Relational Aggression among Female African American Undergraduates: An Intersectional Perspective

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Abstract

Limited scholarship has focused on the relationally aggressive experiences of women of color and additional information is needed about experiences of relational aggression within college environments. The goals of this study were to discover the experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors experienced by Black female college students, to determine if there were instances of racialized content within relationally aggressive experiences, to examine if the experiences of these women were captured by the existing paradigm on relational aggression among women, and to determine if there is a need for new theorizing on relational aggression that integrates an intersectional perspective. Data collection methods included focus groups and interviews. Data was analyzed using qualitative methods, including Narrative Inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1995) and The Listening Method (Brown & Gilligan, 1993).

Relationally aggressive experiences were occurring for the women in this study and being perceived as harmful. Women were experiencing gossip and exclusion from the Black University community and academic and social exclusion from White students. Racially specific relationally aggressive content such as accusations of "acting White" and stereotypes such as the "angry Black woman" and "strong Black woman" played a role in relationally aggressive experiences. Additional factors such as year in school and small Black community size were also influential.

The existing paradigm of relationally aggressive experiences sufficiently addressed behaviors and relationships in which aggression was experienced, but failed to account for race specific content and contexts of experience. Experience of multiple social identities concurrently and the influence of these identities on each other and on experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors lend support for a need for the integration of an intersectional perspective in future

relational aggression research. This study contributes to a growing body of knowledge on the relationally aggressive experiences of college women. It extends the body of work considering the role of race in relational aggression, and evaluates the need for an intersectional perspective in relational aggression research. Understanding of the experiences discussed in this survey could prove useful for researchers, student affairs professionals, mental health care providers, and Black female undergraduates.

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Dedications:

This work is dedicated to my family and God, without whom I never could have come this far.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

College has long been thought to be a time of both academic learning and personal growth (Graham & Cockriel, 1994). Personal growth includes identity exploration (Erikson, 1968) and it is not uncommon for students to grapple with ethnic identity, religion, personal belief systems, gender roles or a combination of these during their college years (Arnett, 2000). Amidst this period of change and the resultant stress that may come along, friendships provide a much needed support (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007), and while friendships are thought to be beneficial for both genders, women are found to place more importance on their friendships and suffer greater ill effects after the loss of a friendship compared to men (Simmons, 2011; Underwood, 2003). Friendships may be of particular importance for women of color attending Predominantly White Institutions, who may face unique challenges such as pressure not to acclimate to White culture from family members (Thompson, Lightfoot, Castillo, & Hurst, 2010) and racial discrimination on campus (Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006) due to having to navigate both gender and racial identity (Cole & Jacob Arriola, 2007; Williams & Nichols, 2012).

With peer support networks considered to be a vital part of adjustment to the personal and academic challenges of college (Buote et al., 2007; Friedlander et al., 2007; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008), it is essential to examine the quality of peer relationships when looking at the overall mental health and educational success of college students (Buote et al., 2007; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Swenson et al., 2008). Many studies have investigated different facets of this phenomenon such as close friendships and adjustment to college or university (Buote et al., 2007; Swenson et al., 2008) and “friendsickness” (preoccupation with

and concern for the loss of or change in precollege friendships) (Paul & Brier, 2001, p. 77). However, in recent years research has given insight to a newly defined set of behaviors that can occur within friendships that may produce negative effects. This set of negative behaviors is most commonly called *relational aggression* and is defined as "harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships" (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, p. 711). Additional research has expanded the definition to include "indirect acts such as spreading rumors, gossiping about a peer, or withdrawing one's attention from a peer by giving the 'silent treatment'" (Ostrov, Ries, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008, p. 665). While indirect and social aggression researchers have claimed to be studying different concepts, a meta-analysis determined these three types of aggression to be functionally the same on measures of aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005). As such for the purposes of this study, indirect acts such as purposeful sabotage and socially aggressive acts such as ostracism will be considered relationally aggressive.

Relational aggression is an important issue when evaluating friendship quality, as it has been found to have negative outcomes for both the aggressor and the victim (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Relational victimization has been associated with negative friendship qualities in children (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996), poor school engagement in adolescents (Hoglund, 2007), drug use and alcohol abuse in adolescents and college students (Skara et al., 2008; Storch, Bagner, Geffken, & Baumeister, 2004; Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006), loneliness in children and college students (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Storch et al., 2004), eating disorders in college women (Werner & Crick, 1999), and depression in college students (Gomes, Davis, Baker, & Servonsky, 2009; Storch et al., 2004). Relationally aggressive children have been found to experience different, but equally negative outcomes such as: depression,

loneliness, and isolation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Additionally, while relational aggression within a dyadic friendship may be damaging, individuals who are aggressing together against a third party together may have stronger friendships due to a heightened level of intimacy between friends (Banny, Heilbron, Ames, & Prinstein, 2011; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996).

Early studies of relational aggression focused largely on gender effects. Prior to the inclusion of relational behaviors when exploring aggression, young females were seen to be less aggressive than their male counterparts (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995); however, after including relational forms of aggression, females seemed equally, or in some cases more aggressive (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). One theory is that women and girls have been socialized from an early age not to express anger or participate in physical altercations, and so when the need to aggress rises they turn to more subtle forms of aggression (Dellasega, 2005; Engel, 2008; Simmons, 2011). Indirect aggression researchers have argued that physically aggressive behaviors have higher potential costs for women, and thus they may rely on indirect means (Archer & Coyne, 2005). While the difference between genders in the types of aggressive behaviors displayed was supported by early research in the field (Österman et al., 1998), there are those who have found that gender differences in relational aggression do not carry over into adulthood (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Archer, 2004; Forrest, Eatough, & Shevlin, 2005), or that boys and men are in fact more aggressive in general (Storch et al., 2004). The question remains if the gender difference in forms of aggression used in childhood and adolescence carries over into adulthood, or if when faced with an adult world that has strong prohibitions against physical aggression men begin to display relationally aggressive behaviors (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Hess & Hagen, 2006). Due to the mixed findings in adult research, many studies investigating relational aggression continue to be framed as an examination of gender differences of aggression. This perspective has limited

consideration of other contextual factors, such as race and socioeconomic status, which may also be at play in determining levels of relational aggression in adulthood.

The majority of relational aggression studies focus on early to middle childhood (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 2007; Giesbrecht, Leadbeater, & Macdonald, 2011; Peters, Cillessen, Riksen-Walraven, & Haselager, 2010; Reed, Goldstein, Morris, & Keyes, 2008), though certain studies have found evidence for relational aggression in adulthood (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Lagerspetz, 1994; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003; Weber & Kurpius, 2011). However, as with the majority of studies in this domain, these studies focused on gender differences, and did not examine other potentially explanatory factors such as race, socio-economic status, or cultural influences.

Race has received relatively little attention in relational aggression research, and is very seldom addressed outside of the initial description of participants in the methodology section. Many studies have been conducted among largely Caucasian samples (Chapell et al., 2004; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Werner, 2007; Nelson, Springer, Nelson, & Bean, 2008; Weber & Kurpius, 2011; Werner & Crick, 1999), and although more recent studies have had diverse samples, they report their findings based on gender (Burr, Ostrov, Jansen, & Crick, 2010; Crick, Bigbee, et al., 2007; Ostrov & Crick, 2007; Storch et al., 2004). While the pattern of continuing to report relational aggression as a matter of gender may reflect the history of the field, examining behaviors by gender alone may not be sufficient to understand the experiences of aggression for all women.

The consideration of race in relationally aggressive experiences could be significant. Black students attending Predominately White Institutions experience unique stressors such as the accusation of "Acting White" (Durkee & Williams, 2013; Murray, Neal-Barnett, Demmings,

& Stadulis, 2012; Thompson et al., 2010), racial microaggressions (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2012; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Williams & Nichols, 2012), and negotiating the development of multiple identities (Cole & Jacob Arriola, 2007). Black female students are experiencing negative emotional and physical consequences of these experiences (Armstead, Hebert, Griffin, & Prince, 2013; Blume et al., 2012; Gomes et al., 2009; Prelow et al., 2006; Williams & Nichols, 2012). These aspects of Black women's experiences may factor into the relationally aggressive experiences of Black female college students, but have not previously been addressed in this area of research.

Proponents of intersectionality argue that to explore complex psychological occurrences, we must look beyond gender or race alone, and must instead examine what role the intersection of multiple identities has on the experience, performance, or perception of the behavior that we wish to study (Cole, 2009). We cannot, for example, simply add participants from an understudied population into an existing protocol. Instead we must explore if the combination of multiple identities might change how our instruments are viewed, and how participants may respond to questions as they are phrased (e.g., are there power dynamics at play that we have not taken into account? Might the assumptions that we make in language affect our results?). Without attending to these intersections we risk discussing surface-level differences, and may miss a deeper level of meaning (Cole, 2009). Prior research on relationally aggressive behavior has not examined how the intersections of race and gender may be influencing experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors.

With a primary focus on gender differences in relational aggression in both adolescent and adult samples, little attention has been paid to the issue of racial differences (Gomes et al., 2009; Gomes, 2011; Sullivan, Helms, Kliewer, & Goodman, 2010). And still less attention has

been given to intersectional perspectives. Studies with adult samples often either woefully under-represent people of color (Chapell et al., 2004; Weber & Kurpius, 2011; Werner & Crick, 1999), or only report results for the entire sample with no mention of potential between or within-group differences (Burr, Ostrov, Jansen, & Crick, 2010; Crick, Bigbee, et al., 2007; Goldstein, 2011; Ostrov & Crick, 2007; Storch et al., 2004). However, studies that have attended to race have found differences in relational aggression patterns between African American and Caucasian samples, in that African American adolescent females were not found to be more relationally aggressive than African American adolescent males (Belgrave, Nguyen, Johnson, & Hood, 2011; Sullivan et al., 2010). In instances where racial differences were reported, the quantitative nature of the studies did not allow for an in-depth examination of how the experience of relational aggression may differ between women of color and Caucasian women.

Earlier studies have either been tangentially related to the area of relational aggression and women of color (e.g., Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, and Buchanan were studying perceptions of womanhood, and relational aggressive behaviors were spontaneously mentioned: 2008), or have included diverse samples in their studies but framed their questions through the lens of gender (Goldstein, 2011). Some clinical implications have been considered (Sullivan et al., 2010), but there is scarcity of work dedicated to the experiences of women of color in regards to their experiences of relationally aggressive acts (Gomes et al., 2009; Gomes, 2011). There have been calls to expand the body of work both in areas of adult and college student populations (Czar, Dahlen, Bullock, & Nicholson, 2011; Nelson et al., 2008), and in populations of color (Gomes et al., 2009; Gomes, 2011; Neal, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2010). However, little research on relational aggression has moved in this direction.

One preliminary study indicates that women of color either do not experience relational aggression as frequently as White women in their friendships or do not feel inclined to disclose the events as freely as other participants (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). Another possibility that has been proposed is that women of color do experience relationally aggressive behaviors in their relationships, but do not consider them as harmful as other participants (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005). However, in a clinical study, it was found that female African American college women did experience relational aggression, and while there were only a small number of participants who reported victimization, the study showed a positive correlation between being the victim of relationally aggressive behavior and depression (Gomes et al., 2009).

It would be interesting to consider aspects of African American culture and resulting stereotypes in relational aggression research. Stereotypes, such as the "strong Black woman" (e.g., that a strong Black woman endures hardships without complaint and provides emotional support for others without asking for it herself; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009), may be preventing spontaneous reporting of relationally aggressive behaviors experienced by women of color. After all, to complain would be to appear weak, a direct violation of the ideal (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010; Settles et al., 2008). Closely related to the strong Black woman stereotype is the "angry Black woman" stereotype (e.g., that Black women are always angry and likely to respond with anger, even in situations that do not merit it; Parks, 2010), which may have mixed results when included within the context of relationally aggressive research. On one hand the "angry Black woman" is free to express her anger and does not shy away from confrontation (Parks, 2010), which may lead her to exhibit fewer relationally aggressive behaviors (Simmons, 2011). Alternatively, the "angry Black woman" stereotype may be leading to a devaluation of

women of color's genuine emotions (e.g., grief, loneliness, justified anger) (Parks, 2010), which may increase feelings of powerlessness and use of relational aggression (Duncan & Owen-Smith, 2006).

Additional aspects of African American culture that may also affect the content of relationally aggressive behaviors are issues of colorism and the concept of "good hair" (Robinson, 2011; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). The role of skin tone within the African American community is one influenced by historical factors, and evidence from contemporary studies suggests it continues to be a pressing issue within the community today (Hunter, 2002; Russell et al., 1992). The valuation of lighter skin and smoother hair has the potential to be utilized by a relationally aggressive individual to target those who do not possess these traits. Similarly those who are "too light" or conform too much to Caucasian standards of beauty may experience rejection for not being "Black enough" or "acting White" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Darker skinned women may experience taunts within the Black community, receive fewer educational or relationship opportunities (Hunter, 1998, 2002; Russell et al., 1992), and experience higher blood pressure and Body Mass Index (Armstead et al., 2013). Given a heavy emphasis on appearance for women in general, these factors may be particularly salient for Black women. This consideration has not been explored within relational aggression research to date.

In this study, I examine the existence of relational aggression within the relationships of Black undergraduate women. This investigation is based upon multiple focus groups and interviews drawn from a college population. This study is largely exploratory as little groundwork has been laid in the area of relational aggression as experienced by women of color. My research questions are as follows:

1) What are the experiences of relational aggression (RA) among Black/African American college women?
    a. Is there evidence of "racialized" content in RA experiences?
       (e.g., Are darker skinned women excluded from social events? Does hair texture play a role in gossip? Are black female college students accused of 'Acting White'?)
2) How do the RA experiences among Black women relate to the existing paradigm on RA among women in general?
    a. Is there a need for new theorizing on RA that integrates an intersectional perspective, or do existing models/accounts seem to capture cultural variation (even if not explicit)?

Given the current findings in the area of relational aggression, my research questions are almost wholly investigational, and as such no hypotheses as to the findings of this study were delineated. This study is important for several reasons. First, it provides a much needed expansion of the study of relational aggression in women of color. Secondly, this study increases our knowledge of the life experiences of women of color, which in turn helps us shape further research and evaluate existing programs. Third, much of the research in the area of relational aggression has focused on aggressors or victims; little focus has been placed on those who do not participate in the aggressive acts. If this study discovers that Black undergraduate women do not participate in acts of relational aggression or find them harmful, we will have gained valuable insight into the mindset of women who do not participate in such acts. Finally, if there are differences in how women of color experience relational aggression, awareness of

these differences could aid in developing more sensitive measures for future studies of the phenomena.

Terminology

In this study the following definitions will be used for constructs within the study.

Relational Aggression- the use of indirect actions or direct threats to injure, demean, or degrade people within or through their relationships (e.g. malicious gossip, negative non-verbal gestures, threats of withdrawal of friendship, exclusion, purposeful sabotage of persons work (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, & Ferguson, 1989; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Ostrov et al., 2008; Underwood, 2003)

Intersectionality- theoretical perspective that proposes that we examine intersecting identities when investigating complex psychological phenomena (e.g., do the intersecting identities of being female and Black effect the perception or experience of a behavior? Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008)

Strong Black Woman- a stereotype that places value on Black women's ability to handle incredible challenges and obstacles, with little to no assistance or support, with no complaints or expressed reluctance (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010)

Angry Black Woman- a stereotype that portrays Black women as perpetually angry, defensive, and always ready to engage in conflict if they encounter any perceived slight (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010)

First year- in an effort to avoid gendered language (Freshman) and to capture the point of time in which women's experiences may have occurred students were asked what year they were in college, rather than their class rank (Freshman, Sophomore, etc.)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To contextualize the questions for this study I briefly examine how the gender effects that were found in early studies of relational aggression shaped the body of research. I then explore the continuation of relationally aggressive behaviors post-adolescence, before narrowing the focus to college student samples. Following that is a discussion of the role that relationally aggressive behaviors play in friendships, theories on the development of identity for Black Women at a Predominately White Institution, and a discussion of their experiences. The need for an intersectional perspective in the research on topics encompassing multiple aspects of identity (e.g., race, gender, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation) is considered. Finally the role of cultural aspects that may affect the relationally aggressive experiences of women of color is discussed.

Gender and Relational Aggression

The study of "alternative" forms of aggression (i.e., non-physical aggression) has been framed through the lens of gender differences almost since its inception. Given that the earliest theoretical definitions of indirect aggression focused on behaviors (Buss, 1961), study findings were almost always reported with a focus on differences between genders (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Lagerspetz et al., 1988). The pattern continued with the study of social aggression (Underwood, Scott, Galperin, Bjornstad, & Sexton, 2004; Xie, Farmer, & Cairns, 2003), and in the preliminary work on relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). When aggression research focused primarily on physical aggression, researchers found that women exhibited fewer aggressive behaviors than men. However, after including relationally aggressive behaviors, they were finding girls and women to be equally as aggressive as their male counterparts (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Bjorkqvist et al., 1994). In an attempt to gain

more knowledge about an understudied aggressive group, the majority of subsequent studies either focused entirely upon women, or compared genders (Hadley, 2003).

Relational Aggression in Adolescence and Young Adulthood

While one might expect people who utilize aggressive behaviors to face social sanctions, studies have found that aggressive youths are often considered popular when rated by their peers, negative behaviors non-withstanding (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Peters et al., 2010). A growing body of work differentiates between likability and popularity, with likability being linked to positive personality traits and fairly stable overtime (Neal, 2010). Popularity is less stable over time, and linked to relationally aggressive behaviors (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). While there are some indications that popular adolescents may not fare well in an adult world due to increased participation in risky behaviors, and persistent use of antisocial behaviors (Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2010), some adolescents have used relationally aggressive behaviors to increase popularity and social capital (Banny et al., 2011). Therefore, it may be unlikely that individuals would change previously successful behavior patterns but instead would continue to use relational aggression in emergent adulthood.

There is a growing body of work that suggests that relationally aggressive behaviors do not end in adolescence. One potential reason for this continuation of aggressive behaviors is that the behaviors have been successful in the past (e.g., aggressors experienced positive outcomes such as elevated social status, without experiencing negative effects) (Rose & Swenson, 2009). Studies have found relationally aggressive behaviors in the workplace (Dellasega, 2005), intimate relationships (Carroll et al., 2010; Goldstein, 2011), higher education (Chapell et al., 2004; Dellasega, 2005; Kolanko et al., 2005), and assisted living communities (Trompetter, Scholte, & Westerhof, 2011). One theory is that while the frequency of behaviors may decrease,

the behaviors themselves become more complex, secretive, successful, and more difficult to measure quantitatively (Dellasega, 2005). This shift in behaviors and complexity, as well as the loss of classroom settings for observation and peer nomination studies, leads researchers to rely more on interviews, focus groups, and self-report measures with adult samples (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Murray-Close, Ostrov, Nelson, Crick, & Coccaro, 2010; Warren, Richardson, & McQuillin, 2011).

The underlying causes of relationally aggressive behaviors and the effects that such behaviors have on the relationships within an aggressor's life are still widely debated. There are those who argue that relationally aggressive behaviors are not always negative experiences for adolescents within friendships, and that youth may be using gossip and rumor-spreading as a tool to strengthen their position and their relationships (Banny et al., 2011; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012). Also, many adult aggressors do not appear to receive any negative consequences for their behaviors (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Dellasega, 2005). In fact, a benefit of using alternative means of aggression is that they are more difficult to detect and carry lower potential costs to the aggressor (Buss,1961). In contrast to the assertion that relational aggression is normative and functional, others have called for inclusion of relationally aggressive behavior as a psychological condition in the DSM-V (Keenan, Coyne, & Lahey, 2008), and that relationally aggressive behaviors are signs of underlying psychological problems worthy of treatment (Dellasega, 2005). While a substantial body of work has been compiled for mental health outcomes and correlates in children and adolescents, more study of adult aggression is needed to determine if the use of these strategies in adulthood are a manifestation of psychological maladies, or valid strategies for achieving success.

Relational Aggression in College Students

The early foundational research on relational aggression, including the studies typically used to define relationally aggressive behaviors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Ostrov et al., 2008; Simmons, 2011) were conducted with children or adolescents. While studies in college populations do indicate that women are experiencing behaviors consistent with relational aggression (Gomes et al., 2009; Loudin et al., 2003; Weber & Kurpius, 2011; Werner & Crick, 1999), it is possible that aspects of relationally aggressive experience change with age, an additional impetus for this study.

Research on relational aggression post-adolescence is still a growing field, with a notable amount of adult research being conducted in college student populations. Early work with college students linked relationally aggressive behaviors to higher levels of maladjustment than their non-aggressive peers, and confirmed the continuation of developmental trends initially discovered in younger participants (e.g., a linkage between relational aggression and borderline personality symptoms, and eating disorders; Werner & Crick, 1999). Furthermore, relationally aggressive behaviors in college populations are linked to social anxiety, loneliness, depression, and drug and alcohol problems (Gomes et al., 2009; Storch et al., 2004). Additional research has linked relationally aggressive behaviors to low self-esteem (Weber & Kurpius, 2011), lower perspective-taking abilities, and concerns about being evaluated unfavorably (Loudin et al., 2003, p. 437). Victims of relational aggression exhibit symptoms of depression (Gomes et al., 2009) and lowered relationship quality (Loudin et al., 2003).

Further complicating the study of relationally aggressive behaviors among college students are findings suggesting that these behaviors can exist on multiple levels of college life. For instance, aggression has been found to occur between and within student and faculty

relationships (Chapell et al., 2004; Kolanko et al., 2005). College students also have the potential to experience relational aggression within their romantic relationships (Carroll et al., 2010; Goldstein, 2011; Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002), and within their on-campus employment settings (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994). The majority of work on relational aggression in the college student population has focused on friendships as opposed to romantic relationships, however, findings of the growing body of work suggest that relational aggression is a problem within college students' romantic relationships (Goldstein, 2011; Linder et al., 2002). Considering that during the college years most students are beginning to negotiate their need for intimate relationships (Erikson, 1968), and that many will be employed while enrolled in classes (National Center For Education Statistics, 2012) these are important aspects of college student life to be addressed.

College students may be a population with increased vulnerability to relationally aggressive behaviors, particularly during their transition into college, when they face the added stresses of homesickness (Hurst, Baranik, & Daniel, 2012), adjusting to new roommates (Ingalls, 2000), and separation from friends back home (Paul & Brier, 2001). Prior research indicates that a feeling of belonging on campus is important to student success (O'Keeffe, 2008; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Schreiner, 2013), that formation of a supportive friendship while in college increases positive adjustment outcomes (Swenson et al., 2008), and that students experiencing high levels of stress and poor coping skills are at risk for increased levels of depression (Dyson & Renk, 2006). These factors may factor into college students' experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors.

Relational Aggression in Friendships

Even though examinations of relationally aggressive behaviors among peers and friends comprise a large portion of relational aggression research (Goldstein, 2011; Linder et al., 2002), there are still questions about the role that relationally aggressive behaviors play in friendships. Relationally aggressive behaviors are thought to be detrimental to friendships by a number of researchers (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Prinstein et al., 2001). However, some of these same researchers argue that while alienating third parties, relationally aggressive behavior against an outsider strengthens friendship between aggressors (Banny et al., 2011; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). Similarly, others argue that a major component of relationally aggressive behavior, gossip, may not always be negative, and can strengthen social bonds (Feinberg et al., 2012). The possibility of positive aspects of relational aggressive behaviors warrants further investigation as it may explain the persistence of relationally aggressive behaviors into adulthood.

Given that a number of researchers consider relationally aggressive behaviors to have negative impacts on friendships, the study of this phenomenon is particularly important for the college student population. Students who are preoccupied with fear of loss of high school friendships were found to be at a disadvantage while attempting to adjust to their first year of college life (Paul & Brier, 2001). Conflict within relationships was found to be detrimental to adjustment to college, and preexisting friendships were needed during the initial transition into college life (Swenson et al., 2008). Even after this initial adjustment period a friendship within the institution was found to be beneficial for adjustment (Swenson et al., 2008).

Researchers propose traditionally-aged college students are in a state of flux:

> Emerging adulthood is a time when many individuals will make one or more transitions to a new social environment, as they start university, begin new jobs, and move from one

community to another. The present research suggests that the development of friendships in these new environments will be an important determination of how individuals will adjust to their new situation (Buote et al, 2007, p. 687).

Studies on college students' friendships lend support to the assertion that they are important as students transition into a new phase of life (Buote et al., 2007; Paul & Brier, 2001; Swenson et al., 2008). Problems within friendships have been linked to additional stress and poor adjustment outcomes (Swenson et al., 2008). This is a concern for this study because prior research indicates that relational aggression has negative effects on friendships (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Prinstein et al., 2001). Poor friendship quality may also increase use of relationally aggressive behaviors (Weber & Kurpius, 2011). If relationally aggressive behaviors are occurring within the context of college students' friendships, the students who experience them may also experience negative adjustment outcomes, thus making the exploration of relational aggression within college students a vital topic for study. These stresses may be particularly salient to women of color attending predominantly White institutions, who may be experiencing additional stressors and receiving little support (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010).

Identity Formation and Experiences of Black Women at PWIs

A multitude of theories of identity development apply to Black female college students. Emerging adulthood, a period of development coinciding with traditionally aged college students, suggests that as societies became industrialized and life choices became more complex the period of time needed to develop one's identity extended from the teens to early twenties (Arnett, 2000). Additional research suggests that in a Predominately White context, Black students develop multiple distinct identities, navigating their sense of self both within the Black community as well as the White community (Cole & Jacob Arriola, 2007). Qualitative work

with an ethnically diverse sample of college women who shared a marginalized sexual orientation suggests that social identities are not a fixed piece of a person's internal narrative, that multiple social identities are experienced concurrently, that the experience of one social identity can be intertwined with another, and that experiences of one's self as different from the majority increases the salience of a particular aspect of identity (e.g., Black students who have been raised in Black communities, may find their Blackness more salient when enrolled at a Predominately White Institution) (Jones & McEwen, 2000, pp. 8–10).

