



**Black Undergraduate Students,
Microaggressions, and Peer Networks at a
Predominantly White Institution**

Joshua Childs
University of Texas at Austin

Research
Supported by:



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*The opinions expressed in
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Introduction

Historically, Black students have not received the same access to higher education as White students. Black slaves were forbidden by law across the south from learning to read or write, and were seldom educated in large numbers. While Oberlin College in Ohio became the first higher education institution in the United States to enroll Black students in 1835, it wasn't until the late 1950s and 1960s that Black enrollment in higher education began to increase. Since universities began admitting Black students, their central challenge has been situated around ensuring that Black students receive an education equivalent to White students, feel supported and safe within the university setting, and are able to access the academic, social, and economic resources that universities are capable of providing (Gomez et al, 2015). However, as evidenced by the swell in student activism amid escalating tensions over hostile university racial climates during the fall of 2015, many universities are still grappling on how to make their campuses more accommodating for Black students. The marginalization of Black students at higher education institutions, specifically traditional four-year universities, has been the focus of numerous research studies for over forty years (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). Much of this research has focused on the obstacles and negative experiences that Black students encounter while attending postsecondary institutions. While it is true that more Black students have enrolled into higher education institutions in the past 15 years, evidence suggests that Black students still fall behind their White peers when it comes to undergraduate degree completion (Harper, 2013). In numerous studies, Black students have reported experiencing stereotypes on campus (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007), experience high levels of stress (Ancis et al., 2000; Neville et al., 2004), feeling academically underprepared (Kim & Conrad, 2006), and unable to form strong relationships with White faculty (Mayo et al., 1995; Schwitzer et al., 1999). Given that

predominantly white institutions (PWIs) claim to desire campus communities that are inclusive and diverse, it is essential to examine the supports available for Black students at the university that can help foster a positive campus climate and lead to successful degree completion.

Despite the attention and the changes in Black student enrollment at higher education institutions, the Black student college experience can still be less than positive. Considerable investment has been made by universities to create initiatives to understand the Black student experience, and increase support to improve social and academic outcomes. In this paper, I report on a three year study on the experiences of 22 Black graduate students at a PWI in the south.

Background

Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin was a Supreme Court case that ruled that UT-Austin could continue with a holistic admissions policy that included race as part of the evaluation criteria. This allowed for UT-Austin's progressive admissions policy to stand and allow the university to move forward with diversifying its student body through various metrics. In the post *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* era, it has become increasingly important that higher education institutions not only be aware of race in college admissions, but also when it comes to student retention and graduation. White and Asian students enroll in postsecondary education at higher rates than their Black counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Studies have shown that Black high school graduates are less prepared for college than any other racial group, as they take fewer AP and honors courses, and are more likely to take remedial courses in high school (ACT & United Negro College Fund, 2014). Also, Black college students are more likely to come from low-socioeconomic neighborhoods and communities, and be underrepresented at 4-year universities (Berkner- Chavez, 1997). Black students are also more

likely to enroll in community colleges than they are to enroll in 4-year universities (Berkner-Chavez, 1997). The underrepresentation of Black students at 4-year universities is supported with data that shows Black students graduating at lower rates than Whites and Asians (Astin & Oseguera, 2005).

Once enrolled at a postsecondary institution, Black students are often challenged with adjustment difficulties that are not usually experienced by their White counterparts (Gardner, Barrett, & Pearson, 2014). This includes, but is not limited to, stressors such as lack of knowledge about the college process, institutional racism, poor health and energy, social isolation, and family and economic problems (Ancis et al., 2000; Watkins et al., 2007). In one study, Prelow et al. (2006) found that 98.5% of Black students reported experiences of discrimination at their college campus. The marginalization of Black students at higher education institutions, specifically traditional four-year universities, has been the focus of numerous research studies for decades (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). However, as evidenced by the swell in student activism amid escalating tensions over hostile university racial climates happening nationwide, many universities are still grappling with how to make their campuses more accommodating for Black students.

