A Qualitative Exploration of Black College Students' Belonging, Coping, and Mental Health

---

Dissertation Defense

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development

University of Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Paris J. Ball, M.Ed.

June 29th, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ELEMENTS

REFERENCES

LIST OF TABLES

Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes out to my fantastic cohort: Marissa, Noor, and Eleonora. Thank you for your unwavering love and support on this journey. I am a better clinician, scholar, and person because of each of you. In addition, this endeavor would not have been possible without the help and guidance of my advisors, Seanna Leath and Jason Downer. I appreciate you constantly pushing me to reach my fullest potential and keeping me grounded. Also, I am grateful for the encouragement of my family, especially my beloved sister Nia and niece Zoe, whose daily video calls are a constant source of joy.

It was a pleasure to collaborate with other graduate students and professors throughout my time at the University of Virginia. My sincere thanks go out to Edward Scott Jr., A'zure Latimer, Erica Stephens, Jordan Taliaferro, and Martinque Jones. Special thanks to the F.H.I.R.E. Lab for providing me with a rich community of scholars of color. I also would like to express my sincere thanks to my committee members: Antoinette Thomas, Lora Henderson, and Lanice Avery. Finally, I would like to acknowledge all the people who have cheered me on along the way, including fellow clinical and school psychology students, my Spelman sisters, and the women of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated.

Linking Statement

College undergraduates are stressed by a variety of factors, including academic requirements, adjusting to a new stage of life, and financial concerns (Sinjin & Howard, 2019). In addition to general college stressors, Black students also face identity-based stress on campuses, including racial discrimination, racial stereotyping, and racism (Leath & Chavous, 2018; Shahid et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). For Black students, identity-based stress, sometimes called race-related stress, is a source of chronic stress that is systemic in nature and directly related to their racial and ethnic backgrounds (Cokley et al., 2013; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Griffith et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020).

Race-related stress may adversely affect Black students' mental health and complicate their adjustment to college life (Cokley et al., 2013). In particular, higher rates of mental illness among Black students negatively affect their academic performance, graduation rates, and retention rates (Kitzrow, 2003; Nami & Eishani, 2014). And, although Black students report higher stress levels than White students during their first year in college (Boyraz et al., 2016), they are half as likely to receive mental health treatment from campus counseling services (Bridges et al., 2018). Several factors contribute to this underutilization of campus counseling services among Black college students, including stigma associated with mental health challenges, cultural mistrust between students and clinicians, and the underrepresentation of Black counselors (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021; Masuda et al., 2012). Due to this, Black students may be more likely to access non-traditional spaces (e.g., clubs, peer support groups, and student events) for support with general and race-related stress during the college period (Grier-Reed, 2016).

There is well-documented literature on Black students' collegiate experiences, help-seeking behaviors, and mental health outcomes (Griffin et al., 2019; Jochman et al., 2019; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Leath et al., 2021). However, fewer scholars have examined how Black students' pre-college beliefs about and experiences with mental health affect their help-seeking behavior on campus (Kam et al., 2018). Research findings suggest that students enter college with a variety of beliefs and life experiences relating to mental health and well-being (Mushonga, 2020). This is commonly referred to as mental health knowledge (MHK). MHK refers to individuals' beliefs and perceptions about psychological concerns and positive mental practices, which can aid in the recognition, management, or prevention of psychological distress (Jorm, 2012). There are a variety of ways in which Black students can increase their MHK, including courses, targeted programs, and personal experience (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is a gap in current literature regarding the extent to which Black students utilize multiple forms of mental health support during their college careers (Grier-Reed, 2016; Hypolite et al., 2020; Volpe & Jones, 2021). Therefore, we sought to understand how Black students' pre-college mental health knowledge (MHK) influenced their help-seeking behaviors on campus, both within and beyond college in paper one.

While there is ample evidence that Black students use a variety of strategies to cope with stress, we have limited research on students' coping flexibility and which coping strategies they perceive to be adaptive and maladaptive. To better understand Black college students' mental health, this dissertation draws on the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to examine the coping strategies of Black students, defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person." In essence, Black students

draw on various coping strategies to reduce or overcome race-related stress and their consequences through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies (Aldwin & Yancura, 2011). According to this theory, one's perception of stressors influences coping strategies, and the type of coping strategy a person uses may affect general adjustment outcomes (Gloria et al., 2017). For example, emotion-focused coping involves regulating your feelings and emotional response to the problem. In contrast, problem-focused coping involves confronting a stressor to decrease or eliminate it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Guided by Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) framework, we sought to understand in greater depth how Black students employ various appraisal strategies to cope with general and race-related stress in paper two.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that Black women experience a decreased sense of belonging at PWIs, which can lead to isolation and increased stress for Black college women (Kelly et al., 2021; Newton, 2023). However, we know less about how belongingness and distinctiveness influence their classroom experiences. Thus, in paper three, we examine Black women's sense of belonging in classroom contexts at PWIs by drawing upon McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) theoretical framework on conditions of visibility and belongingness in organizational contexts. Embedded social norms and power structures of race, gender, and power can make it difficult for Black women to control their level of belonging and distinctiveness at work. McCluney & Rabelo (2019) identified four conditions of visibility in the workplace for Black women: (a) precarious visibility (low belonging/low distinctiveness), (b) invisibility (high belonging/low distinctiveness), (c) hypervisibility (high belonging/high distinctiveness), and (d) partial visibility (low belonging/high distinctiveness). However, few scholars have explored how the belongingness-distinctiveness paradox plays out in a higher education context. Therefore, we utilized an exploratory case study design (Berg, 2001), as well as McCluney & Rabelo's (2019)

conditions of visibility framework to examine whether Black undergraduate women's experiences in PWI classrooms may mirror challenges experienced by Black women in predominantly White work environments. In addition, we sought to understand how Black women navigated conditions of visibility to be successful in the classroom. Altogether, this dissertation aims to advance research related to mental health, coping, and belongingness among Black students and ways to address these factors on campus. As a result, educators, administrators, and clinicians will be able to understand better how they can support the retention and mental well-being of Black college students.

In addition to Lazarus & Folkman (1984) and McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) theoretical frameworks, we referenced Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in papers two and three. Through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, we examined how systemic and interpersonal racism affects the mental health of Black students attending predominantly White and minority-serving institutions (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Across all three studies we drew on intersectionality as a critical lens to emphasize how students' identities (e.g., race and gender) informed their college adjustment and sense of belonging (Crenshaw, 2017). Intersectionality originated from The Combahee River Collective (1977). Crenshaw (2017) built on these early ideas by conceptualizing a three-part framework for intersectionality—structural, political, and representational—to illuminate how complex latent power relations shape the lives of Black women. While originally focused on the experiences of Black women, scholars have used intersectionality as a theoretical tool to investigate the lived experiences of many different groups and communities (Crenshaw, 2017). Thus, in the current dissertation, we considered how Black women and men's gender and racial identities impact their experiences. Altogether, this three-study dissertation used qualitative methodologies to investigate how Black students'

intersectional identities impact their campus experiences, with an explicit emphasis on understanding how their mental health evolves in college and how they navigate challenges. Furthermore, our results suggest the ways in which Black students find a sense of belonging and visibility are complex and multifaceted. We hope our findings can help inform strategies to better support Black students during their collegiate journey.

Paper 1: Black Students' Mental Health Help-Seeking Processes during College Matriculation

In the first study, we used semi-structured interview data and thematic analysis to examine the experiences of 48 Black college women and men at a predominantly White and minority serving institution. A particular focus of this study was how Black students' pre-college beliefs about mental health services affected their help-seeking behaviors within and beyond college counseling services. In addition, this study examined how Black students' mental health knowledge (MHK) and help-seeking behaviors changed during college. A team of coders transcribed and analyzed interviews and identified the following four themes: (1) pre-college experiences shape MHK; (2) college adjustment challenges as a precursor to seeking treatment; (3) negative perceptions of college counseling services; and (4) campus community mental health support. Across both universities, most students arrived at college with very limited MHK.

In addition, the college adjustment period encouraged students to seek mental health support through their college counseling centers; however, many students encountered cultural insensitivity when seeking counseling services. Therefore, they sought mental health support from Black student organizations and the Black administration on campus. We found that Black students engage in alternative campus community spaces for mental health support when they perceive college counseling centers as insensitive and unresponsive. The study's findings shed

light on Black students' openness to learning about their mental health and demonstrate how they reimagine informal spaces to address identity-based stressors.

Paper 2: "What's in My Coping Toolbox?": An Exploratory Study of Black College Students' Coping Flexibility

In the second study, we sought to understand how Black students cope with general, gendered, and race related stress tied to their identities as Black women or men. In addition, we assessed how students evaluated the effectiveness of various coping strategies within the college environment. Using a deductive thematic coding method, we identified four main themes from student interview data that mapped onto different kinds of coping: (1) emotion-focused, (2) avoidant, (3) problem-focused, and (4) adaptive, variable, and maladaptive. We found that individuals demonstrated coping flexibility, which refers to the ability to discontinue ineffective coping strategies and replace them with one or more effective strategies (Kato, 2012). In addition, the participants displayed awareness and reflection in their coping responses by assessing situations and their environment in order to make appropriate adjustments. Furthermore, we considered within-group variation in coping methods among Black college students concerning the type of stressor and the type of institution of higher education. This study shed new light on how Black college students cope with general and race-related stressors and how their coping strategies vary between types of institutions. The findings of our study provide a more nuanced understanding of Black college students' coping to guide college-based prevention and intervention efforts.

Paper 3: "Now You See Me, and Now You Don't": An Institutional Case Study of How Conditions of Visibility Affect Black College Women's Sense of Belonging

As an extension from Papers one and two, we conducted an exploratory case study in Paper three to focus on the experiences of four Black women from the overall sample of 48 college students. In recent years, a growing number of studies have examined Black women's collegiate experiences, particularly their academic, social, and psychological adjustment. Nonetheless, there is a gap in research regarding how Black women are perceived and evaluated in academic spaces and how it affects their sense of belonging. We applied McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) framework to investigate how Black women at a PWI experienced belongingness and visibility in the classroom. We found that these four young women experienced four classroom visibility levels: precarious visibility, invisibility, hypervisibility, and partial visibility. Our case study employed deductive coding methods to select specific cases that corresponded well to the framework's categories. The findings lend deeper insight into how visibility affects Black women's academic confidence and classroom engagement, as well as the variety of strategies that Black women use to navigate visibility in the classroom.

Contributions of this Three-Paper Dissertation to the Current Literature

Overall, this work showcased Black students' strength, resilience, and collective determination to succeed, despite regularly navigating discriminatory university spaces. Together, findings from these linked studies address gaps in the literature by increasing our current knowledge about Black students' pre-college beliefs about mental health and how their perspective shifts over time. We illustrated how Black students sought informal spaces to maintain their mental health in place of formal campus mental health services. This dissertation also revealed the many coping mechanisms that Black students employed and their flexibility in using multiple coping strategies to deal with psychological distress in the face of systemic, identity-based stressors. Moreover, we demonstrated how conditions of visibility affect Black

women's sense of belonging in classroom contexts at a PWI. Our results also offered relevant considerations for university counseling centers, university administration, educators, and researchers regarding ways to increase Black students' retention rates, adjustment, and positive mental health outcomes. We also presented considerations for improving Black women's sense of belonging and visibility in PWI classrooms. Furthermore, each study identified the need to further research and establish intentional, culturally responsive, and effective mental health and classroom resources for Black students.

This dissertation offers valuable insights into the diverse experiences of Black students across different institutional settings. The study participants were drawn from a Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) and a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), providing insight into the varying contexts in which Black students navigate their collegiate journeys. It is important to highlight that despite their differing institutional classifications, the demographic makeup of Black students within the student bodies of both institutions in our study was comparable. Our analysis compared participant responses across these two contexts and largely found similar experiences between Black students at PWIs and MSIs despite the contrasting institutional environments. For instance, both groups often faced similar challenges related to racial discrimination, sense of belonging, and access to mental health support services. This highlights the pervasive nature of systemic issues impacting Black students across diverse institutional landscapes. Furthermore, our study sheds light on the implications of these findings for practices and policies at PWIs and MSIs. At PWIs, where Black students may constitute a smaller percentage of the student body, there is a critical need for enhanced support mechanisms to address the unique challenges they encounter, including efforts to combat racial bias and promote inclusive campus environments. Conversely, at MSIs, which serve a higher proportion

of Black students, there is an opportunity to leverage existing cultural resources and support networks to bolster student well-being and academic success.

The practical implications of the dissertation findings underscore several critical areas for universities to address in supporting Black students. Mental health providers must be equipped with specific knowledge and skills to assist Black students in dealing with racism and interpersonal discrimination effectively. Understanding how these students choose and evaluate their coping strategies is crucial, as they may prefer informal learning environments and benefit from peer-based support networks. Given that Black students often resort to emotion-focused coping strategies, such as seeking instrumental support, counseling centers should offer a broader range of problem-focused coping techniques to enhance their support options. Additionally, universities should emphasize skill promotion and preventative approaches rather than solely relying on deficit-driven interventions. Recognizing the lack of formal support spaces for Black students, institutions should also foster environments where students can access informal support through peers and faculty. Lastly, fostering White allyship and encouraging White colleagues to engage in prosocial behaviors could help create a more psychologically safe environment for Black students, particularly Black women, by challenging the existing status quo in predominantly White settings.

Furthermore, the findings of this dissertation underscore the critical need for further research on Black college students to deepen our understanding of their unique experiences and needs. Although this study has shed light on the intersections of race, gender, and mental health, as well as the effectiveness of pre-college mental health education and culturally responsive support services, there remains much to explore. Future research should investigate how pre-college mental health knowledge influences help-seeking behaviors in greater detail.

Additionally, there is a need to examine the full spectrum of coping mechanisms used by Black students, particularly in diverse institutional settings, and how these strategies can be supported or enhanced. Furthermore, additional research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of Black women's challenges in classroom settings. Investigating their adaptive strategies is essential to develop more effective interventions. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to creating more inclusive and supportive college environments that better address Black students' mental health and academic needs. Collectively, these findings contribute to the existing literature by enhancing our understanding of Black students' collegiate experiences and providing actionable recommendations for educators, administrators, and mental health professionals better to support the well-being and success of Black college students. As we endeavor to foster equity and inclusion in higher education, it is essential that we take these insights into account and strive towards establishing campus environments that are supportive and inclusive for all students.

References

Aldwin, C. M., & Yancura, L. (2011). Stress, coping, and adult development. In R. J. Contrada

    & A. Baum (Eds.), *Handbook of stress science: Psychology, biology, and health* (pp.

    263-274). New York: Springer.

Boyraz, G., Granda, R., Baker, C. N., Tidwell, L. L., & Waits, J. B. (2016). Posttraumatic stress,

    effort regulation, and academic outcomes among college students: A longitudinal study.

    Journal of Counseling Psychology, *63*(4), 475.

Bridges, L. S., Sharma, M., Lee, J. H. S., Bennett, R., Buxbaum, S. G., & Reese-Smith, J.

    (2018). Using the proceed-proceed model for an online peer-to-peer suicide prevention

    and awareness for depression (SPAD) intervention among African American college

    students: experimental study. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, *8*(1), 15.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). *Ecological systems theory*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Cabral, R. R., & Smith, T. B. (2011). Racial/ethnic matching of clients and therapists in mental

    health services: A meta-analytic review of preferences, perceptions, and outcomes.

    Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58(4), 537–554.

Center for Collegiate Mental Health. (2022, February). 2021 annual report (Publication No. STA

    15-108). State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University.

Cokley, K., McClain, S., Enciso, A., & Martinez, M. (2013). An examination of the impact of

    race-related stress and impostor feelings on the mental health of diverse ethnic minority

    college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *41*(2), 82-95.

Collective, C. R. (1977). *'A Black Feminist Statement'* (pp. 210-218). Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. W. (2017). Race, reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in

    antidiscrimination law. In *Law and Social Movements* (pp. 475-531). Routledge.

Gloria, A. M., Castellanos, J., Delgado-Guerrero, M., Salazar, A. C., Nieves, C. M., Mejia, A., & Martinez, V. L. (2017). El ojo en la meta: Latino male undergraduates' coping processes. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 10*(1), 11–24.

Greer, T. M., & Chwalisz, K. (2007). Minority related stressors and coping processes among African American college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(4), 388–404.

Grier-Reed, T., Arcinue, F., & Inman, E. (2016). The African American student network: An intervention for retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *18*(2), 183-193.

Griffith, A. N., Hurd, N. M., & Hussain, S. B. (2019). "I didn't come to school for this": A qualitative examination of experiences with race-related stressors and coping responses among Black students attending a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *34*(2), 115-139.

Hypolite, L. I. (2020). People, place, and connections: Black cultural center staff as facilitators of social capital. *Journal of Black Studies*, *51*(1), 37-59.

Jochman, J. C., Cheadle, J. E., Goosby, B. J., Tomaso, C., Kozikowski, C., & Nelson, T. (2019). Mental health outcomes of discrimination among college students on a predominately White campus: A prospective study. *Socius*, *5*, 2378023119842728.

Jones, S. C., Anderson, R. E., Gaskin-Wasson, A. L., Sawyer, B. A., Applewhite, K., & Metzger, I. W. (2020). From "crib to coffin": Navigating coping from racism-related stress throughout the lifespan of Black Americans. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *90*(2), 267.

Jorm, A. F. (2012). Mental health literacy: Empowering the community to take action for better

    mental health. *American Psychologist*, *67*(3), 231.

Kam, B., Mendoza, H. & Masuda, A. (2019) Mental health help-seeking experience and attitudes

    in Latina/o American, Asian American, Black American, and White American college

    students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling 41*, 492–508.

Kitzrow, M. A. (2003). The mental health needs of today's college students: Challenges and

    recommendations. *NASPA Journal, 41,* 167–181.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer publishing

    company.

Leath, S., & Chavous, T. (2018). Black women's experiences of campus racial climate and

    stigma at predominantly White institutions: Insights from a comparative and within-

    group approach for STEM and non-STEM majors. *Journal of Negro Education*, *87*(2),

    125-139.

Leath, S., Mathews, C., Harrison, A., & Chavous, T. (2019). Racial identity, racial

    discrimination, and classroom engagement outcomes among Black girls and boys in

    predominantly Black and predominantly White school districts. *American Educational

    Research Journal*, *56*(4), 1318-1352.

Leath, S., Jerald, M. C., Perkins, T., & Jones, M. K. (2021). A qualitative exploration of jezebel

    stereotype endorsement and sexual behaviors among Black college women. *Journal of

    Black Psychology*, *47*(4-5), 244-283.

Masuda, A., Anderson, P. L., & Edmonds, J. (2012). Help-seeking attitudes, mental health

    stigma, and self-concealment among African American college students. *Journal of Black

    Studies*, *43*(7), 773-786.

McCluney, C. L., & Rabelo, V. C. (2019). Conditions of visibility: An intersectional

    examination of Black women's belongingness and distinctiveness at work. *Journal of*

    Vocational Behavior, (*113)*, 143-152.

Mushonga, D. R., & Henneberger, A. K. (2020). Protective factors associated with positive

    mental health in traditional and nontraditional Black students. *American Journal of*

    Orthopsychiatry, *90*(1), 1-14.

Nami, Y., Nami, M. S., & Eishani, K. A. (2014). The students' mental health status. *Procedia*

    Social and Behavioral Sciences, 114, 840–844.

Shahid, N. N., Nelson, T., & Cardemil, E. V. (2018). Lift every voice: Exploring the stressors

    and coping mechanisms of Black college women attending predominantly White

    institutions. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *44*(1), 3–24.

Sinjin, R., & Howard, K. (2019). Coping with stress in college: An examination of spirituality,

    social support, and quality of life. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, *22*(8), 832-843.

Sontag-Padilla, L., Dunbar, M. S., Ye, F., Kase, C., Fein, R., Abelson, S., & Stein, B. D. (2018).

    Strengthening college students' mental health knowledge, awareness, and helping

    behaviors: The impact of active minds, a peer mental health organization. *Journal of the*

    American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, *57*(7), 500-507.

Volpe, V. V., Katsiaficas, D., & Neal, A. J. (2021). "Easier said than done": A qualitative

    investigation of Black emerging adults coping with multilevel racism. *Cultural Diversity*

    & Ethnic Minority Psychology, *27*(3), 495–504.

Winkle-Wagner, R., Kelly, B. T., Luedke, C. L., & Reavis, T. B. (2019). Authentically me:

    Examining expectations that are placed upon Black women in college. *American*

    Educational Research Journal, *56*(2), 407–443.

PAPER 1

Black Students' Mental Help-Seeking Processes During College Matriculation

Paris J. Ball, M.Ed.

School of Education and Human Development

University of Virginia

Edward D. Scott Jr.

Graduate College of Social Work

University of Houston

A'zure Latimer

Department of Psychology

University of Virginia

Martinque Jones, Ph.D.

Department of Psychology

University of North Texas

Seanna Leath, Ph.D.

Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences

Washington University St. Louis

Abstract

The present study examined how Black students' pre-college beliefs and perceptions of mental health services influenced their help-seeking behaviors, both within and beyond college counseling services. Using semi-structured interview data and consensual qualitative research methods (CQR), we examined the experiences of 48 Black college women and men (ages 18–22) sampled from two universities. We identified the following four themes: (1) pre-college experiences shape mental health knowledge (MHK); (2) college adjustment challenges as a precursor to seeking treatment; (3) negative perceptions of college counseling services; and (4) campus community mental health support. Upon seeking counseling services, many students encoun-tered a lack of diversity in counseling staff and cultural mistrust. Thus, they opted to seek mental health support in campus community spaces curated by Black student organizations and administrators. Overall, our findings suggest Black students engage in various alternative campus community spaces to support their mental health. We conclude by discussing the need for de-liberate and specialized mental health support for Black students

Keywords: Black college students, higher education, MHK, college counseling, help-seeking behaviors, Black cultural centers, Black student organizations

Black students' mental help-seeking processes during the college matriculation

As Black students transition into college, they face new social dynamics, academic expectations, and a greater sense of autonomy (Arnett, 2000). In addition, many Black students encounter race-related stress that can harm their mental health outcomes and hinder their overall adjustment to college (Kelly, et al., 2018; Shahid et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). While Black students are more likely to experience both general (e.g., roommate negotiations and living away from home) and race-related stressors (e.g., stereotypes and discrimination), they are less likely to seek support from mental health professionals in college counseling centers (Anderson, 2018). While Black students are less likely to use college counseling centers for mental health support compared to students from other racial groups, they still engage in various forms of adaptive coping and rely on other campus supports.

Yet, amidst the growing scholarship on Black students' mental health processes (Leath & Chavous, 2018; Leath et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2016; Jochman et al., 2019), there are fewer studies that consider how students' pre-college beliefs and experiences about mental health inform their help-seeking behaviors on campus (Kam et al., 2018). In addition, fewer studies consider the extent to which students draw upon multiple forms of mental health supports while navigating their college experiences (Grier-Reed, 2013; Hypolite et al., 2020; Volpe & Jones, 2021). The current study investigates how Black students' pre-college mental health knowledge (MHK) influenced their help-seeking behaviors on campus, both within and beyond college counseling services. We deem it necessary to advance research in this area because doing so will illuminate areas for intervention for educators, administrators, and clinicians, working to support Black students' adjustment and retention in college.

Mental Health Knowledge and Help-Seeking Behaviors during College

Given that many mental health disorders start in early adulthood, college matriculation represents a critical period to identify and address new and unmet mental health care needs among Black students. Prior evidence suggests that students enter college with various beliefs and life experiences surrounding mental health and well-being (Mushonga, 2020), commonly referred to as MHK. MHK refers to individuals' beliefs and perceptions about psychological concerns and positive mental practices, which can aid in the recognition, management, or prevention of psychological distress (Jorm, 2012). For instance, comprehensive MHK can help students identify psychological distress (Hadlaczky et al., 2014) and encourage them to seek treatment to support and maintain their mental and emotional well-being (Jorm, 2012). This may be especially important during the college adjustment period, as pre-college MHK may inform students' help-seeking behaviors once they arrive on campus and adjust to new academic and social demands (e.g., Masuda et al., 2012; Leath et al., 2022).

Prior evidence suggests that college students acquire MHK through psychoeducation received through mental health providers or coping strategies learned in a person's upbringing (Grier-Reed, 2013). In contrast, other students may gain MHK through health classes or targeted programs, such as Active Minds (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2018) or Mental Health First Aid (Potvin-Boucher et al., 2010). These programs focus on enhancing knowledge surrounding psychological disorder risk factors, attitudes regarding mental health, and the capacity to access mental health information and professional services (Miles et al., 2020). For example, Sontag-Padilla et al.'s (2018) study concluded that Black and Latino college students that participated in a student peer organization focused on increasing mental health awareness reduced students' mental illness stigma, increased help-seeking behaviors, and enhanced peer-to-peer support. Similar programs

have also increased students' attention to somatic indicators of psychological distress, such as a feeling of nausea or an increased heart rate when feeling anxious (Torres-Harding et al., 2020). However, many of these programs fail to directly address the culturally specific challenges that Black students face, such as the stress of finding a sense of belonging on campus, mistrust of institutions, and racial discrimination (Grier-Reed, 2013). Therefore, universities must consider the interplay between students' mental health concerns and help-seeking processes to address Black students' mental health concerns and improve students' well-being and sense of adjustment (Volpe & Jones, 2021).

Mental Health Knowledge and Help-Seeking Processes among Black College Students

Individual and contextual-level factors inform Black college students' MHK, such as forming relationships with natural mentors (Griffith et al., 2019), tapping into peer networks (Grier-Reed, 2013), mental health stigma (Cheng et al., 2018), and minimization of mental health struggles (Alang, 2019). Mental health stigma refers to the negative evaluation of those with mental health illnesses or those who solicit mental health treatment (DeFreitas et al., 2018). Individuals who endorse higher mental health stigma often report more negative attitudes toward help-seeking and shame surrounding experiencing mental health symptoms compared to individuals with more positive attitudes about mental health service utilization (Barry et al., 2017; DeFreitas et al., 2018). Given the longstanding history of medical mistreatment of Black communities (Taylor & Kuo, 2018), it has historically been the case that Black Americans tend to report higher levels of mental health stigma relative to other racial and ethnic groups, and, as a result, tend to be more hesitant to engage in mental health services (Alang, 2019).

Mental health stigma in the Black community may also contribute to some Black youth receiving less information or encouragement on seeking out professional mental health services

when needed. In addition, a reluctance to discuss mental illness results in fewer conversations surrounding mental health maintenance and positive mental health supports, such as proactive coping practices (e.g., social support) and psychoeducation (Kam, 2019; Masuda et al., 2012). On the other hand, emergent research suggests that Black female college students are generally more open to receiving counseling and seeking services to address their mental health concerns compared to Black male students (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2016). Likewise, groups that draw on Afrocentric coping strategies and utilize culturally informed practices effectively engage Black students (Leath & Chavous, 2018). Thus, while some Black students may have a strong sense of cultural stigma around seeking counseling services, others likely enter college with beliefs on mental health that encourage them to pursue help through college counseling centers when they experience psychological distress.