Further, work with lesbian college students suggests that social identities are performed, not achieved (e.g., identity is fluid, comprised of multiple components such as racial identity, gender identity, ethnic identity, which change over time and based on experiences) (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). The salience of identity can be affected by contextual factors; for example, a Black female student may consider her gender, not her race when being excluded in an Engineering class; her race but not her gender when she is the only Black student in a classroom, and both race and gender if given a menial task at work. This effect is influenced by the level of the individual's complexity of meaning making, with lower levels of "formulaic" meaning making reflecting a consistent acceptance cultural norms, mid-level "transitional" meaning making inconsistently accepting social norms, and advanced level "foundational" meaning making accepting social norms only if they fit one's own personal beliefs. For instance, a woman with low meaning making may feel that her gender and religious identities are separate if she has been raised in a home in which the only religious figures are men; the same woman with moderate level meaning making may feel that religion and gender do not coincide in allowing women to be priests, but may believe that a woman can be called for missionary service; and a women with advanced level meaning making raised in the same environment may decide that

she feels women should be allowed to preach and maintain this view regardless of the views of others around her) (Abes et al., 2007, pp. 7–13). The different levels of meaning making and salience of a particular identity may influence how Black female college students perceive relationally aggressive acts that they might encounter.

Ecological developmental theorists such as Bronfenbrenner would argue that the construction of these identities occurs "within a nested context of individuals and the immediate, more distal, and broader societal settings in which they are located" (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 582). Bronfenbrenner described these settings as systems, and contextualized individual experiences occurring within these systems. Bronfenbrenner's model contains five systems: microsystems containing direct interactions (e.g., family, friends, instructor), mesosystem containing interactions between microsystems (e.g. friends and family interacting), an exosystem where events influence the individual without their direct interaction (e.g., existing college policies), a broader macrosystem of belief systems and cultural norms, and a chronosystem accounting both for change in the individual over time as well as place in historical time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). As this model suggests, Black female college students' direct personal interactions with roommates, friends, family, and faculty members (i.e., proximal processes in microsystem settings) are contextualized within broader contexts such as institutional climate, academic regulations, societal norms, and significant world events.

Black female college students attending Predominantly White Institutions may face substantial amounts of stress, some of which may result from the intersections of conflicting identities. Black women at Predominately White Institutions experience greater minority stress than their counterparts at Historically Black Colleges (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). They also experience pressure from family members to preserve their ethnic heritage, as well as

accusations of “Acting White” from family members if they conform to the culture at their institution too well (Thompson et al., 2010). Participants in one qualitative study described feelings of “homelessness”, caught between a campus where they were not accepted and home communities that they no longer felt a part of (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These additional levels of stress appear to be have negative effects on the women experiencing them.

Work examining the role that frequency of experiences of normal college stressors (e.g. heavy work load, important decisions about the future), discrimination, and depressive symptoms found that increased frequency of college stressors increased African American students vulnerability to depressive symptoms following experiences of discrimination (Banks, 2010). Women attending Predominantly White Institutions perceive receiving less social support after experiencing discrimination, which was linked to higher instances of depression (Prelow et al., 2006). Additionally, higher levels of exposure to discrimination and stress were among the theoretical explanations used for higher resting blood pressure and body mass index for darker skinned African American college women (Armstead et al., 2013). And experiences of racial microaggressions have been found to increase levels of anxiety and alcohol use (Blume et al., 2012). Collectively, empirical research on Black female undergraduates suggests their experience of college in Predominantly White institutions may be influenced by a combination of intersecting social identities (Black, female, young adult) in the context of a unique set of stressors that may create challenges not experience by male students or students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Given the critical role of social support during college, it is important to understand how social stressors like relational aggression may contribute to these experiences.

The Need for an Intersectional Perspective

Historically, the focus of much relational aggression research has been on gender differences, and additional identities have been given little consideration. Given the personal nature of aggressive incidents, particularly ones that are both personalized and subtle, it seems unlikely that results drawn from specialized samples can be safely generalized to the experience of women as a whole. The majority of the foundational literature in this area has not examined the collective effects of race, gender, or socioeconomic status, on the experience of relationally aggressive behaviors. While it may be due to relatively short period of time in which relational aggression has been studied, it is reasonable to question if the assessment of aggression via gender alone is enough to fully understand the concept. Instead we must consider how relational aggression is experienced by those who are not encapsulated in the traditionally Caucasian samples, and explore the possibility that the intersection of race and gender may influence how relational aggression is experienced.

Intersectionality is an important theoretical framework to use when examining experiences that may be filtered through multiple identities simultaneously. Originating in feminist and critical race theory, intersectionality examines questions of how the co-occurrence of race, gender, social class, sexuality and other salient identities and statuses may act upon each other and therefore affect the meaning and significance of a particular experience (Abes et al., 2007; Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008; Warner, 2008). Intersectionality is important to consider, because "failure to attend to how social categories depend on one another for meaning renders knowledge of any one category both incomplete and biased" (Cole, 2009, p. 173).

Research on identity indicates that aspects of social identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, etc.) are experienced concurrently and that the experience of one social identity

can influence the experience of others (Abes et al., 2007; Cole & Jacob Arriola, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000), making a focus on a single aspect incomplete. Proponents of intersectionality suggest that the questions we ask, how we ask them, and who we ask them to need to be considered in a multitude of ways if we are to truly understand any phenomena fully, and in a generalizable fashion. Questions of power, the role of privilege, heteronormativity, sexism, racism, and a multitude of other biases need to be considered prior to data collection, and consideration needs to be given to why particular identities are being selected for a particular study and why others are not being considered (Cole, 2009; Warner, 2008).

Proponents of intersectionality criticize psychologists for their resistance to incorporate intersectionality into their studies (Shields, 2008). In a response to the statement that such intersections of identity are not within the scope of psychology as a discipline, one author writes:

> If we say "yes, but that's not psychology" it is unnecessary to recognize that in defining the subject population in one way, "college students," for example, that it might make a difference who those college students are. In some ways, psychology's solution is to add categories of "special" subject populations. Early on, the solution was to add women to the sample and leave race unspecified—why? Because the college student population from which most research participants were drawn was predominately White. (Shields, 2008, p. 305)

This lack of consideration for these factors is not considered to be indicative of malice, or lack of desire to more fully understand concepts. Instead proponents of intersectionality propose that psychology has been slow to incorporate intersectionality in full, largely because it makes quantitative data collection and analysis unwieldy and difficult, and suggest qualitative methods for investigating intersectional questions (Shields, 2008).

There are mixed results in measuring the effects of relational aggression in women of color. In a qualitative study, African American women did not spontaneously report relationally aggressive behaviors with the same frequency as their White counterparts did, however, the

authors discuss cultural factors, specifically the ideal of the “strong Black woman”, which may have kept the women silent (Settles et al., 2008). Although African American women did not spontaneously report relationally aggressive behaviors, several studies have found relational aggression to be problematic in adolescent and college student samples (Gomes et al., 2009; Williams, Fredland, Han, Campbell, & Kub, 2009). In one of the only studies to compare racial groups, there was no difference between White and non-White samples. However, this study examined frequency of aggression and did not examine content; it also combined several different ethnic groups to create a White vs. non-White sample (Czar et al., 2011).

Another aspect of the gendered discussion of relational aggression in which race must also be considered is the role of gender and expression of anger. Many believe that relationally aggressive behaviors stem from a prohibition of women’s anger, and the inability to engage other in interpersonal conflict (Dellasega, 2005; Engel, 2008; Simmons, 2011). Some argue that Black women are more able to express anger, do not have the cultural prohibitions against direct confrontations, and thus exhibit less relational aggression than Caucasian women (Dellasega, 2005; Underwood, 2003). Others note that while not expressly forbidden anger, Black women are expected to use their anger to fight for others while sacrificing their own needs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010), which could lead to indirect aggression. While both are valid hypotheses, further examination is needed on the role that anger and its expression plays in Black women’s experiences with relational aggression.

The Role of Culture in Relationally Aggressive Behaviors

The need to consider the mutually experienced identities of race and gender may be of particular importance considering that these identities cannot be easily changed and are typically visually identifiable. In addition to the possibility that women of color may experience relational

aggression differently due to the intersection of feminine and racial identity, another factor that has not previously been considered in relational aggression research is the role of cultural norms and expectations. Within the African American community there are sometimes tensions based on topics such as skin color and hair texture (Russell et al., 1992). While physical appearance maybe an area of vulnerability for all women, research has indicated that women of color continue to experience unique stressors in this domain (Hunter, 1998).

Historically, the African-American community has both valued and reviled people for appearing “too Black” or “not Black enough,” depending on the circumstances at hand (Hunter, 1998; Russell et al., 1992). These issues are a significant area of stress for women at either end of the color spectrum, with light-skinned women being the focus of resentment and darker women experiencing rejection (Russell et al., 1992). These divisions are long-standing, believed to have developed prior to the Civil War due to slave owners’ preference for lighter skin (Hunter, 1998, 2002; Russell et al., 1992). The division became more entrenched with admittance to social clubs, churches, and academic institutions relying on standards that gave preferential status to those with lighter skin and straighter hair (Russell et al., 1992). While we no longer see combs hung outside of churches or compare people to a paper bag for admission to social events, this issue of colorism still remains (Hunter, 2002; Robinson, 2011; Russell et al., 1992).

While the standard of Black attractiveness may be biased towards lighter skin, women who are “too light” have reported encountering resentment as well (Hunter, 1998, 2002; Russell et al., 1992). Some feel that lighter-skinned women do not experience the same degree of racism as their darker peers, or that lighter skin serves as an unwanted reminder of a past that many find painful (Russell et al., 1992). Darker-skinned women report being looked upon less favorably in romantic relationships, and have a lower likelihood of marrying successful males (Hunter, 2002;

Russell et al., 1992). Darker skinned women have higher resting blood pressure and higher body mass index, even after controlling for factors such as family history of hypertension, possibly indicating increased experience of stress (Armstead et al., 2013). Women with darker skin tones also have lower incomes and educational attainment compared to their lighter-skinned peers even when controlling for similar backgrounds (Hunter, 2002; Russell et al., 1992). Thus, while colorism is an issue that may be perpetuated by institutional practices and racism, it also has the potential to affect relationships between women and may manifest in the form of relational aggression.

Hair also can be a contentious matter for women of color, with preference given to long straight hair, which may not be naturally occurring. Contrasting the valuation of "good hair" (hair that is straight and requires less upkeep) is the belief that more natural hairstyles should be embraced as part of Black culture (Robinson, 2011; Russell et al., 1992). The debate is a fierce one with one researcher noting; "for black women hair *is* political, and those who are "happy nappy" consider perming "politically incorrect," just as others consider unstraightened hair a disgrace. No matter which choice a Black woman makes, someone may react negatively to it (Russell et al., 1992, p. 84)." The notion of "good hair" is thought to be detrimental to women of color (Robinson, 2011), however it continues to persist, as reflected in the following statement from a woman's mother about her choice of husbands, "Lord, child, you better not marry no nappy-headed man 'cause I can't deal with no Brillo-headed grandbabies (Russell et al., 1992, p. 97)."

These persistent tensions present a possibility for unique, culturally-relevant content within relationally aggressive interactions. While a Caucasian woman may experience relational aggression which contains content about her appearance, there is little evidence to indicate that

such an experience encompasses an attack on a fundamental part of her identity (Russell et al., 1992). The same cannot be said for a woman of color if the attack on her appearance is related to skin color or hair texture. Russell, Wilson, and Hall describe the difference as follows:

> Superficially, taunts about color may seem the same as calling a child with glasses "four eyes" or a fat child "tubby"—part of the inevitable cruelties of childhood. Yet children can never outgrow skin color as they do other childhood traits, cannot change it by going on a diet or getting contact lenses, and may be less likely to find reassurance at home (1992, p. 101).

As described in the quote above the combination of race and gender as experienced through American culture may be exposing Black women to an additional avenue for personal attack. As such, it would be beneficial for us to examine the content of the relational aggression that Black women report, and determine if there are culturally-grounded experiences that prior research has not addressed due to a lack of attention to cultural variation.

Hair texture and skin tone are two possible avenues for relationally aggressive content, which are supported by literature in the field (Armstead et al., 2013; Hunter, 1998, 2002; Neal, 1989; Robinson, 2011; Russell et al., 1992). However, there may be other areas in which relationally aggressive experiences and content may be shaped by the intersection of race, gender, and student status. Other possibilities could include content specific to behaviors, academic performance, choice of friends, musical preferences, or any number of other aspects of participants' experiences that prior research may not have discovered.

An additional facet of Black culture that may need to be considered in the assessment of relational aggression is the concept of the "strong Black woman" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010; Settles et al., 2008). In one study, a series of focus groups with Black women did not yield discussion of relationally aggressive experiences as they did in a similar group of White participants; instead the concept of a "strong Black woman" occurred frequently (Settles et al.,

2008). Settles and colleagues reported that Black women consider strong Black women to be "defined as those who are self-reliant, able to withstand the challenges placed before them, and unwilling to depend on others to take care of them." (2008, p.468). Another author describes an almost superhuman description of what being a strong Black woman entails:

> The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts all trials and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motivated, hard-working bread winner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection. (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 21)

The identity of a being a strong Black woman appears to be a double-edged sword, leaving many women who value that aspect of themselves feeling that they are expected to carry impossibly heavy burdens, without asking for or receiving help, and without complaint (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). While expressing pride in their self-reliance, the same women also acknowledge that there are often unacknowledged costs; in order to maintain the illusion of strength, women either do not ask for or do not receive aid that they may desperately need (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010). Parks notes that "on average, African American women take *more* preventative measures than women of any other race…Yet, they still get sick and die at higher rates" (2009, p. 167), indicating that the internalization of high amounts of stress with limited social supports may well be proving fatal.

A common theme that arises when listening to the stories in which the concept of the strong Black woman is invoked is that there is no whining, complaining, crying, or "acting like a white woman" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p. 77). This concept of a strong Black woman who suffers in silence may be responsible for the lack of freely volunteered information about relational aggressive experiences in women of color (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010; Settles et al., 2008). To engage in conversation about one's weaknesses, to acknowledge that

pain is felt, and to accept the label of victim are all violations of the concept of the strong Black woman (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010). Thus, in studying relational aggression it may be necessary to frame questions in such ways that affirmative responses do not imply weakness. It may also be advantageous to make questions about victimization more explicitly about behaviors experienced, rather than expecting Black women to volunteer the information holistically within a conversation.

Another stereotype that may play a role in aggression research is that of the "angry Black woman" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010). The "angry Black woman" stereotype portrays Black women as perpetually angry, defensive, and always ready to engage in conflict if they encounter any perceived slight (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010). According to Parks (2010) there are positive and negative connotations of the "angry Black woman" stereotype. On the positive side, she uses her anger to protect others, while "the negative version of the Angry Black Woman image is of a woman who is permanently furious and dangerously ready to act out her anger on innocent-read white-people" (Parks, 2010, p. 110). The proliferation of this concept within American culture has been used to devalue legitimate feelings of Black women, and may also play a role in the fact that Black women are erroneously perceived as angry when they are, in fact, expressing other emotions (Parks, 2010). As permission or prohibition to express anger may play an instrumental role in relational aggression (Simmons, 2011; Underwood, 2003), this is an important concept to explore.

In American culture there is often a perceived difference in cultural norms for expressing anger, with one author noting: "Black women were never required to give up anger, but anger is still controversial for white women, even after three waves of feminism" (Parks, 2010, p. 121). If relationally aggressive behaviors are born out of the prohibition of women to express anger

verbally or physically as some researchers would suggest (Simmons, 2011; Underwood, 2003), then one might predict lower levels of relational aggression among Black women. However, if Black women are repressing feelings of anger and resentment, as the strong Black woman concept suggests they might be (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010), we may find more relationally aggressive behaviors present in Black women's lives. Currently there is a paucity of research to inform us on the subject of the amount of relational aggression displayed or received by Black women, or what that aggression might look like in comparison to other samples of women.

The "angry Black woman" stereotype lends itself to another possibility as well. If, as Parks (2010), suggests the myth of the "angry Black woman" is used to devalue or decentralize other more humanizing emotions from Black women, this myth may be continually perpetuated due to cultural misunderstandings of differences in communication strategies between groups. Black women have been found to communicate their emotions differently than Caucasian women, making more frequent eye contact and using fewer speech disclaimers (Parks, 2010). When combined with the stoicism required by the strong Black woman expectation (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009), this may cause researchers to make erroneous attributions as to how harmful Black women find acts of relational aggression to be.

It is plausible that observed cultural differences in communication strategies among Black and White women may at least partially explain the differences in aggression patterns found within relational aggression research. Parks gives an explanation of some of these communication differences here:

> It is common for women of other racial groups [White is specified, the other groups referred to are not] to weaken their speech with disclaimers---"I think…" or "I don't mean to…"—or they may end a statement with an up-tone sound of a question. They may avoid looking the person to whom they are speaking directly in the eye. Often,

> black women do not do any of these things—I never had to learn to smile when I did not mean it-- (2010, p. 118)

While it seems that Black women may be masking their feelings in other ways, it appears that anger is not prohibited. One theory is that because Black women are allowed to be angry in ways that White women are not they may utilize less relationally aggressive behaviors (Crothers et al., 2005). However, as noted in the earlier discussion of intersectionality, while there is growing attention to relational aggression in culturally diverse samples, we have been testing those samples based on a set of norms developed with White women. Given cultural differences in what is acceptable behavior, this may not be sufficient.

Relational aggression is a complex phenomenon (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Underwood, 2003); over time we've learned that these behaviors are not limited to children and adolescents, but continue to occur throughout the lifespan in multiple contexts (Carroll et al., 2010; Chapell et al., 2004; Dellasega, 2005; Goldstein, 2011; Kolanko et al., 2005; Trompetter et al., 2011). In order to more fully understand the complexity of this topic we need to begin to include multiple perspectives (Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008; Warner, 2008) and explore cultural factors that may be affecting relationally aggressive experiences (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Hunter, 1998, 2002; Parks, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Russell et al., 1992; Settles et al., 2008). Given the lack of attention to cultural variation in relationally aggressive research, the following research questions are being proposed:

Research Questions

1) What are the experiences of relational aggression (RA) among Black/African American college women?

Is there evidence of "racialized" content in RA experiences? (e.g., Are darker skinned women excluded from social events? Does hair texture play a role in gossip? Are black female college students accused of 'Acting White'?)

2) How do the RA experiences among Black women relate to the existing paradigm on RA among women in general?

    a. Is there a need for new theorizing on RA that integrates an intersectional perspective, or do existing models/accounts seem to capture cultural variation (even if not explicit)?

Chapter 3: Methods

Site

This research was conducted with Black/African American, female undergraduate students at a four-year institution of higher education ("The University"). The University is located within the mid-Atlantic region with a predominately White student body population of 72.2%, and an African-American population of 7.2% .

Researcher Role and Access

I have been a student at the University since 2003. While I have held several jobs at the University during this time, none of them placed me in a position of power over potential participants.

Researcher's Statement of Bias

Prior to beginning this study I was aware of a potential for personal bias in the areas of race, due to my status as a White woman examining the experiences of Black women, and a lack of openness to possible positive aspects of relational aggression, due to past negative personal experiences of relational aggression. In the first reading of the transcribed files and in my role as note taker I discovered three unexpected personal reactions to the narratives I was being exposed to, as well as unintentional heteronormative bias. As a student, I found it difficult to accept that the level of prejudice treatment and discrimination some participants described had gone on around me without my awareness. As an instructor I had a difficult time processing that instructors, at times, facilitated interactions in which students felt marginalized. Additionally as someone coming from a supportive family environment, it was difficult to remain objective when participants described relationally aggressive behaviors from family members.

I had of course been aware that there were incidences of racism and prejudice at the

University, however, I had been naive in believing that they were few and far between, that they were aberrations rather than a repeated pattern of events well-known and understood enough that when one participant would begin a story others in the group would nod in agreement, exchange knowing looks, and the older students would volunteer their experiences to the younger students as to how to work around it or through it. I chose to believe that my fellow students were behaving well in this regard, and upon examining my own experiences in light of the findings of this study, I discovered that I myself had participated in some of the same coping strategies that participants in the focus groups had used, careful cultivation of friendships that did not violate my beliefs and views on this topic. Because the friend group I had cultivated did not tolerate such behavior, it was easier for me to dismiss it as an isolated incident when I did hear reports of exclusion or prejudice. I assumed that most of the other students at the University were like my friends and me, however the frequency of reports of social exclusion and outright discrimination, along with the responses of the women in the focus groups caused me to reassess this particular belief. The stories that came forward were painful to listen to, and induced a sense of guilt and shame at the behaviors being described.

While many of the experiences of prejudice and discrimination that were reported do not fit the exact definition of relationally aggressive behavior for this study, the fact that multiple participants in several groups had similar negative experiences of discrimination and exclusion does need to be addressed. A report of information collected in this study will be complied and provided to contacts in relevant University offices (i.e., those providing services to African American students). This action and the knowledge that the information gathered may be useful to help prevent future students from having the same experiences helped to curb the initial reaction of overwhelming disgust at the ill treatment the participants described.

As an instructor I also found it difficult to accept the role of professors in narratives of participants' experiences of relational aggression. While most of the situations described appear unintentional on the instructor's part, they were far from the classroom environment that good instructors are supposed to cultivate. It was also surprising for students to admit that they had engaged in relationally aggressive behaviors against a professor, which despite findings indicating that it was possible (Kolanko et al., 2005), it was not something that I had expected to find. As with the instances of discrimination and prejudice at my Alma matter, I had convinced myself that such things did not happen here. These narratives served as a reminder to remain open to the possibility of previously unconsidered vulnerable populations (such as professors), and reinforced the necessity of ensuring that professors are purposeful in their classroom activities to ensure that they are not feeding into relationally aggressive behavior unintentionally.

As someone who has received a great deal of support from my family, it was difficult for me to fathom that family members could be a significant source of relationally aggressive behavior. While I was aware that not all people come from supportive, positive home environments, prior interactions had been with people who had verbally or physically abusive family members. As such, the realization that several participants had experienced relationally aggressive behavior from family members was a difficult one. This was a fundamental violation of my expectations of how family members were supposed to treat each other, yet in the instances it was mentioned other participants were sympathetic, but seemed resigned to the fact that this occurred in families. As such I had to remember that my family background is not necessarily normative, and certainly colors my perceptions of others' family experiences.

In listening to participants' stories, I unconsciously substituted romantic partner with the word “boyfriend”. While this may be a valid assumption for a majority of the women who

participated in our groups, it is certainly not true for all of them. Realization of this bias occurred when a participant reported a lesbian relationship, which prompted me to realize that while many participants followed the descriptor of 'romantic partner' with a masculine qualifier such as 'he' or 'my boyfriend', not all did so. Further analysis of participants' experiences with romantic partners took this bias into account.

Safeguards against Bias

Questions for this study were piloted with Black graduate students at the institution from which the sample was being taken, in order to assess their perceived validity. Additionally this study was discussed with several student affairs professionals who work primarily with Black female college students, who provided advice and support during the study. In order to reduce researcher bias, all analyses were examined by a second researcher with limited involvement in the data collection and analysis. At several points during both the data collection and analysis, graduate members of a research lab with specialization in race, ethnicity, and culture and development reviewed parts of the study and provided feedback as to the validity of analysis and conclusions. Discussions of data and analysis were also conducted with focus group facilitators (women of color).

Ethics

All study methods and instruments were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To preserve the privacy of my participants, pseudonyms were used in any published or shared work. All files, data recordings, focus group transcripts, and field notes were kept in a secure location. Participants in the focus group were asked to keep other participants' responses to questions confidential, and participants were warned that I as the researcher had limited means of ensuring that participant complied with said request.

Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the focus group at any point, and that they were free to refuse to answer questions that they found uncomfortable. Additionally as some of the memories of the experiences described or experienced had the potential to cause participants distress, participants were provided with contact information for Clinical and Psychological Services. As this study targeted aggressive behaviors, the IRB requested that participants also be provided with contact information for police, in case they had experienced physical harm.

Recruitment

I utilized several methods to recruit participants for my focus groups. I posted flyers in heavily trafficked areas of the University. I sent out e-mails to list serves which largely serve populations of African American/Black students, I asked professors to make announcements in classes, consulted with Deans in Offices who provided service for Black and African American students, and I sent targeted e-mails to residential complexes of on-campus housing. Participants were compensated for their time with refreshments during the focus group, and received a gift certificate to a local movie theater.

Participants

Participants were 18 African American/Black undergraduate students between the ages of 18-24. Requirements of the study were that participants identified as female, and as African American, Black, or multiracial with one of the races the participant identified with being Black or African American. Participants were required to be of traditional college age (18-24), and be able to recall witnessing or experiencing at least one relationally aggressive incident during their college career. Experience of aggressive incidents was assessed in a short, online pre-study questionnaire (see Appendix A), in which possible participants were asked if they met the

gender, age, race, and aggression experience requirements. This same survey was used to acquire contact information for scheduling purposes for those who met study requirements and wished to participate. The sample consisted of a first year student (5%), second year students (16%), third year students (39%), fourth year students (33%) , and a fifth year student (5%), and represented several majors. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, each participant was given a pseudonym, and physical descriptions and other personal details were changed or omitted as necessary in order to conceal participant's identities. Refer to table 3.1 for a compilation of participant's pseudonyms, self-reported racial/ethnic group, and year in school.