Literature Review

Three strands of research inform this study on Black students' networks and experiences at PWIs. In this section, I review the research literature on homophily and its impact on creating connections between students. I also discuss the impact on microaggressions on the Black student college experiences. Finally, I discuss racial battle fatigue (RBF) as an appropriate framework for understanding the effects of microaggressions and racism on Black students.

Homophily

In network theory, homophily refers to the affinity one shows or has towards similar others (Mollica et al., 2003). In other words, social connections occur between individuals who are similar based on demographic or personal attributes (McPherson et al., 2001). Early studies on homophily examined small groups and focused on understanding how it manifests within schools, colleges, and neighborhoods (Farmer & Farmer, 1996; Joyner & Kao, 2000; McCroskey et al., 1975). Typically, homophily is demonstrated based on demographic factors such as race, class, and gender (McPherson et al., 2001). However, recent studies in homophily have highlighted how proximity in terms of physical location or similar interests both professionally and personally also influence the types of interactions that happen between individuals (Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

Homophily in social networks is also a source of human capital (Coleman, 1988). Personal networks have been shown to increase job satisfaction, educational success, and positive interactions among peers (Lin, 1999; Krug & Rubien, 2021; Hasan & Bagde, 2013). Within university settings, a student's social network allows them to gain access to important information like available courses, opportunities for social interactions, and increased connection with the physical spaces on campus (Fries-Britt, 2017; George Mwangi et al., 2016).

Racial Microaggressions & Racial Battle Fatigue

Research has highlighted the ongoing problem of racial hostility, discrimination, and prejudice in higher education (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Jones and Reddick (2017) discussed the emotional cost of being a Black student at a PWI. In their research they discussed how Black students can be labeled as unstable, disruptive, or a nuisance for existing or challenging norms on college campuses. Black students at PWIs engage in forms of activism that can lead to

negative social, academic, emotional, and physiological consequences (Feagin et al., 1996; Jones & Reddick, 2017; Smith et al., 2011). Racial microaggressions refer to the everyday, subtle, verbal and non-verbal insults that operate as mechanisms of racism (Sue et al., 2019). Pierce (1974) documented how microaggressions can lead to detrimental mental and physical health outcomes.

It is well documented that students of color experience racial microaggressions in higher education (Brown et al., 2019; Hubain et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2006). Several studies have highlighted the experiences of Black college students at PWIs, revealing that microaggressions happen across academic programs, disciplines, campus buildings, and other institutional spaces (Borum & Walker, 2012; Clark et al., 2012; Hubain et al., 2016; Mahtani, 2004; Willis, 2015). Research has documented how Black students report experiencing more hostility in higher education that is directed toward them than other groups (Brown et al., 2019; Smith, et al., 2016).

Consistent exposure to microaggressions and overt racism can lead to racial battle fatigue (RBF) within Black students (Smith et al., 2011). As a conceptual framework, RBF (Smith et al., 2006; 2016) asserts that the cumulative effects of racism on Black students can be draining and excessive, and impact their educational achievement. Hostile learning and living environments can also RBF and impact the attraction, persistence, and retention of Black students at PWIs (Lee et al., 2020).

Methods

This study is guided by the following research questions: 1) How do Black students' networks influence their experiences at a PWI? 2) In what ways do Black students rely on their networks to navigate microaggressions and racism at a PWI? 3) What resources do Black students gain through their personal networks? This study uses qualitative data from 22 in-depth

interviews to understand how Black students relied on their personal networks at a PWI. Students were either in their second or third year, and classified as either a sophomore, junior, or senior. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 60-90 minutes each and were recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol used informal and open-ended questioning sequence in order to elicit a range of responses. Each study participant also completed a social network survey that asked about their personal and professional connections on and off campus.

Data were collected at a PWI in the southwest United States. Historically the institution has had trouble recruiting and retaining Black students, not having its first class of Black students enroll and attend the university till the late 1950s. The Black student population has never risen above 6% and in recent years there have been a number of racial incidents that have negatively impacted Black student recruitment efforts. At the time of data collection, campus enrollment was just over 50,000.