For those with less MHK, researchers suggest that culturally relevant programs can improve MHK, decrease stigma, and increase help-seeking behaviors. For instance, Bridges et al.'s (2018) study concluded that an online peer-to-peer program that was culturally appropriate for Black college students led to significant improvements in attitudes and management of depression. In addition, the study's findings demonstrate how the implementation of culturally responsive programming in conjunction with peer support significantly increases Black college students' MHK. Furthermore, Black students gain MHK through other venues, such as psychology courses, workshops, and media distributed by college counselors. Undergraduate students who have taken a clinical psychology course or have majored in psychology are likely to have more substantial MHK than their peers (Miles et al., 2020). In addition, Black-focused mental health platforms are now available, such as Therapy for Black Girls, which promotes mental wellness among Black women (Bradford, 2020), and #YouGoodMan, a hashtag for

engaging Black men in mental health conversations on Twitter (Francis, 2021). Therefore, Black youth may be more exposed to MHKs than generations past. Given that students' mental health and help-seeking behaviors influence their academic performance and college retention rates (Griffith et al., 2019; Nami et al., 2014), it is critical to consider how Black students' pre-college MHK informs their service utilization on campus.

Black Students' Experiences with College Counseling Services

College counseling services have an opportunity to support Black students' MHK and wellness outcomes. Black students report higher stress levels during their first year in college compared to White students (Boyraz et al., 2016) but are half as likely to receive mental health treatment from campus counseling services (Bridges et al., 2018). Counseling service underutilization among Black college students is wide-ranging and includes mental health stigma, cultural mistrust, and the underrepresentation of Black counseling professionals (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021; Masuda et al., 2012). For instance, many college counseling centers use a medical model to diagnose and treat mental illness (Mushonga, 2020; Taylor & Kuo, 2019). This approach may alienate Black students who fear inappropriate labels, unnecessary medication, and hospitalization.

Counseling centers should not only strategically pivot away from mental illness to decrease stigma among students but also should seek to create more inclusive spaces for Black students. Informal spaces for psychological support tend to benefit Black college students' mental health and help students avoid the systemic challenges associated with counseling centers, which often revolve around few or no representative staff and long waitlists for services. For example, research suggests that Black colleges use natural mentorship as an effective coping mechanism, particularly in PWI settings (Griffith et al., 2019). Natural mentors (e.g., coaches,

professors, and university administrators) tend to share the cultural background of their mentees and provide support and advice (Hurd & Sellers, 2013), especially as it related to coping with race-related stressors (Griffith et al., 2019). Black students also tap into peer networks for academic and personal support, such as relying on older students to direct them to resources on campus or encouraging them to persist when they struggle in a class (Brooms, 2018; Grier-Reed, 2010).

Moreover, Black students arrive at college with individual and cultural coping mechanisms that aid them with college adjustment (Oliver et al., 2017). For instance, Black students employ resilient coping, the capability to move forward in the face of adversity, more than their White counterparts. (Oliver et al., 2017). Moreover, Black students report higher spirituality levels than White students, which helps them cope with stress and provides a sense of comfort (Luna & MacMillan, 2015). Nevertheless, Black students need access to effective therapeutic services, especially those with more serious mental health concerns. The counseling center also serves as a gateway for students to access other university services, such as academic accommodations (e.g., extra time on a test for a student with an anxiety disorder) or access to psychiatry services. Thus, students who do not utilize campus psychological services may miss out on additional services they may benefit from.

The Current Study

Black students encounter race-related stress that can harm their mental health outcomes and hinder their overall adjustment to college (Kelly, et al., 2018; Shahid et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Black students are more likely to experience both general (e.g., roommate negotiations and living away from home) and race-related stressors (e.g., stereotypes and discrimination. University counseling services can play a crucial role in helping students

recognize and manage the effects of race-related stressors and the more general life stage adjustments connected to college matriculation, such as new academic expectations, social status changes, navigating unfamiliar resources (Jorm, 2012; Smith et al., 2014). Yet, Black students experience racial bias within campus counseling centers that may hinder their desire to seek out and use such services. To build on extant literature, the current study examined how Black students' pre-college MHK informed their help-seeking processes in college. Specifically, we draw on interview data to explore potential shifts in Black students' beliefs about mental health concerning their perceptions of mental health supports on campus. Our findings will offer insight regarding the adaptive coping strategies and campus supports that Black students find helpful. Three main questions guided our inquiry:

1) Upon entering college, what do Black students know about mental health?

2) How do Black students' perspectives on mental health shift during college?

3) How well do Black students think their institutions address their mental health concerns?

Method

Participants

The sample included 48 Black students (women, $n = 36$; men, $n = 12$) ages 18-22 years ($M = 20$ years). Twenty-seven of the participants were enrolled at a public, predominantly White institution (PWI) in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States (U.S.), and 21 participants were enrolled at a minority-serving institution (MSI) in the south-central region of the U.S; PWI and MSI status was determined based on the racial demographic of the student body. At the time of data collection, Black students comprised approximately 6% of the undergraduate population at the PWI and approximately 13% of the undergraduate population at the MSI. Regarding ethnicity, 28 participants identified as Black or African American, 12

identified as African (i.e., Rwandan, Nigerian, Zoe Leonean, Ethiopian, and Ghanaian), four

identified as biracial/multi-ethnic (i.e., African American, White, and Hispanic), three identified

as Afro-Caribbean (i.e., Haitian, and Jamaican), and one participant's ethnic background is

unknown. Sixteen students were first-generation college students, and annual household income

ranged from $5,000-$200,000 (median = $95,000). As it pertains to mental health, participants

reported experiencing a variety of concerns, including anxiety (23%), depression (27%), and

eating disorders (2%--e.g., anorexia or bulimia). When asked about whether or not they have

engaged in mental health services in the past, students reported having participated in individual

counseling (35%), group counseling (2%), and psychological assessment (6%).

Procedures

After obtaining IRB approval at both institutions, researchers sent a weekly recruitment

email to Black student organizations. The email detailed that the study focused on students'

perceptions of campus racial climate and mental health, and interested students contacted the P.I.

at their institution to set up an interview time. Each P.I. scheduled interviews until the target

number of participants was obtained, based on available grant funding for the project. Before the

interview, participants completed an informed consent form. Due to covid-19, researchers

conducted interviews virtually via Zoom or by phone. When interviewing via Zoom, participants

had the option of having their camera on or off during the interview, but all interviews were

audio-recorded.

The interview team consisted of the lead author (a Black woman) and two Black women

university professors (co-PIs on the project). Before the interview, participants completed a 15-

question survey of demographic information (e.g., social class, ethnicity, age, gender, and racial

composition of their childhood neighborhood). The average length of the interviews was 90

minutes, and participants were compensated $20 for study participation. After the audio files were transcribed into written format by a professional transcription service, the researchers reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy and uploaded them onto a data server.

Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interviews consisted of three main sections – the first section focused on campus racial climate, the second section focused on mental health processes, and the third section focused on the institutional response to covid-19 and access to student mental health services. Within the first section of the interview, participants responded to questions related to their academic and social experiences and their sense of belonging at the institution. The second section focused on the participant's MHK and help-seeking behaviors. The third section focused on their perceptions of their institution's response to covid-19 concerning academic, financial, and mental health services. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, some participants touched on their mental health processes in various sections of the interview. Thus, the coding team reviewed the transcripts in their entirety. An abridged version of the interview protocol is available upon request from the P.I.s (Drs. Martinque Jones and Seanna Leath).

Researcher Positionality Statement

Researchers' identities and their roles can influence the research process and interpretations of data (Ladson-Billings, 2000); thus, we provide relevant details about our personal and scholarly positionality. The lead author is a cisgender Black woman from a lower-income background working toward her doctorate in clinical and school psychology. As a part of the lead author's training, she provides psychological services for clients through a college counseling center and a children's psychiatric hospital. The second author is a queer(ing) Black man who was reared primarily by his mother in a military family. He is a licensed mental health

provider and experienced youth development researcher, currently earning a doctorate in applied developmental science. The third author is a cisgender Black woman from a middle-class background working toward her master's in community psychology. Her research focuses on respectability politics and youth agency within the Black community. The fourth author is a cisgender Black woman raised in a working-class background; as a licensed psychologist and assistant professor, her work centers on identity, mental health, and counseling process relevant to Black women. Finally, the fifth author is a Black, queer woman from a working-class background. She has conducted nine years of research on the academic motivation and psychological well-being of Black girls and women. Collectively, our breadth and depth of experiences in developmental and clinical psychology made us well-equipped to explore Black college students' mental health processes.

Coding Analysis Approach

We used consensual qualitative research methods (CQR) to analyze the interviews (Hill, 2012). CQR is an inductive thematic approach that uses multiple perspectives best to represent the intention and meaning of participants' narratives. First, the coding team, comprised of the first, third, and fourth authors, focused on chunking relevant information from the 48 transcripts related to the three research questions. The research questions were (1) upon entering college, what do Black students know about mental health; (2) how do Black students' perspectives on mental health shift during college; and (3) how well do students think their institution addresses Black students' mental health? The lead author reviewed all 48 transcripts, and E.S. and A.L. reviewed 16 transcripts each. After reviewing the transcripts, the coding team gathered to review all the highlighted statements from the 48 transcripts per Hill's (2012) guidelines on creating a codebook. Then, the team met weekly to reach a consensus on all statements. After finalizing the

inclusion and exclusion criteria (e.g., we excluded statements about help-seeking and MHK

during the pandemic) were updated and made available on a secure data server. The lead author

uploaded the transcripts into Dedoose 9.0 for coding upon finalizing chunks.

Each member of the chunking team generated a list of domains that represented themes in

the data. Then, the team reconvened to discuss. Upon reviewing each team member's domain list,

we decided to organize the codebook by MHK, MHK shifts, and psychological climate. The

final three MHK coding themes included: indistinct MHK, direct MHK, and indirect MHK. The

five MHK shifts included: overcoming stigma, prioritizing mental health, identifying disorders,

learning how to access mental health services, and embracing peer support. For psychological

climate, the coding theme was negative perceptions of psychological climate, with four

subcodes: centering Whiteness, rhetoric without resource changes, campus organizations, and

Black faculty and university administration. After five coding iterations, the team met 85% inter-

rater reliability, or sufficient agreement among multiple coders (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The

coding team engaged in reflexivity by individually taking memo notes throughout the data

analysis process. When there was a disagreement about coding, the team reviewed specific

chunks within the full transcript and discussed it until the team reached a consensus.

Findings

Overall, the participants provided a range of responses regarding their MHK, shifts in

their perspectives since college matriculation, and their beliefs about how well their institution

met Black students' mental health needs. We identified four main themes from the data: (1) pre-

college experiences shape MHK, (2) college adjustment challenges as a precursor to seeking

treatment, (3) negative perceptions of college counseling services, and (4) community mental

health care. Below, we provide representative quotes from the participants to illustrate each of the themes. We use pseudonyms for all names and locations to maintain confidentiality.

Theme 1: Pre-College Experiences Shape MHK

Our first theme illustrated the level of MHK students possessed when they began college. Results indicated that participants arrived at college with varying levels of MHK. Among participants, 50% of students entered college with indistinct MHK, 16.7% possessed indirect MHK, 22.9% had direct MHK, and 10.4% possessed both.

We defined *indistinct MHK* as participants with limited to no exposure to MHK. We defined *indirect MHK* as participants who had experiences with someone with adverse psychological symptoms or psychological diagnoses or participants who acquired MHK through high school coursework or through pursuing information online, in books, and on social media. Lastly, we defined *direct MHK* as participants who engaged in mental health treatment, indicated past or present psychological symptoms, or received a psychological diagnosis.

Indistinct MHK

For some participants, mental health stigma within their families did not create space for conversations about mental health in the home environment. In addition, some participants had some exposure received at school through coursework but did not report experiencing mental health struggles themselves. When they entered college, these participants recognized some superficial mental health awareness. Overall, they lacked knowledge about essential components of mental health and how they tied into their overall well-being. Raven, a 2nd year African American student at the PWI, said,

> I knew that it could affect anyone, and that it wasn't really talked about in the Black
> community or many different minority communities, because it was just seen as being
> weak or not knowing how to take advantage of your situation.

Similarly, Jamal, a 2nd year African American student at the PWI, reflected,

> Growing up, we operated in a culture of "Suck it up," and type of "You will get over it"
> type of mentality and vibe. So, I feel like structurally, when it goes down the line,
> decades and decades, my family lynched, people weren't taught about mental health, so
> that it inevitably forced my whole household to never discuss mental health, growing up.

Raven and Jamal described how cultural stigma toward mental health and intergenerational trauma were barriers to accessing MHK within her home and community. Specifically, their quotes highlighted the messages they received that seeking out mental health treatment indicated weakness and that mental health challenges should be contended with privately. Despite Raven's awareness that mental health is a concern that can affect anyone, she lacked a comprehensive understanding of what mental health entails and how it affects an individual. Raven's and Jamal's experiences were representative of other students in the sample in that many participants reported experiencing mental health stigma within their family, faith, or home community.

Indirect MHK

Our study included participants with indirect MHK, typically gained from taking a psychology class in high school that covered psychological disorders and coping strategies. Others gained indirect knowledge about mental health from friends or family members who shared their experiences. Destinee, a 2nd year African American student at the MSI, stated,

> I don't want to say I know fairly a lot [about mental health] because I'm still learning, but I think my senior year of high school was where I feel like my mom finally felt comfortable expressing some of her mental health issues that she goes through, so that's when I started learning a little bit and researching for myself, and even now, I'm still learning and figuring out myself as well, and I think by my mom being able to confide in me a little bit has helped me learn what the struggle's like and how everybody is different.

Destinee had the opportunity to learn about mental health through the lens of her mother's struggles. In addition, her mother's disclosure served as an opportunity for Destinee to become more curious about her mental health and encouraged her to be more attuned to others' unique mental health struggles.

Direct MHK

Some students had multiple experiences that contributed to their MHK when they entered college compared to students from the indistinct and indirect categories. For instance, some of these students experienced significant psychological distress or lived with a diagnosable mental illness. Students with direct knowledge were more equipped to recognize psychological distress in themselves and others. In addition, some participants attended therapy or received mental health supports. Darryl, a 2nd year Ghanaian and African American student at the PWI, shared,

> I've been taking antidepressants since 9th grade, maybe 10th grade. So yeah, I was aware of it. My dad has bipolar disorder, and my mom feels depressed, and anxious, and stuff. We talked about it, and they have experience with it and understanding of mental illness. I've seen a therapist for a while. So yeah, I definitely was treating my depression before.

Due to Darryl's diagnosis of depression and having parents who lived with mental health issues, he had both direct and indirect experience with mental health. He emphasized the importance of

therapy and how having an affirming home environment provided a clear pathway to treatment and reduced shame around living with a mental health disorder. Darryl added,

> When I'm struggling with mental health, I'm most inclined to call my mom, mostly because she's understanding, and she's been through it, and she's around, she's in the house or whatever. I feel comfortable talking to her.

Darryl illustrated how his parents destigmatized mental health by openly discussing their mental health issues. Additionally, his mother provided steadfast support, which created a safe space for him to be honest with her about his struggles. Regardless of the level of MHK participants possessed at college entry, adjusting to college prompted many of them to seek out more MHK.

Theme 2: College Adjustment as Precursor to Seeking Treatment

Our second theme involved exploring whether students' perspectives on mental health shifted during college. We found that many of their perspectives shifted within the first year, often in response to significant emotional and physical symptoms of distress brought on by the college transition. Overall, their emotional distress combined general college stressors and stressors specific to Black students, such as racism and discrimination. For instance, Aaliyah, a 1st year African American student at the PWI, reflected,

> A thought that has crossed my mind so many times is, what if I'm actually not smart enough to go here, or I'm only here because I'm a Black woman? That is a thought that has crossed my mind way too many times. I guess, a lot of times, I'll push myself to get these grades just to prove that, yeah, I do deserve to be here.

Aaliyah detailed how she felt tokenized as one of the few Black women at her PWI. In addition, Aaliyah experienced stereotype threat, or the increased pressure to excel in academics, when she believed her performance was judged by others as representative of her race (Neal-Jackson,

2020). Although Aaliyah gained acceptance into her university and academically excelled, she felt like an intellectual fraud, and she struggled with anxiety and guilt. Aaliyah is a student that could have significantly benefited from counseling services to cope with the stress she experienced. However, she ultimately did not seek out campus counseling services. In the case of those who experienced mental health stigma before college, their psychological distress during college prompted them to reevaluate their upbringing's influences on mental health. Nemiya, a 1st year Congolese student at the MSI, shared,

> I remember a point in time in my life where I was about maybe 10, 11, 12 years old. And my sister was just kind of, I won't say disassociating from us, or something. And my mom was like, "Why? She's being very moody, she's being mean, she's been acting crazy or whatever." And it wasn't that. It wasn't that at all. Honestly, in my first-year of college, I didn't really deal with it. I was still just suppressing feelings and just emotions and stuff like that, kind of the same with second year except I ended up getting more physical symptoms, but it wasn't honestly until my third-year I started seeing the realities of life and just how hard college is, I was just feeling the system playing me and just feeling not good enough, and I don't know at that point I think that's just when I had a mental shift.

Nemiya witnessed her family minimize and dismiss her sister's mental health concerns challenges throughout her childhood. She noted how this early formative experience contributed to her difficulty with emotional expression as an emerging adult. Instead of holding space for her negative emotions, she suppressed her feelings, which became unstainable in her third year of college when she began experiencing somatic pain. Like Nemiya, somatic symptoms were often the catalyst for participants recognizing they struggled with their mental health and needed support. Many of the participants shifted towards more open curiosity about their mental health.

For some, this entailed tolerating the stigma associated with mental illness in their families, faith, or home communities. For instance, Jalen, a 4th year Nigerian student at the PWI, stated,

> My parents were aware that I sought counseling at first, but they kind of discouraged it, so I didn't tell them about the second time. So, they were under the impression that if I just tell myself that I won't have it, then I won't have it. And I believed that for a while but then I realized that that wasn't working, so I had to take steps on my own. I don't really talk to anyone. I guess the person I talk to the most is probably the clinician that I spoke to at CAPS. So, since entering college, my mental health has gone on a roller coaster, and I was able to acknowledge my mental health. So, that allowed me to become more knowledgeable of mental health as a topic, in the entirety. So today, I stand and speak to you, I am a mental health advocate, a positive mental health advocate, were coming into school, I never asked my friends, "Oh, how's your mental health?" or, "How are you mentally, physically, and spiritually?" but now that is a question that I ask daily to my best friends, my cousins, my parents, my siblings. So, my awareness of mental health has gone from maybe less than 10% to almost 95%, 100%, since college.

The college experience for Jalen was transformative in terms of his MHK and how he engaged with his peers. In college, his mental health fluctuated, and he finally overcame the discouraging messages he received from his parents about soliciting mental health support by seeking psychological support at CAPS. His role as an advocate for mental health began after he acknowledged its importance and went to therapy. To illustrate the shift in perspective on mental in college, Victor, a 3rd year African American student at the MSI shared,

> College has highlighted how important mental health is because I've seen people have a cloudy or rainy day just kind of turns them off and doesn't make them want to class.

Well, if you don't go to class, you're not getting the information. Not getting the

information, you're not going to do well on the exam. So mental health is very important,

and it's very fundamental to having success in college. Since I've been in college, it only

has heightened its importance.

Like Jalen and Victor, participants often discussed realizing that mental health was an essential

component of their general health and academic success. As a result, many tried to learn about

the mental health services on campus and encouraged their peers to adopt healthier mental health

practices (e.g., meditation, yoga, and sharing their feelings). However, even as students

recognized the need to seek out mental health supports, many encountered difficulties with the

quality of mental health services offered on their campus.

Theme 3: Negative Perceptions of College Counseling Services

The third theme of our study involved Black students' views on the effectiveness of

mental health services at their respective campuses. Prevalently represented were participants

who did not believe their institution adequately addressed Black students' mental health needs.

Also, they were unaware of any targeted efforts to do so. Consequently, they had a generally

negative perception of the psychological climate at their respective institutions. Nevertheless,

one-third of these participants reported engaging in counseling and psychological services via

individual therapy, group therapy, and/or psychological testing.

On the other hand, some participants had not sought counseling services at their

university. Thus, while some students' perceptions of the counseling service derived from direct

experiences, other students based their beliefs on reviews from peers regarding an apparent lack

of awareness about identity-based challenges and inadequate staffing of clinicians of color. For

instance, students named various reasons they opted away from using counseling center services,

such as their perception that the counseling center was overwhelming focused on pathology

rather than positive mental health supports. Some participants did not perceive the counseling

center as a culturally inclusive space, which contributed to feelings of marginalization since they

perceived the counseling center as a potentially harmful rather than helpful space on campus.

Across both institutions, a prominent concern reported was the provision of mental health

services tailored for White student experiences rather than addressing challenges specific to

Black students' experiences (e.g., microaggressions, social isolation, and stereotype threat).

Participants provided rich insight into the factors that shaped their negative perceptions of their

institutions. Terra, a 3rd year African American student at the PWI, stated,

> The counseling center is best equipped for White females probably, like White females,
>
> White males. I feel like if you're not that, it's not so quick to help. Specifically, if you're
>
> like Black or brown, I haven't heard anything positive coming from people in those
>
> communities. There are some who said, like this specific person is good. And I'm like,
>
> yeah, but I didn't get helped like all three times I went, and for me, it's more exhausting to
>
> go there and try to work through that than just doing it myself.

Terra's words suggested that she did not receive effective help when she sought out therapy. Her

excerpts highlighted that inadequate counseling experiences can deter students from continuing

individual therapy, and she indicated that this was true for many students of color on her campus.

Additionally, participants at both institutions echoed this viewpoint. For example, Skyler, a 4th

year Rwandan student at the MSI, reflected:

> When it comes to Black mental health, I don't think they do a very good job. I think, at
>
> times, they might try to be too inclusive. Too broad, too vague when it comes to certain
>
> things, and I feel like, in turn, that ends up hurting Black mental health. Yeah, I don't

think they do a very good job. I think that instead of addressing certain instances or

offering certain services to support Black mental health, I feel like they try to please

everyone and be very neutral and very passive. That can come off as being a little

dismissive at times. So that's what I mean when I say it's not very good. Sometimes you

can feel unheard or dismissed when your university doesn't address things in the way that

they should or as aggressively as that situation was. So that's what I mean by that.

Skyler underscored how generalized mental health initiatives at her university neglected to

recognize the challenges Black students faced compared to their White counterparts. The lack of

recognition left her feeling overlooked and skeptical that clinicians at the counseling center could

understand her experiences and provide adequate support. Accordingly, the counseling centers

reflected how these students perceived the broader campus racial climate concerning the lack of

support for Black students. Claire, a 4th year African American student at the PWI, shared:

From one to ten, I'd give the university like a four. Okay, it's basically a four because of

how everything in this school is centered around White people. So, when it comes to

Black mental health, especially Black women's mental health, there's a few clubs here

and there. But there's not a system of support that is centralized at this university. I just

feel like they do these things to put it on a poster of statistics and diversity, for diversity

stuff, but it's not really a qualitative improvement, or an actual investment into Black

women, Latino women, people of color in this school. There's not an investment into this

community. It's more of a statistic, a diversity fact, or a benefit that comes with having

those people around.

Claire's statements called into question her institution's inaction toward supporting the mental

health needs of Black students, despite their rhetoric around the importance of diversity. In

addition, she believed that the responsibility for providing support to Black students should not rely solely on student organizations. According to her, a centralized institutional support system centered on mental health for students of color could be a viable solution. In the absence of adequate mental health care through her universities' counseling services, she and several other students turned to community spaces on campus created by and for Black students.

Theme 4: Community Mental Health Care

While Black students might not have been utilizing the counseling centers, many participants used Black peer networks and organizations at the university as a primary means to access mental health resources. Furthermore, they relied on mentorship and culturally affirming emotional support from the Black administration and staff. Kiara, a 3rd year Afro-Caribbean student at the PWI, said,

> When we do have things that are like Black mental health or Black wellness, it's by Black organizations. The school again sees us as either a) angry people, b) people who don't believe in being a part of the school and want to self-segregate, or c) they see us as ungrateful. But I think it's just hard, they don't understand us. The fact that they don't even understand our history, they don't understand just like the significance of my PWI's lifestyle of slaves and how that has carried on until this day, which is racism. Like if they can't even understand racism, they're just not going to understand our health, and that all just carries with each other. If you can't understand us as people, then you're not going to understand our mind, and the school does not do a good job in either category.

Kiara's reflections revealed that she believed her institution had a hostile racial climate. As a result, Black students were deterred from campus counseling centers and instead relied on Black student organizations to help fill the gap and support Black students' wellness. Moreover, Kiara

noted that as long as her institution failed to recognize its participation in institutional racism and

anti-Blackness, it would continue to be unable to serve Black students who experienced racism at

the university. Her views are especially relevant given that Kiara's PWI has historical ties to the

enslavement of African Americans in the United States. Serenity, a 4th year Nigerian student at

the MSI, reflected,

> From what I've seen, I definitely can see that it's evolving, and I know that that starts with
>
> us first, like people of color. Literally, this past year, a lot of organizations have been
>
> implementing and hosting events or meetings that focus on mental health. They have
>
> people come speak, they offer resources, which they didn't do at all when I first came to
>
> college. It wasn't even a topic, but some people tried to make it a topic, but I feel like
>
> people are slowly trying to let people know that it's okay to not be okay and go seek help.

Serenity's statements indicated that Black student-led organizations at her MSI deliberately

shifted toward focusing on mental health. In this way, Black student organizations helped

normalize mental health, which reduced stigma. Additionally, these organizations rallied to find

culturally relevant speakers and resources that addressed the psychological challenges Black

students faced. Furthermore, Serenity's experience demonstrated how informal social structures

enhance Black students' MHK. Maurice, a 3rd year African American student at the PWI, said,

> I'm a part of a mental health initiative with a school dean who is a Black man, and it's
>
> cool. It's in a small group of Black men at the university, and we have been doing zoom
>
> meetings now because of obviously the displacement of the pandemic. I feel almost
>
> privileged to be there because the group is so small. I feel like I'm gaining access to
>
> something that should be widely accessible to Black men all over the university.

Participants at both institutions shared stories in which Black faculty provided emotional support and mentoring related to navigating challenging situations at the university. Maurice was able to commune with others who shared aspects of his intersectional identities (i.e., race and gender) in a cherished space created by a Black man. He also highlighted the importance of having access to this virtual support group during the covid-19 pandemic. Maurice expressed both appreciation and disappointment that access to the support group was not more widely accessible to all Black men at his institution.

Many participants highlighted the importance of mental health support specific to their racial and gender identities. When asked, what it would look like for her MSI to care for Black women's mental health, Zoe, a 2nd year Sierra Leonean student at the MSI, said,

> Like get-togethers or how we had the Being Black in America or UPC, like events for Black women. But I could see that being controversial. I can see that being an issue because some people would be in their feelings about it. But like networking or talking about natural hair or talking about the problems that Black women face. But I don't see that happening because other races would get in their feelings about it.