Data Collection Methods

In this study I utilized focus groups and interviews to gather information about African American/Black female college student's experiences of relational aggression. Focus groups allowed for the determination of how widely supported the idea was within a group, whereas interviews allowed for one viewpoint at a time (Kitzinger, 1994).

Pseudonym	Self-reported race/ethnicity	Year in School
Tori	Black or African American	4
Asha	Black or African American	2
Serena	Black or African American	3
Sasha	Black or African American	4
Elsa	Black or African American	2
Cassie	Black or African American	3
Kara	Black or African American	4
Dena	Black or African American	4
Jemma	Black or African American	5

Joy	Black/Jamaican	4
Skye	Black or African American	3
Robin	Black or African American	3
Darcy	Black or African American	2
Mia	Black or African American	3
Larissia	Black or African American	4
Kimber	Black/Asian	1
Shanna	Black or African American	3
Tara	Black or African American	3

Table 3.1 Pseudonym and self-reported race/ethnicity *Focus Groups and Interviews*

I conducted six focus groups (60-75 minutes each), with two to three women per group (See Appendix B for focus group protocol). Two participants were unable to attend a focus group, due to scheduling conflicts. These participates participated in one on one interviews (30-40 minutes each) (See Appendix C for interview protocol). The focus groups and interviews consisted of entirely African American/Black women. Each group was moderated by a trained facilitator and a note taker. Digital recordings were made of all focus groups and interviews, and the note taker maintained a log of non-verbal gestures and reactions. In order to facilitate participants' comfort, in most groups the trained facilitator was a woman of color, while the primary investigator assumed the role of note taker. In one group and one interview the primary investigator, a White woman, served as both facilitator and note taker. This does not appear to have had an effect on the data collected, however one member of the focus group and the interviewee had prior interactions with the investigator which may have increased their comfort level during the discussion.

Participants were asked to complete a writing prompt prior to the discussion, to stimulate thoughts on relationally aggressive experiences (see Appendix B for Writing Prompt). These writing prompts were collected at the end of the focus groups, however they were not used within the analysis as participants discussed the events they wrote about in greater detail within the focus groups and interviews, and some participants expressed anxiety over the use of their writing (concerns about being judged on spelling, grammar, and handwriting). Participants were asked to provide demographic information and then the facilitator followed a protocol with questions adapted from several other measures of relational aggression (Murray-Close, Ostrov, Nelson, Crick, & Coccaro, 2010; Goldstein, 2011; Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002; Appendix B). The facilitators were trained to use follow up questions where necessary, in order to ensure a complete response to all questions. Participants were encouraged to interact with each other during the focus group.

In an effort to address concerns about participants being unwilling to discuss aspects of their experience in front of other group members, participants were asked if there were any women that they would prefer not to be in a focus group with. Participants were also asked to fill out a short demographic survey after their focus group participation, in which they were asked if there had been any experiences that they had not felt comfortable sharing within the group, and if so if they would be willing to discuss the experience in a one on one interview. These decisions were influenced by concerns about "problematic silences" (Hollander, 2004), an unwillingness to disclose an experience in front of others. In order to address "problematic speech", or shaping of responses due to social pressures or cues that occur within the group, careful attention was given to power dynamics within the groups (Hollander, 2004). During analysis I made note of which participant spoke first on a topic, and the relative power of

speakers within the room. When possible group member characteristics such as year in school and major were varied within groups, and the majority of groups were composed of strangers. Two groups of friends came forward voluntarily and wished to participate together, as a result those two groups consisted of women who identified themselves as friends. This mixture allowed for both the relative safety of anonymity within a group, which may have made participants more willing to discuss experiences, and deeper explanations of shared experiences between friends, which may have led to more details with the narrative (Hollander, 2004).

Qualitative Theoretical Lens: Interpretivism

As I am interested in how individuals create the meaning of an experience, I elected to use interpretivism, an ontological stance that allows for the possibility of multiple meanings of the same event (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interpretivism is a theoretical lens in which we assume "emergent, multiple realities, indeterminacy, facts and values as inextricably linked, truth as provisional" (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 126–127). Through this lens, there is no singular truth to be discovered; instead truth and knowledge are discovered by the researcher and participants as they engage in social interactions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This is necessary as participants' differential experiences will shape their perceptions of experiences with relational aggression. There is no singular experience of relational aggression to be discovered, because even if several participants experienced similar events, each will likely have their own interpretation and meaning of the event.

From an epistemological standpoint, knowledge can be seen as the meaning that participants assign to the personal interactions and experiences that they profess. Careful consideration must be given to the meaning of participants' experiences as they need to be contextualized within the person's own life experience, societal positioning, etc. (Clandinin &

Huber, 2010). The central question involved in this type of inquiry is not what happened, but instead what did this event mean, to these people, in this place, at this time, and what that meaning might tell us about other people in similar situations (Erickson, 1986). In this study, this can be seen as: how do previously unexplored cultural standards and stereotypes affect women of color's experiences of and responses to relationally aggressive behaviors?

Data Analysis

To analyze the data gathered during the focus groups, I used Narrative Inquiry (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1995) to examine the personal narratives of the participants' lived experiences. Narrative inquiry can be described as "a subset of qualitative research designs in which stories are used to describe human action…narrative refers to a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.5). In the paradigmatic school of Narrative Analysis, meaning is constructed from the careful reading and rereading of the narrations of participants' past experiences. This approach was chosen because each individual experience of relationally aggressive behavior is in and of itself a complete narrative (each one has character, plot, thematic elements, etc.) (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). At the same time these individual experiences occur within a social context, which in this case is represented and supported by the focus group. The physical non-verbal responses or group replies to a participant's story are also a source of information, which is lacking from individual interviews (Morgan & Spanish, 1984).

By utilizing this approach, I was free to treat each individual incidence of relational aggression as a singular case study, and then look at the collection of stories as a whole to compare and contrast recurring themes. To reach a fuller understanding of the phenomena being studied, I examined participants' stories (i.e., occurrences described with a beginning and an

ending), and then drew overarching themes, with events that occurred in multiple narratives or held a particular salience, from the data collected (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Furthermore I contextualized participants' experiences within time, societal situation, and place (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).

In addition to themes, a coding scheme was applied after multiple readings of each narrative, as I moved from the personal stories to the thematic interpretations (See Appendix D for coding structure). Themes and coding structure were not determined beforehand, as I was seeking to utilize an inductive coding structure (Thomas, 2003). However, for my first research question I attended to the possibility that some instances of relational aggression may be tied to racial group membership, and for my second question I used the existing research on relational aggression in women (conducted with predominantly White samples) as a point of comparison with emergent themes.

There were several steps to this process after the period of data collection had elapsed. The first step was a holistic reading and rereading of the entire body of text several times to gain an overall scope of the stories being told within the transcription of the focus group (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). I utilized The Listening Method as popularized by Brown and Gilligan (1993) in the first reading/listening particular attention was paid to the story at large, to situate the story within a context, and my reactions as the reader and the potential biases I may be bringing with me into my analysis. On the second reading particular attention was paid to the voice of the particular storyteller, with particular attention being paid to concepts of self, such as 'I' and 'me'. The third and fourth readings focused on relationships as experienced by the storyteller, and the interactions of the story and the ways it may be constrained or enabled by societal influences (Brown & Gilligan, 1993).

After several iterations of rereading/listening, I selected passages and narratives that I felt were related to my research questions. For my first research question, I focused on the possibility of relationally aggressive behaviors being connected to racial group membership. For the second question I compared emergent themes with existing research on relational aggression in women. From those selections I developed and described themes that have occurred throughout the narratives I have collected. I then utilized those themes to make meaning of the experiences of my participants, and constructed a narrative that enhances our knowledge of the experiences of relational aggression for women of color (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).

Aspects of Self

The second reading of the transcripts with special attention paid to personal pronouns provided a useful understanding of where participants were discussing events that they had experienced themselves, versus those that they had observed. The use of the personal pronoun 'you' also came up several times when participants were describing their reactions to situations that they had experienced, but also seemed to need space from the incident that they were describing. For example Asha, a second year student switched from the personal pronoun 'I' to 'you' and a broader 'us' when describing the difference between her experiences in high school and college. "I don't know why I was so shocked, I thought it would be ok, but um no it's just different, you can't really, the white people just kinda want to be friends with each other and not us." In response to another participant's comment about her anxiety about the possibility of being excluded based on race, Asha responds with "You kinda don't understand". While this does not appear significant in sanitized text, audio reveals her becoming more distressed as the conversation continues, and pronouns become more distant.

The use of personal pronouns or lack thereof also was useful as a benchmark for when

participants were describing actual events verses theoretical occurrences, which some questions did solicit. Jemma's explanation of a hypothetical rumor is such an occurrence. "I can see if maybe you're hanging out with a guy – whether you guys are dating or not – especially a football player and another girl sees you and maybe they like him. I can see that starting a rumor." In this statement 'I' is used to differentially from 'you', which helps determine that the experience was not a personal one. Finally use of pronouns was useful for examining perceived group membership. In her discussion of Black women's use of gossip against each other Larissa says: "Just talking about Black girls like they can't stick together." The use of the pronoun 'they' instead of 'we' indicates that this is not an area in which Larissa feels that she is part of 'Black girls', though in other comments she professes group membership. "I'm all Black but I don't know. I guess kind of just growing up with that kind of angry Black female…" This quote implies that the construct of "angry Black female" is salient to Larrisa's perceptions of herself as a Black woman, while gossip within the Black community, women tearing other women down, is not. Recognizing these pronouns was useful in examining feelings of exclusion and group membership.

Coding

Given the exploratory nature of this study, an a priori code structure was not created, however, foundational literature (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988; Ostrov, Ries, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008; Underwood, 2003) was used to create focus group and interview protocols, as well as make determinations as to whether or not experiences reported by participants fell within the area of relationally aggressive behaviors or not. For example, a participant reported feeling pressure from a professor to provide a non-majority opinion in class. While this is certainly valuable information about the context of the

participant's experiences it was determined to be inconsistent with relationally aggressive behaviors, even though the participant reported it as an example of being excluded. This instance was considered to be more consistent with behaviors described in racial micro-aggression literature (Sue et al., 2008;Williams & Nichols, 2012), and as such was not considered as an instance of academic exclusion. The same participant reported experiencing malicious gossip within in an academic group, with one member of her group spreading rumors about other students in the class. This instance was determined to be consistent with relational aggression due to similarities to existing literature on relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Underwood, 2003).

Individual instances were classified by participant's role in the experience, what relationship context the story occurred in, and the racial group membership of all parties mentioned in the story. As individual instances were compared to existing literature to determine if the reported experience was consistent with relationally aggressive behaviors, themes began to emerge. Thematic elements such as who was involved in an experience, what happened, and how participants responded to the experience were used as parent codes for an emergent code structure. Individual occurrences within these parent codes were developed into a subordinate code structure; for example, under the parent code of relationship context, subordinate codes included friends, non-friends, romantic partner, family, and academic.

Themes related to the questions posed in this study emerged in the areas of: types of relationally aggressive behaviors experienced/witnessed, relationally aggressive content specific to Black and African-American women, institution-specific experiences, the relationship context the behaviors were experienced in, and consequences of experiences with relational aggression. Themes involving perceived motivations also emerged, but were of limited use to this study, as a

low number of participants admitted to being an instigator of relational aggression. As such many of the motivations described were speculative, and not directly related to participants' experiences of relational aggression, exceptions to this were personality and group cohesion.

Chapter 4: Results

Themes related to the questions posed in this study emerged in the areas of: types of relationally aggressive behaviors experienced/witnessed, relationally aggressive content specific to Black and African-American women, institution-specific experiences, the relationship context the behaviors were experienced in, and consequences of experiences with relational aggression.

Types of Relational Aggressive Behaviors Observed or Experienced

Based on participants' narratives, several types of relationally aggressive experiences were part of how participants experienced relationally aggressive behaviors. These behaviors were consistent with those discussed in the body of research about relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dellasega, 2005; Ostrov et al., 2008; Simmons, 2011). Among these were *exclusion*, where a participant was not included in invitations to a social event or engagement, or was not made part of a conversation going on around them, though the topic being discussed was relevant to them. *Gossip* was reported heavily, defined here as the act of discussing a person or their actions when they are not present. Upon participant's request it was clarified that the act itself is gossip, which may be considered either positive or negative based on the content of the conversation and the intention of those engaged in the act (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012). Many participants reported being given the *silent treatment*, or having someone refuse to converse with them or ignore attempts at communication, such as e-mails or text messages. *Negative non-verbal gestures* were also reported, such as closed body language, rolling eyes in response to a person, or giving evil looks. Lastly participants reported *threats of withdrawal or withdrawal of support or friendship*. See table 4.1 for prevalence of relationally aggressive experiences.

Behavior	Participants Reporting an Experience
Exclusion	77.7%
Gossip	72.2%
Negative Non-verbal Gestures	16.6%
Silent Treatment	38.8%
Threats of Withdrawal of Support/Friendship	27.7%

Table 4.1 Prevalence of relationally aggressive experiences

Exclusion. Participants described exclusion in multiple settings, with some facing it in multiple contexts at the same time. The most common context in which participants reported experiencing exclusion was in social contexts such as roommates and friendships, followed by academic settings, such as study groups. One such case was that of Melinda, a slender and tall woman, with unprocessed hair held back from her face, her eyes were framed with wire rimmed glasses, and unlike the other members of her group she did not fidget. Instead she assessed her situation, chose her words carefully, and considered the responses of the other two women in the group with her, before she responded to questions. When she spoke her voice was calm and clear even as she described being excluded when others were setting up their study groups for classes. "I feel like a lot of times they have their own groups and I'm not included so it's like I might as well just stay to myself and figure it out myself..." She was not alone in this experience with several other participants expressing similar tales of exclusion from study groups, difficulties in finding people to work with in class, and a lack of inclusion within groups that in theory they should be welcomed in, such as assigned groups for class projects. In the passage below Mia describes being ignored when people from her major are planning to study together.

> if I'm doing a group project or if I'm in a class with people who are in my major because my major is pretty small and we're in a class that's really large and they know I'm in

> their class too and they'll study with their friends and not tell me. I'm like we're both in the same class so you could've just said hey, we're studying.

While many of these experiences could be viewed as unintentional on the part of people who may have connections to classmates that our participants were not aware of, several participants described occurrences from early on in their college years, while friendships were still forming. Elsa showed up to the focus group in a loose fitting University hoodie, she was rather quiet in the beginning, but as the group continued she became more animated. When asked about her experiences she described an event that occurred in her residence hall:

> I found that my suitemates kind of isolated themselves from me. They were White. I don't think that had anything to do with it but one time they were going out to a party and so I asked them oh, where are you going? I was dropping hints that I'd like to go, too, I don't know and she said oh, we're going to a party and then just left it at that. I was like oh, okay, well, have fun. I guess I would've understood if they had already been friends for a while before coming to college but they had, they knew each other when I knew them, too.

According to Elsa, this would not be the only time that she found herself isolated, but she did note that earlier experiences were more difficult to deal with. She says that her first year she " just felt kind of like isolated and estranged from the group." Elsa's experience was unusual in that she experienced exclusion from both White students and the Black community during her first year. While she does report making and maintaining friendships within the Black community after these experiences, she engages in a number of coping mechanisms, and her early experiences have left their mark. As a rising third year student she notes: "For me family and God is more important than friendship because I remember in my first year when I was having trouble making friends".

Several participants noted that they tried to believe that the exclusion was not purposeful, but that repeated occurrences made it more difficult to discount the behaviors of White students as unintentional slights. Darcy discusses her thoughts on the difference between

unintentional and purposeful relationally aggressive actions.

> It's deliberate but I think sometimes people do it unintentionally so I always – when I experience something, I always kind of think are they doing it on purpose? Or do they genuinely not realize the impact of what they're doing? And I think that makes a big difference. To deliberately want something out of someone and if they're not going to do that, tell them that you're not going to be their friend. I think that's different than just being really good friends with someone in a class and just happening to go to them to study all the time and unintentionally excluding someone else who might want to have been invited.

While assessing the motivations of the aggressors in these participants' experiences is beyond the scope of this study, the women discussing their experiences felt that they had been excluded. This exclusion is not without cost, and participants expressed both frustration and hurt at not being included in these groups, and many report increased isolation as a result.

While some of the experiences that participants described could be viewed as unintentional, some participants described pointed exclusion coming from friends as a retaliatory tactic for slights real or imagined. Sasha walked into the focus group with apparent confidence, she was taller than the other members of her group, and appeared to be the leader of the group, as the other two members looked to her from time to time for guidance. They were all members of a student organization, and volunteered to come as a group. Here she describes an occasion in which a friend had excluded her:

> What they do is just like oh, you know, ask all my friends around me to go somewhere and then don't ask me to go like to dinner and then I find out about it obviously because we're all in the same friend group.

Sasha's friend had reportedly not expressed any sign of being angry with her, and it was through the lack of an invitation to a group event, and her friends' reports of what had occurred at the dinner that Sasha discovered that her friend was angry and why. This incident occurred in a group of all Black women. Sasha notes that she is generally more direct when it comes to dealing with conflicts and expressed her preference that her friend would have come to her so

that the two of them could discuss it rather than take this tactic.

Exclusion can also occur as a result of a person's actions within a friendship. Here Elsa describes a friend's response to her drawing attention to how her behavior might be perceived. "I was calling her out on her like her partying or something, her activities and I think maybe she took offense to it so then she didn't bother contacting me about any other activities…" Elsa perceived her actions as well intentioned, and her honesty was rewarded by no longer being included in her friend's activities.

Gossip. One of the most prevalent types of relationally aggressive behavior mentioned by participants was gossip. For the purposes of this study gossip was defined as talking about or discussing another person outside of their presence. No value judgments were expressed by the researchers, and participants had a varied experience with gossip, and differing beliefs on the subject. Participants reported gossip across multiple contexts, including within friendships, families, social, and academic settings.

One of the most common topics of gossip was romantic relationships. The tone of this gossip ranged from what the participants largely judged as harmless, to personal attacks. Kara, a tall thin woman, with a bright smile and open posture describes her experience, which she says has been complicated by the fact that the Black community at the University is so small.

> Just friends in general – people I thought were friends. Friends I'd see occasionally in the library would be like, "Oh, I notice you're with this guy a lot. Who is he?" "Oh, I heard you're talking to someone." It's like, "Yeah, I am." Especially the Black community here, it's so small, so any event you go to with a guy, they assume, "Oh, you must be dating." And if I'm with the same one every time, it's like, "Oh, it's something serious. Where's the guy you were with?" I'm associated by him. And if I'm not with him, I must be hoeing around someplace.

Dena, with a reserved expression nods at Kara's statement and replies:

> I like what you said – you are someone but you really become someone when you're with someone else. When you're single, you're important. But when you're in a relationship, it's like, "Oh, what is she doing?" I've never been in a relationship with someone here, so I think that's also why I can say there's no true gossip about me. As far as I can see, that helps me be really low key. I guess now that she's in a relationship, she's a hot commodity.

While the attention paid to Kara's dating life and whereabouts of her partner could be seen as an expression of genuine interest in her activities, the mean spiritedness that Kara encountered in the absence of her partner is concerning, as is Dena's assertion that you "really become someone". If women are judged as more important when in relationships with men, how are they viewed when a relationship ends? If the response that Kara describes when her boyfriend is absent is not an isolated one, the treatment that women receive upon ending a relationship may prove damaging. While support for this was far from conclusive in our limited sample size, this would be a meaningful area of future research, possibly contributing to our understanding of the effect romantic relationship status has in the treatment of women of color within college contexts at a Predominately White Institution.

Not all gossip about romantic relationships was negative, and several participants describe more benign conversations they've had with friends about who's dating and who makes a cute couple; however there is also a darker undertone. Women who receive too much attention from men or seem to be seeking out attention are at risk of being labeled "promiscuous", particularly if they are seen to be too close to a "highly desirable" man such as an athlete. Sasha, who became close to a number of such men due to a summer program prior to first year, describes her experience:

> I had the chance to get very close with a distinct group of people and then when I came in for my first semester, because I was so close especially to like a lot of star athletes then to me, how I perceive that was people were kind of like why is she so close with this football player? Why is she so close with these track runners? She must be doing more than being a friend so I had that experience and people were trying to say that I was, I had

> like five boyfriends. Of course none of which were true but that subsided after the first semester once people started to realize oh, this is why but yeah, that was potentially damaging.

Several years removed from the experience Sasha has weathered the rumors well, and became involved with a student organization, seeking to prevent others from having similar experiences. Her organization has held multiple forums addressing how members of the Black community on campus address each other, but she acknowledges that her early experiences were difficult. She also cites that she has a well-established friend group outside of the University to rely on, which may have mitigated her experiences.

Participants experienced gossip in academic settings as well, particularly in more competitive majors such as commerce and engineering. Tori, a slim, tall woman described with broad, expansive hand gestures an experience that she'd had with a student the year prior.

> I was in a group last year, and this girl would come in with this is what I wrote about with the knowledge of every group that we should be threatened or worried about, just gossiping about the smartest people and the smartest groups that we need to be aware of and I think that kind of, we were never able to take her seriously, so we're not really that good of friends because being around that atmosphere with somebody always comparing themselves to another person and just gossiping and sharing quote unquote secrets just kind of made it difficult, I mean it made the atmosphere fun as a group, but it was also like we can't really I don't know, it makes it a really competitive atmosphere to be able to be productive just in general.

During the course of the focus group, Tori remained very charitable in her assessments of behaviors that she had experienced, seemingly eager to assume the best of the people that she was describing. She was quick to reassure Asha that her future was not as dark as the stories made it seem when she expressed misgivings about the possibility of similar experiences (the two women shared a major). It is possible that Tori's optimistic outlook may have mitigated her experiences.

An unexpected area in which participants reported experiencing gossip was within family interactions. Asha, a petite woman nibbles at her lip while listening to the other members of her focus group speak, and laughs several times over the course of the group in what appears to be an attempt to mask discomfort. The repeated experiences she described in the group illustrate why this topic might be painful for her. Here she describes an incident that eventually led to her alienation from her extended family.

> But like at home, family wise, like my aunt is kind of mean person. Like um, she kinda um, we got into a fight my first year and she kinda just told my whole family that I was a disrespectful person. So and at that point I was just like I'm done with you guys.

While the initial disagreement with her aunt was not a relationally aggressive act, Asha's aunt's response which followed may be classified as relationally aggressive. Every act of family members discussing a third party is not relationally aggressive, and it may be possible to argue that Asha's family members were trying to be helpful. However, several components of Asha's story bring that interpretation into question. Asha does not report anyone seeking to hear her side of the story or defending her from her aunt's accusation. The aunt does not appear to be attempting to reconcile with Asha. No family member appears to be attempting to facilitate compromise, as might be expected in a situation in which family members are trying to be helpful. Instead there is an implied ultimatum, "do as your elders say or face family disapproval". Asha's aunt appears to have used gossip and family disapproval to attempt to influence Asha's behavior. While it is certainly possible for family members to discuss another family member without being relationally aggressive, attempting to use group disapproval as a method to punish someone or influence their behavior can be considered a relationally aggressive action.

As a result of this encounter, and her family's response to it, Asha stopped attending family gatherings. While the other members of her group did not describe anything as extreme, they responded to Asha's story with a resigned acceptance and sympathy, but in no way seemed surprised. Another group member noted that only her grandmother's strict oversight kept family gatherings from becoming nasty, and participants in other groups reported being a topic of gossip within their extended family. While these findings were interesting, few participants reported them, and given the population of our sample, most participants have a good bit of distance between themselves and their family members, possibly providing a buffer from these experiences.

Silent Treatment. Another behavior participants reported experiencing was the silent treatment. This behavior was typically reported as occurring when another party was upset, and appeared to be utilized instead of a direct confrontation. Elsa describes how this plays out for her in a hypothetical instance of having angered or annoyed a friend. "I communicate mostly by text[ing] so if I've rubbed someone the wrong way in my opinion then I won't hear from them for a couple of weeks unless I make the effort..." This behavior can also be seen here in an exchange between Jemma and Kara.

> Jemma: And now that technology's a part of it, a step further than silent treatment is not answering your texts or –
>
> Kara: Yeah, nobody responds, so it's just like – and you see evidence like, "Oh, I missed your text," and you see them texting someone else. They're just ignoring you.

While it can be argued that taking some time to allow tempers to cool when emotions are running high could be a positive step, the silent treatment described can last for weeks, or even until the relationship has ended entirely. This behavior also appears to have a co-occurrence with both gossip and exclusion, as can be seen in this passage from Dena who describes being on

the receiving end of the silent treatment from a friend. “even though they might not be talking to you, they'll talk about you to someone else and you'll hear it through them. They're still obviously thinking about you, but they just won't address you.” While it could be argued that this behavior is both childish and relatively innocuous by itself, in combination with gossip and exclusion it proved distressing to participants, who described experiencing the silent treatment from both friends and romantic partners. Participants reported relationships ending, without a reason, simply a long period of silence followed by vague explanation if pressed. Tori describes a more extreme experience where a friendship ended in silence.

> We were really good friends, and I think she started going out more and started hanging out with a different crowd. I was just like, I don't know if I want to be a part of that. And we just never reconciled, and we just we never made up. So yeah now we're not really friends, cut off.

Tori expresses sadness at the ending of her friendship, but did not discuss any attempts to pursue reconciliation with her estranged friend. In Tori’s case there was at least an understanding of the initial problem between the two of them, Tori’s reluctance to follow her friend into a different social circle. For others, there is no moment to point to as the moment that the beginning of a rift occurred. In describing the breakdown of one of her friendships Dena says:

> I don't really know what the reason was. Like, they never really gave me a reason. But I did confront them about it to see what the deal was. She never really had a solid reason. To this day, I don't know and I've obviously let it go.