During the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school year, a survey went out to over 250 Black undergraduate students on campus to complete a web-based survey. Campus organizations and departments helped with the recruitment of students. From the sample of students that completed surveys, a call was sent out for those who were willing to be interviewed. 48 students completed initial interviews, and 22 of the 48 had follow up interviews at a later date. This project followed Institutional Review Board protocols for research involving human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants in the study. Pseudonyms are used when applicable throughout the paper.

Interview data were coded in Dedoose, with deductive codes developed from literature on student networks and undergraduate experiences (Miles et al., 2014). Guided by the literature review, I employed a deductive analytical approach to identify instances of homophily and

microaggressions experienced by Black students at the PWI. This deductive approach included a series of codes developed before the analysis of the survey's open-ended responses. Themes emerged from the codes and were useful for answering the research questions.

Findings

Network Composition based on Microaggression Experiences

Many Black students described their networks as being influential on their experience at the PWI, despite the many microaggressions they experienced on campus. Black students in the study described feeling more connected on campus in large part due to their peer networks. As one student said, "I feel included and a part of social activities and outings in large part due to the people I hang out with and know." Many described a feeling of connectedness to the university thanks to their peer networks. Another student described feeling like 'a part' of the larger community when they attended a football game with one of their friends:

"I had attended a few football games on my own when I first got here. It was lonely, even though the games were exciting to watch. However, once I got friends and especially folks who wanted to get to know me—I got to go to the games with them. It was a much better experience. There was one time when some other students started yelling racial slurs about the Black players playing on the field. It was hurtful to hear but my group of friends was able to get them quieted down and make the game enjoyable."

This example highlights the importance of peer networks for Black students on campus, especially when it came to experience social activities. In this example we see how the student's peer network helped to not only make the game enjoyable but also navigated a series of microaggressions.

Whether it was subtle or explicit, Black students described in detail experiencing microaggressions as soon as they arrived on campus. Study participants provided numerous examples of microaggressions, verbal racial assaults, and feeling threatened due to being Black. As one student told me about her experience: "It happens at least once a day and sometimes

more than once a day. I hear about how smart I am or lucky to be here. It gets annoying.”

Another student expressed: “It gets old. It’s tiring. It’s the subtle backhanded compliments or digs that make me feel unworthy of being a student here sometimes.” These students’ experiences emphasize the toll that microaggressions can have on the overall Black student experience at PWIs.

To mitigate the harm of microaggressions, students described relying on their peer networks. As one student explained, “Who I hang out with matters. They get me. Understand me and see me for who I really am.” Another student described that their friend group was important to being able to deal with not only the daily stress of school, but also their experiences as a Black student at a PWI. “I don’t hang around white people. I don’t have any white friends. What’s the point? I mean they don’t know or get me,” said one student. When I pressed them further, they were adamant that their Black friends were easier to get to know and easier to experience life on campus with. “Plus they don’t think I don’t belong. Because if I don’t belong then they don’t belong.” Their personal networks were instrumental in keeping them safe on campus.

These networks were not only comprised of students, but also faculty, staff, alumni, family, and friends from back home. However, when most of our study participants talked about their personal networks they referred to their friends on campus. For many of the Black students they identified making their friends from orientation week(s), taking similar classes in Africana Studies, meeting them at different Black student organizational functions and events, or living in the same dormitory. Very rarely did they identify meeting other Black students in their personal networks from courses in their major. In fact, for several of the Black students that were interviewed they discussed how their personal networks helped them not feel so isolated because they were one of a few or the only one in their major or academic building. As one participant

related, “I just don’t see many people who look like me and that is why I hang out with the friends I do.” For many of the students, relating with peers who understood what it was like to be Black at a PWI was important. They chose living arrangements, class schedules, and even where to hang out based on their networks. For the undergraduates that were living on campus and in student housing, having other Black friends was expressed as very important. “I have heard of other Black students who were the only Black person on their [dorm] hall floor. I didn’t want to have that experience so I made sure that I was living with someone else that was Black or that I knew,” said one of the sophomore students.

