my mental health over the millions of Black people in America who are going through a horrible time, too. I have the privilege of a degree and economic stability. So, I just don't see myself sitting on that and not doing anything to help lift others up too.”

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, the themes of the stories shared by the two students are presented in connection to a larger context. The voices of both participants are connected to the relevant pre-existing research related to the experiences of Black student activists and their well-being on PWIs. In addition to the race of the participants, multiple factors may have influenced their engagement in activism. These potentially include their ability status, ethnicity, relationship status, sexual identity, religion, career, and socioeconomic status. The following section details how this study contributes to the literature and explores the implications this research has for Black students, who engage in activism, at Predominantly White Institutions. Finally, the limitations of this study and future areas of research related to this content are presented.

#### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality refers to the relationships between the multiple dimensions of an individual's identities. The participants in this study identified as Black and as women. They do not experience these aspects of their identity exclusively or in isolation. For instance, Gendered racism is defined as experiencing both racism and sexism simultaneously (Essed, 1991). While race and gender are important parts of the participants identity, these aspects of identity only represent two aspects of who they are. When understanding the participants' experiences and engagement in activism it is important to note that their socioeconomic status, sexual identity, education, religious beliefs, and many other aspects of identity also played a role. Therefore, the

intersectionality of their identity must be acknowledged as influencing the themes that emerged in this study.

### **Parental Attachment**

Parental attachment has an essential role in how one develops an understanding of their cultural worldview and to optimize their functioning, especially in for with racially minoritized identities (Brown, et al., 2013). Brown, et al. (2013) found that Black students in the pre-encounter stage of their racial identity development had insecure attachments. These individuals experienced emotional alienation and had a lack of conversations with their parents. Furthermore, they had a negative self-image and self-hatred. Conversely, students who had more secure attachments experienced increased self-acceptance and a “sense of Black pride via immersion in Black culture” (Brown, et al., 2013, p.118).

In seemed, prior to starting college, the participants were in the pre-encounter stage of their racial identity development. Additionally, they described experiences with their parents that reflected those identified in Brown, et al.’s (2013) study. Daisy described her parents as “emotionally unavailable” and felt “inadequate” in high school. Septima noted that she did not confide in her parents and experienced self-hatred in high school. These levels of attachment, particularly related to their racial identity develop, seemed to impact their understanding and examination of their racial identity. Once in college, both of the participants developed an increased sense of self and greater pride with the Black community especially as it related to their activism efforts.

### **Racial Socialization**

Racial socialization refers to the process by which parents communicate young people of color about race, individual and group identities, and intergroup relationship (Barr & Neville,



2014). The content shared during this process varies for each family. Two common types of racial socialization messages used by Black American parents include *proactive* and *protective*. Messages that emphasize positive aspects of one's racial group are from the *proactive* approach. *Protective* racial socialization messages include warnings of racism and strategies to respond to discrimination and oppression (Barr & Neville, 2014). Both types of racial socialization messages have been shown to decrease psychological distress, buffer against lower levels of self-esteem and low-energy (Bynum, Burton, & Best, 2007; G. Y. Davis & Stevenson, 2006).

Youth and adolescences who experience discrimination are more likely to reach out to their peers and parents to discuss these experiences and learn strategies to cope and address these incidents. However, the participants in this study did not feel comfortable talking with their parents when experiencing discrimination and racism, especially prior to college. Similarly, Septima and Daisy did not talk with their peers about racism they experienced prior to college. A limited amount of *protective* racial socialization conversations prior to attending a PWI may not have prepared the participants on how to address racial discrimination and oppression campus. Both participants credit activism for increasing their self-esteem and awareness related addressing incidents of racism. Specifically, Daisy and Septima identified their increased conversations with peers and adults about racial socialization for this improvement.

Additionally, the participants did not describe having *proactive* racial socialization conversations with their parents that highlighted the positive aspects of Black culture. The benefits of these conversations would have fostered a positive self-image and increased commitment to the Black community. Daisy and Septima acknowledged that engagement in activism and with Black people and spaces on and around campus increased their self-esteem

and commitment to creating improving the campus for Black students. Overall, the majority of their racial socialization started in college.