Zoe's response pointed to a desire for more spaces for Black women and the potential benefit of these identity-focused spaces to develop MHK. However, Zoe believed that having spaces for Black women would spur opposition from non-Black students. Zoe's doubt about the possibilities of these spaces further reflected the sentiment that Black women's mental health received less support than White students at the university. Colleges have a responsibility to fix these perceptions by tangibly supporting Black students, like Maurice and Zoe, with culturally specific mental health supports, to ensure student success and well-being.

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine Black college students' shifts in mental health knowledge during college, mainly focusing on how that related to their experiences navigating mental health supports. Prior research indicates that: Black college students contend with racism, discrimination, and microaggressions which negatively affect their mental health (Kelly et al., 2018; Shahid et al., 2018); MHK is essential for students to sustain their emotional health (Jorm, 2012); and pervasive mental health stigma can diminish MHK and hamper help-seeking behaviors (DeFreitas et al., 2018). Research also suggests that Black students often encounter racial and cultural insensitivity from their university's counseling and psychological services, contributing to the underutilization of campus resources (Burkett, 2017; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2016). Our study builds on prior literature by providing valuable insights about how Black college students' MHK shifts during college, how they navigate ecological stressors and barriers to access, and how universities can leverage culturally responsive communities to ensure their psychological well-being. Next, we briefly discuss how the findings expand the growing body of literature on Black college students' MHK, services, and well-being. Finally, we present implications for college counselors and higher education administrators.

Mental Health Stressors and College Adjustment among Black Students

Adjusting to college can be stressful, particularly for students from underrepresented and historically excluded groups (Mushonga, 2020). New academic standards, faculty relationships, forming friendships, financial demands, and distance from family are just a few common stress points (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Harper & Newman, 2016; Hurd et al., 2016; Keels, 2019). In addition, it is well-documented that Black college students experience unique race-related stressors in college, including stereotype threat, imposter feelings, and various forms of

interpersonal discrimination (Bernard, 2017; Karkouti, 2016; Keels, 2019; McClain et al., 2015). Similarly, we found that academic demands, forming friendships, and their transition-related psychological distress resulted in physiological manifestations or somatic symptoms. Notably, participants mentioned that both adverse experiences during college and before college negatively affected their mental well-being. These findings highlight how the adjustment to college is multifaceted for Black college students.

Student Perceptions of University Mental Health Services

Consistent with prior literature (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021; Masuda et al., 2012; Taylor & Kuo, 2019), our results suggest that students perceived their institutional mental health services to be unsupportive in that they felt the services inadequately met Black students' needs. Students felt their university made rhetoric around the importance of diversity yet did not support Black students through its counseling center's resources. For example, the students want more guidance around positive mental support, not just pathology (Mushonga, 2020). They also wanted more culturally competent counselors and more events tailored to Black students and their experiences. Black students face different realities from their counterparts (Griffith, 2019; Shahid et al., 2018), making it necessary to provide support beyond the standard model of university counseling services, which does require clinicians to address issues related to race and institutional racism explicitly. This university-sanctioned embrace of colorblind ideology hiding behind the term "diversity" centers on Whiteness, allows these hard conversations not to occur, and leaves the current systems intact (Arday, 2018).

In addition, the students' responses highlighted the various relational and organizational contexts that provided their early personal understandings of mental health, including

experiences with peers, family members, and formal educational settings. While mental health education in formal programs was less common for students in the sample, those who did participate in such programs received a significant degree of technical MHK, including information on possible manifestations of mental illness and knowledge about diagnostic criteria. However, more prevalently represented in our sample were participants who garnered MHK through interpersonal relationships and some degree of personal experience, which gave those participants lived experiences that increased their MHK. While both direct and indirect experiences with mental health conditions teach a person that mental health exists, universities must foster the growth of MHK that Black college students have at the beginning of their collegiate experience.

The Importance of Campus Community Care

Our findings indicate that Black organizations and administration are leading efforts to meet Black students' psychological needs. While there is a lack of research on the impact of college peer organizations, research suggests that peer organizations that focus on MHK decrease stigma and positively predict help-seeking behaviors (Songtag-Padilla et al., 2018; Volpe, 2021). Moreover, the findings highlighted how non-traditional spaces (e.g., clubs, peer support groups, and Black student events) could serve as powerful vehicles for building MHK and accessing emotional support resources (Grier-Reed, 2013). The study found that some students do not go to the university counseling services but instead seek non-traditional spaces that they feel are culturally relevant and meet the needs of Black students, at times providing the benefit of being tailored to Black women or Black men. Moreover, these initiatives led by Black students and Black administrators help educate students, provide support, and reduce the stigma around Black mental health. Our findings that students coped by seeking out Black professors

and administration for natural mentorship and mental health support aligned with previous literature (Griffith et al., 2019; Hurd & Sellers, 2013). Mentorship relationships were vital for many participants who leaned on them to provide advice and wisdom about navigating college and life.

Consistent among students at both institutions was the discussion of *space* and how institutions deliberately create *space* to address mental health concerns or receive explicit mental health-related education, whether formal or informal. This finding reveals nuances in the current discussion about mental health stigma by highlighting the potential of peers, family, and formal courses or seminars to improve MHK among Black students beyond what they receive prior to beginning college. Our data encourage a pivot away from the assertion that mental health stigma is a deterrent to accessing mental health services among Black college students. Instead, it motivates us to shift the discourse toward how mental health stigma limits discussion in ways that negatively influence Black college students' MHK and self-efficacy for seeking mental health services, even when in need. Universities must-see peer networks, family partnerships, and supplemental programming as opportunities to infuse mental health education. In addition, they often are a site of support seeking among Black college students.

Student peer groups might play an essential role in shaping a supportive climate for mental health issues by changing how students view and understand mental health issues (Grier-Reed, 2013). If Black students feel that the mental health climate on their college campus is more favorable, they may be more likely to seek treatment for their mental health problems. However, these non-traditional spaces are going beyond the scope of their student organization and the requirements within the administration's job description to help students. In addition, they are more stretched and less resourced than their counterparts in traditional spaces. The present study

provides novel insight into Black students' MHK and how it might affect help-seeking behaviors. In addition, the findings illuminate how peer networks and mentorship provide integral mental health support for Black students.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Despite the strengths of this study, there we some limitations. Researchers did not provide an operational definition of mental health for participants during the interview. As a result, some participants discussed their knowledge of psychopathology and talked less about the other essential mental health components, such as preventive care and positive mental supports related to optimal psychological functioning. In addition, while a strength of the current study is that we considered MHK among Black students at two different institutions, our findings may not accurately capture the campus experiences of Black students at other types of institutions. Moreover, MSI is a broad term that encompasses many types of universities, such as HBCUs and institutions that gain MSI status based on enrollment demographics at their institution (Center for Minority Serving Institutions, 2015). However, some MSIs still have a small population of Black students. For instance, at the MSI included in this study, just 12.6% of their students were Black, compared to HBCUs, which often have a much higher proportion of Black students. Given that Black students' experiences and mental health processes look categorically different across universities (Mills, 2019), this is an important area for future study.

Our study demonstrates that Black college students have varying MHK levels that develop and shift their perspective toward mental health care over time. However, we do not know precisely when and how the shifts occur. Therefore, it might be essential to evaluate pre-college experiences amongst Black high school students to understand how they develop MHK. Additionally, consider how Black families discuss mental health in the home and how we might

encourage normative conversations about mental health early on in childhood. Moreover, colleges may consider disseminating intake measures to first-year college students to understand their current level of MHK to enable universities to offer strategic wellness services at time points that address Black students' environmental stressors. (e.g., living away from home test anxiety, roommate negations, post-graduation plans).

Furthermore, where our participants noted concerns about their counseling staff's ability to respond to race-related sources of distress (cultural responsiveness), universities must ensure that their mental health providers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support Black students through experiences with racism interpersonal discrimination. Successful methods for supporting Black students on campus include creating student affinity housing (Volpe, 2021), providing opportunities for students to form natural mentorships with Black faculty (Griffith, 2019), implementing college transition programming (Cole et al., 2020), promoting African American student networks (Grier-Reed, 2013), and forming race and gender-based counseling groups (Leath & Chavous, 2018).

Conclusions

During the college transition, Black students bring a wide range of experiences and knowledge that shapes their perspectives on mental health. In general, our findings highlight Black students' eagerness to gain MHK and invest in mental health supports, challenging the notion that Black students are resistant to therapy due to mental health stigma. Nevertheless, our study also highlights the importance of providing positive mental health support for Black students in counseling centers and within campus community spaces that offer other academic and social programming forms. Finally, the students' narratives suggest that one way to encourage mental health service utilization among Black students may be to focus less on

pathology and more on culturally relevant coping skills and wellness practices that prevent

psychological distress and mental illness.

References

Alang, S. M. (2019). Mental health care among Blacks in America: Confronting racism and constructing solutions. *Health Services Research*, *54*(2), 346-355.

Anderson, M. (2018). Barriers to the utilization of mental health services on college campuses by African American students. *McNair Scholars Research Journal, 11*(1), 1-12.

Anderson, R. E., McKenny, M., Mitchell, A., Koku, L., & Stevenson, H. C. (2018). Embracing racial stress and trauma: Preliminary feasibility and coping responses of a racial socialization intervention. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *44*(1), 25–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798417732930

Anglin, D. M., & Wade, J. C. (2007). Racial socialization, racial identity, and Black students' adjustment to college. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *13*(3), 207–215. https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.13.3.207

Arday, J. (2018). Understanding mental health: What are the issues for Black and ethnic minority students at university? *Social Sciences*, *7*(10), 196. http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100196

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, *55*(5), 469.

Allen, W. R. (1992). The color of success: African American college student outcomes at predominantly White and historically Black public colleges and universities. *Harvard Educational Review, 62*, 26 – 45. http://dx.doi.org/10.17763/haer.62.1.wv5627665007v701

Barry, A. E., Jackson, Z., Watkins, D. C., Goodwill, J. R., & Hunte, H. E. (2017). Alcohol use and mental health conditions among Black college males: Do those attending

postsecondary minority institutions fare better than those at primarily White institutions? *American Journal of Men's Health*, *11*(4), 962-968.

Bell, C. C., Jackson, W. M., & Bell, B. H. (2015). Misdiagnosis of African-Americans with psychiatric issues–part I. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, *107*(3), 25-34.

Bernard, D., Lige, Q., Willis, H., Sosoo, E., & Neblett, E. (2017). Imposter phenomenon and mental health: The influence of racial discrimination and gender. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 64*(2), 155–166. doi:10.1037/cou0000197

Boyraz, G., Horne, S. G., Owens, A. C., & Armstrong, A. P. (2016). Depressive symptomatology and college persistence among African American college students. *The Journal of General Psychology*, *143*(2), 144-160.

Bradford, A. D. J. H. (2022, February). *Therapy for Black girls*. Therapy For Black Girls. Retrieved February 24, 2022, from https://therapyforBlackgirls.com/

Bridges, L. S., Sharma, M., Lee, J. H. S., Bennett, R., Buxbaum, S. G., & Reese-Smith, J. (2018). Using the precede-precede model for an online peer-to-peer suicide prevention and awareness for depression (SPAD) intervention among African American college students: Experimental study. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, *8*(1), 15.

Brooms, D. R. (2018). 'Building us up': Supporting Black male college students in a Black male initiative program. *Critical Sociology*, *44*(1), 141-155.

Brondolo E., Brady N., Thompson S., Tobin J.N., Cassells A., Sweeney M. (2008) Perceived racism and negative affect: Analyses of trait and state measures of affect in a community sample. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 27(2), 150-173.

Burkett, C. A. (2017). Obstructed use: Reconceptualizing the mental health (help-seeking) experiences of Black Americans. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *43*(8), 813–835. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798417691381

Cabral, R. R., & Smith, T. B. (2011). Racial/ethnic matching of clients and therapists in mental health services: A meta-analytic review of preferences, perceptions, and outcomes. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58*(4), 537–554. doi:10.1037/a0025266

Center for Collegiate Mental Health. (2022, February). *2021 annual report* (Publication No. STA 15-108). State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University.

Center for Minority Serving Institutions (2015). *On their own terms: Two-year minority serving institutions*. Philadelphia, PA. Retrieved October 20, 2021, from https://cmsi.gse.upenn.edu/content/reports

Chavous, T. M., Richardson, B. L., Webb, F. R., Fonseca-Bolorin, G., & Leath, S. (2018). Shifting contexts and shifting identities: Campus race-related experiences, racial identity, and academic motivation among Black students during the transition to college. *Race and Social Problems*, *10*(1), 1-18.

Cheng, H. L., Wang, C., McDermott, R. C., Kridel, M., & Rislin, J. L. (2018). Self-stigma, mental health literacy, and attitudes toward seeking psychological help. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *96*(1), 64-74.

Chiang, L., Hunter, C. D., & Yeh, C. J. (2004). Coping attitudes, sources, and practices among Black and Latino college students. *Adolescence, 39*, 793– 815.

Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006). *Qualitative research guidelines project* (n.d.). Retrieved November 21, 2022, from http://www.qualres.org/

Cokley, K., McClain, S., Enciso, A., & Martinez, M. (2013). An examination of the impact of minority status stress and impostor feelings on the mental health of diverse ethnic minority college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *41*(2), 82-95.

Cokley, K., Hall-Clark, B., & Hicks, D. (2011). Ethnic minority-majority status and mental health: The mediating role of perceived discrimination. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, *33*(3), 243-263.

Corbin, N. A., Smith, W. A., & Garcia, J. R. (2018). Trapped between justified anger and being the strong Black woman: Black college women coping with racial battle fatigue at historically and predominantly White institutions. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *31*(7), 626–643. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1468045

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*, 1241–1299.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach*. Sage publications.

Dean, K. E., Long, A. C., Matthews, R. A., & Buckner, J. D. (2018). Willingness to seek treatment among Black students with anxiety or depression: the synergistic effect of sociocultural factors with symptom severity and intolerance of uncertainty. *Behavior therapy*, *49*(5), 691-701.

DeFreitas, S. C., Crone, T., DeLeon, M., & Ajayi, A. (2018). Perceived and personal mental health stigma in Latino and African American college students. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *6*, 49.

Flores, S. M., & Park, T. J. (2015). The effect of enrolling in a minority serving institution for

    Black and Hispanic students in Texas. *Research in Higher Education, 56*, 247–276.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11162-0149342-y

Francis, D.B (2021). "Twitter is really therapeutic at times": Examination of Black men's

    Twitter conversations following hip-hop artist Kid Cudi's depression disclosure. *Health*

    Communication, 36(4), 448-456. DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2019.1700436

Gary, F. A. (2005). Stigma: Barrier to mental health care among ethnic minorities. *Issues in*

    Mental Health Nursing, 26, 979–999. http://dx.doi.org/101080/01612840500280638

Goodwill, J. R., Watkins, D. C., Johnson, N. C., & Allen, J. O. (2018). An exploratory study of

    stress and coping among Black college men. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*,

    88(5), 538.

Grier-Reed, T. (2013). The African American Student Network: An informal networking group

    as a therapeutic intervention for Black college students on a predominantly White

    campus. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *39*(2), 169–184.

Griffith, A. N., Hurd, N. M., & Hussain, S. B. (2019). "I didn't come to school for this": A

    qualitative examination of experiences with race-related stressors and coping responses

    among Black students attending a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Adolescent*

    Research, *34*(2), 115-139.

Hadlaczky, G., Hökby, S., Mkrtchian, A., Carli, V., & Wasserman, D. (2014). Mental health first

    aid is an effective public health intervention for improving knowledge, attitudes, and

    behaviour: A meta-analysis. *International Review of Psychiatry*, *26*(4), 467-475.

Harper, S. R., & Newman, C. B. (2016). Surprise, sensemaking, and success in the first college

    year: Black undergraduate men's academic adjustment experiences. *Teachers College*

Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education, *118*(6), 1–30.

https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811611800609

Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & Williams, E. N. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual

qualitative research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 25*, 517–572. https://doi.org/

10.1177/0011000097254001

Hill, C. E. (Ed.). (2012). *Consensual qualitative research: A practical resource for investigating

social science phenomena*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Hurd, N. M., & Sellers, R. M. (2013). Black adolescents' relationships with natural mentors:

Associations with academic engagement via social and emotional development. *Cultural

Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 19*, 76-85. doi:10.1037/a0031095

Hurd, N. M., Tan, J. S., & Loeb, E. L. (2016). Natural mentoring relationships and the

adjustment to college among underrepresented students. *American Journal of Community

Psychology*, *57*(3–4), 330–341. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12059

Hurtado, S. (1992). The campus racial climate: Contexts of conflict. *The Journal of Higher

Education 63*(5), 539-569.

Hypolite, L. I. (2020). People, place, and connections: Black cultural center staff as facilitators of

social capital. *Journal of Black Studies*, *51*(1), 37-59.

Jochman, J. C., Cheadle, J. E., Goosby, B. J., Tomaso, C., Kozikowski, C., & Nelson, T. (2019).

Mental health outcomes of discrimination among college students on a predominately

White campus: A prospective study. *Socius*, 5, 1-16.

Jones, M. K., & Pritchett-Johnson, B. (2018). "Invincible Black women": Group therapy for

Black college women. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, *43*(4), 349-375.

Jorm, A. F., Korten, A. E., Jacomb, P. A., Christensen, H., Rodgers, B., & Pollitt, P. (1997). "Mental health literacy": A survey of the public's ability to recognise mental disorders and their beliefs about the effectiveness of treatment. *Medical Journal of Australia*, *166*(4), 182-186.

Jorm, A. F. (2012). Mental health literacy: Empowering the community to take action for better mental health. *American Psychologist*, *67*(3), 231.

Kam, B., Mendoza, H. & Masuda, A. (2019) Mental health help-seeking experience and attitudes in Latina/o American, Asian American, Black American, and White American college students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, *41*, 492–508. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-018-9365-8.

Karkouti, I. M. (2016). Black students' educational experiences in predominantly White universities: A review of the related literature. *College Student Journal*, *50*(1), 59-70.

Keels, M. (2019). *Campus counterspaces: Black and Latinx students' search for community at historically White universities*. Cornell University Press.

Keyes, C. L. (2010). The next steps in the promotion and protection of positive mental health. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research*, *42*(3), 17–28.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 257–277). Sage.

Lee, J. A., & Barnes, A. R. (2015). Predominately White institutions: Transition programs to address academic underpreparedness and experiences of discrimination. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, *1*(4), 401.

Li, A. Y., Gándara, D., & Assalone, A. (2018). Equity or disparity: Do performance funding

    policies disadvantage 2-year minority-serving institutions? *Community College Review*,

    46(3), 288-315.

Luna, N., & MacMillan, T. (2015). The relationship between spirituality and depressive

    symptom severity, psychosocial functioning impairment, and quality of life: Examining

    the impact of age, gender, and ethnic differences. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*,

    18(6), 513–525. DOI: 10.1080/13674676.2015

Masuda, A., Anderson, P. L., & Edmonds, J. (2012). Help-seeking attitudes, mental health

    stigma, and self-concealment among African American college students. *Journal of Black*

    Studies, *43*(7), 773-786.

McClain, S., Beasley, S. T., Jones, B., Awosogba, O., Jackson, S., & Cokley, K. (2016). An

    examination of the impact of racial and ethnic identity, impostor feelings, and minority

    status stress on the mental health of Black college students. *Journal of Multicultural*

    Counseling and Development, *44*(2), 101-117.

Mills, K. J. (2020). "It's systemic": Environmental racial microaggressions experienced by Black

    undergraduates at a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Diversity in Higher*

    Education, *13*(1), 44.

Miles, R., Rabin, L., Krishnan, A., Grandoit, E., & Kloskowski, K. (2020). Mental health literacy

    in a diverse sample of undergraduate students: Demographic, psychological, and

    academic correlates. *BMC Public Health*, *20*(1), 1-13.

Mushonga, D. R. (2021). The glass is half full: The need to promote positive mental health in

    Black college students. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, *35*(4), 313-326.

Nami, Y., Nami, M. S., & Eishani, K. A. (2014). The students' mental health status. Procedia: *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *114*, 840–844.

Neal-Jackson, A. (2020). " Well, what did you expect?": Black women facing stereotype threat in collaborative academic spaces at a predominantly White institution. *Journal of College Student Development*, *61*(3), 317-332.

Patton, L., Bridges, B., & Flowers, L. (2011). Effects of Greek affiliation on African American students' engagement: Differences by college racial composition. *College Student Affairs Journal, 29*, 113–123.

Potvin-Boucher, J., Szumilas, M., Sheikh, T., & Kutcher, S. (2010). Transitions: A mental health literacy program for postsecondary students. *Journal of College Student Development*, *51*(6), 723-727.

Quayee S.J., Shamika N.K., Carter K.D., Okello W.K., Allen C. (2020). Why can't I just chill?": The visceral nature of racial battle fatigue. *Journal of College Student Development, 61* (5), 609–623. doi:10.1353/csd.2020.0058.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2000). Data management and analysis methods. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, *2*, 769-802.

Shahid, N. N., Nelson, T., & Cardemil, E. V. (2018). Lift every voice: Exploring the stressors and coping mechanisms of Black college women attending predominantly White institutions. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *44*(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798417732415

Sontag-Padilla, L., Dunbar, M. S., Ye, F., Kase, C., Fein, R., Abelson, S., & Stein, B. D. (2018). Strengthening college students' mental health knowledge, awareness, and helping

behaviors: The impact of active minds, a peer mental health organization. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *57*(7), 500-507.

Taylor, R. E., & Kuo, B. C. (2019). Black American psychological help-seeking intention: An integrated literature review with recommendations for clinical practice. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, *29*(4), 325.

Torres-Harding, S., Torres, L., & Yeo, E. (2020). Depression and perceived stress as mediators between racial microaggressions and somatic symptoms in college students of color. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *90*(1), 125.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau. (2018, October 15). *Current population survey*. Retrieved October 5, 2021, from https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html

Watkins, D. C., Hunt, J. B., & Eisenberg, D. (2012). Increased demand for mental health services on college campuses: Perspectives from administrators. *Qualitative Social Work, 11*, 319-337.

West, L. M., Donovan, R. A., & Daniel, A. R. (2016). The price of strength: Black college women's perspectives on the strong Black woman stereotype. *Women & Therapy*, *39*(3-4), 390-412.

Winkle-Wagner, R., Kelly, B. T., Luedke, C. L., & Reavis, T. B. (2019). Authentically me: Examining expectations that are placed upon Black women in college. *American Educational Research Journal*, *56*(2), 407–443. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218798326

PAPER 2

"What's in My Coping Toolbox?": An Exploratory Study of Black College Students' Coping

Flexibility

Paris J. Ball, M.Ed.

School of Education and Human Development

University of Virginia

Seanna Leath, Ph.D.

Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences

Washington University St. Louis

Author Note

"Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably throughout the paper. I chose to capitalize "Black" and "White" to reflect that I am discussing a group of people and being consistent with the capitalization of "European American" and "African American."

Abstract

Black students in college face general and racial stressors that can negatively affect their overall psychological well-being. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how Black students apply various coping strategies in relation to their stress-related experiences and their university context. Additionally, we know little about which strategies these students deem as adaptive or maladaptive based on how well it mitigates their stress response. The present qualitative study draws on semi-structured interview data with 48 Black college students (ages 18-22) across two universities to explore the different coping skills Black students used for general and race-related stressors. We identified four main themes from the data: (1) emotion-focused coping (religion & spirituality, venting & instrumental support, yoga and meditation, physical activity, journaling, humor, positive reframing, & acceptance) (2) avoidant coping (substance use, behavioral and mental disengagement), (3) problem-focused coping, and (4) adaptive, variable, and maladaptive coping mechanisms. The findings contribute to the literature on Black college students' coping flexibility and the extent to which participants were able to combine different coping strategies to manage general and race-related stressors.

Keywords: Black college students, higher education, race-related stress, coping flexibility, emotion-regulation, wellness

"What's in My Coping Toolbox?": An Exploratory Study of Black College Students'

Coping Flexibility

During Nia's second year at a predominantly White institution, her White professor asked her to stay after class to discuss Walt Whitman, a self-documented racist who called African Americans "baboons" and questioned their place in American society (Porter, 2019). The professor said, "I am uncomfortable about some of Whitman's remarks about race. Can you suggest anything for me?" Nia was unsure of how to respond. In addition, she was bewildered when her professor failed to address Walt Whitman's racist views in class. Exasperated, she wondered, "Why did you talk to me but refuse to address any of the problems?" The encounter caused Nia significant stress and anxiety as she pondered whether this interaction would affect her grade and relationship with her professor. Afterward, Nia went to her Black friends for support and wrote poems to express her feelings. Nevertheless, she was still confused and distressed. Finally, she explained, "I can't believe he said this, and he didn't do anything. Now, I have to be the one to cry and no one else." The professor singled Nia out because of her racial background and asked for her advice on how to reconcile his respect for a celebrated poet with the poet's racist views. Still, he did not consider Whitman's racist beliefs necessary to address in class, and placed undue responsibility on Nia, as a student, to help him improve his pedagogical practices. Nia's experience illustrates a prime example of the additional race-related stressors that Black students may experience in university contexts.

According to researchers, race-related stress is a unique form of chronic stress that Black college students experience associated with their ethnic and racial background, also referred to as minority status stress (Cokley et al., 2013; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Griffith et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020). In addition, several other factors contribute to Black undergraduate students' stress,

including academic demands, financial strain, and social challenges (Roming & Howard, 2019). Therefore, college can be stressful and challenging for Black students as they learn to manage both general and race-related stressors. Consequently, it is crucial to understand how Black college students adjust to college and maintain their mental health through various coping behaviors and skills. A significant amount of research has focused specifically on the ways in which Black undergraduate students cope with stress (Grier-Reed; 2010; Griffith et al., 2019; Hurd et al., 2014; Kilgore et al., 2020; Marshburn and Campos, 2022). For example, Banks et al. (2022) found that Black college women who were prompted to engage in coping exercises in response to racial microaggressions reported less cognitive depletion than participants who waited to cope. In addition, Jones et al. (2021) study findings demonstrated that social support mediated the association between gendered racism and depression. Moreover, Morrison & Hopkins's (2019) results suggested that African American culture may serve as a buffer to possible suicidal behavior in African American women. Finally, Huang et al. (2022) indicated that Black college students' emotional well-being positively predicted self-care coping strategies, feelings of being in control in life, and social connectedness.