Resource Access

Qualitative data also indicated that Black students leveraged their personal networks to gain access to a variety of resources on campus. This includes navigating academic contexts, connecting with faculty, securing financial aid and scholarships, professional opportunities, and social experiences that positively impacted their undergraduate experience. Students talked about how their networks were important for overcoming some of the microaggressions and blatant racism they had experienced while at the PWI. One student discussed how one of their friends helped them to find resources for securing a summer internship:

“It was weird because in class everyone was talking about their summer internships and asking me why I had not gotten an internship yet. It was almost like everyone was in the know on how to get an internship except me. I did not know until later that every student in the class had some family or professional connection to the company or business they would be working for. Some students in class even said that I was smart enough for an internship but probably did not present well. I did not know what that meant. Anyways, one of my close friends helped me to secure an internship with a Black-owned business. It was a family friend of theirs. I do not know what I would have done without my friend helping me out like that.”

Other students shared that connecting with faculty and staff through their personal networks helped to make either the transition or staying connected to campus easier. As a student shared,

“learning about who the important staff were and the good faculty to take classes from. I learned that all from my friends and people I’m close with.” There was an expectation that Black students would connect with not only other Black students, but with Black faculty and staff, who were best equipped to help them during the college years. While many of our study participants found that helpful, it did create some tension for some who felt that it was a requirement or forced. “It was hard because the high school I went to, I was the only Black student in my grade. So making Black friends in the beginning was hard. It felt almost forced or I had to. However, I am glad I did because I don’t think this place would be as fun if it wasn’t for the other Black friends I gained here,” described a student.

An important resource that was afforded from the peer networks was access to counterspaces at the PWI. Counterspaces are defined as academic and social spaces that are free from microaggressions and racism (Torres & Charles, 2004; Solórzano et al., 2000). Counterspaces often provide opportunities for Black students to build community and engage with one another within certain parts of the college campus. One student described it as: “I had no clue about the MLK Lounge. It is the spot where Black students on campus come and hang out. Fellowship and just chill. Like I had never heard about it till I met with some other Black students who told me where I could find other Black students at. It’s our space.”

Conclusion

Black students relied on their peer networks to navigate the organizational dimensions of their higher education campus. Black students in our study wanted to be connected to other Black students on campus, which in turn helped them to feel a part of the larger campus community. Black students discussed participating in Black student organizations, attending Black student events and programming, and the importance of Black student networks on

navigating unwelcoming spaces on campus. Black students discussed often being invited or persuaded to join other Black students at events because it would help to expand their personal networks. There was an expectation for Black students to become friends or develop relationships during their time as an undergraduate, and to pay it ‘forward’ to the Black student community. Dawson’s theory (1995) describes students feeling a sense of responsibility to give back so that others lived experiences, particularly within higher education, is better than their own.

This research demonstrates the importance of social networks for Black students at PWIs. Higher education institutions, from the moment Black undergraduates arrive on campus, should target support and resources for Black students to become acclimated on campus quickly. This includes facilitating opportunities for Black undergraduates to connect with alumni, current students, faculty and staff. This will allow Black students to begin to build their networks early in their undergraduate experience, and possibly lead to less feelings of isolation and disconnect from the larger university campus. For example, outreach services and support programs can better help Black students connect with resources during their first semester.

Lessons learned from this project could inform future research, such as exploring the ways in which Black students’ networks influence their post-graduation professional and personal experiences. Do their networks lead to future opportunities as it relates to job placement, living location, or other personal networks? This could inform university programming and initiatives that focus on Black students, both while they are on campus and after graduation. Understanding these networks over time also has the potential to inform organizational and policy decisions that could nurture better college-going experiences for Black students.

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