Despite her acceptance, Dena is left with the questions that many women have when their friendships end in silence rather than open conflict (Simmons, 2011), and many of them express frustration at the lack of clarity.

Negative Non-verbal Gestures. As with the silent treatment, negative non-verbal gestures are a more subtle form of aggression that participants reported experiencing. Several participants described these behaviors, and they were reported to occur within multiple

relationship contexts. Dena describes the nonverbal ways that her friends indicate their displeasure. “I think a lot of times it comes through body language. They don't have to say anything, but they can roll their eyes or position their bodies in ways that you know they're not happy with you.”

An interesting facet of this behavior however was the fact that participants did not necessarily even know the aggressors directly as can be seen here in a description of an experience by Asha.

> I had my two really good friends that I live with this year and they, they kind of had beef with another group of girls and I had never met the girls. And they just kind of give me dirty looks every time they see me. And I was like you guys don't even know my name. And sometimes I would just like smile and they would just mean mug me, it wasn't very nice at all.

While this behavior was not as commonly reported as gossip or exclusion, in the instances that participants did discuss it, other participants would nod in agreement, in one case even mimicking an exaggerated eye roll. This appears to be behavior that is familiar to participants, but few spontaneously reported it. There are several possible explanations for this, one being that it is so common that participants do not regard it as aggression, instead seeing it as typical behavior. Another is that it is difficult to quantify a dirty look or to prove that someone made a negative gesture, an aspect that relational aggressive researchers cite as one of the reasons such actions are used (Simmons, 2011; Underwood, 2003). Given the responses to later questions about how comfortable participants felt when expressing emotions, it may be that they have determined that little good can come of showing that such a small act has upset them.

Asha’s response to the dirty looks she received appeared fairly common. “it doesn't really bother me, because I could just see that they're not very nice people. And I wouldn't want to be friends with them in the first place.” While Asha claims not to have been bothered by the

experience, she still remembers it clearly months after the fact, and her posture and facial expressions do not match her expressed disinterest. While individual instances maybe easily dismissed, there is a possibility that cumulative experiences could be more problematic alternatively it could be that the lack of reporting indicates a true absence of concern from the women on the receiving end of these gestures.

Withdrawal of Support or Friendship. Threats of withdrawal of support or friendship were rare in relation to more commonly reported experiences such as gossip or exclusion. However, one instance is of particular interest, as it came from an unexpected source. In the passage below Kara describes her mother's reaction to a lesbian relationship.

> I went through a phase when I was into girls, so my last relationship was with a female. My mom completely hated it. So I see her as a friend, so I'll just put her in that bucket. She threatened to disown me and everything, so I would say that was an example of that. It definitely hurt my relationship with the girl. Of course, my mom comes first so that just broke that off.

Kara characterizes her relationship with her mother as particularly close, found the distance between the two of them created by the relationship to be too difficult, and noted that her mother's reaction was a large part of her break up. It would certainly be possible to categorize this behavior as emotional manipulation or overly controlling parenting, however, the behavior also fits the criteria for relational aggression, in that it seeks to use threats to relationships that the victim values to control behavior. Threats of withdrawal of family support have not to the researcher's knowledge ever been classified as relational aggression in research. While other instances of withdrawal of friendship were reported over romantic relationships, none appeared to have the same impact, possibly due to the differences in the power dynamic between friendships and family relationships. Withdrawal of family support is potentially more far reaching and detrimental as many students rely on their family for financial or emotional

support, threats to these relationships would likely be a particularly effective method to insure a child's behavior complied with family expectations, however, only one instance of this type of family aggression presented itself in this study. While data are insufficient to form any conclusive statements on the matter, this would be an interesting area of future inquiry. A better understanding of relationally aggressive interactions within families could help mental health and student affairs professionals to provide support for students experiencing them.

Race Specific Content of Relationally Aggressive Behavior

The types of relational aggression that participants reported experiencing—gossip, exclusion, the silent treatment, negative non-verbal gestures, and threats of withdrawal of friendship—were all consistent with previous research on relationally aggressive behavior (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Ostrov et al., 2008; Simmons, 2011;Underwood, 2003). While the form is familiar however, content and context of relationally aggressive behaviors experienced by Black women at the University appear to have some unique, culturally-relevant dimensions. These experiences included judgments based on hair texture and skin tone, terminology specific to the Black community, and the relevance of stereotypes as the "strong Black woman" and "angry Black woman" in receiving and responding to relational aggression.

Hair. Participants in this study reported being exposed to statements about their hair texture, which is consistent with prior research in African American women showing that differing hair textures have varying levels of desirability, with some being considered good and others bad (Robinson, 2011). For some women in the sample, hair texture was part of a greater set of societal expectations of how they should appear that left one vulnerable to gossip and judgment if violated. Shana arrived to the group in casual clothing, seemingly sure of her welcome, though she'd joined the group unexpectedly at the invitation of another participant.

She nodded emphatically when asked if appearance plays a role in relationally aggressive experiences, and punctuates Tara's statements with a seemingly unintentional finger snap.

> Like the clothes I wear. From the way that I would do my hair, whether I just roll out of bed and just have my hair however it is. Appearance is not, I've always been the type of person to keep in the back of my head the song by India Arie like "I Am Not My Hair" so I always try to perpetuate this, or express this type of person that it's not about my looks or how I dress, it's more about the person I am. So for me, but that doesn't work for other people so I've always gotten comments about oh Shana your hair, or oh Shana you don't wear makeup, or Shana why are you dressing like that and stuff like that so appearance besides race of course has definitely played an issue, or played a part in reactions towards me.

Shana admitted to wearing casual clothes like sweatpants frequently, which, combined with her lack of participation in formal hairstyling and absence of makeup, appears to violate the polished standard of beauty expected by those around her. It is important to note that these criticisms came from within the Black community at the University, and that participants felt that the standards that they hold each other to appear to be higher than those imposed on other members of the University community. In the passage below Elsa discusses a difference in the expectations placed on Black women compared to the way she has seen White women dress.

> Then yeah, definitely hair texture, what kind of fashion, urban fashion you're supposed to keep up with so I think those pressures are a little bit different like if you see a White sorority girl versus a Black sorority girl and how they dress, like they'll have on their t-shirt with their like whatever on the back and then running shorts whereas if you see someone maybe who's like in a Black sorority, they'll have their sorority t-shirt on and like a skirt or really nice jeans and like cute – and accessorizing and their hair done so I think there's like definitely a difference in appearance.

Joy doesn't consider the issue to be hair texture, instead saying that if hair is neatly presented it isn't a matter of natural hair versus processed:

> I wouldn't just – necessarily say hair texture, but I will say whether or not your hair looks good, or neat – that causes, that definitely causes people to have targets on their back, or if their hair looks a mess – we tend to talk about whether someone's hair looks a mess, not necessarily if it's natural or not, curly or straight.

This is not a universally held belief however, as Tara, who has recently begun transitioning from processed hair to a more natural style attests:

> this year I've been letting my hair curl up and do whatever it wants to do and that's made me a target for some things. I mean whether it's joking or not it's still something I've noticed and picked up more than when I had my hair straight.

While it could certainly be argued that appearance is a matter of concern for all women, regardless of race, participants did report feeling that there was a different expectation for them as Black women at the University. Some of our participants said that it was a matter of neatness, not processed versus natural hair, yet Tara's report that she began receiving negative comments once she stopped processing her hair and the criticisms that Shana experienced for not styling her hair 'appropriately' indicate that while it may not always be explicit, not all members of the Black University community are accepting of natural styles. On the surface, Joy's statement about neat hair is not about processed versus natural hair; however prior research indicates that straight, often processed hair, is inherently viewed as "neater" than natural hair (Robinson, 2011; Russell et al., 1992).

Only two participants reported direct experiences with gossip based on hair, both negative comments for not conforming to a beauty standard of 'neat' hair. While these experiences are not enough to conclusively say that hair texture specifically is a factor in relationally aggressive content, the overall appearance of hair appears to be a facet of gossip within the Black University community. There seems to be at least for some women a common idea of what 'neat' hair looks like, and community-sanctioned censure if that idea is violated. Relationally aggressive content concerning physical appearance is not exclusive to the Black University community, having been reported in other studies of relationally aggressive behaviors (Gerson, Rappaport, Meier, Prince, & Witsell, 2011; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Simmons,

2011). The use of gossip to enforce social norms has been addressed in research about gossip (Feinberg et al., 2012; McAndrew, 2014), but this body of work has generally focused on social norms more extreme than aspects of experience, saying that certain types of gossip "protects others from antisocial or exploitive behaviors" (Feinberg et al., 2012, p. 1015). The use of gossip within the Black University community about hair may be a reflection of a more deeply held social norm; however, the concept of a single standard of beauty being enforced by gossip within an adult community has not previously been studied.

Skin Tone. Another undercurrent of the experiences that participants reported was judgment based on skin tone. Existing research does suggest that there is a dichotomy between light and dark within the African American community, with a preference for those with lighter skin (Hunter, 1998, 2002; Russell et al., 1992). Participants did not describe specific instances of relationally aggressive content, however, several participants mentioned the dichotomy as an aspect of appearance that influenced relationally aggressive behaviors.

Tara, when asked if appearance played a role in relationally aggressive experiences, first mentioned encounters with those who had assumed that she was an athlete or a recipient of financial aid, however a response from Shana about within-group statements about her appearance prompted Tara to describe skin tone specifically.

> I'd say skin color as well, like I don't consider myself light skinned and there's a light skin spectrum, like either you're light skinned or dark skinned and like if you're lighter skinned then you're supposed to be more preferred by society at least the Black community apparently, however that goes…

Kara expresses her dismay at the seeming division of the African American community, though she speaks in generalizations, and does not describe specific instances.

> And it's sad because now it's light skinned versus dark skinned. So it's just reinforcing those stereotypes. As the African American community, we're separating ourselves even more and it's like – why? We do it as a joke, but at the same time kids are 12-13 years

> old are saying, "Oh, it's because it's light skinned." Why are we doing this? We're hurting ourselves and not helping ourselves. It's just sad.

Given the background literature which indicated that differential treatment of dark skinned versus light skinned women was pervasive within the Black community (Hunter, 1998, 2002; Neal, 1989; Russell et al., 1992), the findings on this topic are not as robust as might have been expected, with several possible explanations. The first being that despite the fact that groups were facilitated by a woman of color in most instances, the note taking role was filled by a White female, which may have made participants uncomfortable. This seems unlikely given the other material shared within the groups, some of which was both personal and emotionally charged. Additionally, Tara's statement, one of the most descriptive occurred in a group facilitated by a White female. A second possibility is that this dichotomy is firmly entrenched enough to be considered common knowledge, and therefore was not mentioned, though the fact that the topic came up independently in several group seems to discredit this explanation. Lastly, as most focus groups consisted of women on differing ranges of the color spectrum, and as Kara notes it is a divisive topic, it could be that participants did not feel comfortable discussing this topic.

While findings were not as robust as background literature (Hunter, 1998, 2002; Neal, 1989; Russell et al., 1992) may have led researchers to believe that they might be, some mention of skin tone-based comments occurred in half of the focus groups, indicating that this is a salient topic for women at the University. This topic has not been previously addressed in relational aggression research, and supports the assertion that there may be race-specific relationally aggressive content not currently measured by existing instruments.

Terminology. Specific terminology used in the Black community at this University was limited, however, what participants reported fell into two categories, the first contained rejections from the Black community, such as the accusation of 'Acting White', the second contained terms

used to describe perceived female promiscuity.

"Acting White". Accusations of "Acting White" have been described as "one of the most negative accusations an African American adolescent can receive from another" (Murray et al., 2012, p. 526). Recent work on within-group discrimination finds that college students who experience these accusations more frequently have increased mental health symptoms (Durkee & Williams, 2013). This and other statements that called participant's authenticity as members of the Black community into question were reported independently in half of the focus groups. Jemma, a tall slim woman, had a bright smile and expansive hand gestures brought a unique perspective to her group. She has a rich melodic laugh, and quickly formed a rapport with the other members of her group, and shares her feelings on the subject here.

> I feel like being Black, a lot of people just define that as you have to talk a certain way, dress a certain way, and hang out with certain people. I feel like that's caused – because I'm outside of that mold, that's caused some kind of relational aggression as far as – I don't think I've gotten it from friends, but definitely associates. I talk right or if I don't know lyrics to a rap song, they're like, "Oh, and you're supposed to be Black? You're the Whitest black girl I know." It hurts because I take pride in being Black, so how are you going to tell me I'm not?

Tara acknowledges that she has been on the receiving end of some accusations from within group members, "In the African-American community as well you're talking White or acting preppy or not down with the cause, or whatever…" While she does note that she has faced more relationally aggressive behaviors from outside of her group, many of the instances she describes are between herself and other Black females.

Cassie, one of the first students to come to the University from her high school describes friction between friends from home perceptions of her, and her peers at the University.

> while I'm here it's kind of hard because I'm striving and like I'm striving to be something in my life and I'm also at [a] really top school, from that top, a lot of times my home friends come and like can't really talk to them on like, I can't really tell them everything I'm doing because I don't wanna like throw it in their face. I don't want them to think like I'm better

> than them and laugh and be like oh, you talk White now when I talk to them but when I come here, it's like I still struggle a lot with my grammar. So like it's still kind of like balancing.

Cassie describes a full life here at the University, she is a member of several student groups, and appears to have been successful at making friends. Despite the successes, she still makes note of the separation from her friends back home and described a separate instance of difficulties with a friend from home several times during the discussion. These repeated stories seem to hold a greater salience for her as they are more detailed than some of her other responses.

Participant's experiences with "Acting White" are consistent with research indicating that using what is considered "White" speech makes one vulnerable to the accusation (Murray et al., 2012), that college students are experiencing the accusation and finding it harmful (Durkee & Williams, 2013), and that acculturation into a Predominately White University community can create tension with people back home (Thompson et al., 2010). This content also appears to be emerging in the content of relationally aggressive acts such as gossip and exclusion from Black peers. The accusation of "Acting White" is unique to the Black community, has a particular effect on Black students with a Predominately White Institution, and appears to be influencing relationally aggressive behaviors.

Joy, describes a term that she cannot remember, used within the Black community for people who don't associate with other members of the Black community.

> I think there's one other word we have. I don't know the word, but it's basically Black people who don't associate with other Black people, they mainly associate with the [University] – with [the University]at large. I forgot what the word is, what we call them. But we – I guess that's one thing that we have. I guess that's similar to "uppity", but that's not a word we use.

Unfortunately, Joy participated in an interview and other group members were not available to help supply the exact term used. The mystery term's similarity to the pejorative "uppity" does

indicate that the tone of the term is not positive. While this information is limited and far from conclusive, this does appear to be an indication of conversation within the Black community on campus of who associates with whom, which may play a role in gossip.

Promiscuity. Terms specific to the Black community based on perceived promiscuity are limited. A single participant, Joy, brings them up in conversation. At the request of the facilitator she expanded on her initial statement and gave two examples of terms used within the Black community to describe women who are acting in ways that group members feel are promiscuous or seeking male attention.

> Oh, well, we have this new term called 't.h.o.t. – that ho over there'. When people see that type – that type of action from a girl, constantly trying to get the attention of a guy by going up to them, dressing – getting up close, etc., they'll get that type of connotation, so then they'll be called "thots" behind their back.

In addition to supplying another instance of terminology, that at least to Joy's knowledge was exclusive to the Black community, this also provides evidence of within-group gossip. Joy also gives another term, this time with more specific terms of behavior and dress.

> I think it would be how she dresses in certain situations. For example, if it is a school – I mean, an organization is holding like a form or something, and they dress like they're going to the club, then we're going to call them – we're going to say that they're "thirsty", looking for attention. Or if they're – if they go to class and they're the type of person that wears heels to class – not a lot of students do that here – the only people that do that are probably professors, and so we'll also call them "thirsty", want to be the center of attention – or want to be the center of attention. So I'd say mainly it's about how they dress.

While substantive conclusions cannot be drawn from a single source, these terms do seem to fit the tone of within-group gossip described by other participants. The concept of Black female promiscuity did reoccur in several other participants' narratives, lending support to the concept if not the terminology. "Thirsty" appears to have been in use for the better part of a decade (Urban Dictonary, 2003), and in the period of time between Joy's interview and the

preparation of this manuscript 'thot' has come into broader use with the Black community as a whole (Drake, 2014; Urban Dictonary, 2012). Historically relational aggression research has not addressed terms used within gossip, quantitative measures typically include questions focusing on the experience of gossip in general, but do not offer a description of what terms were contained in gossip (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Gomes et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2008). Owens and colleges in a qualitative study examined what was said, but were focused on gender and did not address the racial context of the interactions (2000). Gossip research addresses the motivations for gossip, but similarly does not address content and racial contexts (Feinberg et al., 2012; McAndrew, 2014). In this study the content of gossip was useful in exploring the experiences of within group exclusion, as referenced in later sections. This may be a beneficial addition to data collected within relationally aggression research, to help better understand the dynamics of within group exclusion.

Strong Black Woman. One of the most prevalent experiences reported were behaviors consistent with the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype. This stereotype implies that a Black woman is always supposed to be strong, regardless of the negative situations she may encounter, she is expected not to ask for help, or prioritize her own needs above those of others (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010). Consistent with the stereotype participants reported reluctance to share emotions that made them vulnerable, a violation of the concept of strength. They also reported remaining silent about their own anger, sadness, or fear for the benefit of others, a self-sacrificial action, placing the emotional needs of others above their own. The "Strong Black Woman" stereotype seems to play several roles in relationally aggressive behaviors.

First, unwillingness to express emotions may be influencing both relationally aggressive

perpetration and victimization. For perpetrators an unwillingness to express anger may be influencing the type of aggression used. Many participants expressed a reluctance to engage in direct conflict, instead preferring to avoid the person who had upset them, which from the other person's side may appear to be exclusion. Additionally, several participants reported participating in the silent treatment rather than addressing the conflict between themselves and another party. This behavior appears to be consistent with both a desire to appear strong in the face of adversity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010) and suggestions that relationally aggressive behaviors stem from women's desire to avoid direct confrontation (Simmons, 2011;Underwood, 2003).

Many relationally aggressive behaviors are covert (Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Ostrov et al., 2008; Simmons, 2011; Underwood, 2003), and the victim's unwillingness to vocalize anger or sadness may be perpetuating the use of these covert methods. For Elsa, it seems that her friends rely on her unwillingness to engage in direct conflict, particularly in front of others, utilizing exclusion and the silent treatment to express their frustrations to her.

> I may be upset over the passive aggressive treatment towards me, but I'm the type of person where I won't bring it up. I don't like to call attention to myself or call other people out on things. Maybe in private so, I would just retreat into myself. I guess they feel like they don't have to be as aggressive. They can just kind of like ostracize or you know, get their point across in more indirect ways, because they know that I'll understand but won't call them out on it. They don't need to be upfront. I think it's because of my more reserved demeanor.

In retreating inward and avoiding confrontation, Elsa may be feeding her friends relationally aggressive behaviors. Elsa is not the only participant who felt that her reactions towards relationally aggressive behaviors, might be feeding into experiences with relational aggression. Several participants cited their unwillingness to engage in conflict as a reason that their friends might use relationally aggressive behaviors against them, and Robin felt that she would have

more protection from relationally aggressive behaviors if people perceived her as an "Angry Black Woman".

A secondary role of the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype in relationally aggressive behavior may be the self-sacrificial care of others. Several participants noted that they did not express emotions for the benefit of others. Serena avoids expressing sadness to keep others from being sad, Asha puts on a brave face so that her little sister won't see her fear and become afraid herself, and in Tara's family younger members of the family were taught to not to express anger, because their feelings were not as important as older family members'. While these silences do not initially appear to play a role in relationally aggressive experiences, participants may be remaining silent when experiencing relationally aggressive behaviors, in an effort to protect the feelings of others. Participants exhibited patterns of internalizing anger, sadness, and personal fears. Each participant's comfort level with expressing anger, fear, and sadness were classified into three categories: comfortable, conditionally comfortable, and not at all comfortable. For comfort expressing fear, conditionally comfortable was separated into person specific, and type of fear. See table 4.2 for examples of each category and the reported prevalence.

Emotion	**Comfort Level**	**Example**	**Percentage of Participants**
Anger	Comfortable	If I'm mad at someone about something, I don't feel as though I should keep it inside of me and be stressed about it when it's kind of their fault so I rather put that over them rather than like me just being mad all day or whatever.	16.6
	Conditionally	Very comfortable with my significant other – not so comfortable with my friends.	33.3

	Not comfortable	If I'm angry, I'm the type of person who will remain quiet and draw away.	50
Sadness	Comfortable	Sad is universal. Everyone is somewhat sad the same way.	11.1
	Conditionally	Usually I try to keep that to myself, and, again, as I said, in the long run that does not help, so usually it helps if I have at least have one or two people I know I can tell.	5.5
	Not comfortable	I don't express sadness – well, I try not to. Even with friends, it's like, "How's your day?" "Oh, I'm wonderful." You might get, "I'm okay," but I'm not a person to delve deep into my emotions with other people.	83.3
Fear	Comfortable	I'm pretty comfortable expressing fear. When I'm scared of something, I'll let people know and then we have to rectify it.	35.3
	Conditionally-People	It depends on who I'm by, like who's with me.	11.7
	Conditionally-Type	I'll express it to a certain extent, depending on what the situation is or like, what exactly I'm in fear of or how fearful it actually is.	35.3
	Not comfortable	I'm not gonna express some fear like I wouldn't do it especially if I'm around a group.	17.6

Table 4.2 Reported comfort level with expressing anger, sadness, and fear

Dena describes the self-sacrificing aspect of the "Strong Black woman" stereotype as she explains the demands on her time from what she views as one sided friendships.

> A lot of people feel like, "Oh, you're accepting of everybody. Oh, I'm having a bad day. Let's have lunch." It's like, "I want to, but I have my own personal things," and then they get confused. "But why?" And I'm like, "I have to put me first." They think I have this ample amount of time to pour into them. So it's that whole thing of, "Oh, you're my best friend," and I'm like, "But really you're an acquaintance because you don't know about me." It's one-sided and then they're like, "I thought I could trust you."

This is not the only instance she describes in the group, and while she does have a defined set of boundaries and takes time for her own needs, she notes that people push back against her when she articulates them. She notes that relative strangers feel that she should give freely of her time. This expectation that she should give freely of herself to provide emotional support to others, even when she has other demands on her time, suggest that other people expect her to prioritize others needs above her own. While this expectation itself is not relationally aggressive, the statement 'I thought I could trust you' and pressure to place others needs above her own if she wishes to maintain her friendships is indicative of relational aggression.

Sasha's example contains aspects of both strength and prioritizing others' needs above her own. Sasha says that she feels that her friends may use relationally aggressive behaviors against her because she is strong enough to take it, where her other friends may not be.

> I would say for me people might use that behavior because they know that I won't break over it. I feel like they're definitely people in my friend group who are more sensitive and that they would never try to approach them in that sort of way because they would end up crying and telling someone and then making themselves look bad whereas me, I just feel like I don't really, I just don't appreciate passive aggressiveness. I don't appreciate being disrespected or you know, there are certain things I don't tolerate and I make that very clear so I think it's easier for them to be more aggressive in other ways to me because like it doesn't really affect me.
>
> It helps them get whatever they have off their mind and off their chest because they know at the end, they're not gonna feel guilty because I'm not gonna cry over it.

Sasha claims that her friends' actions against her don't affect her, and that she is a better target than other members of her friendship group, that the relationally aggressive behaviors used against her are helpful to those who use them, and that they can attack her without guilt. It can be viewed as admirable that she is willing to allow people to attack her rather than others, and endure bad behavior to allow others to relieve stress, however, there are consequences to this action. This act of self-sacrifice ignores the fact that her friends should not be attacking any member of their circle to make themselves feel better, and prioritizes others wellbeing over her own.

Sasha is the only participant to have articulated this particular position. It is possible that her situation is an isolated one. However aspects of her situation were repeated in the experiences of others. For both Sasha and Elsa, their attackers appear to be relying on their acceptance of the behaviors and seem to be anticipating their silence. For both Dena and Sasha, an aspect of expected self-sacrifice plays a role in their experiences. While Sasha's exact experience combining both silent strength and self-sacrifice maybe unique, it still appears significant due to the similarities between stories.

While many of our participants did not report direct personal encounters in which the "Strong Black woman" stereotype played a role, many of them expressed beliefs on expressing emotions consistent with the stereotype. Several participants did describe instances in which aspects of the "Strong Black woman" played a part. This stereotype is unique to the Black community, and there seems to be indications that this stereotype may be playing a role in Black women's experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors. Additional work in this area would be useful to discover the prevalence of these experiences, and the potential affects that maintaining an aura of strength may have on Black women's mental and physical health.

Angry Black Woman. Participants described behaviors consistent with the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype, which portrays Black women as perpetually angry, defensive, and always ready to engage in conflict if they encounter any perceived slight (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010). The proliferation of this concept within American culture has been used to devalue legitimate feelings of Black women, and may also play a role in the fact that Black women are erroneously perceived as angry when they are in fact expressing other emotions such as sadness or fear (Parks, 2010). Contrary to prior literature which reported that Black women were comfortable with anger (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010), a surprisingly low number of participants felt comfortable expressing anger in all contexts. Participants described having relatively neutral reactions perceived negatively and feeling that their anger was going to be dismissed as irrational, and several participants expressed a belief that being viewed as angry made them more vulnerable to relationally aggressive attacks. In a somewhat surprising turn of events, however, participants also highlighted some instances in which they felt the stereotype was positive, such as when it served as a potential deterrent to aggression.