Despite this growing literature on Black college students' coping processes, fewer studies focus on Black students' coping flexibility (Mischel & Shoda, 2000). Coping flexibility is the ability to discontinue an ineffective coping strategy and produce and implement an alternative coping strategy (Kato, 2015). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in discovering the extent to which individuals can combine different coping strategies. For example, individuals with a flexible coping style adapt their strategy readily as their situation changes (Freire et al., 2020). Furthermore, people who perceive their coping repertoire as containing numerous helpful

strategies (rather than a small number) may experience higher levels of psychological adjustment (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). In the current study, we add to the stress and coping literature by exploring Black college students coping flexibility. In addition, we examine students' perspectives on whether the strategies they employ to manage stress, such as taking a nap or writing poetry, are adaptive or maladaptive. Past studies describe coping strategies as inherently "adaptive" (healthy and useful) or "maladaptive" (unhealthy or harmful) based on previous literature or researchers' conclusions (Javed & Parveen, 2021; Roming & Howard, 2019). Coping mechanisms can be influenced by various environmental factors, including social, cultural, familial, and situational contexts. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, the present study considers how a student's environment plays a significant role in shaping their coping mechanisms and determining whether they are adaptive or maladaptive.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

In the current study, we utilize Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) Transnational Theory of Stress to examine Black college students' stress and coping processes. Appraisal refers to the process by which individuals continuously evaluate their relationship with the external environment and its implications for their well-being (Lazarus, 1999). Individuals' appraisals of stressors influence their coping strategies, which affect their outcomes. Therefore, coping strategies (such as emotion-focused or problem-focused) may have differential effects on the psychological outcomes of stress (Gloria et al., 2017). This theory emphasizes the distinction between primary and secondary appraisals, based on the sources of information used in each evaluative process (Khronee, 2002). *During a primary appraisal, one evaluates whether external events correspond to one's values, goals, beliefs about self and the world, and situational*

intentions. The threat of external events to these critical characteristics of well-being creates stress. The primary appraisal consists of three main components: the relevance of the goal, the congruence of the goal, and the type of ego development (Lazarus, 1999). *In secondary appraisal, evaluative processes assess stress-coping or stress-management resources.* As part of secondary appraisal, individuals place blame and credit for outcomes based on their judgments of who or what is responsible (Smith & Kirby, 2011). There is, however, no sequential or independent process involved in appraisal. Instead, there is a reciprocal relationship between primary and secondary appraisals (Smith & Kirby, 2011). Therefore, recognizing how stress, appraisal, and coping interact is crucial to understanding how college students cope with challenges along their educational journeys.

Coping Processes

In Lazarus and Folkman's (1984, p. 141) definition, coping is defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person." In essence, coping attempts to reduce or overcome stressful experiences and their consequences through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies (Aldwin & Yancura, 2011). Coping is a method of maintaining psychological adaptation during stress to stabilize oneself (Javeed & Parveen, 2021). Researchers distinguish between three types of coping mechanisms: problem-focused coping (managing or changing the source of stress), avoidant or passive coping (denying or minimizing a problem), and emotion-focused coping (regulating stressful events) (Billings & Moos, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014). Brown & Nicssio (1987) distinguished between active and avoidant coping as an alternative classification of coping. A problem-focused coping approach is considered more adaptive and involves addressing stressors head-on (Nielsen

& Knardahl, 2014). Avoidant coping is often considered a maladaptive strategy because it includes negative self-targeting and avoidance behaviors (Wood & Bhatnagar, 2015). Emotion-focused coping is the ability to respond to the ongoing demands of experience with the range of emotions in a socially tolerable manner. An emotion-focused coping approach is generally more adaptive when dealing with uncontrollable stressors, but it tends to be maladaptive when the stressor is controllable (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014).

In addition, scholars have noted that coping can have adaptive and maladaptive dimensions (Mortiz, 2016; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014), and how a person copes with stress can significantly impact their quality of life (Mekawi et al., 2022). Adaptive coping refers to mechanisms that benefit or positively affect the lives of those who use them. For example, Lewis et al. (2013) identified five distinct adaptive coping mechanisms that Black college women used to cope with race-related stress: two forms of resistance coping (active strategies that incorporated both cognitive and behavioral ways to deal with the situation), one collective coping mechanism (relying on one's social support network and group-centered activities as a way of coping), and two self-protective methods (strategies used to minimize the stressful cumulative effect of experiencing gendered racial microaggressions over a period of times). Additionally, Hurd et al. (2014) found that it was adaptive for Black students to receive guidance from natural mentors (e.g., deans and professors) to manage the stress of navigating college. Positive racial identity beliefs, expressing feelings in a safe space, and seeking social support can also act as adaptive coping strategies for Black students experiencing academic stress (Brondolo, 2009; Renk & Smith, 2007; Spades et al., 2020).

Furthermore, researchers suggest that adaptive coping mechanisms are associated with reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety and may improve an individual's health and

quality of life (Roming & Howard, 2019). According to Kilgore et al. (2020), writing can be a valuable tool for Black college women to cope with microaggressions. Specifically, this study identified styles of writing Black women engaged in to cope, such as poetry and short stories. In addition, Black women found comfort in the writing of other Black women, such as Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde, when coping with gendered racism (Kilgore et al., 2020). Writing was considered an adaptive coping tool because it provided a creative outlet for Black women to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences safely and privately. It allowed them to articulate their emotions, reflect on their experiences, and make sense of their identity within the context of their race and gender.

In contrast, maladaptive coping refers to mechanisms that are not helpful for psychological functioning or lead to adverse outcomes (Javed & Parveen, 2021). Generally speaking, individuals tend to us maladaptive coping methods in attempts to remove or alleviate stressors in ways that can lead to suppression of feelings (e.g., social withdrawal and self-criticism), physiological consequences (e.g., high blood pressure), and feelings of isolation (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020). Maladaptive coping mechanisms include substance abuse, overeating, and other behaviors that potentially increase stress and the likelihood of mental health difficulties (Javed & Parveen, 2021). For instance, researchers suggest that a Black college student's insufficient coping with chronic stress may lead to increased substance use (Blume et al., 2012) and greater severity of mental health issues (Greer & Cavalhieri, 2019).

Despite using terms such as "adaptive" and "maladaptive," Lazarus & Folkman (1984) maintain that coping efforts should not be confused with outcomes. Fundamentally, no coping mechanism is inherently related to adaptive outcomes. In addition, some strategies may be effective in the short run but counterproductive if used persistently over time. Instead, every

form of coping has the potential to be maladaptive or adaptive under certain circumstances. For instance, Bridges et al. (2011) found that Black men (ages 18-24) avoided close interactions with White students and school officials and disengaged emotionally during conversations, which is classified as an avoidant coping style. Although researchers often classify avoidant coping as maladaptive, Bridges et al. (2011) study highlighted a circumstance in which it may prove beneficial for Black students to cope in an avoidant manner. Accordingly, this study draws attention to the importance of coping flexibility and race-related coping among Black college students.

Race-Related Coping among Black College Students

There is an established body of qualitative research on how Black students experience racism and discrimination on campus and how students manage the accompanying stress (Corbin et al., 2018; Goodwill et al., 2018; Grier-Reed; 2010; Griffith et al., 2019; Marshburn & Campos, 2022; McGee, 2016; Moore et al., 2003; Sun, 2021; Spates et al., 2019; Volpe et al., 2021). For instance, Hoggard et al. (2012) explored how Black students appraise and use different coping strategies for race-related stress versus general stressors. The results of the study revealed that Black students appraise racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events. In addition, participants used fewer problem-solving coping strategies and more ruminative and avoidant coping strategies in racially stressful events compared with nonracially stressful events (Hoggard et al., 2012). This study's finding suggests that different types of stress may require different coping strategies. Therefore, our study aimed to consider how different types of stressors affected Black students coping approaches.

A review of current research on race-related coping by Jones et al. (2020) discusses accumulating evidence that race-related coping involves approach-oriented behaviors (i.e., acts

of collectivism, intergroup support, and civic engagement) to facilitate the coping process. The

effectiveness of coping strategies for deterring racial discrimination may vary by the context

where it occurs (e.g., in class or on campus), which emphasizes how important it is to

acknowledge the environmental context when employing specific coping strategies. However,

there are mixed findings in the research literature about the degree to which active (e.g., doing

something about discrimination or talking to others) and passive (e.g., accepting discrimination

or keeping it to oneself) race-based coping styles are differentially associated with psychological

outcomes and whether they buffer the effect of racial discrimination on symptoms (Mekawi et

al., 2022).

Various research studies indicate that seeking social support is a common method of

coping with race-related stress (Brondolo et al., 2009; Swim et al., 2003). In addition to building

a sense of security and connectedness, supportive social networks help individuals understand

that discrimination is a shared experience. Individuals can benefit from group members'

examples of effective responses and methods of coping with discrimination. Moreover,

Marshburn and Campos (2022) found that racism-specific support from Black friends improved

Black college students' overall psychological well-being, demonstrating that the best social

support is from individuals who have experienced similar stressors. Furthermore, Hoggard et al.

(2012) indicated that Black students were less likely to use planful problem-solving and more

likely to use confrontational, ruminative, and avoidance coping strategies when faced with

racially stressful events. Finally, rather than relying on one primary coping mechanism, Black

students tend to use a set of coping strategies, such as processing an event individually, sharing

with others, and implementing behavioral strategies to disprove negative stereotypes (Griffith et

al., 2019). Altogether, this work demonstrates the importance of Black college students having practical coping skills to navigate general and race-related stressors in the college environment.

The Current Study

A well-established body of research reveals that Black students face numerous general and racial stressors that can negatively affect their overall psychological adjustment (Greer & Brown, 2011; Griffith et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Mushonga, 2020; Shahid et al., 2018; Williams, 2022). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding Black students' coping flexibility, and the adaptive and maladaptive nature of Black students' coping strategies across general and race-related stressors. A major aim of this study was to explore the coping mechanisms employed by Black students and their assessment of the effectiveness of various types of coping strategies. Furthermore, we explored coping patterns to examine how Black students handle stress by using myriad coping approaches. To address these gaps in the literature, we analyzed qualitative data from interviews with 48 Black men and women at two higher education institutions. Two main questions guided our inquiry:

1) Which coping mechanisms did Black students utilize when faced with general and race-related stressors?

2) Which coping mechanisms did students perceive as adaptive, variable, or maladaptive, and why?

Method

Participants and University Settings

The sample included 48 Black students (women, $n = 36$; men, $n = 12$), ages 18-22 ($M = 20.08$ years, $SD = 1.24$). Twenty-seven of the participants attended a public, predominantly White institution (PWI) in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States (U.S.), and 21

participants attended a minority-serving institution (MSI) in the south-central region of the U.S. At the time of data collection, the PWI student body was 56.8% White, 13.1% Asian, 6.4 % Black or African American, 6.3% Hispanic or Latino, 4.5% two or more races, and 0.7% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders. At the time of data collection, the MSI student body was 42.2% White, 24.8% Hispanic or Latino, 13% Black or African American, 6.8% Asian, 4.5% two or more races, 27% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.6 % Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders.

Regarding ethnicity, 28 participants identified as Black or African American, 12 identified as African (i.e., Rwandan, Nigerian, Zoe Leonean, Ethiopian, and Ghanaian), four identified as biracial/multi-ethnic Black (i.e., African American and White or African American and Hispanic), three identified as Afro-Caribbean (i.e., Haitian and Jamaican), and one participant did not report their ethnicity. The study included participants across different academic years, including those in their first through fourth years of study. Sixteen were first-generation college students, and annual household income ranged from $5,000 to $200,000 (median = $95,000). As it pertains to mental health services, participants reported having participated in individual counseling ($n = 35\%$), psychological assessments ($n = 6\%$), and group counseling ($n = 2\%$). In addition, several participants reported experiencing depression ($n = 27\%$), anxiety ($n = 23\%$), and eating disorders (e.g., anorexia or bulimia – $n = 2\%$). We provide additional participant demographic information in Table A1 (Appendix A).

Procedures

We obtained IRB approval from both universities before the primary investigators (PIs) (Drs. Martinque Jones and Seanna Leath) emailed weekly recruitment emails to Black student organizations at each respective campus. The email included detailed information about the

study, including its focus, eligibility criteria, and contact information for the PI. We invited interested students to contact the PI at their university to schedule an individual interview. Each PI scheduled interviews until the target number of participants was obtained, based on data saturation (i.e., the point in coding when you find that no new codes occur in the data; Saunders et al., 2018) and available grant funding for the project. Participants completed a consent form before the interview, and due to COVID-19, the interview team conducted interviews via Zoom or over the phone. All Zoom interviews were audio recorded, and interviewers always had the camera on. However, participants could turn their cameras on or off during the interviews.

The interview team consisted of the lead author (a Black woman), another graduate student (a Black woman), and two Black women university professors (co-PIs on the project). Before the interview, participants completed a 15-question survey of demographic information (e.g., social class, ethnicity, age, gender, and racial composition of their childhood neighborhood). The interviews ranged from 50 to 120 minutes ($M = 95)$ and participants were compensated $20 for study participation. After the audio files were transcribed into written format by a professional transcription service, the researchers reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy and uploaded them onto a data server.

Interview Protocol

We used a semi-structured interview protocol during the data collection process. The open-ended interview questions allowed participants to incorporate context and provide pertinent information about the topic in their responses (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The semi-structured interviews consisted of three main sections – the first section focused on students' perceptions of the campus racial climate and included questions such as, "In your own words, how would you describe the campus racial climate at [undergraduate university]?" The second portion focused

on mental health processes and coping and included questions like, "When you experience a

challenge related to being a Black man/woman, what coping strategies do you use?" In addition,

we provided a handout of examples of coping strategies so that participants could more readily

identify the methods they employ. The handout included a broad definition of coping and a list

of fifteen coping strategies (e.g., venting, denial, humor, and positive reframing) with brief

definitions. For example, acceptance was the first coping skill listed and was defined as

"accepting the fact that the stressful event has occurred and is real." The handout also

encouraged participants not to feel constrained to only talk about the items on the list or to feel

the need to discuss each coping skill. In addition, we provided the list to collect consistent data

across the sample. However, the question was left open-ended so that participants could name

additional coping strategies not on the provided list. Finally, the third section focused on

students' perceptions of their university's response to COVID-19 and how students coped with

changes brought upon by the pandemic. This section included questions like, "Overall, how are

you coping with the changes brought on by COVID-19 concerning your college experiences?"

Researcher Positionality Statement

Our personal and scholarly positions influence the research process and interpretation of

data (Ladson-Billings, 2000); therefore, we provide relevant details about how our personal and

professional identities offer critical insight into stress and coping among college students. The

lead author (P.B.) is a Black, cisgender woman from a low-income background. She completed

her undergraduate studies at a women's historically Black college and is pursuing a doctoral

degree in clinical and school psychology. Her clinical work includes training in a university-run

outpatient clinic and family medicine clinic, in which she often assesses clients' coping strategies

and introduces new adaptive coping mechanisms. The second author (S.L.), who also served as

the code auditor, is a Black woman and assistant professor at a PWI who graduated from a PWI. She has over nine years of expertise regarding the academic performance and identity development of Black women and girls. In addition, she researches variations in the family and school-based experiences of Black youth and young adults. The third member of the coding team (E.S.) is a Black, cisgender woman from a low-income background who recently graduated from a PWI. Her research explores health disparities to advance health equity. The fourth member of the coding team (J.T.) is a Nigerian American woman majoring in psychology and African American studies at a PWI. Her research focuses on how mental health issues and experiences of trauma impact Black families.

Coding Analysis Approach

We used Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) coping theory to guide our deductive thematic approach. According to this theory, individuals' appraisals of stressors determine their coping strategies, which affect their mental health outcomes. In addition, situational context is vital in understanding how appraisal stress may differentiate the type of coping tool a person decides to employ (Gloria et al., 2017). The coding process involved five coding phases with a team of three coders (P.B., E.S., and J.T.). Furthermore, the second author (S.L.) served as the auditor; she reviewed coded data, provided feedback regarding the correct application of codes, and ensured that important themes in the data were not overlooked.

Data Chunking

In the first phase of coding, the lead author reviewed transcripts in their entirety, extracted all statements broadly related to coping mechanisms and stressors, and added excerpts into two excel sheets. One sheet included the students attending the PWI, and the second was for students attending the MSI. Each excel sheet contained 10 columns: Participant ID, participant

pseudonym, type of stressor, coping mechanisms, number of coping mechanisms, adaptive/variable/maladaptive, student ability status and their use of mental health services, coding team notes, and auditor notes. Next, the coding team reviewed all excerpts and kept statements that addressed the research questions: (1) Which coping mechanisms did Black students utilize when faced with general and race-related stressors? (2) Which coping mechanisms did students perceive as adaptive or maladaptive, and why? Then, the coding team determined inclusion and exclusion criteria for the excerpts. For example, the team removed statements about coping before college (i.e., during their upbringing or in high school) and statements related to how students coped with the stress of the global pandemic since this was outside the scope of the study.

Codebook Development

In the second phase, we developed initial codes using Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) categorization of coping strategies. For example, we categorized coping strategies into emotion-focused, problem-focused, and avoidant coping. Our team applied the initial codes to raw data during codebook development and created additional codes until we achieved code saturation (i.e., the point in coding when no new codes occur in the data; Saunders et al., 2018). In addition, codes were further labeled, defined, and described during the codebook application stage. For example, we discussed categorizing and labeling specific strategies based on our clinical experience and reviewing relevant research. For example, Greer & Brown (2011) described religion and spirituality as emotion-focused coping strategies, because religion helped participants cope with the ongoing demands of a stressor while balancing the range of emotions associated with it. As a result, after reading this study, we decided to move religion and spirituality to emotion-focused coping.

To determine the validity of the codes, we used examples from the raw data and established explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. For instance, we originally had a separate venting and instrumental support code. We defined instrumental support as seeking tangible support through information, advice, assistance, or resources from a social support network (e.g., friends, family, church members, mentors, and deans). Next, we reviewed the participants' responses and observed that they often conflated the two. For example, even when they recounted "venting," they described receiving and seeking advice from another person, which also qualifies as instrumental support (Jones, 2020). After a lengthy discussion and review of literature, we decided that combining the codes would more succinctly capture the interview data. Thus, we combined the codes and decided that in the sixth coding phase, any participant that received a venting and instrumental support code would undergo another round of coding to specify whom they went to for support.

During the third coding phase, we worked on the second iteration of the codebook, in which we finalized the codes and subcodes and deleted any overlapping codes. The first code was emotion-focused coping, which included religion/spirituality, venting/instrumental support, humor, positive reframing, yoga and meditation, physical activity, and journaling as subthemes. The second code was avoidant coping, which included substance use, behavioral and mental disengagement, denial, and displacement as subthemes. Finally, the third code was problem-focused coping.

Interrater Reliability

In the fourth coding phase, we clarified how we would code for adaptive, variable, and maladaptive coping strategies. We decided only to apply codes when participants explicitly labeled a coping mechanism as adaptive, variable, or maladaptive to avoid imposing our beliefs

about how helpful or unhelpful each coping mechanism was. We engaged in inter-coder testing, which refers to the extent to which different researchers agree on how to code the same content by applying codes to fictitious vignettes and short excerpts from the data (Hill, 2012). After two coding iterations, the team met 95% inter-rater reliability, or sufficient agreement among multiple coders (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The lead author compiled all the participants' excerpts into an Excel database for coding, and each member of the coding team was assigned an equal number of participants from the PWI and MSI. The lead author (P.B.), J.T., and E.S. each coded 16 excerpts. The auditor reviewed codes halfway through (after 24 transcripts), and when coding concluded, and provided feedback to the team to ensure we assigned codes consistently.

Thematic Analysis

During the fifth and final coding phase, the codebook remained the same, but the first author reviewed demographic surveys and transcripts to code for other information that could provide rich insight into our participants. In this phase, the first author coded for types of stressors (i.e., general stressor or race-related), ability status (i.e., a mental health diagnosis), and students' counseling and psychological service utilization (i.e., had the participant received therapy services on campus and what kind of service), and whom students sought out for instrumental support. Finally, the coding team met to share their observations and to create a document that included specific data about how many times we assigned each code across the sample and then specified by the type of institution the participant attended (i.e., PWI or MSI).

The coding team engaged in reflexivity by individually taking memo notes throughout the data analysis process. The notes consisted of excerpts in which we needed clarification related to the type of coping mechanism a participant described. The team met weekly over three months to code, a total of 48 excerpts. When there was a disagreement, the team reviewed

specific chunks within the full transcript and discussed it until the team reached a consensus. For

example, one participant wrote poetry to cope with stress. However, there was disagreement

surrounding if this could fall under journaling or if it necessitated a new code altogether. We

discussed and reviewed the data to determine the extent to which our sample used poetry as a

coping tool. Additionally, we requested feedback from the second author. In order to avoid

losing important insights into strategies that were less represented among our participants, the

second author suggested we create an "*other*" code to capture students' unique approaches.

Findings

Overall, participants provided a range of responses regarding the stressors they faced and

the coping mechanisms they employed, as well as their perceptions about how their coping

methods informed their mental health processes. It is noteworthy that participants used, on

average, three different coping strategies. At the MSI, 85% ($n = 18$) of participants used more

than one coping mechanism, and 96% ($n = 26$) used more than one strategy at the PWI.

Furthermore, we observed other institutional differences in the number of coping strategies

employed. For example, on average, participants at the PWI used four different coping skills,

whereas participants at the MSI used two different coping skills to address a stressor. Therefore,

across the sample, we observed evidence that participants engaged in *coping flexibility*, which is

the ability to discontinue an ineffective coping strategy and produce and implement an

alternative coping strategy (Kato, 2012). In this way, participants were keenly aware of their

coping methods and assessed situations and their environment to make changes when necessary.

In alignment with Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) coping theory, results indicated that (1)

71.46% of participants ($n = 93$) reported engaging in emotion-focused coping (religion &

spirituality, venting & instrumental support, humor, positive reframing, acceptance, yoga and

meditation, physical activity, and journaling), (2) 21.54% of participants (*n* = 28) reported

engaging in avoidant (substance use, behavioral & mental disengagement), and (3) 6.92% of

participants *(n* = 9) reported engaging in problem-focused coping. For research question two, we

identified various coping mechanisms participants identified as adaptive, variable, and

maladaptive. Below we provide representative quotations from the participants to illustrate each

in order of frequency (from high to low). We use pseudonyms for all names and locations to

maintain confidentiality.

Theme 1: Emotion-Focused Coping

The first theme highlights emotion-focused coping strategies in which participants

engaged. We defined emotion-focused coping as the ability to respond to the ongoing demands

of experience with the range of emotions in a socially tolerable manner. Results indicated that

71.46% of participants (*n* = 93) reported engaging in emotion-focused coping, which made it the

most commonly reported coping mechanism. In addition, we identified five sub-themes, *religion*

and spirituality (i.e., using prayer, soliciting help from a pastor or religious leader, increased

engagement in religious activities, or finding comfort in your religion or spiritual beliefs)*,*

venting and instrumental support (i.e., saying things to others to let your unpleasant feelings

escape or seeking tangible support in the form of information, advice, assistance, or resources

from a social support network), *humor* (i.e., using humor or sarcasm to point out the funny or

ironic aspects of a situation), *positive reframing* (making the best of the situation by growing

from it or viewing it in a more favorable light), *journaling* (writing about one's feelings and

experiences), *yoga and meditation* (engaging in a yoga, breathing, or meditation practice), and

physical activity (or physical activities associated with the experience of pleasure or mastery)

and *acceptance* (i.e., accepting the fact that the stressful event has occurred and is real).

Religion and Spirituality

Several participants considered religion and spirituality to be their primary coping mechanisms. The participants found meaning in their challenges through prayer, reading religious texts, or seeking pastoral counseling. Several participants also indicated that their upbringing had significantly contributed to these coping mechanisms. For example, Daniel, a 1st year African American student at the PWI stated,

> College can be stressful, and you just think of a lot of stuff during college, but I kind of have reminders around me to keep me in a positive mindset. Like on my desk, I have a verse that somebody gave me from my trunk party, and it's in a frame ... I think it's a quote, and it says something like, "Whenever my heart gets overwhelmed, lead me to God," or something like that. During stressful times, I just look at that, and I just remember that God's not giving me more than I can bear. But overall, in terms of mental health in college, I would say I try to stay positive. I just try to keep myself in the Lord, because times can be hard, but I believe I can stay positive in God.

Daniel's account provided an excellent illustration of the importance of his faith as he transitioned to college. The religious plaque he displayed in his dorm room reinforced the values he learned from his upbringing. In addition, it served as a reminder that he could rely on God during times of difficulty for support and strength. Likewise, Charity, a 2nd year Black student at the MSI shared,

> Okay, definitely religion. That's a really big thing for me, because like I said, that's what I feel like I've been on my whole life. You're talking about mental health and stress. Yeah. Really, definitely relationships and religion. It's like the same thing in high school, except

to a much bigger extent now. If I feel stressed out, I may call someone who could help

me through it, and definitely still like to pray on a lot of issues that I may be having.

Similarly, Jamal, a 2nd year African American student at the PWI shared,

I guess some religion and spirituality because I was raised in a Christian home. I just kind

of find comfort in being able to pray and being able to kind of discuss problems I might

be having with a pastor or someone who's got a religious leading.

Through their upbringing, Jamal, Charity and Daniel learned to cope with stress and overcame

obstacles by relying on their faith and religious leaders. Furthermore, other participants described

dealing with stress through religion and spirituality as an effective and familiar strategy for

coping with stressors.

Venting and Instrumental Support

Several participants sought the support of social networks to share their emotions,

connect with others, and sometimes receive guidance and wisdom. For example, in the study,

participants often reported seeking mutual understanding and validation from a peer, family

member, or mentor who shared their gender and racial identity. For instance, Crystal, a 1st year

African American student at the MSI shared,

 [To cope with a stressor] I guess I would call my mom, or I'd talk to my friends who are

Black women, and talk through those issues. I wouldn't go to any of my college's mental

health options, there's not a lot of Black women in that field. At least I haven't seen any

Black women in therapists or the psychologist's office. Share with Black women talk to

friends or family or just handle it myself.

Similarly, Fallon, a 2nd year Ethiopian-American student at the MSI said,

> Initially I try to maybe talk to another Black woman that kind of understands what I'm speaking of. I feel like it gives me more of a sense of validation and if I'm thinking a certain way, they can help me reassure myself in what I know.

In addition, Jazmine, a 2nd year Grenadian student from the PWI shared,

> I just love to call people sis that are Black female identifying and I usually call them up and I'm like, this is what just happened to me. Am I bugging? And they usually affirm or sometimes we just really had that conversation about whatever is being said. Just to have an empathetic conversation where I know that the person is really understanding where I'm coming from because either they've experienced it or they've had some type of, I don't know like they can get it essentially.

Crystal, Fallon, and Jazmine indicated their desire to reach out to someone who shared their identity to cope with race-related stress, and sought the assistance of various Black individuals, including friends, parents, mentors, and therapists. Race-related stress often caused participants to ruminate and question their experiences, which made social support and validation a crucial element of their coping. For these participants, speaking with someone who shared their identities gave them a sense of being seen, heard, and not alone. As a result, participants greatly benefited from reaching out for support or talking openly about their feelings.

Humor

Several participants used humor or sarcasm to point out the funny or ironic aspects of a situation as a means for them to cope. For example, Victor, a 4th year African American student at the MSI, shared,

> Okay. Me personally, I would say I'm a funny guy. I've been told I'm pretty funny, so I like to joke around. Even I'm kind of the guy that in a bad situation try to lighten the

mood. because I have a lot of Black friends, most of my friends are Black, I would go

vent to them like, "Y'all, I cannot believe. Y'all will not believe what happened to me

today. This happened, this happened." I think that would be my immediate reaction,

would be go vent with my friends and go be like, "Can you believe if something were to

happen, I would probably go to humor, and connected with that go vent. "Oh my God, I

cannot believe this happened." Luckily, that's never happened, that situation has never

come up. But I feel like that would be my initial response to a racial situation, would be

to go vent and to go be like, "Bro, oh my gosh, this happened. I cannot believe it." Yeah,

I think that would be it.