### **The Benefits of Engagement in Activism**

Daisy and Septima identified some benefits related to their engagement in socio-political activism on the campus of a PWI. Sense of belonging was greatly diminished for both participants prior to engagement in activism. Racial cohesion appeared to provide the most benefit to the participants as it increased their sense of agency, hope, and safety on campus. Similarly, less priority was devoted to scholarly tasks to accommodate for the increased responsibilities related to activism. The themes explored in this section include: sense of belonging and racial cohesion.

**Sense of belonging.** Prior research shows that Black students, in general, have a lower sense of belonging than White students (Johnson et al., 2007). Hussain and Jones (2019) noted the negative effects that experiences of bias, discrimination, and perceived lack of intuitional support have on the sense of belonging of Black students at PWIs. Both Septima and Daisy seriously questioned if they belonged on their campus, especially during freshman year. They identified engagement in activism as a factor in increasing their sense of belonging at the PWI.

For Black students attending PWIs, campus involvement was found to be a significant factor in their retention and success (Brooks & Allen, 2016). Therefore, Black students are more likely to remain enrolled in college if they are involved on campus and have a sense of belonging (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Daisy and Septima shared the importance of gaining access to Black mentors and safe spaces on campus that they might not have accessed if they did not engage in activism. They recalled feeling supported not only academically but personally, as well.

Research also suggests that a sense of belonging for Black students may extend to relationships in the communities surrounding the campus (Brooks & Allen, 2016). Again, Septima and Daisy shared the importance of engaging and connecting with the surrounding community. For Septima, this extension of her sense of belonging was a primary coping skill in response to racial incidents on campus. Daisy found that engagement in outreach as an activist with local high school students was rewarding. Similarly, Guiffrida (2003) found that Black students benefit from participating in the Black communities outside of the PWI.

**Racial cohesion.** Perhaps more applicable to the experiences of Daisy and Septima is the concept of racial cohesion, which is partially influenced by the concept of social belonging. Bentley-Edwards (2016) defines racial cohesion as the coalescence of one's racial group with their own racial identity, behaviors, interests, and agency. More specifically, "racial identity focuses on how one feels about being a Black person, while racial cohesion reveals enactments of these feelings" (Bentley-Edwards, 2016, p.4).

Higher levels of racial cohesion result in an individual having a more positive perception and interaction with Black spaces or other Black individuals. Septima described being instrumental in the creation of the Black Caucus and a Black house on campus. Her efforts and demonstrated a high level of racial cohesion. Similarly, Daisy expressed having a high level of racial cohesion in sharing her appreciation and reassurance that she can rely on the Black community on campus for support and she attempted to reciprocate. Prior research emphasizes the importance of these close relationships for Black students as they might provide more protection from hostile campus environments than relationships with White peers (Thelamour, Mwangi, & Ezeofor, 2019).

Septima and Daisy conveyed comparable individual investments in the success and future of Black students, which is often reflective of people who demonstrate high racial cohesion (Bentley-Edwards, 2016). A significant portion of the meaning they attributed to their activism work was improving the campus culture, not so much for themselves, but for their fellow Black students and future Black cohorts who will attend the school.

Furthermore, Bentley-Edwards (2016) identified *racial agency* as a factor that contributes to one's racial cohesion. Racial agency represents an individual's hope and desire for positive change to occur in the Black community through their actions. While both demonstrated racial agency, they expressed a desire to make the campus a better place for future Black students and hope that it can be achieved through their activism efforts. "Racial Agency symbolizes a sense of sociopolitical agency in the Black community as a whole and in their proximal environment as well" (Bentley-Edwards, 2016, p. 13). Increased sense of hope and agency about the issues in the Black community was suggested to positively impact an individual's sense their personal goals are attainable (Bentley-Edwards, Agonafer, Edmondson, & Alaina Flannigan, 2016). Septima and Daisy expressed a greater sense of confidence in their abilities to influence change and belief that their career goals are attainable. Septima expressed that she was very passionate about the activism work she has done and was inspired to continue this work for the rest of her life.