A surprising number of women in this study were not comfortable expressing anger, 83.3% of participants in this study expressed at least some reluctance to express their anger. Asha feels safe expressing her anger to people she is closer too, but is less so when dealing with people more distant from her. "With people who I'm closer to, it's easier for me to do it cause I feel like they're not leaving, and I can do it." This finding is unexpected, as more of the participants in this sample felt uncomfortable in dealing with anger, choosing to internalize their anger rather than express it, contrary to what prior scholarship indicated (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010). Serena says that "You could just keep it [anger] in, then

it just slowly simmers off and you forget about it." Elsa indicated she required a high level of trust in order to share her anger, "I'd have to be very comfortable around the person whom I'm directing my anger towards. Other than that I'll cover it up." This may prove an extension to Simmons' work with adolescent girls indicating that as academic achievement goes up for Black girls, so does a tendency towards silence due to having attempts at honesty squashed by expectations of White academic institutions that girls are 'nice' (2011).

Mia, who provided an example of being excluded from study groups within her major explained why she felt that she might be singled out for exclusion.

> I just think people are scared of me because they think I'm an "angry Black woman" sometimes. Especially in my neuroscience class because I just felt like – the whole group situation, I want to study too. I don't know. They think that we're not friendly or whatever.

Robin's experience is similar to Mia's as she described an experience in one of her classes.

> I know the other Black girl so we always sit together in the classes and there are two of us and that's it and we're right there together and I think since maybe I'm more quiet and maybe I don't sit there with a big ole smile on my face, it's not that I'm grumpy or it's not that I'm always irritated but it's just that I'm there. I'm just there with a straight face and maybe since I'm sitting there on my own, not making a huge attempt to always be talking to someone, I think I can be perceived as kind of – not always an outsider but not someone that a lot of people would automatically go to and be – I don't think I'm usually assumed or perceived to be a nice person.

In both Mia and Robin's experiences they felt that they were perceived as negative or angry in neutral situations. This is consistent with the "Angry Black woman" stereotype (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010), and appears to be influencing experiences of academic exclusion by White students.

The "Angry Black woman" stereotype is also reported to have contributed to Black women's experiences with anger being discounted as irrational. Joy's explanation as to what she thought would happen if her anger was expressed publically, provides a good example. "People

would probably think I'm crazy. People'd be like 'What's wrong with her?' I think that's one of the reason why I only keep it to a few people." Earlier in her interview Joy expressed a reluctance to share anger with anyone save for her closest friends. While it is possible that Joy is correct, and that people may view her as crazy, this appears to be an example of having rational emotions discounted due to the "Angry Black woman" stereotype. Several other participants expressed an unwillingness to share anger due to a desire not to be seen as crazy, or reported experiences where their feelings were dismissed as irrational. While this aspect of the stereotype may not have a direct link to relationally aggressive experiences, fear of appearing crazy or having people dismiss their emotions may be preventing Black women from expressing their emotions freely and may be linked to role of silence as discussed in the previous section; further study would be needed to substantiate this linkage.

Some participants, like Sasha viewed their willingness to engage in open conflict as a reason that they experienced relationally aggressive behaviors. Larissa also attributed her experiences to a willingness to engage in open conflict. Larissia arrived to the focus group carrying a box of tissues, a take-out box from the dining hall, and a book to do her homework while she waits for the group to begin. She was quiet, almost subdued before the group began, possibly diminished by what appears to be a rather nasty head cold. Here she discusses her perception of being targeted for relational aggression.

> a lot of my friends know that I'm aggressive, not really just aggressive and kind of like confrontational so often they don't feel comfortable coming to me with something so I feel like they would rather do you know, other stuff like that [gossip].

For Larissia her willingness to engage in open conflict appears to make her friends uncomfortable, and at least to her perception, makes her a target of relational attacks instead. This supports previous views that Black women may be less relationally aggressive due to a

perceived lack of freedom to express anger (Crothers et al., 2005; Simmons, 2011), but does not seem to be insulating them from the aggression of others.

Not all mentions of the Angry Black Woman stereotype were negative. Robin disagrees with Mia and argues that being perceived as an Angry Black Woman would lessen her exposure to relationally aggressive behaviors.

> I think for me I have the opposite problem that I feel like if I were perceived as the "angry Black woman" I would have a lot less relational aggression than I do because I think for me it's not when you don't know me, it's when you get to know me that I get a lot of the relational aggression of people seeing me being the talkative, out there person and perceiving that a sort of weakness or a lack of strength and making it easier for people to threaten not to be friends with me or exclude me from things because they either perceive that I've already got people to do things with or they are upset about something. And so I feel like it's a lot easier to kind of target that.

Even Larissa, who noted that her comfort with anger has made her a target, does not find the stereotype entirely negative, saying that her methods of dealing with conflict have worked for her up until this point.

> I guess kind of just growing up with that kind of "angry Black female" that kind of thing and well, I'm from Philly so it's kind of like, kind of have to be kind of aggressive there so I guess those two mix together, not that I didn't have any choice, I kind of – but it's worked for me thus far so –

There does not seem to be a singular consensus as to the effect of the Angry Black Woman stereotype. However, it does appear to be influencing relationally aggressive behaviors in the Black community with some participants feeling that they have been excluded or are more likely to be on the receiving end of relationally aggressive behaviors. Others believe it to have been protective or adaptive. Further study of this concept would be useful to determine the scope of each belief, however, this stereotype does appear to be influencing relationally aggressive behaviors as experienced by Black women at the University, supporting the argument that racial content does need to be considered in future relational aggression research.

Relationship Contexts in Which Relationally Aggressive Behaviors Occurred

Consistent with existing research participants reported experiencing relationally aggressive behaviors in multiple contexts, including friendships (Duncan & Owen-Smith, 2006), romantic relationships (Goldstein, 2011), and academic settings (Dellasega, 2005). Perceived harm from these experiences appeared to be dependent on both closeness of the participant's relationship with the aggressor, and how frequently these experiences occurred. Participant's experiences seem to follow two different, but co-occurring patterns. From White students, participants experienced academic and social exclusion. Within the Black community they faced gossip, which appears to be used to enforce community standards of behaviors and appearances with those who refuse to conform facing rejection and censure. The meaning that participants made of these experiences appears to depend on multiple different aspects of identity interacting at once, with individual variation based on prior experience and salience of identity (Abes et al., 2007).

Experiences Across Multiple Settings. Participants experienced relationally aggressive behaviors across multiple contexts. Asha experienced exclusion from her roommates, negative non-verbal gestures from a group of women involved in conflict with one of her friends, gossip and damaged reputation within her family, and exclusion from parties from the White Greek community. Asha's response to these occurrences varied, from ending her friendships with former roommates, annoyance and frustration at being judged by people who had never interacted with her, avoidance of her family members, and feelings of exclusion from the University community. Other participants echoed Asha's experiences with relationally aggressive experiences occurring within multiple contexts, and their differential responses appeared to be based on both the participant's relationship with the aggressor and the frequency of experience.

Relationally aggressive content from people with whom their interactions were limited, such as Asha's experience of negative non-verbal gestures from enemies of a friend, generally had less of an effect than relationally aggressive content from people participants expected to have a continuing relationship with such as roommates or family members. Joy felt that relationally aggressive behaviors were more painful when the aggressor was someone she trusted. "I would say, I feel like, I guess I would say that this type of aggression, it hurts, but it depends on the source. If it's someone who's close to you, you're going to wonder why, what happened?"

While it could be argued that the difference in perceived harm could stem from frequency of experience alone, with more distal relationships being less harmful due to their infrequency of interactions, participants reported both singular instances of relational aggression from trusted persons and repeated actions from more distal sources as harmful. For example Asha had a single disagreement with her aunt and avoided family gatherings as a result, she also had repeated experiences of exclusion by relative strangers (being denied admission to multiple parties in the course of an evening) and felt a lack of belonging in the University community. Infrequent instances of relationally aggressive behavior from distal sources appeared to be less harmful than repeated instances in closer relationships. For example, while the negative non-verbal gestures from enemies of a friend made enough of an impression on Asha for her to report them in our focus group a significant amount of time after they occurred, this one time incident was more easily dismissed than the reoccurring instances within her dorm. See figure 4.1 for an example of some of Asha's experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors across contexts, and her reactions to these experiences.

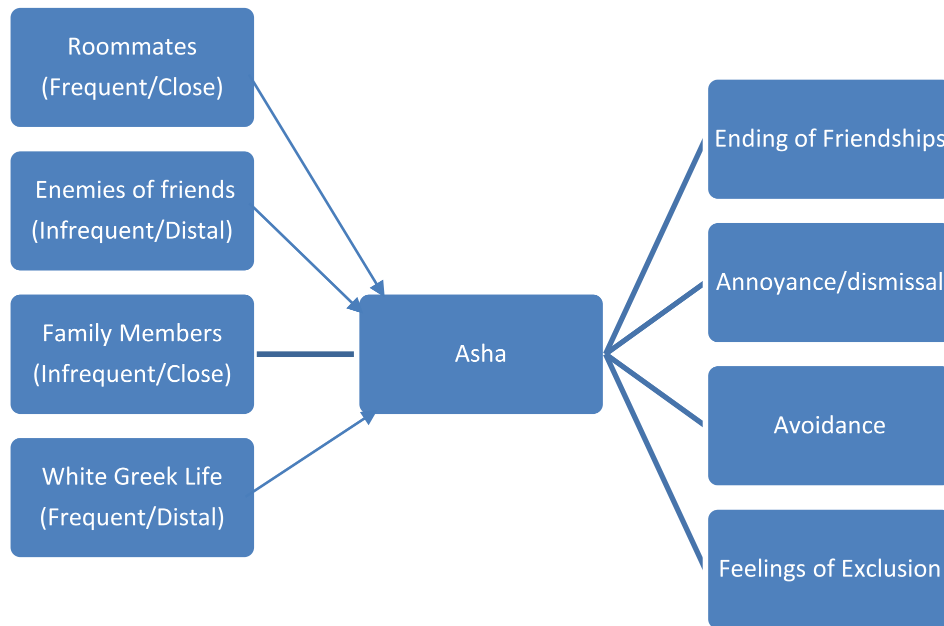

Figure 4.1 Multiple contexts of relationally aggressive experiences and responses

Within these multiple contexts participant's experiences appeared to follow two overarching patterns, exclusion from the White student community, and use of gossip to enforce community standards on members of the Black community.

Out-group Exclusion. A pattern of academic and social exclusion by White students emerged across participants' narratives. Participants reported academic exclusion, which included being unwelcome in study groups, difficulty finding partners for group work, and other students purposefully scheduling group meetings when they could not attend. Social exclusion was more widely reported than academic experiences, and included instances such as not receiving invitations to social events, not being welcomed at White student's events, and exclusion by members of White sororities. Sixty-one percent of participants reported experiencing at least one instance of academic or social exclusion by White students. Academic exclusion was reported by a third of participants, but occurrences tended to be singular rather than recurring. Incidents of social exclusion were more commonly reported than academic

exclusion, with individual participants reporting multiple incidents of social exclusion. The frequency of both academic and social exclusion of Black women by White students supports the assertion that Black women are being subjected to relationally aggressive content in the form of exclusion by White students.

Academic exclusion occurred for Mia in the form of not receiving an invitation to participate in study groups. She further described her experience in response to a follow up question, intended to see if she had pursued these experiences after her initial exclusion.

> I've asked them, like, hey, are you guys studying and they'll give me the answer like yeah, we are but then never tell you when. Or if you go to one, it's like they never invite you to the rest of them.

The argument could certainly be made that study groups that occur outside of classrooms are not required to be inclusive for everyone. Little can be done at an institutional level to ensure a student's inclusion in events that occur voluntarily outside of the classroom; however, Mia's exclusion from these groups was a source of frustration for her. While such study groups are not mandatory, it is also possible that repeated exclusions from such groups could affect a student's performance in the course. Mia and other participants did not report being caused academic difficulty due to their exclusion in these groups, however, statements made in answer to other questions indicate that they may not feel comfortable admitting that they needed additional academic help. Dena describes a competitive mentality that may prevent participants from sharing academic vulnerability, "with the culture here, too, it's frowned upon. If you go to office hours or something, like, 'You couldn't do that homework all by yourself? Ha ha.'" Jemma notes that "As sad as it is, some girls don't want to see other girls doing better than them. That creates tension. This is the first time in my life it's been hard for me to ask for help." More data would be needed to determine if exclusion from voluntary study groups is affecting student's

performances in the classroom.

While student study groups are not mandatory, the exclusion appears to be extending to mandatory groups such as those used for class projects. Jemma describes a group work experience, in which the group leader consistently scheduled times to work on their project at times that conflicted with Jemma's cheerleading practices.

> I've experienced that a lot, actually, last semester with a group from one of my classes. A girl that was the leader of our group would make a time for a meeting and find out that I had cheerleading practice during that time. She'd be like, "Oh, it's okay if not everyone's at the meeting," which is fine. But then it kept happening. So it ended up that I missed a lot of meetings and instead of approaching me about it, they all saw me as being lazy and not showing up to stuff, when in reality she kept scheduling things when I couldn't make it.

While being excluded from one or two of the group meetings described could be attributed to difficulty juggling the schedules of multiple people at the same time, repeated occurrences and failure to provide an explanation of Jemma's absences to her other group mates indicates that the exclusion in this case may have been purposeful. Jemma was not certain why the group leader kept scheduling meetings when she could not attend, but her position in the group was affected by both her absences, and a lack of communication about the reasons behind them. Unlike voluntary study groups, this has a more direct possibility to be detrimental to a student's academic success as professors sometimes include rubrics for students to assess other group members' contributions to group projects, and absences from multiple group meetings could have detrimental effects on a student's grade if reported by group members who were not aware of the reason behind the absences. Jemma is the only participant who described this particular kind of exclusionary behavior. While a singular experience is not sufficient to base substantive conclusions, when viewed along with other participants examples of academic exclusion Jemma's experience does provide additional evidence that some Black women are being

excluded by some White students.

Cassie noted a difference that she saw in her experiences when students were asked to form groups within a class.

> when we'd split off into groups, I noticed that I would be the last one to find a group because people were kind of just like go find your own group but I would kind of have to go find the group myself instead of like people coming to you.

As discussed in the section on the Angry Black Woman stereotype, Robin and Mia experienced exclusion which they attributed to beliefs consistent with the Angry Black Woman stereotype (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010), the experiences were similar to Cassie's of being excluded within an academic context by White students.

These experiences also seem to mirror other instances of exclusion participants reported in social interactions. Asha's voice quivers slightly as she announces that "the White people just kinda want to be friends with each other and not us", reminiscent of Elsa's experience of exclusion by her suitemates discussed in the section on exclusion, and multiple participants exclusion from White Greek life discussed in the section on exclusion and Greek life. Kimber echoes instances of participants feeling that they were not welcome at White social events such as parties, saying that "I can't get into any parties…without white people."

Within-Group Gossip and Censure. In addition to exclusion by White students, participants also reported experiencing gossip within the Black community at the University. Unique terms were used to describe perceived female promiscuity, and gossip about women in the Black community seemed heavily skewed towards actions undertaken in relation to men (e.g. if they dressed to attract male attention, if they pursued partners rather than being pursued, if they were overly friendly or receptive). Gossip was used against those who violated community standards either by acting promiscuously or by spending too much time with people in the White

community.

Several participants reported that Black women within the University community often exchange malicious gossip about each other rather than supporting each other. Kara expresses her belief that women are bad at supporting each other, with Black women being especially so. “Not only do you have like hating and girls hating on each other. I think we're the worst, especially Black females.” Larissa agrees with this statement, “Just talking about Black girls, like they can't stick together.” Kimber gives an example of a friend who has been labeled promiscuous and feels let down by the community that she thought would support her. “Yeah, my friend, she said, she was deemed promiscuous by the larger Black community and she got really upset because she feels that the Black community is supposed to support each other and not tear each other down.”

As Joy’s discussions of terminology used within the Black University community indicated, a significant amount of the gossip that participants reported centered on perceived female promiscuity. While Kimber told us about her friend’s disappointment at not being supported by the Black community, she also feared being affected by the stigma associated with being labeled promiscuous.

> One of my friends is very promiscuous and she likes to go out and do promiscuous things with people and one time she got really, really drunk. She's an African American female and we were at this African American party and she got really, really drunk and I, this is my first time going out, I didn't know what to do, so I kind of just wanted to leave so I kind of asked her to leave with me and she agreed but then before she pretty much danced on every single guy there and guys noticed and I was really scared that her reputation would kind of rub off on me…

Kimber’s reaction is not unreasonable as often women who are judged to be promiscuous by the Black University community are often the subject of gossip. Fear of this gossip, of being viewed negatively and having that fact discussed openly within the community appears to have kept

Kimber from enjoying the party as she might have otherwise, and seems to have shaped the behaviors that she felt were appropriate for her friend to display. While it can be argued that a certain amount of personal moral judgment comes into play here, at no point does Kimber say she thought that her friend's behavior was wrong. Instead there is the focus on how her behavior was viewed, largely by the male party guests.

Jemma feels that the labeling and gossip within the community stem from the fact that the majority of her interactions with other Black students occur at social events such as parties, and notes that her assessments of women formed at parties carry over to interactions with them outside of social events.

> I feel like it's us labeling each other as well, because the fact that it's so small. Not a lot of Black women are in my classes, so when I see other people in the Black community, it's at a party. So of course I'm going to see what you're wearing, how small it is, how tight it is, and what you're doing on the dance floor. So I don't even know what you're here for, what your major is, what your grade is, or what kind of woman you might be. But all I see is that. So when I see you walking around [campus], that's what I'm thinking and I don't want anything to do with you because of what I saw. I guess it's a bad label, but they were doing that. So it might be an accurate label. I don't know.

Jemma's assessments are based on her own observations of a woman's behaviors in this example. However, she notes that she can see other motivations for gossip. "I can see if maybe you're hanging out with a guy – whether you guys are dating or not – especially a football player and another girl sees you and maybe they like him. I can see that starting a rumor." This supports statements made by other participants indicating that gossip could stem from being too close to a desirable man.

Competition over eligible Black men in a population where women severely outnumber men is one potential motivation for relationally aggressive behavior. Elsa notes that there is a lot of tension between women, "especially when it comes to interracial dating here like between the Black female and the Black females and some of the White because of competition for especially

like the more attractive Black males on campus". Sasha feels that the gender ratio within the Black University community plays a role in gossip, "I think Black women at the University gossip because there aren't that many of us especially in relation to African American men." None of our participants admitted to being intentionally relationally aggressive in this kind of situation, but several did admit that they had gossiped with others about friends' romantic relationships and attire at parties. While none admitted to starting a rumor, there seemed to be an agreement on how rumors spread within the community, if you were too close to a man someone else wanted, if your dress was too revealing, if you were too eager for male attention, or had too many male friends in the Black community you ran the risk of being labeled promiscuous. For the Black University community, "promiscuous" seems to be similar to the accusation described by Simmons, 2011, as "she's all that". For middle school girls, "she's all that" was an accusation leveled at girls who were deemed too confident, pretty, popular, or in possession of something that the girl who leveled the accusation wanted. The accusation of "She's all that" held similarly vague standards and rules and could be arbitrarily applied based on the needs of the person starting the rumor, in our population, for example, there is not a specified hem length for too short, nor a definition of what is merely friendly or what crosses the line to become 'thirsty' (Simmons, 2011).

Several participants argue that gossip is not solely a feminine sport, and that men in the Black University community also play a large role in gossip. Larissa addresses this topic during the wrap up questions in the focus group, saying that she'd thought that gossip was just normal. When asked to clarify if she meant just women gossiping, she shook her head. "Guys, too, just everyone gossips." It cannot be said that everyone gossips based on the findings of this study, however, a significant number of participants admitted to participating in gossip in some way.

Joy describes the way that she's heard men gossiping within the Black University community. "Yeah, guys talking about women. Whether or not they're 'thick', or not. Definitely whether or not they are pretty. Guys are just terrible! Whether or not they're wifey material, or they're just good for hooking up..." These conversations, the distinctions between what makes a woman 'wifey material' vs 'just good for hooking up' may hold a significant role in the Black University communities standards of promiscuity. However, this question exceeds the scope of this study.

Kimber, in answering a question about who was most likely to use gossip against her, replied, "I think maybe the male population here because I know, I choose my friends very carefully." Kimber is still anxious about being deemed promiscuous by association, and goes to great lengths to insure a friend's integrity before entrusting her with her secrets. Even after this process she still admits to being concerned that some of her friends might spill her secrets if their friendship ceases.

Along with the risk of being labeled promiscuous, participants also reported censure for spending too much time outside of the Black University community, or seeking membership in White organizations for which there was a Black University community equivalent. Joy alluded to this when she was describing terminology specific to the Black University community, and Jemma describes how a friend of hers was treated for joining a White sorority.

> I know one of my friends is Black and she's in a White sorority. They don't call it that, but that's what they primarily are. She got a lot of talk about that from the Black community, like a traitor. "You couldn't find any Black sororities that you liked?" So I can definitely see – if a White girl or White guy was going to try to join a Black one, I don't think anyone would have a problem with it. It would be kind of funny, like, "Okay, White girl." It would be fine. I definitely feel like there's this unwritten contract where you have to do everything with your race and this has to be your favorite race.

Jemma is the only participant who reported a response this extreme to seeking relationships

within the White student community. However, other participants did describe comments about 'Acting White', or not being Black enough, these comments support Jemma's assertion that there is an expectation that Black female students identify and participate in the Black University community.

Other manifestations of this expectation are more subtle. Elsa noted that due to her upbringing she initially felt more comfortable with the White students on campus, and that she was aware of looks she received from Black students while interacting with White students.

> I feel like in the beginning because I grew up in a predominantly White [area], I didn't really feel drawn to black students here. So what I would be seen with White students then you could kind of tell from the looks of other Black students like okay she's one of them but they never came out and didn't say hurtful things.

While the reaction that Elsa received was more reserved than the one Jemma's friend faced, the judgmental looks were not without consequence. Elsa describes a breakdown of her relationships with her White friends in her first year, as she began to be excluded from social events and her suitemates grew more distant. Elsa did eventually gain a friend group within the Black University community, and she came to our focus group as a member of a Black student organization, however she did note that the process took time, and she still remains cautious due to her period of friendlessness during her first year.

Black female students appear to be experiencing two separate, but often concurrent patterns of relationally aggressive behavior. While the behaviors of gossip and exclusion are consistent with the broader patterns of relational aggression (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Simmons, 2011), there does appear to be a specific pattern that is occurring for the participants of our study as the intersections between Black, female, and student occur. A Black male student may face academic exclusion, but does not face the threat of being called promiscuous. White female students may face being judged based on appearance or behavior at parties, but they also don't

seem to face the same censure when seeking friends outside their racial group. Refer to figure 4.2 for an illustration of these intersections.

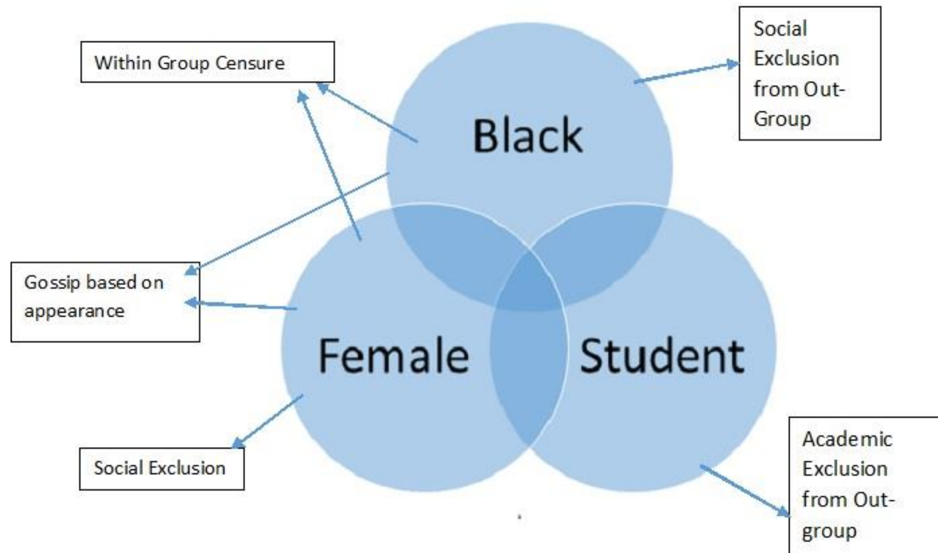

Figure 4.2 Intersection of Black Female Student Identities and Patterns of Relational Aggression

At the intersection of multiple identities there is a possibility of experiencing both traditional relational aggression, within a group of friends or dyadic friendships, and experiencing relational aggression at a person-community level in which social standards and group acceptance are considered. Rejection of a person at a group level (for example: accusations of acting White) may hold different personal consequences based on how salient an identity is to an individual (Jemma's quote page 67). For example in order for rejection from the Black community to be detrimental, an individual must first value and find their Black identity salient to them. Given participants feelings of rejection from the White community as described in prior discussions of academic and social exclusion, as well as participants expressed participation in Black student organizations on campus it is probable at least for this sample of women that their Black identity was salient for them. As such the threat of rejection from the group may be more harmful, and could possibly explain apprehension about being judged by

members of the Black community (see page 87 for Kimber's experience) or continued participation in within group gossip.

While the individual relationally-aggressive actions, such as gossip and exclusion, that Black female students in our sample encountered are addressed within relationally aggressive literature (Dellasega, 2005; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Simmons, 2011), the context in which they are experiencing them in is not. The concurrent experiences of academic and social exclusion from White students and gossip and censure within the Black community appear unique to Black female college students at this Predominantly White University. This pattern of experiences is not currently addressed in studies of relational aggression, as current studies focus on gender or student status not, gender, race, and student status (Nelson et al., 2008). Based on the patterns of experience our participants reported experiencing further studies of relationally aggressive experiences within college students would benefit from considering the role that intersecting identities play on participants' experiences of relational aggression.