Victor's experience illustrated the importance of his Black friends gathering to discuss complex

topics and to find humor in stressful circumstances when possible. In addition, Jamal, a 2nd year

African American student at the PWI, said,

Humor, I would just go to that. it's easier to just make a joke about the situation rather

than accept that it's something serious. So, it could just be a way of minimizing the

situation and being able to cope with it.

Likewise, Asia a 1st year Ghanaian student at the PWI shared,

Me and my friends usually just turn something that's stressful around [into humor], so it

doesn't seem that it doesn't have that much of a stressful impact on us. Mostly it's with

my roommate or my diverse peer group.

Jamal, Victor, and Asia's experiences highlighted another theme among participants: using

humor to lessen the effects of stress. This was especially true for stressors beyond the

participants' control, such as prejudice or stereotyping. The participants used humor in different

manners, which affected whether the coping strategy was adaptive, variable, or maladaptive.

Victor noted that humor could help to cope with the shock of encountering a racialized stressor but did not elaborate on how such an approach could assist him in dealing with the stressor. Comparatively, Jamal and Asia used humor to reduce the intensity of the racialized stressor, thereby freeing up their mental resources to cope more effectively.

Positive Reframing

Rather than attempting to change their circumstance and stressors, some participants focused their energy on changing *how* they thought about their stress. Positive reframing is distinct from humor, because it focuses more on making the best of a situation by growing from it or viewing it in a more favorable light (e.g., seeing the glass "half full" as opposed to "half empty"). These participants managed their emotions by deliberately viewing their problems from a positive perspective. Lexi, a 2nd year African American student at the MSI, said,

> Coping related to being a Black woman-I guess yeah, I kind of use them in the way but it's more I guess of reminding myself that God made me the way I am for a reason and that I should be proud of who I am. I just tell myself that even in moments where I feel like I'm discriminated against or something, I have the power to just ignore their thoughts and ignore their perceptions of me. Just best that I can be to prove them wrong.

Lexi poignantly described using positive reframing in conjunction with her religious beliefs to see herself as valuable and worthy even when she faced discrimination on campus. Therefore, when she rejected racial discrimination and focused on her inherent worth, Lexi was better able to cope with race-related stressors. Similarly, Quisha, a 1st year Ghanaian student at the PWI, said,

> Well, I guess like sometimes I will just, before successful Black women, or successful Black people period, I'll read up on those things. Or like I'll try to think of, just try to

keep positive thoughts and think of empowering thoughts towards myself. And stuff that

this will help me keep going or just take at least the next step.

Quisha used positive reframing by monitoring her thoughts and immersing herself in examples

of outstanding Black women. In Quisha's experience, learning about other Black women's

triumphs facilitated her coping with stress and challenging circumstances.

Acceptance

For some participants, simply acknowledging that something happened and could not be

changed was a powerful coping tool. Those who reported using acceptance described using this

coping strategy in response to stressors they could not change or had little control over. For

instance, Asia, a 1st year Ghanaian student at the PWI shared,

Yeah, I feel like probably acceptance. Sometimes I realize that sometimes it is what it is.

If the problem wasn't too intense, I let it go I guess and don't let it bother me that much.

For Asia, simply accepting a stressor as unchangeable or acknowledging an adverse event helped

her regulate her emotions and let go of some of her stress to find a path forward. In addition,

some participants combined acceptance with other coping strategies, such as instrumental

support. For instance, Deja, a 2nd year Ethiopian student at the PWI, shared,

Hearing my mother just saying like, "Deja, like literally like, don't stress yourself out of

the school. It's going to hurt you in the long run. Everything will be okay." Having that

constantly being told that, it would help me get into the space of acceptance. All right,

this is what it is. But like we're going to get out of it? And I think just thinking back to

the different points in our lives where we've had really rough times, but we have gotten

out of this, that's I think with thinking like it's going to, it's going to end, it's going to be

resolved and everything, looking forward I think is what really helps me. It's like I always

think I'm like, all right, I can't wait until this happens. Then I'll be like this and this. I

can't wait until I'm no longer feeling anxious because I know it will go away once I form

a routine. I think about how I would be with it when I reach that point of passing that

anxious time. Yeah. I think that we aren't given the luxury of truly dealing with our

emotions. And part of it may be cultural, not fully understanding mental health and

everything, but I think that it's also very situational and systemic in the sense that for a lot

of us, this is our only shot and you don't want to mess it up. And so, it's like, all right,

well you got to figure it out and keep pushing because at the end of the day I don't have a

fallback plan. So, I think that's why for a lot of Black women it's harder. This idea of

pushing through is so common. It's just because we don't have a fallback plan.

For Deja, her mother's support and reassurance helped her to accept the factors she could not

change (i.e., systematic barriers to college matriculation). Deja's mother also encouraged her that

she could overcome her problems. This state of acceptance made it easier for her to solve

problems and look forward to the future. In addition, she raised the issue that Black women may

not have the luxury of dealing with their emotions. She highlighted how Black women face

systemic barriers, and others hold them to harmful cultural stereotypes that they must remain

"strong." Additionally, Black women often lack the financial or social resources to fall back on if

they fail to succeed in college. Consequently, Deja illustrated Black women's difficulties in

coping with racialized and financial stressors.

Yoga, Meditation, and Physical Activity

Participants reported engaging in *mindfulness and wellness* as strategies that helped them

achieve a calm emotional state by focusing on the present moment and acknowledging their

feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. These coping skills included *yoga and*

meditation (engaging in yoga, breathing, or meditation practice), *journaling* (writing about one's feelings and experiences), and *physical activities* (engagement in physical activities that provide a sense of mastery, such as practicing a sport or working out). Asia, a 1st year Ghanaian student at the PWI, said,

> Usually I start journaling, I feel like is easier to get my emotions out on paper so it's not like all stuck in my head. I also just ask my friends about it. My roommate, she was Black, so we had similar experiences at the university.

Asia highlighted a theme we observed across many participants, namely the combining of multiple coping strategies to reduce stress. Aside from journaling, Asia mentioned reaching out to another Black woman to discuss race-related stress. In addition, Precious, a 4th year Ethiopian student at the PWI, reflected,

> I'm just not the best at journaling. I've tried, I just, I'm not consistent enough, I guess it's a lot of effort and I just like doing a little list on my notes versus just like journaling every day. I don't always have something to say.

Due to Precious' inconsistency, she did not feel she had reaped the full benefits of journaling. Despite this, she carefully assessed the barriers to engaging in journaling (lack of consistent content) and adjusted her strategy by taking periodic notes on her phone as a substitute. Some participants reported engaging in physical activities to cope with stress. Some participants reported engaging in physical activities to cope with stress. Terra, a 3rd year African American student at the PWI, shared,

> I really started kind of running and just like being outside because I had a really rough second year and I was in a back brace for a while so I really value being able to like to move and not hurt. I still have like days where my back really hurts and it's kind of

difficult and I'll just like start, like the day will just kind of start slow. It was just kind of

like a lot was just going on. Like I had a back injury. I was still doing ROTC, cheer,

computer science and Russian, so I was just like stressed all the time. So yeah, it was just

a rough year, like mentally for me. I cried a lot. Just kind of like walked. There wasn't

really anything that like could be done, I feel like, like even now, I'm like in a better

place. I couldn't even go home because there wasn't even time. So yeah, I just kind of had

to brace for impact, I guess.

As a student-athlete, Terra began to experience significant psychological distress due to an

injury, chronic pain, and juggling academic demands. Moreover, she indicated that school

demands prevented her from accessing social support at home. However, walking, running, and

simply being outdoors allowed her to return to a more positive state, so Terra could continue to

work toward her goals. Similarly, Carmen, a 4th year Black student at the MSI, stated,

I exercise. That's helped a lot. I finally ... Oh my gosh. I finally got back into playing

tennis. For years ... In middle school and high school, I was one of the best tennis players

there was, but then I quit. And I'm so glad that I finally got back to that because I feel so

much better finally being out in the sun and everything. And biking and yoga, things like

that. One of the reasons why I so desperately wanted to get back into playing tennis in

particular is because ... I didn't even tell my coach this, but the main reason why I quit in

the first place wasn't because it was conflicting with my schedule, because I was also in

marching band, but it was because I didn't want to tan. I didn't want to get darker. I know

there's a stigma in the Black community that you got to stay out of the sun and all that

type of stuff, so I didn't want to get bullied more. So, I quit and didn't play for five years

until now. So, I'm just glad that I got back into it. I'm finally comfortable in my own skin,

and finally comfortable being outside in the sun, and I don't even care if I tan or not.

Terra described exercising and playing sports as practical and fulfilling activities for her.

However, she could not continue those activities due to her busy schedule and marching band

commitments. Furthermore, Terra provided an insightful examination of the impact of colorism

(i.e., the preference given to people of the same race based on their proximity to Whiteness) on

her desire to engage in physical activities (Crutchfield et al., 2022). Several years ago, she

abandoned her love of tennis, because she feared becoming darker. However, as a fourth-year

college student, she become more comfortable in her skin and started to play tennis again.

Theme 2: Avoidant Coping

The second theme highlighted avoidant coping strategies, which we defined as avoidant

coping as efforts to disengage from a stressor. Results indicated that 21.54% of participants ($n =$

28) reported engaging in avoidant coping. In addition, we identified four sub-themes, *substance*

use (i.e., turning to the use of alcohol and other drugs as a way of disengaging from the stressor),

behavioral and mental disengagement (i.e., physically or mentally giving up, or withdrawing

effort from, the attempt to attain the goal with which the stressor is interfering), *denial* (i.e.,

outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring), and

displacement (i.e., taking out our frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects that are

less threatening).

Substance use

Notably, no participants from the MSI reported using substances as a means of coping.

However, students at the PWI were candid about their substance use. It is important to note that

students who reported using substances to manage stress typically did so in conjunction with other strategies. Aaliyah, a 1st year African American student from the PWI, shared,

> I would say venting. I would say venting, a lot, but I also like smoking weed, so that's also part of it, too. I would say those two are probably my top two coping strategies. A lot of times, also, I'll smoke and then vent to my friends. Again, a lot of times, it would just be school stuff. One specific thing that comes to mind is I remember studying literally eight hours for an exam and then getting a 56, and that just completely blew me. I got my friends together. I got the bong. And I just ... and, yeah, after that, I felt a lot better about my 56. Yeah, definitely. It's almost like a daily, we'll come together every day and just smoke, and then, we'll talk for hours.

For Aaliyah, smoking helped her cope with her stress mainly because it was a consistent way for her to spend time with friends to talk about her feelings. However, some participants used substances to distract themselves from or ignore stressors. For instance, Claire, a 4th year African American student from the PWI said,

> So, I call up my friends or my home girls and start telling them, "Oh my God, this is what happened." Then, I just go on and on and on about it. The third one is usually we go out to the bar, and then we drink, and we go out and drink, smoke weed and all of that stuff, so forget about it. So, it's first is denial, second is venting, third is drugs and substance abuse, as a way to forget about it. And then afterwards, maybe then I start accepting that it happened. That's the fourth one. In that order.

Like other participants, Claire provided a list of coping tools she utilized when stressed. Initially, she sought out other Black women to vent about her experiences, which she found adaptive. However, Claire also used alcohol and weed to avoid her emotions. Yet, she found that the

maladaptive methods provided only temporary relief, and ultimately, she needed to accept her feelings.

Mental and behavioral disengagement

Some participants reported finding solace, or at least temporary relief from their stress, through mental or behavioral disengagement. Mental disengagement manifested as daydreaming, sleeping excessively, watching excessive television, or finding distractions. Behavioral disengagement was exemplified by participants who isolated themselves in their dorm rooms, skipped classes, or neglected extracurricular activities. Notably, many students acknowledged that disengagement was unhelpful and even harmful in some circumstances. In comparison, some participants used disengagement to maintain their cognitive reserves or compartmentalize a problem. Additionally, participants frequently described using disengagement strategies to cope with race-related stressors they could not control. As an example, Talisa, a 3rd year African American student at the PWI shared,

> I think it's definitely been on the negative side. Like I don't like isolation I guess, like. Yeah, I think there was a, I can recall like a period of time where I really did like second year, first semester I really did disengage. That looked like, you know, staying in my room and closing all the blinds and sleeping all the time. I knew it wasn't and just kind of like going through the motions and kind of disengaging from like some of the communities and different clubs and organizations I was a part of. I remember I stopped going to a Black Christian group on campus. I stopped going there. You know, I was like completely out of it. Like I just didn't want to, I was like ashamed and like I was, I don't know, it was, it was hard. Like it was a dark time. So, I remember that semester was like completely, it was like awful.

Talisa described her tendency to self-isolate herself when she was distressed. For instance, she slowly ceased participating in meaningful extracurricular activities and distanced herself from social support networks, such as the Christian student group she typically attended. Notably, she attributed her self-isolation to the shame she felt surrounding others seeing her in a fragile state. In addition, her self-reliance might stem from the "strong black woman" stereotype that many Black women feel pressured to uphold (Corbin et al., 2018). Similarly, Nemiya, a 1st year Rwandan student at the MSI said,

> I kind of just locked myself away, because it's like, everything that I can say has been said already by people before me who are older than me, and people who've experienced it already. And so, it's kind of just frustrating for me when, for example, there are times where we'll go up to the beauty supply, and people are watching you. And it's just like, I can go home and talk about it on Twitter, but it's already been talked about. I can go home and talk about to my friends, but it's nothing new. And so, it can be frustrating to experience these things time and time again. I think one of my very bad coping strategies, is to just kind of lock myself away, and just think about it. Sometimes I'll ruminate, I'll go through the situation over and over in my head and think about different ways that I could have handled the situation. That's just one. That's one thing, I just lock myself away. Yeah, I'll just kind of either put myself in my room, or I just try to avoid it, but then by trying to avoid it, the only thing I can do is think about it over, and over, and over again.

Nemiya's account provided insight into how she dealt with race-related stress. In particular, she described discrimination at a beauty supply store when a store clerk closely monitored her for shoplifting. Moreover, she emphasized that the coping mechanisms she used in the past (e.g., venting and instrumental support) were no longer adequate. Nemiya's experience illustrated how

prejudice and discrimination are chronic stressors for Black students. Therefore, students may need a wider variety of coping strategies to implement if their primary methods are no longer beneficial. For example, when Nemiya exhausted her typical coping strategies, she isolated herself and ruminated on the negative experience to avoid the pain she felt. Nevertheless, as she pointed out, her efforts to prevent her distress exacerbated it. Likewise, some participants used sleep as a strategy to escape stressors. For example, Maurice, a 3rd year Black student at the PWI said,

> I really wasn't picking up the healthy coping mechanisms. Like, I'm so good at concealing like what I'm dealing with in the inside. But I was asleep and skipped class. Like I would actually go a week without going to one class. And I would just sleep, and sleep and I would eat disorderly. Like I wouldn't eat all day, and then binge eat throughout the night and my health was really being compromised. Honestly, I would be lying to you if I said I had healthy coping mechanisms. Food and sleep. I was very distant. I was not talking to people really because I wasn't used to doing something like that. I wasn't used to being like, "Hey y'all, I'm not right. I'm not okay."

Similarly, Latoya, a 3rd year African American student at the PWI shared,

> For me, I need to escape by going to sleep, by taking a nap. I've woken up and been like, okay I, feel better. How am I going to navigate? I will say sleeping is definitely my coping strategy, and I say that because it's not meant to help the situation. It's not meant to rectify. It's for me to kind of reset if you will. It's a way for me to, I think the word is tolerate, to deal with, okay, this is what I'm going through. Let me come back after I take a nap and figure out a blueprint on how to get through it. Sleeping for me is number one specifically.

Sleep served two different purposes for Maurice and Latoya in terms of coping. In Maurice's case, he slept to avoid and disengage from stress. Due to this, his sleep became so disrupted that he missed several weeks of classes. Additionally, he engaged in disordered eating and acknowledged that he lacked healthy coping mechanisms. Maurice described a common barrier to seeking assistance: not knowing how to ask for help. It is important to note, however, that Maurice is not alone in this struggle. Research indicates that Black men are less likely to seek social support compared to Black women (Mincey et al., 2015).

Conversely, Latoya slept so she would have the energy to tackle the problem. Research suggests that exposure to racism is particularly taxing to African Americans (Harper et al., 2011). Thus, managing these experiences may require considerable emotional and cognitive energy (Pierce, 1988). Therefore, extra rest (in moderation) may be necessary for self-care when facing race-related stressors. Altogether, Maurice and Latoya provided valuable insights into how sleeping to cope may be harmful and helpful under certain circumstances. Maurice and Latoya's experiences also offered insight into the effects of pairing coping strategies. Maurice, for example, employed two behavioral avoidant coping strategies (sleeping and binge eating), whereas Latoya combined an avoidant coping mechanism with a proactive one, which might have resulted in different outcomes.

Denial & Displacement

We defined denial as outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring. We defined displacement as taking out frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects. Both mechanisms involve redirecting or avoiding the actual source of discomfort. Denial entails refusing to acknowledge or accept the reality of a distressing situation. On the other hand, displacement involves transferring one's negative emotions or

responses to a stressor onto a substitute target. In both cases, individuals seek to distance themselves from the initial source of stress, either by denying its existence altogether or redirecting their feelings toward a more manageable target. Ultimately, denial and displacement serve as temporary coping mechanisms, offering short-term relief but potentially hindering long-term emotional growth and resolving underlying issues. Notably, no participants from the MSI reported using denial, and only one participant at the PWI reported using displacement. Nevertheless, the participants' experiences still provided a window into these coping mechanisms. Claire, a 4th year African American student at the PWI shared,

> So, I would be in denial at first. That's the first thing for me. Whenever I failed to do something or didn't get the grade I expected in a class, I would be in denial, like, "No, that didn't happen. I put in a lot of work on this, I should have gotten an A, or I should have gotten a B. Or I didn't expect this to happen to me. I'm special." But that's not the case. So, denial is definitely the first thing that goes through my mind first.

Moreover, Kiara, a 3rd year Afro-Caribbean student at the PWI shared,

> Denial, I'm very good at that. My number one phrase for denial is say nothing is wrong when I obviously know something is wrong because one, it tells people to not bother me or they're just like, okay, leave it at that. And then also it just makes me check myself. The one thing I kind of listed before the venting was me from high school up until last semester was kind of just like wanting to deny everything to be able to feel fine. But I think even after being able to talk to my friend who went to counseling and psychological services (CAPS) and then going to CAPS, I realized that I like venting, I don't know, there's just something about being able to talk about all your problems. I think even now this is very helpful for me, just being able to say everything that's on your mind, whether

good or bad, and just feel free from it. And it allows you to just let go of it. I think I just

realized that because before I was just bottling everything up, it was just making me

stress a lot. And then high blood pressure, it was a lot, the stress levels were too high and

that just made me feel a lot worse and venting just makes you feel relieved from it.

Claire and Kiara discussed how they used denial to cope with stressful situations. When Claire

felt disappointed in her academic performance, she unconsciously resorted to denial. Her denial

served as a means of dealing with unexpected negative outcomes (i.e., studying for a test and

failing it). By contrast, Kiara resorted to denial to avoid feeling her feelings. However, after

accessing counseling and psychological services (CAPS), Kiara discovered that talking about her

emotions was helpful. Her experience in therapy enabled her to recognize that denial contributed

to her bottling up her feelings and that sharing her feelings reduced her stress level. Thus, Kiara's

experience provided a valuable example of how CAPS can provide positive support and assist

students in diversifying their coping mechanisms. As an example of displacement, Rekia, a 3rd

year Caribbean student at the PWI shared,

I could say, growing up, and even still now, I do take my frustration out on individuals,

but not over the past three years. It has changed. So, going from being a 16, 17, year old

high school student, I took my anger and frustration out on everyone. And now, being a

19, almost 20, year old adult, I don't do that, too often. And that's because I have now

been able to acknowledge my mental health and know how to cope with my problems

differently.

Often, displacement of emotion is unconscious and used to reduce anxiety and restore emotional

balance. Specifically, a person may use displacement when facing a stressor that they cannot

direct their feelings toward without suffering consequences. For example, Rekia employed

displacement as a coping strategy during her adolescence and early adulthood. However, as she learned more about her mental health, she identified other strategies to deal with her distress. As a result, Rekia demonstrated a high level of emotional insight and illustrated how the collegiate environment provided natural opportunities for students like Rekia to explore new ways to cope with stress.

Theme 3: Problem-Focused Coping

We defined problem-focused coping as defining a problem, the cause of the problem, selecting alternatives for a solution, and implementing a solution. Results indicated that 6.92% of participants *(n = 9)* reported engaging in this coping strategy. In addition, several participants stated that they used problem-focused methods to deal with general college stressors, such as juggling classes and extracurricular activities. Trevon, a 3rd year Ghanaian student at the PWI noted,

> So, for me, some of the coping strategies that I've used are like, acceptance and planning, mostly I use planning. Actually, being president is a lot, it's like a full-time job and being an engineer student as well it's basically, like 10 full time jobs. I'm just kidding. So, I have to often plan when I realize I have too much going on. So, I take a step back, understand okay, this is what I need and then make plans, put things on my calendar and call people when there's less time and various things, make a to-do list, that always helps me get everything back together.

Trevon has a lot of responsibilities to juggle as a student leader with a challenging major. Even so, he managed his stress by utilizing tools such as calendars and to-do lists. Similarly, Terrance a 2nd year Caribbean student at the PWI shared,

I think this semester I think I've been really good at acceptance and planning I feel like, especially planning. What I've noticed is that when I plan, and I know when things are going to happen it's easier for me to maintain my stress. Because I know I have an exam Monday, instead of studying Sunday night even if I do a little bit Friday night that's still going to help me feel better. I've noticed that even when I get assignments done early, I get a sense of euphoria. So that's one thing and if I can plan better if I know okay, I have this, do this, this I'll do next it's much, much easier for me to break things up and maintain the stress yeah. Definitely I think definitely I've been trying more planning.

Similarly, to Trevon, Terrance utilized acceptance as well as planning simultaneously. Despite their obligations, both students organized themselves and devised a plan to deal with challenging assignments to manage the intensity of their stress. Terrance observed how he felt when he completed his work ahead of schedule versus when he procrastinated. Therefore, he learned to manage his stress more effectively by breaking tasks into smaller pieces and completing them early.

Generally, we found that participants were aware of their coping strategies and were open to exploring new methods for managing stress that could lead to better outcomes. Additionally, participants employed a combination of coping strategies simultaneously and sequentially. As a result of chronic stressors, some participants exhausted their coping tools, which in some cases led to engaging in less helpful methods because they were easily accessible and familiar. Among participants, emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies were the most prevalent, while problem-focused coping was the least prevalent.

Research Question 2: Adaptive, Variable, and Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms

Finally, for the second research question, we identified the coping mechanisms participants appraised as adaptive (i.e., a coping mechanism was effective or helpful for them to reduce stress or improve their overall psychological well-being), variable (i.e., a coping mechanism had both beneficial and harmful effects on their overall psychological well-being), and maladaptive (i.e., that a coping mechanism was harmful or unhelpful to their overall psychological well-being).

Adaptive Coping Strategies

A coping mechanism was considered adaptive based on if participants found it effective or helpful for them to reduce stress or improve their overall psychological well-being The most commonly reported adaptive strategies were venting and seeking instrumental support, humor, religion and spirituality, acceptance, and problem-focused coping. For example, Raven, a 2nd year African American student at the PWI said,

> My friends told me I have a really hard time attacking stress head on, so my body just shuts down, really. Then, I vent sometimes to my friends. I think I vented the most this past semester because of all the events that were taking place during Black History Month. It just really hard to be there at that time.

Similarly, Riley, a 4th year African American student at the MSI said,

> Coping. I guess talking to people that I know experience the same things is probably my most healthy coping response. Yeah, that's pretty much it. I think that having conversations with other people that understand what you've gone through or what you're going through helps a lot with any kind of mental health issues or any issues that you face being a black person. For negative ways, probably shutting down for the most part and

> not speaking to people is what I used to do, not really letting people know if I had things
>
> going on and just letting everything just fall on me would be a negative way.

Raven and Riley typically shut down and avoided stressful situations to avoid stress. In both cases, however, venting and seeking support from others proved adaptive. They also discussed how their coping strategies changed over time by describing how they used to cope compared to how they cope today. We found that participants often described how their coping evolved through reflection on the past and consideration of which methods they found adaptive, maladaptive, or variable. Additionally, Raven and Riley's experiences illustrated the adaptive nature of social support for Black students on campus, mainly when dealing with race-related stressors. Even so, some participants sought social support outside of the campus community. For example, London, a 2nd year African American student at the MSI stated,

> I'd say my main thing is going to the Internet and trying to find other people who relate to
>
> that, if I can't find them directly where I'm at, whether that be in my classes or in my
>
> friend groups or whatever. I just feel like there is someone online who has talked about
>
> the struggles of black females and that has been very helpful.

London's experience illustrated how participants found it adaptive to seek support and validation from others who shared their gender and racial identity. London's story is unique in that she also used online platforms to connect with others who had faced similar challenges. Using online platforms could be adaptive for Black students like London, who have difficulty connecting with other Black students or have fewer opportunities to do so.

Variable Strategies

A coping mechanism was considered variable based on if participants found a method to have beneficial and harmful effects on their overall psychological well-being. The participants

indicated that these strategies were helpful sometimes or worked best when used occasionally.

For example, sleeping and substance abuse were the most commonly reported variable coping

strategies. Brittney, a 3rd year African American student at the PWI shared,

> I think I have gone through almost every last one of them, but my biggest one is
>
> distraction. When I'm surrounded by a lot of people, sometimes I'm like, I forget about it.
>
> Or if I have a task to do, I forget about the things that are on my mind. But it seems like,
>
> you know, you get alone, or you get in your head, it kind of comes back. And so,
>
> distraction isn't always the best thing.

Brittney described how distraction served as a variable coping skill for her, given that she found

it sometimes helpful and other times unhelpful. For instance, although distractions temporarily

relieved her stress, she eventually had to address her stressors. Her response illustrated how

distractions might be adaptive up to a certain point. Jalen, a 4th year Nigerian student at the PWI

said,

> I think that some shouldn't have been helpful, like the substance use and sleeping. It's
>
> probably not that healthy that they be helpful, but I mean, I felt better after I slept. I'm
>
> also really mean after I sleep. So, I think once I slept and then woke up and then I felt
>
> awake, it was better. Because a lot of the stuff I feel stressed about is mainly grades now,
>
> and its stuff I can't change, like oh, if I got a bad grade on something, it'll be something I
>
> can't change. So, I'll sleep to take my mind off of it. Then sometimes it'll come up again
>
> and so I'll just sleep and I'm fine.