### **The Cost of Engagement in Activism**

Conversely, engagement in socio-political activism on the campus of a PWI also resulted in negative consequences for the participants. Mental health was often impacted especially as involvement in activism increased. Similarly, scholarly tasks were prioritized less to accommodate for the increased responsibilities related to activism. The themes explored in this section include: activist burnout and academic performance.

**Activist Burnout.** Activist burnout refers to the accumulation of activism-related stress that negatively impacts the physical and emotional well-being and sense of hope of the activist, forcing them to reduce or disengage completely (Rettig, 2006). Both participants in this study shared stories that described experiencing symptoms of burnout related to their engagement in activism on campus. Comparing the stress related to racism and engagement in activism, Septima said that engagement in activism was comparable to fighting two battles at once. She described the first battle as coping with the racism that occurred on campus and the second battle as having to constantly prove the legitimacy of the issue and that your life matters.

Daisy and Septima recalled being significantly more involved in activism during their sophomore year. They both noted being more aware of many issues that could be addressed and felt compelled to do as much as they could which lead to them feeling “overwhelmed.” Septima reported gaining 30 pounds and losing an average of three hours per night of sleep. She recalled not sleeping for a period of three nights because she was doing activism planning. She added that she felt pressured to complete the tasks by herself as she did not want to burden other students. Septima was surprised that she survived this stressful period of her life and vowed to not experience something similar in the future. The summer after her sophomore year, Septima visited her doctor and explained the severity of her symptoms and the diagnosis was that it was stress-induced. Junior year, she reduced her commitments and responsibilities by being more selective in choosing opportunities that were enjoyable and satisfying. She also incorporated more relaxation, by watching Netflix, taking time to be by herself, and using facial peel-off masks more often.

**Academic Performance.** While their experiences differ, each participant acknowledged that engagement in activism negatively impacted their ability to perform as they desired,

academically. Daisy recalled that her engagement in activism increased during her sophomore year, as did the amount of stress she experienced. She attributed this, in part, to gaining a better understanding of how an academic setting works and the multitude of issues that exist. She felt compelled to address each problem and began to feel overwhelmed, as the work never ended. Balancing her responsibilities with school and activism became increasingly more challenging. During the Fall semester of her sophomore year, her grades declined as she was not able to devote enough time to school. She barely maintained the GPA required to retain her scholarship. Activism began to negatively affect her “attention span and concentration” in class and increased the amount of time and energy to complete her coursework. Daisy said that she sacrificed having a social life and seeing her friends for long and late hours devoted to activism and course work.

In their qualitative study, Linder, et al., (2019) use the word *labor* to describe the additional work that students endure when engaging activism on campus. They explored the lived experiences of 25 students with minoritized identities and the cost and consequences of their engagement in activism on primarily PWI campuses. One of the consequences the researchers identified was decreased academic performance and learning. Similar to Daisy and Septima’s experiences of activism, participants in their study expressed difficulty with balancing studies with the demands of activism. Additionally, some compromised their well-being and sacrificed their social life to adjust.

### **Implications**

This study contributes to the literature by adding to the understanding of the experiences and well-being of Black student activists who attend PWI. “By understanding the relationships between race-based campus experiences, political action, and mental health, practitioners can support students in their efforts to create a positive learning environment in ways that do not

threaten mental health or the primary objective for students— graduation” (Hope, et al, 2018, p.36). Black students who decide to engage in activism on a PWI would benefit from being aware of the mental health resources offered on campus or in the community for additional support. The participants in this study acquired additional stress when engaging in activism while coping with racism-related stress and their well-being declined (see activist burnout), thus increasing the need for support. Practitioners can be trained to better support Black students who engage in activism on PWIs by increasing their awareness of mental health symptoms related to coping with racism and working to address and change the problems. Both Septima and Daisy stated that their experiences as Black students were significantly different than their White peers on campus, as they do not have to navigate or cope with racism. Therefore, Black students would benefit from having practitioners, who understand the effects that the campus and national culture have on the well-being of the Black students they work with, as this should reduce the threat of over-pathologizing this population. Additionally, practitioners could proactively and collaboratively work with Black student activists to identify specific goals related to activism to maximize their efforts and create a balanced approach that includes self-care and course work while reducing the threats of activist burn-out. Ultimately, Black students would benefit the most from PWI administrators who address racism on campus in a more timely and sufficient manner and create initiatives that improve diversity and the campus climate. This would greatly reduce the additional burden on Black students who engage in activism to address these chronic and systematic issues and allow them to focus more on the primary reason they enrolled, to be students. This would most likely increase the retention and graduation rates of Black students as well.