Meaning Making. Consistent with Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) theory of the intersection of multiple identities and meaning-making, participants indicated fluidity in their social identities as they reported experience and growth, and a varying level of the salience of particular aspects of their identity depending on their situation. The influence of contextual factors on experiences varied depending on participant's levels of meaning-making. This differential meaning-making influenced experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors.

Kimber, who displays formulaic meaning-making (Abes et al., 2007), accepts her mother's negative views on Black people even as they conflict with her racial identity. Kimber feels that White people don't want to include her in their groups and attributes this exclusion to her race because her mother has told her that people will not want to talk to her because she is

Black. Several times in the course of the focus group she discussed views directly imparted from other people, saying “my friend, she thinks that's” in response to a question about why people participate in relationally aggressive behaviors as well as giving the following answer when asked how race had played a role in her experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors:

> My mom is Asian and she's always pointing out to me how I'm like Black and not Asian and therefore kind of inferior to other people… when other people are kind of exclusive or they don't really wanna talk to me, I just kind of automatically assume it's because I'm Black or they perceive me being Black.

Sasha, who displays advanced meaning-making (Abes et al., 2007), applies her own interpretations as to what it means to be a Black, female, student at a Predominately White institution. She holds to those views even when they contradict societal norms, and in the presence of other women professing another more widely accepted interpretation. Sasha rejects the idea that a similar experience of having her point of view ignored during a group project in a group of White classmates was due to her race or gender.

> My way of thinking is different than theirs, not necessarily because I’m female or because of my race. I wouldn't attribute it to that, but I think it's easier to persuade like for one example, we had a group project and it was easier for two of my classmates to persuade the rest of the class because they have like loose connections with one another… they're campaigning in the classroom and it was easier for them to listen to him than it was for me but I wouldn't really attribute that to my gender or race. I just think that's [the University]. It's all about networking.

Sasha makes this statement in a room with two other women who have described academic exclusion that they perceived to be based on a combination of their race and gender. Her dissenting view, maintained in the wake of stories from others who expressed a different view, indicates advanced levels of meaning making (Abes et al., 2007). Kimber and Sasha share four of the same social identities, and yet their differing attributions of exclusion and their meaning-making behind them provides an example of how the combination of Black, female, and student identities can be experienced differently based on which identities a person finds

salient.

Institution-Specific Occurrences. Participant's stories and the interpretations that can be drawn from them are both affected and limited by the context from which they were collected. The content and context of relationally aggressive experiences may differ between the University from which this sample was drawn, and from other Predominately White Institutions due to specific occurrences on campus and institutional history. The University from which the sample was drawn is historically a Predominately White Institution. The first African American student was not admitted until the 1950s. Since that time, the University has taken steps to improve the experiences of African-American students, with a growing number of support programs and initiatives resulting in a high graduation rate for Black students. However, there are still instances specific to this institution which may factor into relationally aggressive experiences for Black female undergraduates. For instance, women discussed factors like socioeconomic status (SES), Greek life, limited size of the Black community within the University, and first year experiences, as catalysts for their experiences with relational aggression.

Socioeconomic Status. The University has a very successful financial aid program. Financial aid awards are generous, and certainly of great benefit to students across racial and ethnic groups, however the widely published nature of the program may be an unexpected source of relationally aggressive content. Some participants reported relationally aggressive content based on socioeconomic status. This topic did not come up frequently, but when individual participants mentioned experiences, other participants responded affirmatively.

Tara and Shanna report speculation from White students that they are athletes or here as a result of affirmative action, both with implications that they are receiving financial aid. Tori explains that social status can be exposed in the way that you dress, and that given the social

aspect of University life, style choices can be significant. Serena discusses plain clothing as an aspect that has made one of her friends vulnerable to gossip and exclusion and notes that things are different at the University than when she was back home.

> I'd say income matters more here than back home, I mean back home I'd never really seen the problem of income. But here with the gossiping and exclusion and all that tends to focus on if you're one of the rich kids or not.

Participants' experiences perceived exclusion due to SES is consistent with prior research indicating that lower SES influences feelings of belonging (Ostrove & Long, 2007).

Another aspect of socioeconomic status which may factor into students' experiences at this University is the racial composition of workers in service professions. The University is an equal opportunity employer, and does employ a number of people of color in high-status positions. However, a significant number of service professionals seen in the dining halls and custodial staff are people, often women, of color. It is possible that perceptions about Black females by the wider student body may be influenced by this contextual feature, which could contribute to experiences with relational aggression that are related to social class. However, this level of context was not a focus of the present study.

Greek Life. Greek life at the University seemed to play a role in relationally aggressive experiences of participants as well, although reports from participants were varied as to what exactly was occurring. There is no single coherent overarching narrative here, but instead several different experiences, including exclusion by White sorority women, divisions between sorority members and non-members, exclusion from social events, tensions between Black Greek organizations, and use of relationally aggressive behaviors to forge and strengthen relationships.

Several participants related stories of exclusion by White sorority women, Serena's being

the most clearly-articulated:

> I've actually had a similar experience [to Asha], but not with the turning people against you, it's more like just being excluded. I live in a suite with five other girls, um four of the five were in a sorority. And they really did exclude me since I wasn't a part of that group, since I wasn't in a sorority.

Tori also reports social exclusion from White women, noting that once women in her dorm began pledging, she could see a divide forming between those who did and those who did not join. While it is not specifically stated, Tori also made the statement that she remembered being the only woman of color on her first-year hallway, and the incident occurred within her first year dorm. While this implies that the divide that she observed is largely occurring between White sorority sisters and other White women, Tori's reports of exclusion appear to indicate that women in general who did not pledge faced exclusion by those who did. In this way White Greek life does seem to factor into the exclusionary behaviors that some Black female students are experiencing. Race was not necessarily salient to this experience, instead it appears to have occurred at the intersection of female and student identities.

Other participants reported experiences of exclusion by White Greek members in which their Black identity was salient. Asha reported being in a group of women who were turned away from a fraternity party, at a time when fraternities were making every effort to attract female guests. "it was boys bid night, and we were all girls, and three of us were Black and four of us were White, and then we weren't let into any parties." Asha felt that the group had been turned away because of the inclusion of Black women in their group. Other students later told her that the fraternity where she had the worst experience was known to routinely deny students of color entrance to their events. While this form of exclusion appears more akin to outright racism, several participants made mention of similar events during the focus groups, and the difference between the two may be the way that the exclusionary statements were phrased. In

Asha's experience, she was excluded by being told that the party was already full, and her entire group of friends was denied admission rather than just the Black members of her group. Her White friends did not seem to make the connection to having Black members in their party and being rejected, though Asha did. She reports not attempting to attend frat parties after that, but does not say that her White friends joined her in her alternate activities. If, as Asha suspects, the exclusion occurred because of the Black women's presence in the group, and the White women readily and repeatedly gained entrance when the Black women were not present, this could be an example of White students using relationally aggressive behaviors to enforce a social norm. This would be consistent with findings that gossip and exclusion are used to enforce social norms (Feinberg et al., 2012), however this model has not previously been applied in such a way.

While there is room for debate as to whether or not this behavior should be considered relationally aggressive or explicit prejudice, it is important to note that participants did consider it to be relationally aggressive from their perspective, and some reported becoming more isolated as a result. Asha notes "I didn't feel like I belonged [at the frat parties], kinda like the White people did." Cassie felt that she was unwelcome, "a lot of times, as being an African American female, you're not wanted at a lot of parties and it's just known…I actually did try to get in one time and it's like 'no'." She noted that instead of dealing with the party scene she spent her time reading instead. While increased time spent reading is not in and of itself problematic, the fact that it is occurring as a result of students feeling that they are not being accepted into the wider University community is concerning. More research would be needed to determine if there is a significant difference between relationally aggressive behaviors and explicit prejudice in situations such as the participants described. However, by either name these reports need to be

addressed, as student's feeling of belonging is influential in their overall success in college settings (Johnson et al., 2007; O'Keeffe, 2008; Schreiner, 2013).

A final aspect of Greek life which is unique to the University in this particular time frame is the resurgence of several historically Black sororities and fraternities. In particular, a Black sorority that had lost its standing within the University recently regained it. One of the final focus groups was conducted the night after an event put on by the Black Greek community, and all of the members of the group felt that the topic needed to be addressed. Robin describes the feeling that negativity between Greek organizations is further splintering an already small community.

> I don't want to use improper terms but like generally how it is in my head, there was just a lot of shade thrown from every direction. From every single Greek organization to every other one, especially from the AKAs to the Deltas and I just feel like we're already such a small community.

Mia nods in agreement and expresses her belief that this divisive nature was unique to Black Greek organizations.

> I don't understand drama either. I just don't understand drama. I feel like it's useless. But yeah, I agree. It's ridiculous. I think it's really destructive. And I don't even think it's all Greeks. To a certain extent, I feel like it's all Greeks but I've talked to some of my white friends about their Greek organizations and they don't understand all the stuff that happens within Black Greek communities either.

Darcy expresses the opinion that the events within the Black Greek system have a detrimental effect on people within the Black community, regardless of the extent of their involvement with Greek Life.

> I know it's like a completely different dynamic and I almost feel like there's different values but at the same time, how you deal with it and how we currently deal with it at [the University] can be really destructive. I think it's one thing at a HBU [Historically Black University] where it's not as much an isolated community it's kinda within like the whole university, but here it's a small community like it's an isolated community. It can be really destructive because I don't think there's anyone who doesn't, I don't think there are many Black students on campus here who aren't vaguely aware of anyone in Black

> Greek, so tension affects you even if you're not in Black organization still affects you.

Darcy also notes that while the resurgence of Black Greek life at the University has advantages, it may also make things more difficult as well.

> And the resurfacing of the Black group community even makes it harder, better for some relational things but also difficult because then you get the question of why are there historically black sororities and fraternities and why aren't you in one and I think that leads to a lot of well, they'll find their own way or well, they don't need to be a part of this group because they have their own Black friends.

Greek life appeared to have an effect on participants' experiences of relational aggression, in the form of exclusion from the White community, divisions between members and non-members, and conflicts between Black sororities and fraternities creating divisions within an already small community. However, some participants reported that they felt that behaviors that appear to be negative from the recipients point of view, may in fact serve a positive purpose. Sasha explains how she feels that friendships may be forged and strengthened by behaviors that fit the definition of relationally aggressive behavior.

> Looking at the prompt and it says sharing secrets and excluding people from friendship groups, I immediately thought of like Black Greek literary organizations. I think that can be an example of positive, I mean it has its negatives too but I mean there are secrets that we definitely share that enhance our sisterhood and our bond and our bonds are based on those secrets and based up on that exclusiveness to you know, which particular organization so I think that can be considered a positive.

While there were varied experiences in the area of Greek life at the University, many of our participants reported having negative experiences. Greek life is a large component of the social life at the University, and exclusion from it may be proving detrimental to participants' social experiences. The experiences of exclusion from White Greek life may be consistent with experiences of students of color at other Predominately White Institutions, though further investigation at additional institutions would be necessary to make this claim with any certainty. While Greek life is certainly not specific to this University, occurrences within the Black Greek

community in this particular time period appear to have a distinct effect on participants' experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors, as tensions between existing and returning sororities are leading members to engage in exclusionary practices, gossip, and secret sharing.

Limited Community Size. The Black community at the institution that our sample was drawn from makes up less than 10 percent of the student population. Most participants reported some aspect of the limited community size in their experiences, with reports ranging from isolation as the only Black female on a hall of twenty, to competition within the community both for standing and desirable romantic partners, and most prominently participants reported that small community size led to an increase in gossip.

Sasha articulated her feelings that the size of the Black community within the larger University community led to an increase in gossip and sharing of secrets.

> I think race plays a role in gossiping, in saying secrets. It's usually people from a friend zone, particularly [the University] because there's a small population of African Americans living here and so with that obviously, you're thrown into an atmosphere where there's so many people, so few African American women than anything that happens, it's kind of like a small town like you know, your neighbor's doing this because you know, there isn't really that many people to hide from I guess so that aspect I think it's easy for gossiping to start and sharing secrets but I don't think it's Black women gossip because they're Black women.

Sasha made an important distinction that she felt that it is the limited number of other Black students within the community that led to an increase in gossip, not a matter of race.

Joy agreed that the smaller community size played a role in gossip, but added to it the theory that gossip was prevalent due at least in part to a competition between women for eligible Black men, a sentiment echoed by several other participants.

> I think Black women at [the University] gossip because there aren't that many of us especially in relation to African American men. I think because our – because the Black community here is so small, everyone pretty much knows about everyone's business – at least some form of it. And so, we're constantly talking about other people, so that we can actually, so, well, not cause we want to know, well, sometimes we want to know – we

> want to know what's going on. And, so, because it's so small, it's easier for us to talk about other people because everyone will – most people will know who you are talking about, and what they did or they didn't do, if that makes sense?

Kara also notes that she had not been the subject of gossip until she took on a student leadership role. “I've been somewhat low key. But then since I became president of an organization, my name's been out there more.” There were a limited number of student leaders in our sample, slightly less than a third of participants held a leadership role in an organization. However, for Kara and several other participants increased visibility coincided with an increase in gossip and relationally aggressive behaviors from other Black women. This may be indicative of competition for standing within the Black community.

Participants within our sample reported feeling that there was an increase of relationally aggressive behaviors, due in part to the limited size of the community. The impact of the small community seemed to be twofold. First in a relatively small community, almost everyone knows all parties involved in an incident. This facilitates gossip, as people involved have background knowledge of the parties being discussed. Secondly, a high number of people competing for a limited reward (i.e. a student leadership position, or particularly desirable mate), appears to be causing an increase in relationally aggressive behaviors, as people who have achieved their reward tend to be the subject of gossip. While this behavior seems more general to people in limited communities rather than race-specific, in the University the Black community is one of limited size, thus potentially leaving community members vulnerable to relationally aggressive behaviors. Much of prior research on gossip in adult populations has been conducted in organizational and workplace settings (Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010; Rooks, Tazelaar, & Snijders, 2010), or focused on gossip as an acceptable behavior in response to antisocial or predatory behaviors (Feinberg et al., 2012) making comparisons to our sample

difficult.

Prior work on relationally aggressive behaviors in middle school settings and college women did examine behaviors within smaller school settings and groups (Simmons, 2011; Underwood, 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999). Qualitative work on relationally aggressive behaviors in middle school girls have previously addressed groups of friends (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2007) or consisted of smaller group conversations (Simmons, 2011). College studies about women's experiences have focused on occurrences within small groups such as classrooms (Gilligan, 1982) and Greek organizations within a campus(Werner & Crick, 1999). That prior work has been conducted in smaller communities or subsets of a larger community may imply that relationally aggressive behavior is more prevalent in smaller populations, however, the impact of community size as a variable which influences gossip or relationally aggressive behavior has not been directly explored. Further study would be need to clarify the role of limited community size in Black women's experiences with relational aggression within a University setting.

First Year Students vs Returning Students. One final area of institution-specific experience with implications for relational aggression is the division between incoming first year students and returning students. As described below, there are a number of institutional policies unique to first year students. A number of participants noted that relationally aggressive experiences they had during their first year were more difficult than those that they encountered in later years. Participants cited a desire to make and keep friends that was particularly salient during their first year, and described participating in relationally aggressive behaviors such as exclusion and gossip in an effort to maintain friendships.

At the institution that our sample is drawn from, first year students are subject to different

levels of oversight than returning students. First year students are required to live on campus and are more closely monitored by residential staff members. The on-campus housing requirement provides an interesting situation for many incoming students, as while it is possible to request a specific roommate, students will still be living in close proximity to people they have never met. The first year dormitory settings at this particular institution are arranged in either hall or suite styles, almost exclusively double rooms, with hall-style dormitories having approximately twenty women on a floor, and suites containing between 4-8 women. In both configurations students share common spaces such as kitchens, bathrooms, and lounges. This differs from the housing options available to returning students who may request single rooms, specify roommates and suitemates, or choose to live off campus entirely. These housing experiences may differ for students attending other institutions with other housing and accommodation models, and therefore for the purpose of this study are considered an institutionally-specific experience.

Participants reported multiple incidents that happened during their first year specifically, with a number of them occurring within dorm situations. Irene's experience with women on her hall excluding her from a party invitation, Tori's observation of women within her dorm forming divides between sorority members and non-members, and Jemma's experiences of appearance-based gossip all occurred within first year dormitory settings. While this could be explained by the amount of time spent within dormitory settings, it is also possible that the particular dormitory configuration affected participants' awareness of exclusionary behaviors. A student living off-campus in an apartment may not have the same awareness of being excluded as a student living on a hall of twenty women who all seem to have plans on Friday nights, for example. Additional studies would be needed to confirm what, if any role housing configuration

plays in the awareness of relationally aggressive behaviors such as gossip or exclusion. However, as the housing situation is not one that is freely chosen by first year students, and by their very nature, housing assignments force at least some interaction with other students within a 'home' environment, it is possible that mandated, on-campus housing may be having an effect on students' experiences of relational aggression.

A typical first-year dorm has a 1-2 staff members per hallway, while returning students' dorms may have one per building, or even one for several buildings. The difference between staffing levels is most likely due to the difficulties of transitioning from a home environment to a University one (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Hurst et al., 2012; Paul & Brier, 2001) However, many of these resident staff members are White and though participants did not explicitly state that they did not feel comfortable talking to residence staff, Mia noted that she felt that non-Black faculty members may have difficulty understanding her experiences.

> I think it makes me always question what people who aren't Black – it's very difficult for me to believe that they would actually understand and it makes it so that if you're struggling with certain things that might be normal for you to be struggling with, it makes it very difficult to even go to a dean because most likely that dean, unless you go to [Office of African-American Affairs], is not going to know what you're talking about.

While there are an increased number of residence staff available, there is limited information about how comfortable students of color might feel about talking to them about relationally aggressive experiences. Given the number of participants who stated that they did not share emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness with other people, these staff members may not be as effective for Black women, though further data would be needed to make a conclusive statement to this effect.

Participants reported feeling that their experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors were more influential as first year students. Sasha notes that as she became more involved with

other activities she had less time to consider the behaviors.

> I think it was a larger impact when I was younger and when I was like in second year but as you grow older, you're kind of like that doesn't even really matter and the more activities that you're in, the more, you just don't have time to worry about things like that…

Many of the returning students who participated in our focus groups were involved in multiple groups, service projects, and activities. Several were double majoring and a handful were balancing work, school, and multiple social activities. Sasha's comment that as she got involved in more things, she didn't have time to worry about relationally aggressive behaviors may indicate a deeper reasoning for all this activity, though further investigation would be needed to determine if this was a singular occurrence or a broader motivation.

Participants also reported engaging in relationally aggressive behaviors to preserve friendships during their first year. Jemma came into a relationally aggressive situation when she joined the cheerleading team, and notes that she felt pressure to dislike another group of women as a part of maintaining her friendship.

> Especially my first year, I was hanging out with a lot of older girls and coming into an already – it was very aggressive. There was a squad for competitive cheerleading, and there were already girls on the squad that didn't get along with each other. By me making friends with this one group, I was automatically not supposed to like this other group. So I guess it was bad and shallow and ignorant for me to just not even give the other girls a chance. But coming in on the first year, these were my friends and I was naïve to that. I never even experienced what the other girls were like. They could've been nice girls and just one bad experience ruined that.

While Jemma second guessed her actions at a later date, she participated in gossip and exclusion during her first year as an attempt to maintain the friendships that she'd established. This is consistent with other participants experiences, with many expressing a strong need to cultivate friendships their first year of college.

Kimber expresses her disappointment of not finding the strong friend group that she was

hoping for during her first year.

> When I came here, I was really, really excited because I thought I was gonna have a great big group of friends like a lot of close friends because I didn't want my high school year – and I really wanted that because I feel these girls are all hanging out in like five or six of them and they can pair off at any time and do something with any of them and I just kind of wanted that relationship with those people, with people, kind of like "How I Met Your Mother" relationship, like the group of them and just they can do anything together. I thought I would find that here but I can't. It's hard.

Kimber still had a semester of her first year in front of her at the time of our focus group. While she still appeared to desire closer friendships, she described her friend group as small, and a pervasive sense that others did not want to befriend her. At the time of our focus group, most orientation activities and programing had concluded, and Kimber was still discontented with her friendship experience at the University.

Institutionally specific experiences such as socioeconomic status, limited community size, Greek life, and first year experiences may be influencing how relationally aggressive behaviors are experienced. Relationally aggressive content based on financial status, gossip facilitated by small community size, discord between Black Greek organizations, and policies unique to first years appear to be possible areas of institutionally specific occurrences which may influence relationally aggressive behaviors as experienced by Black female students.

Perceived Consequences of Relational Aggression

In addition to asking participants to share their experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors, I also wanted to discover how they felt that relationally aggressive behaviors had impacted them in the time that they had been in college. Responses from participants support the assertion that some Black female college students are experiencing relationally aggressive behaviors, and that those who do are finding them harmful. This finding supports the clinical work of Gomes et al. (2009), and refutes the theory that Black participants are not finding their

experiences as harmful as others as proposed by Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005). Participants reported a fear of vulnerability, avoidance of relationally aggressive persons or situations, and a variety of effects on their friendships, including mistrust, limited numbers of friendships, the concept of 'real friends', and termination of relationships.

Fear of Vulnerability. Prior work examining relational aggression in college students indicated that relationally aggressive experiences were significantly related to social anxiety (Storch et al., 2004). In our sample participants described a fear of vulnerability which impacted what information they felt comfortable sharing with other people, including friends. Dena describes an awareness that information given can be used against her.

> Yes, I can still be close with them, but at the same time how am I presenting myself to them in a way that they're going to relate to other people? Yes, I'm going to tell her, but at the same time she can tell someone else. So I have to be aware that it may come back to bite me in the butt.

This feeling that sharing information increases vulnerability was echoed by Jemma who notes that even among people who are close to her she feels the need to be aware of what information she shares.

> So it just taught me how much information to share with people. You shouldn't share everything with everyone. And even those people you think are really close to you, you still have to be cognizant of what you give people about yourself.

Robin's experience is different, as she doesn't fear misuse of personal information, but instead discusses feeling that she had to avoid making her friends angry or upset to protect herself from exclusion and the silent treatment.

> I kind of walk on eggshells with my friends that are relationally aggressive. I try not to make them upset so that they'll keep me in the conversation or if I know that they're upset with someone else I'll be a listening ear and kind of won't voice my opinion about whatever they're upset about so they won't be upset with me.

Fear of vulnerability was reported explicitly in situations such as those discussed above. It also

appears to be influencing participants' mistrust of friendships, and was discussed by several other participants in those contexts. The two contexts combined resulted in approximately a third of the sample reporting some aspect of fear of vulnerability within their relationships. For each woman who reported it, this fear of vulnerability is discussed after experiencing or witnessing acts of relationally aggressive behaviors. These findings appear to support prior claims that relationally aggressive behaviors occur within Black female student populations, and that they are finding these behaviors harmful (Gomes et al., 2009); further these results support the association between relational aggression and social anxieties (Storch et al., 2004).

Avoidance. Skye, a slender, shy woman, hunched into her hoodie and fiddled with a bit of plastic as she acknowledged that she generally avoids relationally aggressive situations. "I try my best to avoid it and just stay away from it." She admitted experiencing more overall aggression in high school relative to college and being more inclined to avoid relationally aggressive behavior as a result. In fact, during the course of the discussion, she did not mention a single experience of her own, instead discussing observed experiences of those around her. This lack of personal experiences with relationally aggressive behaviors could be seen as a positive, however, Skye doesn't mention positive interactions with her friends either, and the only time she directly references friends is to say that relationally aggressive behaviors haven't affected her friendships. Thus, it is possible that in an attempt to avoid aggressive behaviors she had left herself isolated from positive experiences as well.

Robin's attempts to insulate herself from her roommate's relationally aggressive behavior in the long run proved ineffective. Robin's participation in a focus group occurred near the end of the semester, and she described the impact of the relationally aggressive behaviors she'd observed and experienced from her roommate.

> Fear and avoidance. Not of all people but especially of that particular housemate. I think there are just certain experiences that can be soured by the way that I've observed her treating other friends and the way that I've watched her disengage from them in kind of a volatile way.

Avoidance of relationally aggressive experiences or persons was mentioned infrequently on its own, however aspects of avoidance appear within behaviors such as limiting the number of friendships, or ending relationships. When taking the co-occurrence of these behaviors into account, avoidance appears to be a commonly occurring response to relationally aggressive behavior. Participants reports are consistent with existing research in younger populations which indicated that females who experienced relationally aggressive experiences within friendships showed increased social avoidance (Crick & Nelson, 2002), and that women who have previously been victims of relational aggression seek to avoid repeat victimization (Gomes, 2011).

Impact on Friendships

Participants reported relationally aggressive behaviors affecting their friendships in a number of ways including mistrust, limiting the number of people they consider friends, the concept of 'real friends', and ending friendships due to relationally aggressive behavior.

Mistrust. Participants indicated that as a result of relationally aggressive behaviors that they experienced they were less inclined to trust friends readily. For Darcy, friendships were built slowly, and she watched potential friend's interactions with others and how they treat conflicts in other relationships.

> It takes me a long time to get comfortable or get really close to any particular friends so I think if I'm just friends with someone and I see them relationally aggressive towards someone else then I'll be more hesitant to become closer to them so I think I watch how people are with their other friends, or I hear that they're coming and venting to me instead of going to talk to them, I think I would be more hesitant to be in a close friendship with them.