Jalen slept and consumed drugs as a means of coping with his stress. Although he acknowledged

that these methods were variable. For instance, even though Jalen recognized that sleeping to

cope negatively affected his mood, he sometimes found sleep helpful Accordingly, his

experience underscored the importance of providing students with a variety of coping

mechanisms in case their variable coping mechanisms are not consistently effective or become

maladaptive over time. Kiara, a 3rd year Afro-Caribbean student at the PWI shared,

> I think I'm working on active, or problem focused coping. That one's still hard for me
>
> because I fall really back easily into the disengagement thing. Like it's just very easy for
>
> me to feel like, oh well this isn't going to work. I don't know, just the idea that like, if it's
>
> not going to work, I'm not going to try just because I'm afraid of failing. So as of now I'm
>
> kind of struggling between trying to have active coping methods with the behavioral
>
> disengagement thing.

Since Kiara did not have much experience implementing problem-focused coping tools, she

viewed them as a variable method. As a result, when she became discouraged, Kiara reverted to

maladaptive coping mechanisms she felt more comfortable with, such as disengagement.

Nevertheless, her experience demonstrated how learning and implementing adaptive coping

strategies might require time and practice to ensure students do not revert to unhelpful coping

tools.

Maladaptive

A coping mechanism was considered maladaptive based on if participants found

strategies as harmful or unhelpful to their overall psychological well-being. In large part,

behavioral and mental disengagement was reported as the most common maladaptive strategies.

Zoe, a 2nd year Zoe Leonean student at the MSI said,

> In the beginning, I would just put it in the back of my mind, and I'll take a nap and forget
>
> about it until it comes to my front door, and I need to deal with it. But now, I sit down,

and I write what is bothering me, and I see what can I do? How can I fix it? And now, I

have a friend that I trust, and I speak to her about my issues.

Similarly, Destinee, a 2nd year African American MSI student shared,

I would say now especially, I think when it comes to stress specifically, I bottle

everything up and that stress causes my anxiety. It honestly is really bad, but I just bottle

it in and then when I realize that it's getting really bad is when I confide to my friends and

I start doing things that I love like play basketball, and playing video games, things that

relax me because I've realized that I'm bottling up all this negative energy, and it's getting

to my head and I need to take a step back and unwind a little bit.

Both Zoe and Destinee suppressed or attempted to escape their emotions. Eventually, they

realized that emotional suppression was maladaptive since it made them feel isolated and

anxious. Thus, they chose to explore new strategies to process their feelings. For instance, they

sought social support and engaged in enjoyable activities. As a result, they learned to cope with

their problems in ways that felt more adaptive and helpful to them (i.e., problem-focused coping

strategies and instrumental support). Jazmine, a 2nd year Grenadian student from the PWI said,

I don't really drink like that, but I do use food as an emotional coping. So basically, when

I'm having a tough time about that identity or just what is within my control because

usually when shit like that happens, it's because I feel out of control and to gain back that

control. I'm just like, well let me eat. And usually something like, because I'm not smart

enough or because of my body and I'm like, well kind of having a Roxanne gay moment,

but kind of to fight against them or to really be in control. I try to distort my body image

and how I'm perceived to kind of get back that control that they took from me. I feel like

sometimes Low key is consciously gaining weight that I don't even really put together.

But that's what's happening or just not eating to lose weight because I didn't get that

acceptance, or because I don't fit in because I have these curves. It's the environment I'm

telling you, you don't think about it, but when you're in environments like these, they

really force you to start emotionally coping with things because your environment that

you were in, it was an environment that you aren't automatically comfortable in.

Jazmine's account illuminated an understudied maladaptive coping mechanism among Black

college students, food coping. According to Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, (2016), food

coping is a covert method for escaping stress and promoting short-term self-care. Our finding

suggested that there was a perception among some participants that food coping gave them a

sense of control during times of discomfort. For example, Jazmine's insecurities regarding her

academic abilities and body image contributed to her coping with food. Notably, food coping can

appeal to college students since food is often easily accessible on campuses and provides quick

satisfaction. However, it is worth noting that long-term and unaddressed food coping can lead to

maladaptive outcomes, such as disordered eating, poor body image, and other physical health

concerns (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2016). In light of Jazmine's candid response, we need

more research on disordered eating, particularly amongst Black college students, to prevent the

potential adverse physical and mental outcomes. Finally, Table 2 (Appendix B) fully accounts

for the other coping mechanisms participants classified as adaptive, variable, and maladaptive.

Discussion

There is ample literature establishing how Black students' experiences with general and

race-related stressors affect their mental health and wellbeing during their time in college (Greer

& Brown, 2011; Griffith et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Mushonga,

2020; Shahid et al., 2018; Williams, 2022). This study aimed to shed new light on how Black

college students employ a variety of coping strategies in response to general and race-related stressors. In particular, the study offers new insight regarding Black students' perceptions on the effectiveness of prevalent coping approaches. This work also explored differences in the higher education context, exploring whether Black college student experiences were distinct across minority serving and predominantly White institutions. Our study identified differences between the two institutions in the number of coping strategies used during stressful periods, with PWI students employing a greater number than MSI students. Considering that prior studies have not compared the coping strategies of Black students across different institutions, this is a novel finding. Previous studies indicate, however, that Black students at PWIs may experience more significant prejudice and discrimination on campus (Blume, 2012; Griffith, 2019; Harper et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2021). In light of this, it may explain why PWI participants engaged in more coping with managing increased race-related stressors.

Notably, we found that, across the sample, individuals demonstrated coping flexibility or the ability to discontinue ineffective coping strategies and replace them with more effective strategies (Kato, 2012). Thus, participants demonstrated awareness and reflection in their coping responses by assessing situations and their environment to make necessary adjustments. Lastly, we identified four main themes from student interview data that mapped onto different kinds of coping: (1) emotion-focused, (2) avoidant, (3) problem-focused, and (4) adaptive, variable, and maladaptive. The following sections further summarize and discuss these results in relation to existing literature, acknowledge the limitations of this study, and lay out implications for future research and university mental health supports for Black students.

Coping Strategy Patterns

Overall, we identified three coping themes that were very consistent with Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) model of coping that emphasizes three main approaches: emotion-focused (in which one manages or alleviates an emotional reaction), problem-focused (in which one resolves a problem), and avoidant coping (in which one denies or minimizes a problem). We identified unique ways Black students prefer to cope with stress, previously overlooked in prior research. Therefore, this study may provide new directions for the types of coping strategies that are more likely to benefit Black college students. For instance, we considered the use of coping strategies not typically included in studies, such as yoga, meditation, physical activity, and journaling. In addition, we captured other non-traditional coping approaches like listening to music, researching successful Black role models, and reflecting on pride of being a Black woman or man. Thus, this work has broadened our awareness of coping tools that Black students find helpful, which clinicians or counseling centers may be unaware of and could use to offer more responsive supports.

Furthermore, we found that students in this study employed multiple coping strategies in response to stressors, which aligns with past literature on Black college students. For example, Lewis et al. (2013) found that Black collegiate women employed a combination of resistant, collective, and self-protective coping mechanisms to cope with perceived gendered and racial microaggressions. Moreover, the women in that study actively considered the short- and long-term benefits and costs associated with specific strategies and power differentials (Lewis et al., 2013). However, studies of this nature have not explored the use of adaptive versus maladaptive coping strategies and students' perceptions of coping. Thus, our study was unique in that it allowed participants to identify adaptive, variable (helpful and unhelpful), and maladaptive coping strategies. We allowed participants to define how they perceived the helpfulness/harm of

specific coping strategies. Our approach was unique in the literature, as we did not assume what was and was not adaptive for the participants. Moreover, by focusing on their perspective, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of how Black students interpret the impact of their chosen coping mechanisms.

We cannot overstate the importance of examining Black students' experiences through their lens, given that historically, a significant amount of psychological research and evidence-based interventions are centered on Whiteness (Adams, 2018). As a result, we gained a greater understanding of what Black students found helpful and harmful by allowing them to be the experts, rather than imposing clinical standards on them. For example, our study found that participants classified emotion-focused and problem-focused coping methods as adaptive, whereas avoidant strategies were classified as maladaptive. In certain circumstances, however, our participants found avoidant strategies to be useful. For instance, Greer and Brown (2011) found that denial and avoidance strategies reduced stress levels and served as an initial strategy for managing emotional responses to challenges that center their racial/ethnic identity. Likewise, Hoggard et al. (2012) found that Black students use less problem-solving and more ruminative and avoidant coping strategies in racially stressful situations. Consequently, the context in which a stressor occurs, as well as the perceived benefit of that stressor, may determine whether a method is considered adaptive, variable, or maladaptive.

Importance of Coping Flexibility

While our findings underscore that Black students employ multiple co-occurring coping strategies and engage in coping flexibility (Griffith et al., 2019; Kato, 2012), fewer studies have examined how students combine coping strategies. Our study found that students, on average, engage in at least three coping mechanisms to handle stressful situations. Emotion-focused

coping (59.5%), avoidant/passive coping (21.5%), and mindful wellness activities (8.46%) were

the most used. Students engaged least in behavior activation (4.6%) and proactive coping (6.9%).

Participants in the sample used a variety of coping strategies that they deemed as adaptive,

variable, and maladaptive. In many ways, our findings are in accordance with preconceived

notions of what coping tools are helpful and unhelpful. As an example, participants often

characterized emotional suppression and avoidance as maladaptive coping tools. Even so,

participants found avoidant coping to be adaptive in certain circumstances, such as situations in

which they felt helpless or overwhelmed. Also, our study highlighted how accessibility is a

critical environmental feature that plays a role in what coping strategies students pursue most

frequently. For instance, taking a nap in a dorm or watching television was more accessible for

some participants than taking a yoga class or finding a faculty mentor. Thus, environmental

constraints and accessibility on campuses must be considered to facilitate students' engagement

in coping strategies.

Another important aspect of coping flexibility is meta-coping, which involves individuals

evaluating the effectiveness of their coping (Lange et al., 2017). As part of applying coping

mechanisms flexibly, coping efforts are evaluated to assess their effectiveness. An individual

may then abandon a coping strategy and employ a new one (Kato, 2020). This coping flexibility

process was evident in our study as participants shifted coping tools and reflected aloud on the

usefulness of various coping techniques. Yet, research indicates that simply altering a coping

strategy in response to a stressful event may not always result in better adaptation since the

individual may not have sufficient time to consider the best coping strategy (Cheng et al., 2014).

Furthermore, selecting coping strategies in isolation or divorced from the environmental context

and consideration of outcomes is also likely to result in undesirable consequences (Cheng et al.,

2014). According to our findings, Black students engage in self-reflection, but they might not evaluate in a manner that results in the most effective course of action (e.g., continuing to use the same coping tool). As such, we should prime Black students to use therapeutic resources that can assist them in leveraging their self-reflective capabilities, potentially leading to more adaptive responses to stress.

Developing coping flexibility involves the ability to discard ineffective coping tools and implement alternative strategies (Lazarus, 1999). Unfortunately, some participants in our study struggled to abandon maladaptive coping skills or relied heavily on one or two coping tools. However, to cope with increasing stress levels, students must develop a wide variety of coping strategies. Additionally, research suggests that having only one coping mechanism does not provide maximal adaptability (Kato, 2015). Furthermore, many participants who used avoidant-coping strategies, like sleeping or psychological distractions, did so to their detriment (e.g., missing classes or feeling fatigued) when they lacked knowledge of alternative approaches. The significance of this finding lies in the fact that individuals who perceive their coping repertoire as containing numerous helpful strategies (rather than a small number) may be better able to cope with psychological distress (Jacob et al., 2023). Additionally, past research indicates that using ineffective coping strategies can lead to repeated failures, which is then likely to result in more negative emotions (e.g., depression) (Sheppes et al., 2015). Consequently, students must recognize when to abandon ineffective coping strategies and know how to do so. Generally, Black students may benefit from having a broader range of coping strategies and a better understanding of the process of assessing their effectiveness so that they may 'move on' to another approach whenever an initial one becomes ineffective or never works in the first place.

Differences in Coping Styles for MSI and PWI Students

Our study was unique in the sense that we analyzed stressors and coping approaches across two different types of institutions. Across both institutions, coping approaches were similar in many ways; namely, students responded to academic and race-related stress by engaging in three major categories of types of coping (i.e., emotion-focused, avoidant, and/or problem-focused approaches). However, participants' experiences across the PWI and MSI settings were also distinct in certain ways. Our findings gleaned three observable differences in coping efforts based on the type of institution participants attended. First, to address a stressor, participants at the PWI used, on average, four different coping skills, whereas participants at the MSI used two different coping skills. Based on previous research, it may be possible that participants at the PWI experienced more frequent and distressing experiences of race-related stress than those at the MSI, and as a result needed to deploy a wider variety of coping skills (Greer & Brown, 2011; Swim et al., 2003).

Secondly, participants at the PWI exhibited more avoidant coping behaviors than participants at the MSI. As previously discussed, although avoidant coping may be harmful in most situations, it could prove beneficial in settings where Black students face stressors they cannot control, such as systemic racism (Greer & Brown, 2011; Hoggard et al., 2012). The findings of our study suggest that, for some participants, behavioral or psychological disengagement temporarily reduced stress by allowing escape from certain situations, thoughts, or emotions. A significant aspect of this finding is that it challenges the widely held belief that avoidant coping strategies are generally ineffective. Rather, avoidant coping may be less beneficial for White students, but it can sometimes serve a crucial role for Black students.

Lastly, none of the participants who attended the MSI reported using acceptance as a coping mechanism. Acceptance involves the choice to accept that the stressful event has

occurred rather than resisting. In contrast, participants at the PWI did report using acceptance as a coping mechanism in response to race-related stressors. The PWI participants may have perceived that they had less control over experiencing discrimination and racism on campus. In contrast, participants at the MSI may have perceived themselves as having greater agency and control over their academic environment. Additionally, past research on Black college students indicates that emotion-focused coping, such as acceptance, can be helpful when enduring discrimination and racism in settings where they have limited control (Brown et al., 2007).

In sum, although our study identified some differences among institutions in terms of coping efforts, more research is required to better identify variations between institutions in terms of the types of stressors experienced. Although the paper focuses on the voices of Black students, it does not provide an analysis of how institutional practices and oppressive systems perpetuate chronic stressors for Black students. Studies in the future may address systemic issues that impact stressors and the ways in which Black students cope with them. It is also worth noting that a limitation of our study was the MSI did not have a large Black student population. Therefore, the results of our study may not generalize to Black students' experiences at HBCUs or universities with a sizable Black student population.

Implications for Higher Education Research and Practice

Although this study highlighted important nuances in coping responses, much remains to be explored. For example, we need to understand how Black students perceive racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events, which is a limitation of our study. Therefore, future work might dive deeper into coping with race-related stressors, in particular, which may or may not differ from how general stressors are faced by Black students. Another limitation is the retrospective nature of our study, since we asked participants to describe how they cope based on

past general and race-related stressors that they have experienced. Unfortunately, most coping studies on Black college students are retrospective. Accordingly, future studies may benefit from focusing on time-specific stressful situations (e.g., a stressor within the past week or month). Another approach to filling this gap in research could involve utilizing ecological momentary assessment (EMA). EMA studies ask participants to complete brief surveys throughout the day and at the end of each day in order to record their overall feelings and stressors (Ortega-Williams et al., 2022). In one such study, Ortega-Williams et al. (2020) examined Black adolescents' experiences of racism across routine activity locations (e.g., their neighborhood and school). According to the study, Black youth experience more racism at school and on the streets (Ortega-Williams et al., 2022). Researchers might replicate this study with a Black college student population to better understand how racism impacts students' daily lives and the specific locations on campus where discrimination occurs.

Additionally, we need to understand better how Black students decide which co-occurring coping skills to use and how they assess the effectiveness of these skills. Research utilizing the Articulated Thoughts in Simulated Situations (ATSS) paradigm might shed light on how Black students approach decision-making in the coping process. ATSS is a think-aloud cognitive assessment method designed to capture ongoing thinking in a controlled environment with considerable interpersonal complexity (Zanov & Davison, 2010). The ATSS methodology could provide students with several vignettes that depict scenarios that include general and racial stressors. Researchers then record participants discussing their reactions to these stressful situations, followed by coding participant responses to identify coping patterns and potentially evaluate interventions' effectiveness. A study of this kind could contribute to a better understanding of the cognitive processes involved in Black students' coping strategies. Finally,

research is also necessary to determine if skills-based interventions or mentorship could effectively increase students' exposure to different coping mechanisms, given that Black students benefit from having natural mentors (Griffith et al., 2019) and tapping into peer networks (Grier-Reed, 2013).

Furthermore, our results have important implications for universities, particularly their counseling and psychological services. For example, our findings suggest that Black students may prefer learning about their mental health in informal settings. Thus, Black students may benefit from trained peer-based support networks. Alternatively, clinicians may host informal groups or collaborate with Black student organizations to reach a captive audience to educate students about various coping methods. Furthermore, these spaces may provide a safe space for students to process difficult emotions and receive guidance and validation. For example, Sontag-Padilla et al.'s (2018) study concluded that Black and Latino college students participating in a student peer organization focused on increasing mental health awareness reduced students' mental illness stigma, increased help-seeking behaviors, and enhanced peer-to-peer support.

In addition, Bridges et al.'s (2018) study found that a culturally appropriate online peer-to-peer program significantly improved attitudes and depression management among Black college students. Similarly, participants in our study sought out and developed informal support groups with their Black peers. These informal groups centered around emotional closeness through mutual experience and provided a therapeutic effect for dealing with daily stressors. This finding is supported by other literature focused on the benefits of informal support groups for Black college students at PWIs. For instance, Grier-Reed (2010) qualitatively studied Black students attending a PWI and their participation in an intervention called African American Student Network (AFAM). AFAM provided Black students with a weekly group-based

intervention to meet their socio-emotional needs. In addition, it was a safe space for Black students to process race-related stress and receive empathy and support (Grier-Reed, 2010). Likewise, our participants reported that having same-race peers validate their experiences and offer guidance was essential in coping with race-related stress.

In addition, our results suggest that students are more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping strategies, such as seeking instrumental support. Due to this, counseling centers may provide students with more problem-focused coping strategies and other approaches to expand their access to a wider variety of coping. Additionally, we found that students were often aware of their coping strategies, even when they employed unhelpful ones. Consequently, counseling centers might educate students on how to interrupt unhelpful patterns, while making tailored recommendations on coping tools that were beneficial to our participants. Furthermore, it would be helpful for universities to focus more on skill promotion and preventative approaches rather than deficit-driven interventions. Thus, college counseling centers may need to pivot away from their current medical model, primarily concerned with diagnosing and treating mental illness (Mushonga, 2020; Taylor & Kuo, 2019), and adopt a proactive prevention strategy. Medical model approaches may alienate Black students who fear inappropriate labels, unnecessary medication, and unplanned hospitalizations. Also, due to cultural mistrust and the underrepresentation of Black counseling professionals, Black students may feel less comfortable accessing traditional counseling services (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2022). Further, counseling centers should refrain from shaming or marginalizing Black students who use avoidant strategies but rather seek to understand since these strategies can be adaptive in specific contexts.

Contrary to this, colleges are encouraged to provide a continuum of services that complement treatment. For example, the Institute of Medicine (1996) proposed a preventative framework for mental health disorders, in which there are three different methods of prevention for targeted populations (Institute of Medicine, 1996): universal prevention (strategies offered to the entire population), selective prevention (strategies targeted at subpopulations at an elevated risk for a disorder) and indicated prevention (strategies targeted at individuals identified as having an increased vulnerability for a disorder). A framework of this type could allow colleges to target both universal and selective prevention. In the universal prevention category, counseling center clinicians might collaborate with Black student organizations to provide coping skills workshops during student orientation, given our findings that Black students benefit from peer networks where they can vent and receive instrumental support. Alternatively, using a more selective prevention approach, colleges could assess Black students' coping skills via a survey and match them with a Black peer mentor who could help assess their current coping toolbox, and introduce them to new strategies, given our findings that Black students benefit from peer-based support.

Conclusions

During college, Black students employ a variety of coping mechanisms to manage race-related and general stressors. Over time, Black students' coping evolves, allowing them to use a broader set of tools while monitoring their effectiveness. However, Black students often lack formal campus spaces and opportunities to expand their coping repertoire, so they lean on Black peers and faculty to find support through informal routes. Although it is essential for Black students to actively engage in developing adaptive coping skills, this responsibility should not be owned by them alone. Nor should we expect Black students to correct or tolerate unsafe, and

unwelcoming campuses. The results of this study do not intend to suggest that Black students should simply adapt to racial stress and better cope with hostile racial climates. Rather, it is ultimately the responsibility of universities to take actionable steps to eliminate discrimination and create an environment where Black students can spend less time coping with stress and more time thriving. A supportive environment and resources should be created based on the lived experiences of Black students rather than on frameworks that are culturally insensitive and centered on the needs of White students (Bridges et al., 2018). The current study makes a substantial contribution to the extant literature, as one of the first to examine within-group variation in coping among Black college students with respect to the type of stressor and the type of institution of higher education. In addition, our study provides insight into the coping approaches students find beneficial and gaps in their understanding of coping approaches. Coping is a crucial component of Black students' ability to adapt to stressful events during their college years and beyond. Therefore, researchers should continue to develop a more nuanced understanding of Black college students' coping to guide college-based prevention and intervention efforts.

References

Adams, G., Kurtiş, T., Gómez, L, Molina, L. E., & Dobles, I. (2018). Decolonizing knowledge in hegemonic psychological science. In N. N. Wane & K. L. Todd (Eds.), *Decolonial pedagogy: Examining sites of resistance, resurgence, and renewal* (pp. 35–53). Springer.

Aldwin, C. M., & Yancura, L. (2011). Stress, coping, and adult development. In R. J. Contrada & A. Baum (Eds.), *Handbook of stress science: Psychology, biology, and health* (pp. 263-274). New York: Springer.

Banks, B. M., & Landau, S. (2022). Take a deep breath: Coping and the cognitive consequences of racial microaggression among Black college women. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, *4* (4), 1-20.

Banks, K. H., Kohn-Wood, L. P., & Spencer, M. (2006). An examination of the African American experience of everyday discrimination and symptoms of psychological distress. *Community Mental Health Journal, 42*(6), 555–570. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-006-9052-9.

Billings, A. G., & Moos, R. H. (1981). The role of coping responses and social resources in attenuating the stress of life events. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, *4*(2), 139-157.

Blume, A. W., Lovato, L. V., Thyken, B. N., & Denny, N. (2012). The relationship of microaggressions with alcohol use and anxiety among ethnic minority college students in a historically White institution. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 18*(1), 45–54. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025457

Bridges, E. M. (2011). Racial identity development and psychological coping strategies of undergraduate and graduate African American males. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, *2*(2), 150-167.

Bridges, L. S., Sharma, M., Lee, J. H. S., Bennett, R., Buxbaum, S. G., & Reese-Smith, J. (2018). Using the precede-precede model for an online peer-to-peer suicide prevention and awareness for depression (SPAD) intervention among African American college students: Experimental study. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, *8*(1), 15.

Brondolo, E., Brady Ver Halen, N., Pencille, M., Beatty, D., & Contrada, R. J. (2009). Coping with racism: A selective review of the literature and a theoretical and methodological critique. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 32*(1), 64–88. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-008-9193-0

Brown, T. L., & Krishnakumar, A. (2007). Development and validation of the adolescent racial and ethnic socialization scale (ARESS) in African American families. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 36*(8), 1072–1085. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-007-9197-z

Brown, G. K., & Nicassio, P. M. (1987). Development of a questionnaire for the assessment of active and passive coping strategies in chronic pain patients. *Pain®*, *31*(1), 53-64.

Cabral, R. R., & Smith, T. B. (2011). Racial/ethnic matching of clients and therapists in mental health services: A meta-analytic review of preferences, perceptions, and outcomes. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58*(4), 537–554. doi:10.1037/a0025266

Center for Collegiate Mental Health. (2022, February). *2021 annual report* (Publication No. STA 15-108). State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University.

Cheng, C., Lau, H. P. B., & Chan, M. P. S. (2014). Coping flexibility and psychological adjustment to stressful life changes: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological bulletin*, *140*(6), 1582.

Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006). Qualitative research guidelines project. (n.d.). Retrieved November 21, 2022, from http://www.qualres.org/

Cokley, K., McClain, S., Enciso, A., & Martinez, M. (2013). An examination of the impact of minority status stress and impostor feelings on the mental health of diverse ethnic minority college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *41*(2), 82-95.

Corbin A.N., Smith W. & Garcia J.R. (2018) Trapped between justified anger and being the strong Black woman: Black college women coping with racial battle fatigue at historically and predominantly White institutions. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 31*(7), 626-643.

Crutchfield, J., Keyes L., Williams, M., and Eugene, D.R. (2022). A scoping review of colorism in schools: Academic, social, and emotional experiences of students of color. *Social Sciences*, *11*(15), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11010015

DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Johnson, O. T., Womble Edwards, C., McCoy, W. N., & White, A. M. (2020). African American professionals in higher education: Experiencing and coping with racial microaggressions. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *23*(4), 492-508.

Gloria, A. M., Castellanos, J., Delgado-Guerrero, M., Salazar, A. C., Nieves, C. M., Mejia, A., & Martinez, V. L. (2017). El ojo en la meta: Latino male undergraduates' coping processes. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 10*(1), 11–24.

Glover, C. S., & Li, H. (2021). Parent socialization to racial coping: Implications for Black emerging adults' growth mindset and psychological well-being. *Research in Human Development*, *18*(4), 239-255.

Goodwill, J. R., Watkins, D. C., Johnson, N. C., & Allen, J. O. (2018). An exploratory study of stress and coping among Black college men. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *88*(5), 538.

Greer, T. M., & Chwalisz, K. (2007). Minority related stressors and coping processes among African American college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(4), 388–404.

Greer, T. M., & Brown, P. (2011). Minority status stress and coping processes among African American college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *4*(1), 26.

Greer, T. M., & Cavalhieri, K. E. (2019). The role of coping strategies in understanding the effects of institutional racism on mental health outcomes for African American men. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *45*(5), 405-433.

Grier-Reed, T. L. (2010). The African American student network: Creating sanctuaries and counterspaces for coping with racial microaggressions in higher education settings. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, *49*(2), 181-188.

Griffith, A. N., Hurd, N. M., & Hussain, S. B. (2019). "I didn't come to school for this": A qualitative examination of experiences with race-related stressors and coping responses among Black students attending a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *34*(2), 115-139.

Harper, S. R., Davis, R. J., Jones, D. E., McGowan, B. L., Ingram, T. N., & Platt, C. S. (2011). Race and racism in the experiences of Black male resident assistants at predominantly White universities. *Journal of College Student Development, 52*, 180-200. doi:10.1353/csd.2011.0025

Hayes-Conroy, A., & Hayes-Conroy, J. (2016). Doing nutrition differently: Critical approaches to diet and dietary intervention. Routledge.

Hill, C. E. (2012). *Consensual qualitative research: A practical resource for investigating social science phenomena*. American Psychological Association.

Hoggard L.S., Byrd C.M., Sellers R.M (2012). Comparison of African American college

    students' coping with racially and nonracially stressful events. *Cultural Diversity and*

    Ethnic Minority Psychology, 18(4), 329.

Huang, H. Y., Li, H., & Hsu, Y. C. (2022). Coping, COVID knowledge, communication, and

    HBCU student's emotional well-being: Mediating role of perceived control and social

    connectedness. *Journal of Community Psychology*. (50), 2703-2725.