## **Limitations**

First, the use of narrative inquiry and small sample size means that the findings from this research cannot be generalized. Additionally, the generalizability of the results is extremely limited by the intersectionality of the identities and aspects of the participants in this study, which includes their socioeconomic status, race, gender, religious beliefs, sexuality, ability status, region of the country, for example. Second, despite utilizing steps to address race-of-interviewer-effects, the potential for this to negatively impact the level of trust between the participants and the researcher cannot be prevented. Specifically, as a White person, I resemble the many White people who have acted in ways that were hurtful, untrustworthy, and disingenuous to both participants in this study. As a result, the potential for the content and depth of the interviews to be impacted exist as the participants may not have felt comfortable to share certain details or experiences.

## **Future Research**

First, the participants in this study both identified as female and future research could study the experiences of Black males who engage in socio-political activism on PWI. Research suggests that gender differences exist between how Black females and males experience and respond to racism. Future researchers could study potential gender differences related to Black students who engage in activism.

Second, future research should consider exploring student perceptions of the campus climates where more POC are in positions of power on PWI campuses. The fact that most people in power were White was a concern raised by the participants in this study. Prior research has looked at the impact of having more faculty of color and found this to benefit students' of color sense of support, but little research exists on administrations.



Third, future research should explore the impact of the increased engagement in socio-political activism in the US following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. Specifically, Black activists would benefit from focusing on how this increased engagement on a nationwide scale impacts their well-being. Furthermore, the research could explore how sense of belonging and racial cohesion are impacted.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this study suggest that the experiences of Black students who attend predominantly White institutions and engage in socio-political activism are multifaceted. The participants' in this study described feeling largely unsupported by the administration's insufficient response to address incidents of racism on campus and decided to rely on themselves and other Black students to create positive change. The benefits of engaging in activism were identified as an increased sense of belonging and racial cohesion. This was exemplified by their experiences of increased hope and confidence that their activism efforts would improve the campus for Black students.

Conversely, the stories shared by both participants depict the unjust burden they acquired when engaging in activism on campus. Not only did they cope with racism on their campus, but engagement in activism added additional stress that further separated their college experiences from their White peers. Engagement in activism negatively affected their mental well-being, social life, and academic performance. By implementing some of the recommendations that resulted from this study, Black students would benefit from an improved sense of belonging, support, and reduced stress as this would increase their satisfaction, retention, and graduation rates.

## **APPENDIX**

## Appendix A

### Semi-structured Interview Protocol

#### 1. Campus Experience

- a. “What has been your experience as a Black student attending this college/university?”

#### 2. Participation in Campus Activism

- a. “Tell me about your role as a student leader in XXX organization or as a student activist on campus.”

#### 3. Racial Issues

- a. “What were some critical moments you experienced attending this college/university, specifically regarding race?”
- b. “Describe to me the process that you use during student activism when critical moments occur.”

#### 4. Perceptions of Well-being

- a. “What are your perceptions of your physical and psychological well-being and activities you engage in that impact your well-being?”
- b. “Describe to me the process that you use during student activism to maintain your sense of well-being.”

#### 5. Sense of Belonging

- a. “Describe your sense of belonging campus by your peers, faculty, and staff and how it impacts you.”

- b. “How has your engagement in campus activism impacted your sense of belonging?”
- 6. Coping Strategies
  - a. “Please describe the ways you cope with campus related stress.”
  - b. “How has your engagement in campus activism impacted your ability to cope with campus related stress?”
- 7. Support
  - a. “Discuss your experiences of support from peers, faculty, and staff and provide examples.”
  - b. “How has your engagement in campus activism impacted your sense of support?”
- 8. Academic Achievement
  - a. “How would you describe your academic achievement at this university?”
  - b. “How has your engagement in campus activism impacted your academic achievement?”

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