Darcy had experienced relationally aggressive behaviors in prior relationships, as an involuntary participant caught between two friends who were relationally aggressive to each other. Her past experiences have led her to be slow to trust new friends, wanting to verify that they are not relationally aggressive before deepening a relationship, indicating a desire to avoid future relational aggression.

While Darcy seeks to avoid friendships with relationally aggressive content, Kimber doesn't fear relationally aggressive experiences within the friendship, instead she fears that her secrets will be used against her if a relationship ends.

> I choose my friends very carefully. Before I trust them I like vet them almost, it's really bad but I just kind of wait a while and I make sure that they're someone I could trust and if they were, if we were to stop being friends, they wouldn't turn on me and spill my secrets. I'm pretty sure my close friends wouldn't but I think some of the other Black females here may not like me because of my demeanor or just because of who I am and how I act so they might –

Kimber mistrusts the actions of other Black women, possibly as a result of witnessing the Black community's treatment of her friend who was labeled promiscuous. Kimber and Darcy's reactions of mistrust support the assertion that experiencing relationally aggressive behaviors may lead to social anxiety (Storch et al., 2004).

Limited Number. Another response to relational aggression that participants indicated is the limiting of their friend group. For Larissa, this limited size of this group is caused partially by friendships ending due to relationally aggressive behaviors, and a reluctance to engage in relationally aggressive behaviors such as gossip. She does not report any dissatisfaction with the size of her friend group, nor does she report experiencing relational aggression within her current friendships.

> I guess I kind of have a smaller group of friends like I'm not in a rush to be friends with everybody as I was I guess kind of first year. I'm kind of like set in like these are my friends and kind of this is all I need. Yeah, I guess because a lot of gossip stuff. I don't know. I

just kind of don't wanna be a part of it now that I'm older.

This pruning of friendships to avoid relationally aggressive experiences is consistent with prior findings that relationally aggressive behaviors may prove harmful to friendships (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Prinstein et al., 2001), and that relationally aggressive behaviors maybe related to loneliness and isolation for aggressors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Kimber provides a different interpretation with her statement that White students are more readily able to make friends. “They [White students] are more easily able to make friends. I've noticed they have like a larger friend group whereas my friend group, my close friend, we're just like two people.” For Kimber, who reported desiring a large group of friends when she came to college, her limited number of friends does not seem to be her choice, but rather the result of mistrust of other women, and fear of relationally aggressive behaviors.

“Real Friends”. One interesting concept that came up in participants’ discussions of their experiences was the concept of a ‘real friend’. This concept, the difference between ‘real friends’ that could be trusted, versus acquaintances that were no so trustworthy also occurred in Simmons focus groups with African American middle schools students indicating a persistence across age groups (2011). Similarly to their middle school counterparts our participants’ ‘real friends’ did not engage in relationally aggressive behaviors, such as gossip, the silent treatment, or exclusion. Sasha makes a distinction between her ‘real friends’ and her other friends. “I just always think that the real friends I had wouldn't do certain things like to me a real friend wouldn't gossip about you. They would come to you with the problem at hand.” Overall a small percentage of participants used this terminology; however, it did show up consistently in several of the focus groups and interviews, indicating that the concept of ‘real friends’ is not an isolated occurrence.

For Kara, the question of if someone was a 'real friend' or not could be answered by their reaction in the face of a false rumor. "it's shown me who my real friends are and who I can really trust. When situations happen like that, you know who's going to be there for you or who's going to be the person like, 'Well, did you?'" Several participants also equated this level of trust with 'close' friends versus acquaintances, but the concept conveyed was the same, you could trust your 'real friends' not to spread rumors about you.

Some participants cited finding out who their 'real friends' were was a positive aspect of relational aggression. Joy, who admitted earlier in her interview that relationally aggressive behaviors hurt worse when they came from people she trusted, also found a positive aspect.

> I think, in the long run, it has caused me to see who my real friends are because I've described to you similar situations, where something has gone on behind my back, but in the end, was able to actually see who my real friends are, who are the ones who have my back and are not talking behind my back. So, I think that's a positive or benefit of this type of aggression.

Ending Relationships. The final consequence of relational aggressive experiences was the ending of relationships. While this concept was not pervasive, occurring in slightly less than a quarter of participants' stories, it was prevalent enough to warrant attention. For purposes of this study, ending a relationship is qualitatively different than withdrawal of support or friendship, in that ending a relationship was enacted by the participant and not another person. This concept did not appear the same way for all participants, for some the ending of relationships was a slow descent into silence within a relationship, and for others a decision not to pursue repairs in damaged relationship.

For Larissa, some of her early college relationships drifted apart due to gossip and other stresses within her organizations executive board. " I'm in on our executive board, like it's a lot alike my friends since first year on it and I feel like a lot of us have drifted apart…" This was the

most common ending reported to relationships, with several other participants describing a slow and subtle ending rather than an abrupt confrontation. For some like Tori, the experience seems like a protracted and mutual silent treatment.

> We were really good friends, and I think she started going out more and started hanging out with a different crowd. I was just like, I don't know if I want to be a part of that. And we just never reconciled, and we just we never made up. So yeah now we're not really friends, cut off.

For some ending a relationship is the result of deciding that the relationship is no longer worth saving. Asha's response to her relationship with her extended family was a simple and decisive one, "at that point I was just like I'm done with you guys." This occurred after a fight with her aunt, and sides being taken after her aunt spread a rumor about her. While such a definitive and final statement might be taken for an exaggeration in the heat of the moment, Asha had ceased to attend family gatherings for the better part of a year at the time of her participation in the focus group.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study was intended to contribute to a growing body of knowledge on the relationally aggressive experiences of college women. It was also intended to provide a needed extension of the body of work considering the role of race in relational aggression research. The goals of this study were to discover the experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors experienced by Black women, to determine if there were instances of racialized content, to examine if the experiences of these women were captured by the existing paradigm on relational aggression among women in general, and to determine if there is a need for new theorizing on relational aggression that integrates an intersectional perspective. As discussed in greater detail below, this study makes important contributions to research on relational aggression through the specific examination of the experiences of Black women who, on the one hand, have some sense of a shared collective identity, but who also have unique experiences as undergraduate students. Attending to these multiple dimensions of identity (Black, female, undergraduate) provided rich insight into both universal and unique dimensions of experiences with relational aggression and elucidated several areas that warrant further investigation.

Due to the fact that large amounts of foundational literature on relational aggression were focused on the experiences of childhood and adolescence (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Ostrov, Ries, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008; Simmons, 2011), there was concern that the definition of relational aggression might not fit the experiences of college students. The experiences of the participants in this sample did not indicate this, and were largely in accordance with prior findings in relationally aggressive research. The experiences that they reported: gossip, exclusion, the silent treatment, negative non-verbal gestures and withdrawal of friendship were similar to experiences found both within children and adolescent samples (Crick

& Grotpeter, 1995; Ostrov et al., 2008; Simmons, 2011), as well as findings of prior studies examining the relational aggressive experiences of college students (Gomes et al., 2009; Loudin et al., 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999). The relationships in which these experiences occurred supported prior research indicating college students experience relational aggression with friends (Goldstein, 2011; Werner & Crick, 1999), romantic partners (Carroll et al., 2010; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2007), and in academic settings (Chapell et al., 2004; Dellasega, 2005; Kolanko et al., 2005). These similarities were not unexpected, as prior work had indicated that adult women might continue using relationally aggressive behaviors in adulthood, due both to their effectiveness and a prior history of using relationally aggressive behaviors without consequence (Banny et al., 2011; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Dellasega, 2005).

Participants' experiences, to some extent, support the finding that academically successful African American adolescent women begin to turn inward, lapsing into silence as they face greater pressures to conform to the image of 'nice girl' perpetuated by White majority culture (Simmons, 2011). In adolescence, Black girls were found to engage in more honest anger, and express their feelings overtly. This acceptance of anger did not hold for academically gifted Black girls who were spending more time within White academic institutions (Simmons, 2011).For this sample the link between pressure to conform to this 'nice girl' standard could play a role in participants lack of comfort with expressing anger, which was lower than prior work had indicated that it might be (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010).

Some women in the sample expressed sentiments indicating they felt caught between expectations of multiple cultural communities, which supports prior work on accusations of "acting White" (Durkee & Williams, 2013; Murray et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2010) and feelings of "homelessness" (Winkle-Wagner, 2009) for students at Predominately White

Institutions. These experiences speak to a need for the construction of multiple identities while navigating majority culture as a woman of color. Participants also reported social anxiety and avoidance after experiencing relationally aggressive behaviors within friendships (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Gomes, 2011; Storch, Bagner, Geffken, & Baumeister, 2004). The difficulties that participants faced, in the negotiation of both majority culture and within group status, family pressure, and social anxiety and avoidance could highlight how the impact of relational aggression occurs in multiple domains as well as at the intersection of multiple identities (i.e., African American, female, college student).

Participants' reports that relationally aggressive experiences were more detrimental during their first year of college compared to later years were consistent with work on the importance of friendships to college students while transitioning into a college environment (Buote et al., 2007; Paul & Brier, 2001; Swenson et al., 2008). Knowledge of these experiences could be beneficial to student affairs professionals, particularly those working first year students. Elsa, who remembered her first year as difficult since she was excluded by both her White hall mates and members of the Black community, felt that future students could be helped by knowledge that they were not alone in their experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors.

> I think it can be comforting and reassuring knowing that other women have gone through some more ordeals so your experiences aren't alone and then yeah. That way then you don't think that you're like the odd ball that no one else had gone through being ostracized or relational aggression issues. It's good knowing that someone else has been there.

Research in social psychology suggests that when college students of color, particularly those in their first year, are explicitly informed that certain struggles and challenges are normative, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the college environment, and have higher levels of academic motivation and performance compared to their peers (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Based on the experiences that participants reported, letting first year college students know that it is

normal to face tensions between friends and family members as their relationships change and they become more acclimated to their new environment may be beneficial (see Asha's story on page 54 or Cassie's quote on page 66). It may also be useful to address the fallacy that all college students have a multitude of friends, and that once established the friend group remains intact forever (see Kimber's quote about the friendships she was hoping to make on page 102).

Conversely, the experiences women reported did not confirm the greater frequency of relationally aggressive behaviors in romantic relationships rather than friendships (Goldstein, 2011), the prevalence of faculty-student relational aggression (Chapell et al., 2004; Kolanko et al., 2005), or workplace aggression (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Dellasega, 2005). These findings were unexpected, particularly the lack of relationally aggressive experiences reported in work environments given that adult work environments were an area in which the study of adult relational aggression has been established (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Bordia et al., 2014; Dellasega, 2005; Lewis, 2004). Contrary to prior studies, this sample reported few examples of workplace relational aggression. This absence may be significant, indicating a difference of experience (e.g., women of color are not experiencing workplace aggression) or perception (e.g., women of color are experiencing work place aggression, but are not perceiving it as aggression). The absence of workplace aggression from this sample could also stem from students being more engaged in academics and not seeking employment in addition to their work at the University. However, few participants answered questions about how a supervisor would express anger with statements that they were not employed and none indicated that workplace aggression would take more direct forms (e.g., yelling or official reprimand).

The second goal of this study was to determine if Black female college students' relationally aggressive experiences contained racially-specific content not examined by current

research. Participants experienced race-specific gossip and exclusionary behaviors, and were affected by racial stereotypes such as the "strong Black woman" and the "angry Black woman".

Participant's experience with gossip contained aspects of appearance such as hair texture consistent with studies of Black women's experiences (Neal, 1989; Robinson, 2011; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). "Neat" hair was referenced more frequently than explicit mentions of relationally aggressive content about hair texture, and some participants mentioned increasing amounts of negative comments from other members within the Black community when they did not style their hair in approved ways or began to let their hair grow naturally. This use of gossip, coming from both other Black women and Black men who expressed certain preferences for other aspects of appearance, may demonstrate underexplored areas of relationally aggressive behaviors, the role of gossip within the community to maintain a widespread beauty standard and the gossip of Black men which have not previously been considered. These findings may be useful when examining the role that gossip plays in community censure, the role that competition for male attention plays in relationally aggressive behaviors, and relationally aggressive behaviors exhibited by Black men.

Limited support was found for evidence of judgments based on skin tone, as participants described these experiences in abstract rather than as matters of personal experience. These findings were not as robust as prior literature in the area suggested that they might be (Armstead et al., 2013; Hunter, 1998, 2002; Russell et al., 1992), though this may have resulted from a limitation of the study. Groups were balanced on characteristics such as year and major while skin tone was not addressed. The participants varied in skin tone, and it is possible that neither light nor dark skinned women wanted to admit to personally experiencing either discrimination or privilege based on skin tone in front of women on the opposite end on the color spectrum.

The single instance in which a personal statement was made about the experience of skin related treatment came from Tara (see page 63). Tara made this statement in a group with one trusted friend, whom Tara had invited to join study, and a facilitator with whom she had prior interactions with which may have established a greater level of trust. Further investigation is needed to determine if social desirability might be leading participants to remain silent on this topic, as another statement of Jemma's may indicate (as referenced on page 88). Additional study is needed, as prior scholarship indicates that skin tone has wide reaching effects (Armstead et al., 2013; Hunter, 1998, 2002; Neal, 1989), which this study failed to replicate.

There was evidence of community-specific terminology such as accusations of "acting White", a concept which has been discussed in the discrimination literature (Durkee & Williams, 2013; Murray et al., 2012; Ogbu, 2004; Thompson et al., 2010), but has not been addressed in current studies of relational aggression. These experiences were significant because they signified rejection from other Black students, experienced within a context in which many already felt excluded by White students and faculty members. Cassie, who had previously attended a low income predominately Black high school, describes a difficult position poised between the fear of being rejected by friends back home and not feeling that she fits in on campus (page 66). Cassie and others in the group indicate that they have learned how to balance between school and home, and within group and out-group environments. Others are like Kimber still struggling, trying to figure out who they can trust in an environment where to be fitting in too well may cause accusations of "acting White" by family and Black peers, failure to embody the Black communities standards of beauty or sexuality may lead to gossip, and White student's perceptions of Black women as angry or unfriendly may lead to exclusion.

Stereotypes such as the "Strong Black woman" and "Angry Black woman" also appear to be playing a part in the experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors by Black female college students. The concept of strength and self-sacrifice embodied by the 'Strong Black woman' may increase Black women's vulnerability to relational aggression due to their silence in the wake of relationally aggressive behaviors. Shana addresses this feeling, "I was taught that if I'm a Black woman I have to be strong, so I kind of internalized that as don't cry, or don't be afraid of anything." There are indications that Black women are less likely to report their relationally aggressive experiences in conversation, which are attributed to wanting to maintain a conceptualization of strength (Settles et al., 2008). While participants disclosed experiences within the focus groups, questions were worded in ways that affirmative answers did not imply weakness. Participants reported an unwillingness to appear vulnerable in front of others or let other people see their sadness or personal fears. As a result programs or measures which require Black women to report experiences spontaneously may be less effective than those asking them to confirm or describe experiences that they have had.

The 'Angry Black woman' stereotype may contribute to experiences of exclusion from White students and increasing relationally aggressive behavior within friendships as others fear confronting this 'anger'. Participants attributed exclusion from White students to the fact that they were perceived as unfriendly. Darcy notes that she feels other students mistake her lack of a constant large smile as cold (as referenced on page 75). Darcy's experience is consistent with the concept that a Black woman must be smiling to indicate that she is not angry, and that Black women who do not smile are perceived as dangerous, angry, or aggressive (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010). While participants in this study did not report sharing emotions easily, they also did not indicate smiling when they did not want to, with the

exception of when they are actively trying to mask sadness. This may play into White students' stereotype of "angry Black women", decreasing the likelihood of their approaching Black female students for experiences such as study groups. Failure to add qualifiers to their speech, such as 'like', 'I don't mean to' and more consistent eye contact may lead White students to perceive them as aggressive (Parks, 2010). While this study did not explicitly measure eye contact or quantify the number of qualifiers used in conversations, there were differences within participant's speech which seemed to support this, which could provide an area for future study.

Women in this study did not express anger as freely as literature on the "angry Black woman" suggested that they might (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Parks, 2010). Instead, half of the sample reported feeling uncomfortable expressing anger, and another third were only comfortable expressing anger conditionally, feeling more comfortable expressing anger to family or significant others rather than friends. While the "angry Black woman" stereotype was still present in the experiences that participants discussed, it tended to show up most frequently as the misinterpretation of neutral expressions as hostile. Of the small portion who acknowledged anger readily, several also said that their friends would be more likely to use relational aggression against them, as they did not want to deal with a direct confrontation. For this sample of women the "angry Black woman" did not seem to offer a freedom to express anger, instead it led to misattributed hostility and heightened vulnerability to relationally aggressive attacks.

The third goal of this study was to determine if the existing paradigm of relationally aggressive research was capturing the experiences of these women. Based on the findings of this study, the existing paradigm is only partially capturing the experiences of these women. In terms of forms of relational aggression and relationships where relational aggression is occurring,

existing views on relational aggression appear to be successful. While participants did report exclusionary experiences that were not addressed by current forms of relational aggression, these experiences were more closely related to microaggressions (Sue et al., 2008; Williams & Nichols, 2012), and lacked the intentionality needed to be considered relationally aggressive (e.g., Tori's professor singling her out in class as a minority opinion makes her feel excluded, but since the action was not related to her social relationships within the class it would not be classified as relationally aggressive). The only relationship context in which the existing paradigm did not fully address the experiences of relationally aggressive behavior was that of family.

Participants' experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors within family groups was limited; however, even this limited finding indicated a potential avenue for research that has been largely neglected, as data on relational aggression within family units is almost non-existent. These unexpected reports bring up several interesting questions, including what effects relational aggression may have on womens' support systems outside of the University community. While it is not assumed that all families of college students are wholly supportive of all their decisions and actions, it is typically considered that they are at least non-adversarial, as can be seen in the role that college administrators expect parents to play in college attendance (Carney-Hall, 2007; Taub, 2008), evidenced at the institution our sample was drawn from in the form of expected family contribution for financial aid, inclusion of parents in orientation programs conducted by the University, and University sponsored 'Parent's weekend'. Many participants reported using family members as a support network when they were faced with challenges in college. The absence or weakening of this support by relationally aggressive behaviors within the family could have a number of unforeseen consequences, and bears further

investigation. In this instance the foundational thinking about the role of family has already been established in relational aggression literature (Kawabata, Alink, Tseng, Van IJzendoorn, & Crick, 2011; Reed et al., 2008; Updegraff, Thayer, Whiteman, Denning, & Mchale, 2014), but needs to be extended into adult populations.

The existing paradigm of relationally aggressive research is less successful in capturing the content and context of relationally aggressive experiences of Black women. For instance, experiences of relational aggression based on hair texture or skin color were salient for many women in the study. While on a surface level these experiences appear similar to those of other forms of relational aggression based on appearance, rejections based on these aspects may prove detrimental to a woman's racial identity in ways that other appearance-based experiences might not, especially since they are not necessarily modifiable (Russell et al., 1992). In women's stories, these factors also seemed to influence social standing in ways that current measures do not assess (Hunter, 1998, 2002; Robinson, 2011; Russell et al., 1992; Thompson et al., 2010), and contribute to mental and physical manifestations of stress that this body of work has not addressed (Armstead et al., 2013; Neal, 1989; Parks, 2010).

The insights provided by women about the role of community size provide an important contribution to research on relational aggression. Participants reported feeling that the small size of the Black community led to an increase in gossip, both as a function of familiarity (it is easier to talk about people who are mutually known), and as a matter of competition for status and romantic partners (women within the community who were dating someone particularly desirable or held a position of leadership were more vulnerable). This finding is significant as it indicates that the role of size of a community plays a role in the relationally aggressive behaviors that participant's experience. If this is the case there are other populations who may be

vulnerable to increased gossip, both within University contexts and other broader reaching ones (e.g., smaller school size may play a role in gossip and women in competition with each other for limited prizes may be more vulnerable). Surprisingly, there is a paucity of research directly addressing the role of community size in the prevalence of gossip, and what work does exist tends to be framed towards community-sanctioned exclusion after commission of acts that violate social norms (Feinberg et al., 2012; Giardini & Conte, 2011), organizational gossip (Rooks et al., 2010), and willingness to seek health care if frightened of gossip (Warr & Hllier, 1997).

Some suggest that terminology referring to 'promiscuity' in Black women is occurring within a societal construct of Black female hyper-sexuality, used to control and justify the victimization of Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011). While the behaviors of gossip and exclusion resulting from an accusation of 'promiscuity' are addressed within the current research paradigm, the context in which they are experienced is not. Microsystem interactions are considered and measured (e.g., the gossip between friends or exclusion by White hall-mates), but elements of the macrosystem (e.g., the view of Black female hyper-sexuality) and the chronosphere (e.g., life in post-Civil War America) are not (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These contextual factors have not been addressed in the research paradigm, and the experiences reported by participants in this study indicate that they should be.

Study of behaviors of relational aggression without examination of the context in which they are occurring appears to be limiting the understanding of what these behaviors may mean in the lives of the women experiencing them. An instance of gossip may matter more to a Black woman who already feels marginalized on a White campus, particularly when it comes from within the Black community. These relationally aggressive attacks may be more salient as Black

women may be expecting greater support than they are receiving in the Black community. Kimber describes the reaction of her friend to being declared "promiscuous" (see page 84). Current examinations of relational aggression do not take contextual factors such as expectations of social support or unity into account, creating a deficit in the body of knowledge about the experiences of relationally aggressive behaviors. Participants' responses indicate that positionality of the aggressor within their life, frequency of the experience, content, context, and individual factors such as prior experience and salience of identity being aggressed against all play a role in how the woman receiving relationally aggressive behaviors perceive, process, and cope with relationally aggressive experiences.

Overall the existing paradigm of relational aggression among women is only partially capturing the experiences of Black female college students. The types of behaviors used and the relationships in which they occur are for the most part well-addressed, with a need to extend certain lines of research into adult populations necessary to encompass family dynamics within the experiences of relational aggression. The paradigm is less successful in terms of accounting for racially specific of content of aggressive behaviors and situating the experiences within cultural contexts, which appear to be influencing meaning. In order to more fully understand the experiences and meaning that Black female college students are experiencing contextualization of these experiences within time, place, and personal significance is needed. This addition to the study of relationally aggressive behaviors would allow researcher a more complete picture of what behaviors are happening and why, as well as what meaning these experiences have for the women experiencing them.

The final goal of this study was to assess the need for intersectional perspective in relational aggression research. Findings of this study support the concurrent and intersecting

experience of multiple aspects of identity (e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality). Elements of participants' experiences support prior research indicating that Black college students are having to navigate the construction of multiple identities (Cole & Jacob Arriola, 2007) and that friction is occurring between the identities of 'student' 'at Predominately White institution', 'Black', 'female' (Blume et al., 2012; Durkee & Williams, 2013; Thompson et al., 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). The perception of one's self as different did appear to play a role in the salience of racial identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), with several participants making statements indicating that their understanding of an aspect of their racial identity changed after arriving at the University and realizing they were different from the majority.

Further support of an intersectional view comes from the role that multiple identities play in the role of exclusion and gossip. Participants were not experiencing these identities separately, but in differing combinations depending upon the situation that they found themselves in. Gossip was experienced in multiple contexts and at different intersections of identity (e.g., female, Black, heterosexual). Exclusion was experienced in a similar manner, with participants experiencing within group exclusion if they were "Acting White" (Durkee & Williams, 2013; Murray et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2010), and out-group social and academic exclusion. Meaning of these experiences may be lost on measures examining a single aspect of identity. For example, Joy's experiences with gossip based on promiscuity may be captured by a measure focused on the relationally aggressive behaviors of women, but an accusation of "Acting White" from a Black male would not.

These findings support Cole's assertion that considering one aspect of identity leaves out areas of meaning, and limits our understanding of psychological phenomena that we are researching (2009). Simply administering to Black women a measure piloted and developed

with a normative sample of White college women is not enough to fully understand the complexities of the intersecting identities of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008). While experiences may not be quantitatively different, rich aspects of experience are being lost by focusing on singular aspects of the experience of relational aggression.

Examinations of exclusion in a single context (e.g., race, gender, or sexuality) do not fully capture the experience of someone excluded from both the majority culture of their institution and the racial group that they identify with. It is notable that when asked about relationally aggressive experiences participant's answers included actions that did not strictly fit the definition of relational aggression (such as being singled out to provide a minority opinion in a predominately White classroom). These experiences fit more closely onto the framework of racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2008; Williams & Nichols, 2012), yet were still considered by participants to be relationally aggressive. This may indicate that the lived experiences of Black female college students and the meaning that they make of them is not being adequately explained by the technical definitions of relational aggression developed by examining the experiences through one lens (gender). Additional study would be needed to determine the prevalence of these experiences and to determine which behaviors, if any, co-occur in larger populations when examining relationally aggressive behavior and microaggressions separately.

Limited scholarship in other areas such as discrimination literature addresses both within-group and out-group experiences for Black students at Predominately White Institutions (Durkee & Williams, 2013; Thompson et al., 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), but additional study is needed to examine the experiences of other students who may be facing exclusion from multiple communities at once. We know little about the relationally experiences of Latina or Asian students. These students may also be experiencing additional pressures from parents not to

acclimate, or censure from peers for acting too much like majority culture, but currently we cannot say because we have not asked.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for future research. First the similarities of the experiences of this sample and prior relational aggression research provides useful knowledge concerning the relevance of this topic for a college student population, as well as helping to increase the diversity of knowledge available by focusing on the experiences of women of color. A better understanding of the relationally aggressive experiences of Black women could help student affairs professionals address these experiences within existing programing to help students transition into college, as a sense of belonging on campus has been shown to affect retention and persistence in pursuit of a degree (O'Keeffe, 2008).