Hurd, N. M., Varner, F. A., Caldwell, C. H., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2014). Does perceived racial

    discrimination predict changes in psychological distress and substance use over time? An

    examination among Black emerging adults. *Developmental psychology*, *50*(7), 1910.

Jacob, G., Faber, S. C., Faber, N., Bartlett, A., Ouimet, A. J., & Williams, M. T. (2023). A

    systematic review of Black people coping with racism: Approaches, analysis, and

    empowerment. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, (1) 1-24.

Javed, S., & Parveen, H. (2021). Adaptive coping strategies used by people during coronavirus.

    Journal of Education and Health Promotion, *10,* 1-8.

Jenkins, D. A., Tichavakunda, A. A., & Coles, J. A. (2021). The second ID: Critical race

    counterstories of campus police interactions with Black men at historically White

    institutions. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *24*(2), 149-166.

Jones, M. K., Hill-Jarrett, T. G., Latimer, K., Reynolds, A., Garrett, N., Harris, I., & Jones, A.

    (2021). The role of coping in the relationship between endorsement of the strong Black

    woman schema and depressive symptoms among Black women. *Journal of Black*

    psychology, *47*(7), 578-592.

Jones, S. C., Anderson, R. E., Gaskin-Wasson, A. L., Sawyer, B. A., Applewhite, K., & Metzger,

    I. W. (2020). From "crib to coffin": Navigating coping from racism-related stress

throughout the lifespan of Black Americans. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *90*(2), 267.

Kato, T. (2012). Development of the coping flexibility scale: Evidence for the coping flexibility hypothesis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *59*(2), 262.

Kato, T. (2015). Effects of flexibility in coping with chronic headaches on depressive symptoms. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 22*(4), 506–511.

Kato, T. (2020). Examination of the coping flexibility hypothesis using the coping flexibility scale-revised. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 3494.

Kilgore, A. M., Kraus, R., & Littleford, L. N. (2020). "But I'm not allowed to be mad": How Black women cope with gendered racial microaggressions through writing. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, *6*(4), 372.

Kitzrow, M. A. (2003). The mental health needs of today's college students: Challenges and recommendations. *NASPA Journal, 41,* 167–181.

Krohne, H. W. (2002). Stress and coping theories. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Behavioral Sciences*, *22*, 15163-15170.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 257–277). Sage Publications.

Lange, F., Seer, C., & Kopp, B. (2017). Cognitive flexibility in neurological disorders: Cognitive components and event-related potentials. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, *83*, 496-507.

Lazarus, R. S. (1999). *Stress and emotions: A new synthesis*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer publishing

    company.

Leath, S., & Chavous, T. (2018). Black women's experiences of campus racial climate and

    stigma at predominantly White institutions: Insights from a comparative and within-

    group approach for STEM and non-STEM majors. *Journal of Negro Education*, *87*(2),

    125-139.

Lewis, J. A., Mendenhall, R., Harwood, S. A., & Browne Huntt, M. (2013). Coping with

    gendered racial microaggressions among Black women college students. *Journal of

    African American Studies*, *17*(1), 51-73.

Marshburn, C. K., & Campos, B. (2022). Seeking just us: A mixed methods investigation of

    racism-specific support among Black college students. *Journal of Black Psychology*,

    48(1), 67-99.

McGee, E. O. (2016). Devalued Black and Latino racial identities: A by-product of STEM

    college culture? *American Educational Research Journal*, *53*(6), 1626–1662.

    https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216676572

Mekawi, Y., Carter, S., Packard, G., Wallace, S., Michopoulos, V., & Powers, A. (2022). When

    (passive) acceptance hurts: Race-based coping moderates the association between racial

    discrimination and mental health outcomes among Black Americans. *Psychological

    Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *14*(1), 38.

Mincey, K., Alfonso, M., Hackney, A., & Luque, J. (2015). The influence of masculinity on

    coping in undergraduate Black men. *Journal of Men's Studies, 23*, 315-330.

    doi:10.1177/1060826515605022

Moritz, S., Jahns, A. K., Schröder, J., Berger, T., Lincoln, T. M., Klein, J. P., & Göritz, A. S. (2016). More adaptive versus less maladaptive coping: What is more predictive of symptom severity? Development of a new scale to investigate coping profiles across different psychopathological syndromes. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *191*, 300-307.

Morrison, K. S., & Hopkins, R. (2019). Cultural identity, africultural coping strategies, and depression as predictors of suicidal ideations and attempts among African American female college students. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *45*(1), 3–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798418813511

Munoz, R. F., Mrazek, P. J., & Haggerty, R. J. (1996). Institute of medicine report on prevention of mental disorders: Summary and commentary. *American Psychologist*, *51*(11), 1116.

Mushonga, D. R., & Henneberger, A. K. (2020). Protective factors associated with positive mental health in traditional and nontraditional Black students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *90*(1), 1-14.

Nielsen, M. B., & Knardahl, S. (2014). Coping strategies: A prospective study of patterns, stability, and relationships with psychological distress. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 55,* 142–150. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12103

Ortega-Williams, A., & Harden, T. (2022). Anti-Black racism and historical trauma: Pushing the positive youth development paradigm. *Youth & Society*, *54*(4), 662-684.

Pierce, C. M. (1988). Stress in the workplace. In A. F. Coner-Edwards & J. Spurlock (Eds.), *Black families in crisis: The middle class* (pp. 27-35). New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.

Renk, K., & Smith, T. (2007). Predictors of academic-related stress in college students: An examination of coping, social support, parenting, and anxiety. *NASPA Journal*, *44*, 405–431. http://dx.doi.org/10.2202/ 0027-6014.1829

Roming, S., & Howard, K. (2019). Coping with stress in college: An examination of spirituality, social support, and quality of life. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, *22*(8), 832-843.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2000). Data management and analysis methods. *Handbook of qualitative research*, *2*, 769-802.

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity, 52*(4), 1893-1907.

Shahid, N. N., Nelson, T., & Cardemil, E. V. (2018). Lift every voice: Exploring the stressors and coping mechanisms of Black college women attending predominantly White institutions. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *44*(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798417732415

Sheppes, G., Suri, G., & Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation and psychopathology. *Annual review of clinical psychology*, *11*, 379-405.

Smith, C. A., & Kirby, L. D. (2011). The role of appraisal and emotion in coping and adaptation. *The handbook of stress science: Biology, psychology, and health*, *1*(1),195-208.

Sontag-Padilla, L., Dunbar, M. S., Ye, F., Kase, C., Fein, R., Abelson, S., & Stein, B. D. (2018). Strengthening college students' mental health knowledge, awareness, and helping behaviors: The impact of active minds, a peer mental health organization. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *57*(7), 500-507.

Spates, K., Evans, N. T. M., Watts, B. C., Abubakar, N., & James, T. (2020). Keeping ourselves sane: A qualitative exploration of Black women's coping strategies for gendered racism. *Sex Roles*, *82*(9), 513-524.

Sun, W. (2021). HBCU undergraduate students' perceived stress management and coping skills. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *23*(1), 27–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2020.1871402

Swim, J. K., Hyers, L. L., Cohen, L. L., Fitzgerald, D. C., & Bylsma, W. H. (2003). African American college students' experiences with everyday racism: Characteristics of and responses to these incidents. *The Journal of Black Psychology, 29*(1), 38–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798402239228

Taylor, R. E., & Kuo, B. C. (2019). Black American psychological help-seeking intention: An integrated literature review with recommendations for clinical practice. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, *29*(4), 325.

Volpe, V. V., Katsiaficas, D., & Neal, A. J. (2021). "Easier said than done": A qualitative investigation of Black emerging adults coping with multilevel racism. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *27*(3), 495–504. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000446

Williams, T. R., Walker, T. L., & Wyatt, W. N. (2022). Conceptualizing racism through a systemic trauma lens: Impacts on Black college students. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, *32*(1), 49.

Wood, S.K., & Bhatnagar, S. (2015). Resilience to the effects of social stress: Evidence from clinical and preclinical studies on the role of coping strategies. *Neurobiology of Stress, 1*, 164–173. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ynstr.2014.11.00

Zanov, M. V., & Davison, G. C. (2010). A conceptual and empirical review of 25 years of cognitive assessment using the articulated thoughts in simulated situations (ATSS) think-aloud paradigm. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, *34*, 282-291.

Appendix A

Table 1

Demographic Summary of Participants (n = 48)

Pseudonym	Year	College	Ability Status	Coping Skills
Serenity	4th	MSI	disability not reported	EF, yoga and meditation, AC, behavioral/mental disengagement
Lexi	2nd	MSI	disability not reported	EF, positive reframing, venting/instrumental support, & religion and spirituality
Zoe	3rd	MSI	depression	AC, behavioral/mental disengagement, EF journaling, venting/instrumental support, PF
Danice	3rd	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support, *listening to music
London	4th	MSI	depression & bipolar disorder	EF, venting/instrumental support, *researching successful Black women
Skylar	4th	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support, positive reframing, humor
Sophie	1st	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support, humor
Taylor	1st	MSI	disability not reported	EF, journaling, *talk myself through it
Charity	2nd	MSI	disability not reported	EF, religion & spirituality, venting/instrumental support

Carmen	4th	MSI	anxiety disorder	EF, yoga and meditation
Destinee	2nd	MSI	depression	EF, venting/instrumental support, physical activity, AC, behavioral & mental disengagement
Brandi	Not reported	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support
Victor	3rd	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support, humor
Riley	4th	MSI	depression & anxiety	EF, venting/instrumental support, AC, behavioral & mental disengagement
Christopher	4th	MSI	disability not reported	EF, religion & spirituality, venting/instrumental support
Fallon	2nd	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support
Lydia	3rd	MSI	disability not reported	yoga and meditation
Nemiya	2nd	MSI	disability not reported	AC, Behavioral & mental disengagement
Crystal	2nd	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support
Tiffany	1st	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support, journaling, positive reframe, PF, AC, behavioral & mental disengagement
Romina	4th	MSI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support, positive reframe

Famus	3rd	PWI	disability not reported	EF, positive reframe, *self-reflection
Aaliyah	1st	PWI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental support, AC, Substance use
Precious	4th	PWI	depression	EF, Acceptance, humor, venting/instrumental support, journaling
Nia	3rd	PWI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental, humor, positive reframe, AC, behavioral & mental disengagement, denial
Deja	2nd	PWI	disability not reported	EF, venting/instrumental, humor, positive reframe, humor
Jalen	4th	PWI	Psychological condition (not named)	AC, behavioral & mental disengagement
Jamal	2nd	PWI	depression & anxiety	EF, venting/instrumental, humor, spirituality, AC, denial
Brittney	3rd	PWI	depression & anxiety	AC, Substance use, behavioral & mental disengagement
Sandra	1st	PWI	anorexia nervosa	EF, religion & spirituality, venting/instrumental support, acceptance, AC, behavioral & mental disengagement, substance use, sleep
Asia	1st	PWI	disability not reported	journaling; EF, venting & instrumental, acceptance, humor, physical activity
Terra	3rd	PWI	depression & anxiety	

Kiara	3rd	PWI	depression	AC, behavioral & mental engagement, denial; EF, humor, venting & instrumental support, religion and spirituality, yoga & meditation, journaling, PF
Jazmine	2nd	PWI	disability not reported	EF, religion & spirituality, venting/instrumental, humor, AC, behavioral & mental disengagement
Jermaine	3rd	PWI	disability not reported	EF, humor, positive reframing, AC, behavioral & mental disengagement
Evyn	2nd	PWI	disability not reported	EF, religion & spirituality, venting and instrumental, humor, AC, behavioral & mental disengagement
Talisa	3rd	PWI	disability not reported	AC, behavioral & mental disengagement, EF, venting & instrumental support
Rekia	3rd	PWI	disability not reported	EF, Acceptance, positive reframe, venting & instrumental support, humor, religion and spirituality
Trevon	3rd	PWI	Slow processing disorder	PF, AC, displacement behavioral & mental disengagement, yoga and meditation

Note. *Coping skills categorized within "other" category. EF = Emotion-Focused, AC= Avoidant coping, PF = Problem-Focused

Appendix B

Table 2

Participants' Classification of Coping Skills

Adaptive Coping Skills	Variable Coping Skills	Maladaptive Coping Skills
Dance	Venting and instrumental support	Behavioral and mental disengagement
Meditation	Positive reframing	Emotion suppression
Religion and spirituality	Journaling	Meditation
Venting and instrumental support	Denial	Venting
Journaling	Substance use	Distraction
Problem-focused coping	Sleeping	Self-isolation
Humor		Not asking for help
Exercise		
Yoga		
Playing basketball		
Therapy		
Group substance (in context of social support)		
Writing poetry		
Acceptance		
Running outdoors		
Positive reframing		
Sleeping to reset		

Appendix C

Table 3C

Summary of Black Student's Coping Mechanisms

Code	Definition	Frequency (# of instances)
		N = 93, 71.55 %
Emotion-Focused Coping	The ability to respond to the ongoing demands of experience with the range of emotions in a manner that is socially tolerable	
Yoga/meditation	Engaging in a yoga, breathing, or meditation practice	
Journaling	Writing about one's feelings and experiences	
Physical activity	Engagement in adaptive or physical activities (which often are those associated with the experience of pleasure or mastery)	
Religion & Spirituality	Using prayer, soliciting help from pastor or religious leader, increased engagement in religious activities, or finding comfort in your religion or spiritual beliefs	
Venting/instrumental support	Saying things to others to let your unpleasant feelings escape or outwardly expressing your negative feelings. Seeking tangible support in the form of information, advice, assistance, or resources from a social support network (e.g., friends, family, church members, mentors, deans)	
Humor	Using humor or sarcasm to point out the funny or ironic aspects of a situation	
Positive reframing	Making the best of the situation by growing from it or viewing it in a more favorable light (e.g., seeing the glass "half full" as opposed to "half empty)	
Acceptance	Accepting the fact that the stressful event has occurred and is real	

Avoidant or Passive Coding	Disengagement from stressor	N = 28, 21.53 %
Substance Use	Turning to the use of alcohol and other drugs as a way of disengaging from the stressor	
Behavioral/mental disengagement	Giving up, or physically withdrawing effort from, the attempt to attain the goal with which the stressor is interfering. Psychological disengagement from the goal with which the stressor is interfering (daydreaming, sleep, or self-distraction)	
Denial & displacement	Outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring. Taking out our frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects that are less threatening	
Problem-Focused Coping	Refers to Working on time management and/or planning to confront or resolve dilemma or stressor	N = 9, 6.92 %

Table 4C

Summary of Utility of Coping Mechanisms

Code	*Definition*
Adaptive Coping Mechanism	Refers to instances in which participants indicated that coping mechanism was effective or helpful for them to reduce stress or improve their overall psychological well-being
Variable Coping Mechanism	Refers to instances in which participants indicated that coping mechanisms had both helpful and harmful effects on their overall psychological well-being
Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms	Refers to instances in which participants indicated that a coping mechanism was harmful to their overall psychological well-being

Paper 3

"Now You See Me, and Now You Don't": An Institutional Case Study of How Conditions

of Visibility Affect Black College Women's Sense of Belonging

Paris J. Ball, M.Ed.

School of Education and Human Development

University of Virginia

Seanna Leath, Ph.D.

Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences

Washington University St. Louis

Abstract

In recent years, a growing number of studies have examined Black women's collegiate experiences, particularly their academic, social, and psychological adjustment. Nonetheless, there is a gap in qualitative research regarding how conditions of visibility affect how Black women are perceived and evaluated in academic spaces and how it affects their sense of belonging. This exploratory institutional case study utilizes McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) conditions of visibility framework, which examines Black women's experiences in the workplace. This study applied this framework to investigate four Black women's (18-22) classroom experiences at a predominantly white institution. Through narrative interviews, the women explore how they navigate the paradox of belonging and distinctiveness on campus while engaging in authentic expression of their distinct racial and gender identity.

Keywords: Black college women; distinctiveness; sense of belonging; conditions of visibility

"Now You See Me, and Now You Don't": An Institutional Case Study of How Conditions

of Visibility Affect Black College Women's Sense of Belonging

Latoya, a 3rd-year African American student attending a mid-Atlantic PWI, reflected on a pivotal classroom experience with a White professor that made her feel a strong sense of belonging in the classroom. She shared, "Professors like her challenged me in a positive way to have my voice heard. A lot of times in these White spaces, for a minority like me, it's great to have that power and really stand out, but also, it can be a lot." She continued, "It can be scary sometimes to get your voice out when you know you are not the majority," and concluded, "This professor reminded me that there are people who want to see how I can use my experiences and identity to further my studies. So, that mattered to me, and I really appreciated that." As illustrated by Latoya's experience, a sense of belonging and visibility interconnect with Black undergraduate women's experiences in university settings (Kelly et al., 2021; Newton, 2023; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2009).

While Latoya reflected on a positive experience in the classroom, she also alluded to the larger struggle that Black women at predominantly White institutions (PWI) face concerning the desire to 'fit in' and 'stick out' (Shore et al., 2011), often referred to as the *belongingness-distinctiveness paradox* (Brewer, 1991). According to the belongingness-distinctiveness paradox, individuals have two fundamental and conflicting human needs, those of inclusion and differentiation (Brewer, 1991). For instance, Latoya wanted to retain a sense of positive self-worth by sharing her unique perspective as a Black woman without being othered and losing her sense of belonging amongst her peers. Therefore, understanding how Black women's identities affect their collegiate experiences requires consideration of the *belonging-distinctiveness paradox*.

A Theoretical Framework on Black Women's Belongingness and Visibility

In the current study, we draw upon McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) theoretical framework on conditions of visibility to interrogate Black women's sense of belonging at PWIs, focusing on their adjustment in the college context. In this framework, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) is integrated with optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) to examine how Black women's social identities, such as race and gender, create unique conditions of visibility within work settings. Within McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) conceptual paper, they articulate how Black women cannot fully control their level of belonging and distinctiveness in organizational settings due to embedded social norms and structures of race, gender, and power. They identified four continuous conditions of visibility in the workplace for Black women: (a) precarious visibility (low belonging/low distinctiveness), (b) invisibility (high belonging/low distinctiveness), (c) hypervisibility (high belonging/high distinctiveness), and (d) partial visibility (low belonging/high distinctiveness). While researchers have studied the belongingness-distinctiveness paradox primarily within workplace contexts (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Shore et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2019), scholars can also use this theoretical framing to interrogate how PWIs – as organizational settings – have unique social, cultural, and racial climates that inform Black college women's belongingness and distinctiveness experiences in similar ways (Neal-Jackson, 2020; Shahid et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner, 2019). Below, I provide a definition of each visibility condition highlighted by McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) and enumerate on how each category of belongingness and distinctiveness may correspond to Black women's experiences of visibility in higher education contexts.

Precarious visibility (low belonging/low distinctiveness) describes a visibility condition in which Black women lack a sense of belonging to their company or organization and lack

distinctiveness, particularly in situations where Black women are overrepresented, such as in low-level positions or temporary jobs within organizations (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Additionally, precarious visibility affects Black women negatively, because they often lack the power to increase their visibility in this organizational context. Thus, Black women are often relegated to low-level positions within organizations, reinforcing their subordinate status within the social hierarchy (Bell et al., 2010). In a higher education context, precarious visibility may lead to Black women being overlooked and excluded from classroom discussions. Even though Black women at PWIs often form a small percentage of students on campus, they may still experience a low level of distinctiveness. For instance, they may attempt to blend in or fade into the background in uncomfortable classroom settings, where their racial and gender identities are particularly salient. It could also look like Black women being overlooked and excluded from classroom discussions. Furthermore, Black women may find that their ideas and opinions are not valued and denied leadership roles when working with peers in groups (Love et al., 2021). As a result, Black collegiate women may feel undervalued, leading to decreased classroom participation and self-doubt.

Invisibility (high belonging/low distinctiveness) describes a visibility condition in which Black women have a high sense of belonging but low distinctiveness. Invisibility can sometimes be the result of efforts to assimilate or fit into a dominant culture, as a strategy to gain belongingness. However, Black women in corporate settings report that assimilation can be harmful, since it entails Black women compromising their unique values in the process (Shore et al., 2011). Additionally, assimilation can stifle Black women's creativity and authenticity by signaling that their unique experiences and perspective are not valuable (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Invisibility can also manifest as an inner struggle with feeling that one's personality or

worth are not valued or even recognized (Franklin, 1999). As a result, Black women have to exert more effort to differentiate themselves and gain recognition (Roberts et al., 2022). In addition, the invisibility of Black women's uniqueness makes them more vulnerable to mistreatment, since it obscures their presence and needs (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). For example, White peers may incorrectly perceive Black women's experiences as similar to those of other minority groups and impose stereotypes on them, intensifying invisibility (Buchanan et al., 2008; Franklin, 1999). Notably, bell hooks (1981) described how the cloak of invisibility forces Black women to adjust, cope, and adapt to perceived inferior status, instead of exercising liberation in the classroom. Moreover, invisibility in a higher education context could appear as Black women feeling pressure to assimilate into the dominant White culture in the classroom. For instance, during a class discussion, a professor may ignore a Black woman's dissenting opinion, or classmates may make assumptions about the values and beliefs of Black women.

Hypervisibility (high belonging/high distinctiveness) refers to a visibility condition whereby Black women's identities are highly distinguishable, but they also feel a strong sense of belonging amongst their colleagues. Nevertheless, Black women who feel a strong sense of belonging and distinctiveness at work may become hypervisible (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Black women in the workplace reported feelings of isolation and being treated as tokens by their employers in an effort to signal gender and racial equality (Ely & Thomas, 2001). As an example of tokenization in academia, Black women faculty members are often expected to serve on diversity committees and lead efforts to recruit other faculty and students of color (Roberts et al., 2022). Moreover, high levels of distinctiveness may lead to feelings of isolation and a narrowing of Black women's expertise within one domain (e.g., diversity work) (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Hypervisibility experienced in college classrooms entails Black women experiencing additional

scrutiny on their assignments and classroom participation due to their underrepresentation. Additionally, hypervisibility may contribute to the perception that Black women must work twice as hard to ensure their work can withstand extra scrutiny and to gain positive recognition from White professors (Kelly et al., 2021). Thus, high levels of belonging and distinctiveness do not guarantee genuine inclusion of Black women in the workplace or higher education settings. On the contrary, it is more likely that their underrepresentation in spaces will result in tokenism and heightened scrutiny of their performance (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

Lastly, *partial visibility* (low belonging/high distinctiveness) refers to a visibility condition whereby Black women's gender and racial identity are very distinct. Still, they have a low sense of belonging among their colleagues. High distinctiveness creates feelings of isolation, and White colleagues perceive Black women's uniqueness as deviant rather than valuable (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Partial visibility diminishes Black women from achieving positions of power, because they are stereotyped and categorized into low-level roles. Consequently, Black women experiencing partial visibility in positions of power may have their leadership undermined by colleagues in dominant and marginalized groups (Phillips et al., 2009). This may be in part due to the "pet to-threat" phenomenon, whereby White colleagues initially show support but withdraw when Black women progress into leadership positions (Thomas et al., 2013). Furthermore, partial visibility creates conditions in which Black women are especially susceptible to racialized jokes and insults that reinforce their high distinctiveness yet low belongingness (Rosette et al., 2013). Similarly, in college, due to partial visibility, Black women may not share their experience and knowledge as readily to limit further isolation and prejudice toward them. When Black women in college do achieve leadership roles or share their

intellectual convictions openly in class, they run the risk of being labeled as angry, abrasive, aggressive, or unprofessional (Doharty, 2020).

Altogether, Black women experience marginalization and power dynamics that undervalue their unique contributions and relegate them to low-level positions in organizations (Smith et al., 2019). The pressures Black women face to conform to organizational settings can have serious consequences for their well-being on both a personal and professional level (Dickens, 2018). In the following sections, building from established concepts in research on Black women's experience in workplace environments, we specifically elaborate on Black college women's experiences with power dynamics, visibility, and belongingness as students at PWIs.

Black Women's Belongingness at PWIs

In higher education, sense of belonging refers to the degree to which students feel connected to their institution and the people within it, including academic and social experiences (Graham & McClain, 2019). Negative stereotypes about their academic abilities (Love et al., 2021), coupled with the low racial representation of Black students at PWIs, may contribute to a reduced sense of belonging for Black women (McClain et al., 2016; Shahid et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2012). For instance, Black women often report feeling invisible and devalued during interpersonal exchanges in academic spaces at PWIs (Love, 2021; Stewart, 2017).

A qualitative study conducted by McCabe (2009) examined racial and gender microaggressions (i.e., covert insults) through individual interviews and focus groups with 82 Black, Latino, and White students at a PWI. According to the study, Black women were most likely to experience microaggressions when participating in class discussions. In particular, Black women in the study experienced covert verbal and non-verbal signals indicating that they

were different from their peers and professors, which alienated them and increased their anxiety (McCabe, 2009). Therefore, these women experienced a diminished classroom experience due to prejudice related to their race and gender. Additionally, many studies have demonstrated that Black women attending PWIs feel overlooked and dismissed in classroom settings (Domingue, 2015; Love, 2021; Miles et al., 2011; Settles, 2006). Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that feeling a lack of belonging can not only result from negative interpersonal experiences, but also from a variety of other contextual factors, including institutional policies, campus climate, and resource allocation (Porter, 2022).

The Impact of Belongingness on Black Women's Collegiate Experiences

A growing body of literature highlights how belongingness informs Black undergraduate women's collegiate experiences, particularly in regard to their academic, social, and psychological adjustment outcomes (Kelly et al., 2021; Newton, 2023; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2009).Students who feel a stronger sense of belonging perform better academically, are more motivated to study, and adjust better to college overall, as compared to students who feel a lower sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). Students who feel accepted by their peers and professors are more likely to succeed than those who feel less belonging (Mallett et al., 2011). Furthermore, feeling a sense of belonging to an institution is a significant psychosocial factor associated with positive academic outcomes (Hausmann et al., 2007; Shook & Clay, 2012). A sense of belonging among peers and professors significantly affects students' academic performance (Castleman et al., 2017; Mallett et al., 2011). According to Tinto (2017), a sense of belonging is one factor that motivates students to persist in higher education in combination with perceptions of the curriculum and self-efficacy.

Despite PWI's high graduation rate of Black women, they fail to create an environment that embeds Black women's experiences within institutional policies and procedures (Patton & Haynes, 2018). Black women must feel that they matter at an institutional level, particularly at PWIs with a history of exclusion (Patton & Haynes, 2018). Unlike belonging, mattering entails institutional action and accountability (Porter, 2022). Therefore, as Black women navigate the various spaces at their university, whether it be in class, sports, or dorm life, they need to feel their institution has policies and takes action to safeguard their educational spaces. According to studies that examined Black women's views on PWIs, there was a consistently reported feeling that PWIs did not act on their behalf that necessitated creating spaces for themselves (Commodore et al., 2018). For instance, Croom et al.'s (2017) qualitative studies examined what motivated Black college women to participate in a student-led organization called "Sister Circle" that focused on centering race and gender. Research findings revealed that interlocking systems of oppression within their institution led Black women to create Sister Circles to counter the negative experiences and messages they encountered on campus (Croom et al., 2017).