The extension of prior findings that African American females who are more involved in White academic institutions turn inward, lapsing into silence, is an area in need of further investigation. Indeed, the role of academic success in Black women's experiences of relational aggression has not been examined in young adults and could better improve understanding of Black female acculturation experiences within predominantly White academic settings (Cole & Jacob Arriola, 2007). Tendencies that participants described of holding in anger and not feeling comfortable seeking help may be significant for campus administrators and those dealing with students who may need to report relationally aggressive behaviors, but might be unwilling to spontaneously report them. This finding is significant for the advancement of relational aggression research, as it may imply that Black women are not experiencing fewer relationally aggressive behaviors than White women as had previously been considered (Crothers et al., 2005; Simmons, 2011). Instead, these findings suggest that they may be suffering in silence due

to an internalized feeling that they should be able to handle their problems on their own (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Parks, 2010).

Also of note for researchers is the ‘angry Black woman’ stereotype which may be leading to bias in attribution of neutral expressions as angry (Parks, 2010). This potential for bias has not, to my knowledge, been addressed in observational research of relational aggression. Participants described feeling that they were excluded because White students viewed them as ‘angry’. This is of concern for administrators, as participants’ experiences seem to support the default assessment of Black women as hostile, which may influence administrative decisions involving the assignment of blame when dealing with decisions involving Black women (Parks, 2010).

Participants also described feeling that they needed to find balance between acceptance in their University environment and the opinions of friends and family members. This balancing act is an area of possible study for those examining the formation of identity and could lead to a richer understanding of gossip and exclusion. Understanding both the physical and mental consequences of these behaviors may be an important area for those interested in promoting the physical and mental health of young Black women.

Finally the role that community size plays in relational aggression has potential implications for those providing student services to populations with limited size within a larger community, such as those that support needs of Black students attending predominantly White institutions. The field of relational aggression would benefit from studies that attend more specifically to the role of context, and contextual features like community size, in facilitating and/or inhibiting relationally aggressive behaviors. Relational aggression research could draw a richer understanding of gossip, particularly as used to enforce societal standards such as beauty.

Limitations

While the findings of this study do add to the growing body of research available about relationally aggressive experiences of Black female college students, there are areas in which it was limited. First, the sample only contained a single first year participant. Every effort was made to recruit first year students (e.g., posting flyers locations frequented by first year students, asking first year residence staff members to share information about the study with their residents, discussing the study with first year students), and of the three additional first years who responded to the initial survey, only two met eligibility criteria. Multiple attempts were made to contact these students to participate in the study. However, due to a repeated lack of response from these attempts, these participants were not included. Given responses from other participants about the detrimental effects of relationally aggressive experiences during their first year, this limitation is particularly regrettable. While participants were able to look back upon their experiences and describe their experiences as a first year, it could be that some meaning was lost in the retrospective view that the immediacy of current experiences may have brought. It is also possible that experiences reported by students with more academic experience and a higher level of meaning-making were not reported the same way that they would have when the experiences first occurred.

This limitation could be due to a number of factors, including poor selection of incentive for participation. While participants were generally pleased with the movie ticket voucher, the ability to redeem the voucher may have been impaired for first year students. First year students were forbidden personal vehicles at the institution from which our sample was recruited. While the voucher used for an incentive was redeemable at a location reachable by public transit, this still may have dissuaded first years from participating in our study. The experiences of relational

aggression that students were currently undergoing may have also been too painful or distressing for students to discuss, causing them to abstain from the study. First year students maybe experiencing too much stress to participate in research studies, particularly those that do not offer course credit as many psychological studies at the institution that the sample was drawn from do. It is also possible that the sampling for this study did not occur at a time when relationally aggressive experiences were salient for first year students, Kimber, our single first year filled out the qualification survey twice, once in late September and once in early April. In September she did not qualify for the study, because she did not report witnessing or experiencing relationally aggressive behaviors during her time in college. Upon her second attempt in April, she had experienced relationally aggressive content and reported feelings of exclusion from the White community.

The findings of our study may be limited in generalizability due to the influence of location and specific events within the participants' experiences. Institutional history and culture, as well as current events experienced by participants such as a resurgence of Black Greek life on campus may limit the generalizability of these findings to other Predominately White Institutions. It is also possible that incidents that participants reported are being exacerbated by institutional characteristics that were beyond the scope of this study. It is also important to note that purposeful sampling was used to screen participants for this study; only women who reported experiencing or witnessing an act of relational aggression were included. Thirty-six percent of women who completed the initial survey reported that they had not experienced or witnessed relationally aggressive actions within their time in college. It is important to note that the findings of this study are certainly not generalizable to these women and that the exclusion of these women is a limitation of this study. As a final limitation, our

survey only included participants who were currently students at the University. The University has a high graduation rate for Black students, however it is possible that the experiences of our participants were different than those who had left the University.

Avenues for Future Research

One unexpected finding was the potential for relationally aggressive behaviors within families. Relational aggression research among family members has focused on largely on children and adolescents (Kawabata et al., 2011), maternal use of relationally aggressive behaviors with peers (Reed et al., 2008), relational aggression between siblings (Updegraff et al., 2014), and parenting styles effect on children's relationally aggressive behavior (Kawabata et al., 2011) . While these behaviors are similar to those classified as psychologically controlling parenting (Reed et al., 2008), it would be beneficial to examine the effects of a threat of withdrawal of support from parents and the effects of relationally aggressive behaviors used by extended family members.

Another interesting aspect for future research to consider would be the role of socioeconomic status in college student's experience of relationally aggressive behaviors. Women described relationally aggressive content based on types of clothing worn and financial aid status, which supported previous findings that students with lower SES contributed to reduced levels of belonging (Ostrove & Long, 2007). It would be interesting to examine the role of economic status and relationally aggressive behaviors, as this could provide further clarification of the role of student financial status and relationally aggressive experiences. Institutional factors, such as the number of students employed in work study positions, and the prevalence of people of color within visible service and support staff could also be avenues to explore.

Additional study of the differences and similarities between covert racism and relationally aggressive behaviors could be beneficial as well. Participants reported behaviors that they classified as relationally aggressive, such as being excluded from study groups. Similar experiences have been explored in prior microaggression research (Blume et al., 2012; Sue et al., 2008; Williams & Nichols, 2012), and a better understanding of how the two concepts are connected could be useful to understanding students experiences.

The role of community size in the experience of gossip, as well as the role of competition for resources in relationally aggressive behaviors would be a beneficial area of future study. The experiences reported by participants in this study could be an anomaly brought about by the intersections of Black, female, student, heterosexual identities within a Predominately White context. Alternatively these experiences of heightened gossip may be a function of familiarity, in which case smaller populations would be more vulnerable to relationally aggressive behaviors. Further research would be necessary to determine if community size plays a role in gossip. If this finding is verified, it could have far reaching consequences for student affairs professionals, dealing with many smaller student populations within a larger student body.

Conclusions

This study provides a much needed expansion of relational aggression research into college student populations. It also addresses a lack of information about the relationally aggressive experiences of Black women at Predominately White institutions. Participants' experiences provide information about racially-specific content and the navigation of multiple identities and groups within college settings. Unique contributions were made in the examination of stereotypes affecting Black women's experiences of relationally aggressive

behaviors. The role of context of experiences is examined and a strong argument is made for the need of intersectional approaches for the study of relationally aggressive behaviors.

The findings of this study may inform research on family dynamics as students attempt to navigate between home and school environments, the role of gossip in the maintenance of socially-constructed values such as standard of beauty and sexual morality, and the silent suffering that may be brought about by conceptualizations of female strength. Discrimination researchers are able to gain knowledge about exclusionary behaviors experienced by Black women, such as academic and social exclusion from White students, and accusations of “acting White” from the Black community. The role of limited community size in the act of gossip may also be a significant finding of this study, indicating an element of familiarity between students which may be breeding contempt.

The findings of this study could help college administrators, student affairs professionals, mental health providers, and Black female college students themselves. Knowledge of the influence of stereotypes such as the “angry Black woman” can decrease biased judgments or assignment of blame in incidents involving Black and White students. A better understanding of the challenges faced by Black women at Predominately White institutions can help student affairs professionals seeking to increase a sense of belonging on their campus, and by extension increase retention of students. Awareness of difficulties faced by Black female college students from the challenges of navigating a new environment without breaking ties completely with the old one, problems navigating the development of both a within-group and out-group identity, influences of racial stereotypes, and cultural standards of beauty can be beneficial to mental health professionals seeking to help ease the transition for students experiencing difficulties. For the Black female college students themselves, this work can provide reassurance that they are not

alone in their experiences, that successful navigation of a complex social landscape is possible, that their experiences are important, and that their voices matter to those examining the social interactions occurring on college campuses.

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Appendix A

Female Experiences Survey
Thank you for your interest in our female experiences study. On the following screens you will be asked a short series of questions to see if we can match you to a focus group. Thank you for your time!

1. Do you identify as female?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

2. Are you between the ages of 18-24?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

3. Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose all that apply.)

- ○ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ○ Asian / Pacific Islander
- ○ Black or African American
- ○ Hispanic American
- ○ White / Caucasian

Other (please specify) ________

4. During your college career have you personally experienced or witnessed any of the following?

Purposeful exclusion of someone (yourself or others) from activities?
A rumor spread about someone (yourself or others)?
Threats of loss of friendship(s)/relationship(s) if a demand wasn't met?
Leaking of private information with the intent to damage someone's reputation (yours or others)?

- ◉ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ I'm not sure

5. At what email address would you like to be contacted?

Thank you for completing our survey. If you are a match for one of our on-going focus groups, we will contact you at the e-mail address provided to schedule a time.

Appendix B

Focus Group Protocol

Things to keep in mind…

- Be aware of "strong" personalities in the group and allow all participants to speak; if one or two people are dominating or cutting others off it is your job to reign them in
- It's okay if not everyone has a response to every question
- Try to avoid redundancy (but allow for it if needed)- if you feel participants have already answered a later question before you've gotten to it, use your judgment about the need to re-ask it (or simply ask if anyone has anything to add on that topic)
- On a related note, it's okay if participants return to an earlier question if they decide they have something to add about that topic
- Remain neutral and avoid inserting your own opinions; however, use head nods, affirmative tones, and reflective statements (e.g., "so it sounds like you're saying XYZ") so that participants feel they're being heard.
- When ready to move onto another question, avoid being dismissive by simply saying "okay" and moving on; instead, use transition statements such as "thank you for sharing those thoughts, and now I want to ask you about XYZ"; also, if time allows be sure to ask if anyone else has anything to add before moving on
- Use follow-up probes as needed, but try not to stray too much from the primary questions
- **Be aware of TIME**: the entire session should only take about two hours
- Room set-up: be sure participants are sitting close enough to each other and to the observer so that they get recorded. Also, **make sure the recorder is on!**
- See this website for some reminders about focus group facilitation: http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm

Logistics

Materials: Digital recorder, name tags and marker, consent forms, paper and pens for the writing prompt, movie ticket voucher, copy of protocol, snacks

Steps:
1. Consent form (be sure to ask if they have questions before signing it)
2. Name tag (first name is fine)
3. Observer should set-up recorder
4. Begin focus group discussion
5. Observer- when taking notes, focus on group dynamics and behaviors; when possible, make note of who is speaking by using participant's first initial
6. Thank participants; remind them to contact Joanna or Julie with any follow-up questions; give them a blank copy of consent form if they want one

Consent Form Blurb

This form basically states that your participation in this survey and focus group is entirely voluntary and that you may decline to participate and leave the group at any time. Please read this sheet carefully before signing it. It discusses potential risks to you as members of this group as well as the use of audio taping during this session. Please let me know if you have any questions before signing the form.

Consent form and Nametag

Focus Group Protocol

Hi, my name is “facilitator”. Thank you for coming here today to participate in this focus group. The purpose of this group is to gain a better understanding of how people interact with each other and experiences of relational aggression. I am sure that you are familiar with overt forms of aggression such as verbal or physical aggression. However, today we are interested in hearing about your experiences of relational aggression, a type of aggression that involves the manipulation of friendships, relationships, or social status instead of physical or verbal attacks. Some examples include gossip, negative non-verbal gestures, threats of withdrawal of friendship, or threatening to use gossip to damage a relationship. While you may have had similar experiences prior to enrolling in college, we will be asking you to focus on aggressive behaviors you’ve experienced while in college. We will be asking you some questions that we encourage you to answer to the best of your ability and we recognize that many of you will have unique experiences with relational aggression. There are no wrong answers.

At this time, I’d like to introduce “observer”, who will be a non-participating member of our group today. He/She is here to record our conversation so that I can be involved in the group

without having to take too many notes. As the facilitator, I will be asking you questions but I will not be sharing my own experiences. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Statement of Confidentiality:

We will be audio taping this session in an effort to maintain the integrity of your dialogue. However, your identities will not be revealed to anyone and only the researchers will have access to this tape. This discussion is to be considered confidential and we would hope that you will all respect each other rights to privacy by not repeating any portion of this discussion outside of this session.

Remind participants to turn off cell phones ringers off

Writing Prompt

We would like for you to read this prompt and write a short response. (Hand out paper with writing prompt and paper, pens, etc.)

- Women often have experiences in which they participate in or witness gossip, share secrets, are excluded or exclude people from friendship groups, and threaten people with or are threatened with the loss of friendships. In thinking about your daily experiences, could you describe a situation that you witnessed or in which you were personally experienced any of these behaviors (please limit responses to experiences that have occurred since you enrolled in college)? Please include the gender, race, and relationship to you (if any) of the people involved in the incident that you are describing.

(Allow approximately five minutes for completion of writing prompt).
Thank you for your thoughts. Now that you have started thinking about these experiences we'd like to ask you some questions.

Opening question

- At this time we would like for each of you to say your first name, your major, and why you are interested in participating in this discussion group.

Specific Questions

1. What are some ways that your friends, romantic partner, professors or supervisors may treat you when they are angry or unhappy with you, other than directly confronting you?

   Follow ups: Have any of you ever been given the silent treatment? If so by who?

   Have any of you ever had a friend or romantic partner turn other friends against you when they were angry at you?

   Has anyone ever damaged your credibility through rumors or inaction (for example: not passing on important information like a change in time for a meeting)?

2. During your time in college, how do you think that any relationally aggressive behaviors have affected your friendships? (if so ask which ones)

   What about romantic relationships?

   School or work experiences?

   Have there any other situations in which you encounter relationally aggressive behaviors?

3. What about you might make someone more likely to use relationally aggressive behaviors against you?

   (Follow up: Do you feel that appearance plays a role?

   What about other factors such as academic success? Social standing?

4. Who do you feel is most likely to use gossip against you?

   What about withdrawal of friendship?

   Who do you feel is most likely to threaten to damage other relationships you value (example: family relationships, work, or reputation)?

5. Why do you feel that people engage in relationally aggressive behaviors? Do you feel that there are positive sides to these behaviors (for example: might gossiping about a third party improve a friendship/relationship)?
6. How comfortable do you feel expressing anger?

   What about sadness?

   Or fear?
7. In what way do you feel that your race has played a role in your experience of these behaviors? In what ways are the experiences you've had/observed the same/different from experiences of students who are not Black?

Follow-up Probes *(use if participant doesn't provide this information when describing specific events)*

- What was the gender/race of the aggressor? Where were you when it happened? Was anyone else with you at the time? How did you feel at the time?

Impact & Coping Questions

1. What do you think the overall impact of your experiences has been on your lives?
2. What are some of the ways that you dealt with these experiences?

Ending Questions

So today you shared several experiences of relational aggression. Some of you said… There were several themes that were consistent across many of your experiences. These themes include…

Does that sound correct? If not, what themes might you add?

We recognize that this topic may stir up a lot of emotions, both positive and negative, and we really appreciate your willingness to share with us. Before we end, we'd like to invite you to share any final thoughts or comments about the topic that you might have, including how participation in this discussion has impacted you today.

Thank you for participating!

Before you leave we'd like to ask that you fill out this brief demographic survey.

Name: ______________________
Year: _______________________
Major: ______________________

Are there things you weren't comfortable sharing in the context of the focus group?

Please circle one: Yes No

If yes, would you be willing to write/talk about it in a follow-up?

Please Circle one: Yes No

If yes, please provide us with a method of contacting you?

E-mail address ____________________________
Phone number ____________________________

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Logistics
Materials: Digital recorder, consent forms, movie ticket voucher, copy of protocol, snacks, list of resources for physical battery and emotional distress

Steps:
1. Consent form (be sure to ask if they have questions before signing it)
2. Observer should set-up recorder
3. Begin interview
4. Thank participants; remind them to contact Joanna or Julie with any follow-questions; give them a blank copy of consent form and/or a list of resources if they want one

Consent Form Blurb

This form basically states that your participation in this survey and interview is entirely voluntary and that you may decline to participate and discontinue the interview at any time. Please read this sheet carefully before signing it. It discusses potential risks to you as well as the use of audio taping during this session. Please let me know if you have any questions before signing the form.

Interview Protocol

Hi, my name is "interviewer". Thank you for coming here today to participate in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of how people interact with each other and experiences of relational aggression. I am sure that you are familiar with overt forms of aggression such as verbal or physical aggression. However, today I am interested in hearing about your experiences of relational aggression, a type of aggression that involves the manipulation of friendships, relationships, or social status instead of physical or verbal attacks. Some examples include gossip, negative non-verbal gestures, threats of withdrawal of friendship, or threatening to use gossip to damage a relationship. While you may have had similar experiences prior to enrolling in college, I will be asking you to focus on aggressive behaviors

you've experienced while in college. I will be asking you some questions that I encourage you to answer to the best of your ability and I recognize that many of you will have unique experiences with relational aggression. There are no wrong answers.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Statement of Confidentiality:

I will be audio taping this session in an effort to maintain the integrity of your dialogue. However, your identity will not be revealed to anyone and only the researchers will have access to this tape.

Opening question

- At this time would to ask you for your first name, your major, and why you are interested in participating in this interview.
- Women often have experiences in which they participate in or witness gossip, share secrets, are excluded or exclude people from friendship groups, and threaten people with or are threatened with the loss of friendships. In thinking about your daily experiences, could you describe a situation that you witnessed or in which you were personally experienced any of these behaviors (please limit responses to experiences that have occurred since you enrolled in college)? Please include the gender, race, and relationship to you (if any) of the people involved in the incident that you are describing.

Specific Questions

1. What are some ways that your friends, romantic partner, professors or supervisors may treat you when they are angry or unhappy with you, other than directly confronting you?

   Follow ups: Have any of you ever been given the silent treatment? If so by who?

   Have any of you ever had a friend or romantic partner turn other friends against you

when they were angry at you?

Has anyone ever damaged your credibility through rumors or inaction (for example: not passing on important information like a change in time for a meeting)?

2. During your time in college, how do you think that any relationally aggressive behaviors have affected your friendships? (if so ask which ones)

   What about romantic relationships?

   School or work experiences?

   Have there any other situations in which you encounter relationally aggressive behaviors?

3. What about you might make someone more likely to use relationally aggressive behaviors against you?

   (Follow up: Do you feel that appearance plays a role?

   What about other factors such as academic success? Social standing?

4. Who do you feel is most likely to use gossip against you?

   What about withdrawal of friendship?

   Who do you feel is most likely to threaten to damage other relationships you value (example: family relationships, work, or reputation)?

5. Why do you feel that people engage in relationally aggressive behaviors? Do you feel that there are positive sides to these behaviors (for example: might gossiping about a third party improve a friendship/relationship)?

6. How comfortable do you feel expressing anger?

   What about sadness?

   Or fear?

7. In what way do you feel that your race has played a role in your experience of these behaviors? In what ways are the experiences you've had/observed the same/different from experiences of students who are not Black?

Follow-up Probes *(use if participant doesn't provide this information when describing specific events)*

- What was the gender/race of the aggressor? Where were you when it happened? Was anyone else with you at the time? How did you feel at the time?

Impact & Coping Questions

1. What do you think the overall impact of your experiences has been on your lives?
2. What are some of the ways that you dealt with these experiences?

Ending Questions

Is there anything that you would like to add?

I recognize that this topic may stir up a lot of emotions, both positive and negative, and I really appreciate your willingness to share with me. Before we end, I'd like to invite you to share any final thoughts or comments about the topic that you might have, including how participation in this discussion has impacted you today. (Offer a list of resources for physical battery/emotional distress and a copy of the blank consent form if the participant wants one).

Thank you for participating!

Appendix D
Coding Structure

Participant's role- the role participant played in the narrative

- Instigator- person who instigated relationally aggressive behavior Ex: I started a rumor about a woman I didn't like.
- Third-party-person involved in relational aggression who is neither the instigator nor the victim Ex: My roommates had a fight, and one of them expected me to stop talking to the other roommate.
- Victim- person who is the target of a relationally aggressive act Ex: One of my friends invited all my friends to dinner, except for me.
- Observer- person who witnessed relationally aggressive behavior, but was not a victim or participant Ex: My friend had a really hard time first year, another woman spread rumors about her and everyone stopped talking to her.

Group Membership- classifies aggressive experiences by racial group membership of the aggressor and victim

- Within Group-relationally aggressive content experienced by a Black woman perpetrated by another member or members of the Black community
- Out-Group- relationally aggressive content experienced by a Black woman perpetrated by a member or members of the University community who are not Black

Relationship Context - the different relationship contexts in which relationally aggressive experiences were reported to occur (context based on participant's definition of the relationship)

- Friends- people whom participants have engaged in voluntary social interactions or conversations with
- Non-friends-people whom participants have contact with but do not identify as friends
- Roommates-people whom participants share housing with
- Romantic partner-person with participant has or had engaged in romantic relationships with
- Family-either biological or adopted direct or extended family members
- Academic-people whom participants have interacted with in school settings
  - Classmates-people whom students share classes or other academic interactions with Ex: another student within the same major
  - Instructor-person responsible for teaching course material, may be professor, teaching assistant, or tutor
  - Supervisor-persons responsible for overseeing student's work in either employment or internships

Types of Relational Aggression- the different types of relationally aggressive behaviors that participants reported experiencing or observing

- Exclusion- failure to include a person in a group invitation, outing, or conversation Ex: When a friend invites all other members of a friend group to dinner.
- Gossip- discussion of a person when they are not present, maybe positive or negative depending on the content and intent of the parties involved
- Silent treatment- refusal to engage in conversation or communication with someone Ex: A person is angry at her friend and ignores her text messages.
- Negative Non-verbal gestures- gestures that are used to express negative feelings without words Ex: Rolling eyes, crossing arms over chest, closed off body language.
- Withdrawal of support/friendship-when one party threatens to withdraw or withdraws support or friendship unless demands are met. Ex: I don't like your boyfriend, if you keep seeing him we can't be friends any more.

Attributions- the motivations that participants perceive for relationally aggressive behaviors

- Insecurity- the aggressor is attacking someone else due to a feeling of or fear of being seen as inferior
- Personality type of target- aspect of personality of the target that they feel makes them more vulnerable Ex: My friends go behind my back, they're scared to confront me, because they know that I'll get loud
- Competition-the aggressor is competing for something, and therefore finds it advantageous to attack the competition
- Group cohesion/bonding-attacking a mutual enemy to strengthen a friendship of excluding someone to maintain the 'closeness' of a relationship
- Unintentional-people participating in relationally aggressive behaviors because they do not perceive them as harmful or see them as normal

Race Specific Content- this code contains aspects of race specific relationally aggressive content

- Hair type/texture- negative statements or judgments based on hair texture or type Ex: referring to someone's hair as nappy
- Skin tone-negative statements or judgments based on skin tone
- Terminology-community specific terminology used as a insult or pejorative Ex: Accusing someone of 'Acting White'
- Strong Black Woman- actions or behavior consistent with the Strong Black Woman stereotype Ex: caring for others at the expense of self, not seeking help in time of stress
- Angry Black Woman-actions or behaviors consistent with the Angry Black Woman stereotype Ex: Viewing emotions other than happiness as anger

Consequences of Relational Aggression- the effects of relational aggressive behaviors

- Fear of vulnerability- fear of appearing vulnerable to others or showing weakness
- Isolation-removing oneself from friendships or social activities, seeking other activities instead Ex: Studying alone rather than in a study group, dropping out of a school club
- Avoidance- avoidance of people or situations in which relationally aggressive behaviors occur
- Friendships-consequences that involve friendships
    - Mistrust-careful screening or testing of people before deciding to become friends with them
    - Limited number-reducing the number of friendships, increasing the number of people whom you consider acquaintances
    - Depth- controlling the depth of friendships either by forming deep friendships with a select few, or having a large number of shallow friendships that may be viewed a disposable
    - “Real Friends”-a qualifier on friendship that is used to determine between genuine friends and those who were fake Ex: Real friends don't tell lies about you.
    - Ending/changing of relationships-reducing the amount of time spent with people or ending a relationship all together

Institution Specific Experiences-experiences that appear to be specific to the institutional context (i.e., competitive, predominantly White, 4-year university)

- SES- judgments based on socioeconomic factors Ex: Designer clothing or accessories
- Elitism- negative behaviors rooted in belief of superiority Ex: Expressing a negative opinion of someone who attends office hours, because students at this school shouldn't need help.
- Greek life-experiences based on involvement or lack thereof in the Greek system Ex: Two women are in the same sorority and exclude their housemate who is not.
- Limited community size- behavior attributed to the small number of Black and African-American students at the Institution Ex: Everyone knows everyone's business, because there are only so many of us here.
- First year experience-experiences reported to have occurred within the first year of attendance of the Institution Ex: Difficulties forming friendships with suitemates.