Newton (2023) examined the gendered racial microaggressions experienced by Black undergraduate women at PWIs, as well as the impact these incidents had on their collegiate experiences. Twenty-five Black college women were interviewed about their experiences in class and around campus. The study results indicated that Black women felt hypervisible and were microaggressed by White faculty and peers. For example, participants described feeling particularly hypervisible when working with White male students since working with the most privileged group on campus made their race and gender more salient (Newton, 2023). The study further found that when participants encountered microaggressions in class, they were less likely to defend themselves to avoid being stereotyped as a loud and angry Black woman (Winkle-

Wagner, 2009). For example, one participant described hearing a White student complain under her breath about her natural hair obstructing her view. Overall, the participants' experiences provided valuable insight into the hypervisibility of Black women in PWI classrooms.

Similarly, Neal-Jackson (2020) qualitatively examined how stereotype threat (e.g., anxiety and stress in a situation where a person is potentially confirming a negative stereotype about their social group) affected Black women's visibility in the context of class discussions. Study participants reported experiencing stereotype threat when their peers were highly judgmental of their comments, which resulted in them feeling hypervisible (Neal-Jackson, 2020). Ultimately, the women felt unable to freely participate in class discussions due to the scrutiny and dismissal they received from their peers.

Furthermore, Porter (2022) interviewed 23 Black women at different PWIs to examine their experiences with belongingness. The study found that the Black women were treated in ways that undermined their belonging by peers and professors. The women lack of belonging created significant self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness. More broadly, they did not feel that they truly mattered in class or in the larger campus community. Notably, a Black woman in the study poignantly shared,

> I don't think people recognize how the gravity of being a Black woman who does not feel like they belong in a space affects your schoolwork, your sense of belonging, how much that affects your self-esteem and mental health in general. So, people will downplay and minimize it as if it's our fault. It definitely breaks you. Since my first year, I've never really wanted to be here. I never really thought I belonged here. So, I surrounded myself with people—intelligent Black women—who were also fighting with me. In reality, it's us bearing the brunt of everything on campus like this where we're surrounded by people

who look nothing like us, don't appreciate us, don't support us, and don't love on us. All

of those little things come together to make Black women feel like they're unworthy of

being a student here. The unworthiness is also perpetuated by other people, so it's not just

an internal thing. It's like someone looking at you and telling you that you're not worthy

of being here (Porter, 2022, p. 109).

Porter's (2022) study participant makes an essential point about how a lack of distinctiveness and

belongingness impacts every aspect of a Black woman's educational experience. Furthermore, it

affects Black women's mental health and self-esteem. The participant also indicated that a lack of

belonging does not simply result from an internal struggle. Rather, it results from oppression

perpetrated by professors, students, and the institution's administration.

These studies clearly show that Black college women often feel invisible or isolated at

PWIs. Alternatively, when they *were* visible, they believed others did not regard them as

valuable academic community members (Stewart, 2017). Moreover, Black women at PWIs often

feel pressured to conform to racial and gender norms in ways that hinder their voice, encourage

passive behavior, or cause them to choose between their racial and gender identities (Everett &

Croom, 2017). Thus, we need "a deeper understanding of the ways in which Black women

successfully access, persist through, and complete college while living at the intersections of race

and gender" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 21).

The Current Study

A substantial body of research focuses on how chronic stress and racial discrimination

play a role in Black undergraduate women's adjustment to college (Leath et al., 2021; Neal-

Jackson, 2020; Porter, 202; Shahid et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner, 2019). According to this

literature, low racial representation, social acceptance, faculty relationships, institutional policies,

and campus climate all affect Black women's sense of belonging. However, few scholars

consider how the belongingness-distinctiveness paradox affects Black women's collegiate

classroom experiences. To examine how Black undergraduate women's PWI classroom

experiences may mirror the challenges faced by Black women in predominantly White work

settings, we utilized an exploratory case study design (Berg, 2001) as well as McCluney &

Rabelo's (2019) condition of visibility framework. Moreover, we sought to understand how

Black women navigated conditions of visibility in similar and different ways. The following two

questions guided our exploratory case study.

Research Question 1: How do Black undergraduate women navigate conditional visibility

informed by the belongingness-distinctiveness paradox in PWI classroom environments?

Method

The Case

The participants were enrolled at a highly selective, public predominantly White

institution (<10% Black) in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. At the time of data

collection, the PWI student body was 56.8% White, 13.1% Asian, 6.4% Black or African

American, 6.3% Hispanic or Latino, 4.5% two or more races, and .07% Native Hawaiian or

Pacific Islanders. This institution carries a complex historical legacy intertwined with the

country's racial past. Founded centuries ago, its origins are deeply rooted in a time marked by

systemic racism and enslavement. The labor of enslaved individuals played an integral role in

shaping its early development, yet their contributions often went unrecognized and

unacknowledged. Over the years, this institution has grappled with the repercussions of its

racialized history, striving to reconcile with its extensive history of anti-Black, racialized trauma,

in addition to below-average racial representation amongst faculty (4% Black). In recent years,

the racial climate at this institution has been subject to heightened scrutiny and introspection.

Incidents of racial bias, discrimination, and inequity have come to light. Black students, faculty,

and staff have voiced concerns about feelings of marginalization, exclusion, and systemic racism

on campus. These issues have prompted protests, demands for institutional accountability, and

efforts to address underlying structural inequalities. While strides have been made to promote

diversity and inclusion, challenges persist, underscoring the ongoing need for sustained efforts to

foster a more equitable and respectful racial climate within the institution.

Participants

In the present case study, data were compiled from a larger multi-institutional, qualitative

study comprised of 48 interviews that examined the associations between Black U.S. college

students' perceptions of campus racial climate, mental health service utilization, and wellness

outcomes across two racially distinct universities (Principal Investigators [PIs]: Drs. Seanna

Leath and Martinque Jones). The final sample consisted of four Black women under the

pseudonyms *Rekia, Talisa, Claire, and Latoya*. Three participants identified as Black or African

American, and one identified as Caribbean. Three participants were in their third year of college,

and one participant was in their fourth year. The household income range of participants was

$20,000-$200,000 (median = $110,000). We chose these participants as our final sample because

they offered rich, detailed, relevant interview accounts of their classroom experiences and

highlighted significant moments related to their visibility.

Procedures

After obtaining IRB approval, researchers sent a weekly recruitment email with a flyer to

Black student organizations during Spring 2020. The email detailed that the study focused on

Black students' perceptions of institutional climate and mental health, and interested participants

contacted the PI to set up an interview time. The PI at the PWI scheduled interviews until the

target number of participants was obtained based on available grant funding and theoretical

saturation. The interview team consisted of four Black women, the co-PIs, both university

professors, and two Black women who were graduate students. Before the interview, participants

completed a 15-question electronic survey of demographic information (e.g., social class,

ethnicity, age, gender, and racial composition of their childhood neighborhood; see Appendix E).

Due to COVID-19, researchers used a modified protocol and conducted interviews

virtually via Zoom or by phone. When interviewing via Zoom, participants had the option of

having their cameras on or off during the interview, but the interviewers kept their cameras on

for the entire time. Researchers discarded video files after audio files were transcribed. The

interviews ranged from 50 to 120 minutes, and participants were compensated $20 for study

participation. After the audio files were transcribed into a written format by a professional

transcription service, the researchers reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy and uploaded

them onto a data server for coding purposes.

Interview Protocol

We used a standardized, semi-structured interview protocol for data collection (see

Appendix F). Interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants to explore a topic in

depth (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The semi-structured interviews consisted of three main sections

– the first section focused on institutional climate, the second portion focused on mental health

processes, and the third section focused on the institutional response to COVID-19 and access to

student mental health services. Within the first section of the interview, participants responded to

questions related to how they decided to attend the institution and their sense of belonging.

Subsequent questions focused on their campus experiences related to race. The second section of

the interview focused on the participants' mental health and wellness processes, including coping strategies, university counseling experiences, and their perception of university resources. The third section focused on their institution's response to COVID-19, including whether they received mental health and academic resources. Lastly, we asked participants how they were coping with the challenges brought on by COVID-19 concerning their collegiate experience. Participants' responses in each section of the interview were reviewed by the research team in order to capture any pertinent information or context related to distinctiveness and belongingness in the classroom.

Positionalities

As individuals and scholars, we are influenced by our own personal and professional identities in the course of conducting research and interpreting the data (Ladson-Billings, 2000); therefore, we provide relevant information about how our professional and personal identities offer insight into the belongingness and visibility of Black college women. The lead author is a cisgender Black woman from a low-income background who attended a Historically Black College for her undergraduate studies. The lead author is working toward her doctorate in clinical and school psychology and studies Black college students' mental health processes and Black women's well-being. In addition, she also has experience providing therapy and intervention services to Black girls and women. The second author is a Black queer woman from a mixed social class background who attended a PWI for her undergraduate studies. Her research focuses on health and well-being processes among Black women and girls in family and school contexts. The third member of the coding team is a Black, cisgender woman from a low-income background who attended a PWI for her undergraduate studies. Her research explores research works to understand and address disparities faced by marginalized communities. The fourth

member of the coding team is a Black, cisgender woman from a lower working-class background who attended a PWI for her undergraduate studies. Her research focuses on the onset and diagnosis of anxiety and depression in late adolescents and emerging adults within the Afro-Diaspora.

Data Analysis

We used an exploratory case study to understand how social, behavioral, psychological, cultural, and environmental factors affected our participants in a real-life context (Berg, 2001). This type of research design offers a more in-depth analysis of the complex dynamics of how race, gender, and higher education shape the experiences of Black women. It also allows us to compare the experiences of multiple women to gain a broader perspective of the barriers Black women face in the higher education system. Additionally, the case study design enabled us to directly examine the implementation of the conditions of visibility framework with Black college women. Finally, the case study design helped identify potential solutions to challenges identified by participants (Crowe et al., 2011). Case studies are a valuable methodology, because they allow for an in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon and can provide important insight even with a small sample size (Crowe et al., 2011). Moreover, they are one of the few research methodologies capable of offering in-depth insights into the lived experiences of Black women in higher education.

Prior to coding, the research team read McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) theoretical article, which describes four continuous workplace visibility conditions that Black women face (precarious visibility, invisibility, hypervisibility, and partial visibility), and created operational definitions for each visibility condition. In the first phase of coding, the lead author reviewed all 17 transcripts of the participants that identified as Black women in their entirety and extracted all

statements broadly related to the research question, (a): How do Black undergraduate women navigate conditional visibility informed by the belongingness-distinctiveness paradox in PWI classroom environments? Then, the lead author reviewed each transcript, explicitly focusing on Black women's classroom experiences. Given the underrepresentation of Black women at PWIs and the fact that in college classes, they are required to negotiate identity, marginality, and power (Love et al., 2021), our team concluded that the classroom environment, among many contexts within a higher education institution, is most comparable to a workplace environment. Thus, the lead author pulled excerpts specifically related to the Black women's classroom experiences and created condensed transcripts.

The lead author then applied preliminary codes using McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) four continuous workplace visibility conditions (precarious visibility, invisibility, hypervisibility, and partial visibility). While we asked participants about their sense of belonging and visibility, not all provided detailed and in-depth responses. Furthermore, some participants preferred to discuss their belonging in terms of their extracurricular activities or the spaces on campus rather than their classroom experiences. This resulted in only four participants receiving preliminary codes. We selected these participants to be our final sample, because they provided detailed descriptions of their classroom experiences and examples of salient experiences related to their visibility. Moreover, the four participants also discussed the impact of their interactions with peers and professors in class on their sense of belonging. Overall, their responses stood out from the other participants due to the level of detail, complexity, and insight they provided into their classroom experiences.

In the second phase of coding, the lead author met with the research team to audit the preliminary coding. As part of the preparation for the meeting, the research team (four Black

women) reviewed all four transcripts in their entirety, in addition to each participant's excerpt highlighting their classroom experiences. Following a second review of each participant's transcript, the team applied codes individually, sharing their coding and providing justification based on McCluney & Rabelo (2019). The meeting involved a discussion about how our biases and experiences may influence our perceptions. We also frequently reviewed the full transcript to gain additional context about the statements made by the participants. In order to resolve disagreements, the team reviewed the McCluney & Rabelo (2019) article and the participants' full transcripts for context until we reached a consensus. By considering their full transcripts, the team was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants, ultimately allowing coders to make an informed decision about which four individuals would best represent the four visibility categories.

Findings

Below, we present narratives from Talisa, Latoya, Claire, and Rekia. Their stories clearly illustrate how Black women attending PWIs negotiate distinctiveness and belongingness and resulting visibility in classroom settings. Findings indicate that Black women attending PWIs experience at least four conditions of visibility, which McCluney & Rabelo (2019) theorized Black women experience in White majority workplace settings. Moreover, findings suggest that Black women felt alienated in classes and were under pressure to conform to the standards set by their peers and professors. White professors and peers wielded more influence over their grades and were the gatekeepers for classroom inclusion. Furthermore, participants reported experiencing significant self-doubt and decreased classroom engagement in relation to their visibility. Lastly, results indicate that Black women do not passively accept their diminished presence in class but instead rely on strategies to advocate for themselves and navigate visibility

issues. These strategies include developing relationships with faculty, resisting tokenization, and seeking out classes with greater racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. In addition, the results suggest that the strategies Black women used to navigate visibility issues led to improved classroom engagement and self-efficacy.

Talisa: Precarious Visibility (low distinctiveness, low belongingness)

Talisa attended a highly competitive and majority White high school. Since she was the only Black student in most of her classes, she became adept at code switching and blending in. Upon receiving an acceptance and full academic scholarship to the PWI, Talisa's classmates rumored that she was only accepted because she was Black. Although the rumor devalued her hard work, she stated that it bolstered her determination to succeed in college as a student majoring in American medical studies. Talisa received a code of precarious visibility for her account of how her unique perspective as a Black woman was not valued in her college classes, as well as for her feeling of low belonging among her White peers (Shore et al. 2011). Accordingly, Talisa's narrative describes what it is like to experience precarious visibility in class. Talisa, a 3rd year African American student, shared,

> I would rate my belonging based on the spaces that I occupy. Maybe on a scale of one to
> 10, maybe a six. I think it's because of my relationship with the Black student services,
> but outside of that office, it decreases. It's a constant pressure to be perfect and not show
> your flaws or mistakes. And I think it's made me self-filtered and, again, code-switching
> again, which I don't like to do, but I feel like I'm pressured to do it in certain spaces. I
> think my sense of belonging increases, I feel like, once I have the ability to prove myself
> to these professors. So, some professors I've had, I just don't feel like they value me, or I
> don't feel as smart as my peers when it comes to classes. So, my sense of belonging

definitely decreases once I'm in the classroom setting. Yeah, because I just feel like,

wow, I'm not getting it. And they are. And they're getting recognition for knowing the

material, and the professor's calling on them constantly in the class to share what they

wrote about in this assignment, and then you're just sitting there like, wow, I'm not even

going to get called on. There are some classes where I feel completely fine in, but there

are certain classes specific to my major that I feel like, "Oh no, I don't fit in here, or I

don't feel like being here."

Talisa explained how she linked her sense of belonging to her academic performance and

perceived value in the classroom. As a result, she felt pressured to codeswitch, mirror her White

counterparts and adjust how she presented herself to achieve desired outcomes, such as social

inclusion (McCluney et al., 2021). Codeswitching to fit in significantly impacted Talisa's sense

of identity and belonging in the classroom, making it difficult to feel accepted and valued for

who she was. Moreover, Talisa's experience of being overlooked by her White professor is

consistent with research findings that White colleagues often overlook the potential and

accomplishments of Black women (Smith et al., 2019). Despite receiving a full scholarship to

her college, Talisa doubts her intelligence and intellectual abilities due to being ignored.

Additionally, she felt pressured to "prove" her intelligence. Her urge to prove herself might have

resulted from stereotype threat or increased pressure to perform well in academics when she

believes that others evaluate her performance based on her race (Neal-Jackson, 2020). In

addition, Talisa's low distinctiveness and low belonging affect her collaboration with peers. She

continued,

Then, there's additional pressure with group work, working with people in my cohort at

that end who, in my opinion, don't really value what I have to say. And when I say

something that I feel should be considered or should be implemented, they'll be like, "Oh, that's a terrible idea." And then, like five minutes later, it's like, "Oh, we should definitely do that." Like, where did the switch happen? And they claim the idea as their own. And that's been really frustrating. And something that I've been talking through with some of my advisors. So along with learning, I have to learn how to advocate for myself in those spaces, even more so, which is hard. Sometimes you want to give up and just say, "Okay, I'll just sit here, and I don't have to be at the center of attention or the person that's getting the best version of you." I don't know. The recognition, whatever, I'll just deal with it. Then in the other respect, I do feel like, man, I really do need to advocate for myself in this space. I deserve to have my opinions or ideas valued, whether in the classroom or within the groups I'm in for that class.

Talisa's experiences demonstrated how she felt her opinions and ideas were devalued by her classmates. Her disappointment was compounded when White peers re-pitched her ideas and received a positive response. Similarly, Black women's potential is often overlooked in the workplace, resulting in missed leadership opportunities and incorrectly attributing Black women's contributions to others (Rosette et al., 2016). Although Talisa was frustrated, she longed to have her opinions and ideas validated. Despite her inclination to fade into the background, she recognized the importance of advocating for herself and claimed her space in the classroom. Altogether, low distinctiveness and low belongingness created precarious visibility for Talisa since she lacked the power to make herself and her work visible. This led to a lack of respect and recognition for Talisa's work and diminished opportunities to lead or participate in meaningful conversations.

Latoya: Invisibility (low distinctiveness, high belongingness)

Latoya attended a racially diverse high school and initially considered attending a HBCU

before she visited her PWI for a recruitment event for students of color. However, when she

arrived at the PWI as an American studies major, she was surprised by the lack of Black

professors and how she was often the only Black student in her classes. Nevertheless, she was

highly involved in extracurriculars on campus. Latoya received a code of invisibility based on

her description of how she worked to assimilate into her White majority classes to increase her

belongingness. However, due to her low distinctiveness, she was denied the opportunity to

become recognized for her unique perspective as a Black woman. Despite her efforts to blend in,

Latoya experienced tokenization as the only Black woman in the class. As a result, her

classmates and professors overlooked her classroom contributions. Latoya, a 3rd year, African

American student reflected,

> I just think that for so long, I've just been used to assimilating to what I'm used to and
>
> what I know that I don't allow myself to even think about a space where I would feel
>
> otherwise. I kind of just stay to what I'm used to, what I'm comfortable with, what I'm
>
> familiar with. So, I've never felt like, okay, I'm not going to go over there because I'm
>
> going to have a difference of opinion or people are not going to understand my
>
> perspective, my experience. I can't really think about think a space like that because I just
>
> don't allow it. I took a class on African American studies post-1865, and it was like 60
>
> students in the class. Also, in this class, the students were majority White, which was
>
> interesting. They raised their hands to add a lot of input, and there have been times when
>
> I wanted to say something different, but I felt weird in the situation to the point that I'm
>
> just like, okay, let me just sit quietly and just listen to what they have to say.

Latoya's account illustrated the negative impact that invisibility had on her and her academic pursuits. Over time, she became accustomed to assimilation in order to feel a sense of belonging, but at the expense of being fully seen by her classmates. Although she tried to take a course where she might experience greater comfort (i.e., African American study course), she found herself in a challenging position since the majority of the students were White. As a result, she chose not to speak up during class discussions in order to avoid standing out too much. She continued,

> There have been times when I was the only person of color in a discussion class. Last semester, when I took Intro to African American Studies, I really liked my TA, and I think she tried her best to make it feel like an inclusive climate even though I was the only person of color. So, in a space like that, how can you really say what you want when you're the only person of color and not be tokenized and not feel like there's a burden of representation going on in these spaces? Automatically, I just think of the class setting because there have been so many times when I've been the only person of color. I feel like a lot of times, TAs or professors just expect the Black students to come up with something profound to say when it has something related to the Black experience or a Black topic. I don't know, I sometimes feel pressure to raise my hand or say something, but I felt like an underlying tokenization of like burden of representation where I felt like me raising my hand, I have to speak on behalf of the Black people. Or the group of Black students had to speak on behalf of the African American community, like the Black experience, and I did not like that. So, a lot of times, I didn't really say anything because it just felt like this underlying pressure to feel like, okay, well, Black person, Black girl, it's time for you to say like the most amazing thing ever to silence us all.

Being the only Black student in a course devoted to African American history created a lot of

pressure for Latoya. Rather than experiencing a positive and inclusive classroom environment,

she felt tokenized. Research suggests being one of few Black women in space creates a stronger

sense of pressure and consequently makes them (and their contributions) more scrutinized than

others around them (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Settles et al., 2019). Furthermore, Black women

who feel pressured to represent an entire racial group are more likely to experience negative

consequences, such as decreased performance and social exclusion (Ferreira & Santos, 2022).

Consequently, Latoya's classroom experience was diminished by the fact that she had to conform

to the majority to receive acceptance but could not express her true self. This lack of recognition

of her individuality contributed to her feelings of invisibility.

Claire: Hypervisibility (high distinctiveness, high belongingness)

Claire was from a first-generation low-income background and attended a predominantly

Black high school. Claire decided to attend the PWI, because she was offered a full scholarship

as a foreign affairs major. However, when she arrived on campus, she noted experiencing culture

shock since she was often the only Black student in her classes. Still, she connected well with her

peers and became highly involved in extracurricular activities. Claire received a code of

hypervisibility, because peers and professors valued her distinct perspectives and contributions,

which made her feel like an insider and increased her sense of belonging. However, her high

distinctiveness rendered her hypervisible, especially in classes where Black women were

underrepresented (Shore et al., 2011). Claire, a 4th year, African American student shared,

> I've definitely had some professors that are racist or discriminatory toward Black women.
>
> And sometimes I feel like they would call on me to answer a question like they would
>
> pick me out of the crowd, especially since I'm the only one, and you know what? When I

circle back to my first year, why was that even difficult? It's like since I would be the only Black girl in most of my classes, every time I was missing or I'm skipping class, he would notice, and he would email me and single me out, and was like, "Oh, you weren't in class this day or that." And I'm just like, "Yeah, I know." But then it's like, "Why are you calling me out on it? If Becky or Karen wasn't there, you're not going to notice her. But you noticed because I'm the only one here who is Black. It's fine if you notice. You just don't have to call me out in front of people. So those experiences I've definitely had, and it was connecting, made me more aware of who I am as a Black woman, and I can't afford to slip up because people are always looking to see me down, catch me in my downfall.

Claire made strong contributions to the class. However, she was hypervisible as the only Black woman in her class. Moreover, Claire's high distinctiveness was not due to her performance, but because Claire was Black in a White majority space. Therefore, she felt singled out and faced greater scrutiny, such as her professor's hyperawareness of her absences compared to White students who skipped class without being noticed. not being noticed. She was also subjected to more intense scrutiny in her academic work. She continued,

Some of the professors, especially the tenured professors, are subjective in how they grade essays. And I always have to be careful to ask them specifically, "What are you looking for, for the essay?" Because I have had experiences where a professor would discriminate on how I write my essay, as compared to how another person writes their essay. And it's like, "Oh, I know the White girl or the White boy or the Asian person didn't even put that much work in them, in the essay because I asked them, I talked to them." But for me, they grade me more harshly because I'm a Black woman. And first,

it's like, some of these professors are playing games with the essay, or however they

want to grade it, they don'' give a "hoot or give a shit or anything. So, everything's

subjective. So, I also have to be very careful when it comes to essay writing because I can

always face discrimination because they can grade me more harshly and punish me for a

little grammatical error, but when it comes to other people, they don't care.

Claire explained that her essays were subjected to additional scrutiny due to the hypervisibility she experienced in the classroom. According to research, Black women reported that hypervisibility negatively impacted their work and performance (Lewis et al., 2013). Furthermore, it can cause Black women like Claire to feel that they must work twice as hard as their White counterparts to gain positive recognition. Although Claire was hypervisible, she managed it by implementing strategies that protected her, such as monitoring grade expectations closely. Furthermore, she spoke with peers about their experiences with professors' grading norms. Moreover, she accepted that the overly biased feedback she received was a reflection of her White professors and not a true reflection of her performance. As a consequence, by anticipating prejudice and developing strategies to deal with it, Claire managed her hypervisibility in the classroom.

Rekia: Partial visibility (high distinctiveness, low belongingness)

Rekia attended a predominantly Black fine arts high school and chose to attend her PWI due to the academic rigor of the university. As a women's and gender studies major, Rekia was highly involved in student leadership in various organizations. Rekia received a code of partial visibility in recognition of her account of how her race and gender contributed to her distinctiveness in class. Nevertheless, she was overlooked for her unique perspective and ideas. Additionally, she felt a low sense of belonging in class due to her peers placing her in

subordinate roles during collaborative work, which diminished the visibility of her achievements (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Rekia, a 3rd year, Caribbean student stated,

> So, I feel like I can't 100% say I feel like I completely belong at my university because I
> don't feel like I belong in every space. I think I create and seek the spaces where I feel
> like I belong and try to put myself in those circumstances as often as possible. For
> instance, when I walk into my entrepreneurship class, I feel genuinely uncomfortable
> because I'm the only Black woman. And I spoke to my professors about this. I feel like
> sometimes they encourage participation, and you should participate in stuff.
> I said, "But I don't think you realize, when I participate when I raise my hand,
> everybody's head is looking to the left to see what I have to say," when that doesn't
> happen with everybody else.

Rekia experienced partial visibility since she was very distinct as the only Black woman in the class but also experienced a low sense of belonging. Moreover, her sense of belonging fluctuated based on the space she occupied on campus, which was also reported by other participants. Although she sought out classes in which she could feel comfortable, she inevitably found herself in classes with a majority of White students. Furthermore, her low belongingness made her feel isolated and disconnected, making her reluctant to share her thoughts and ideas. She continued,

> I have a really bad habit of like really tapping into what I'm saying to the point where I
> feel like, "This doesn't make any sense." And it could be making 100% sense, but
> sometimes, I'm just like, "Okay, I sound crazy right now. Or I sound really stupid." And
> that's not something I think I ever did until I got to college. Raising my hand and talking
> and feeling like what I'm contributing is subpar or not adding to the class is not a feeling

BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS' STRESS, COPING, & MENTAL HEALTH   163

I've ever felt until college. And I remember the first time I felt like, "Wait, I don't know. I used to rehearse what I would say, especially in my first year, when I realized participation was a big deal. On the other hand, I took up a woman and gender studies class my very first semester, and I felt 100% comfortable. I was carrying the class, like sometimes, "Okay, somebody else other than Rekia." But in other classes, I could not get my hand up. I just couldn't. I felt like it was the demographic of the class, versus my women and gender studies class was a smaller class, but it was also all women, and then there were also women of color in there. So, I felt like, even if I were saying a new idea, it would be supported by at least one other person because they knew what I was talking about.

Similar to other participants, Rekia expressed varying levels of belongingness at her PWI, and the types of classes she enrolled in affected her visibility. Despite her high distinctiveness as a Black woman, her low belongingness made it difficult for others to see her beyond her race and gender. Due to this, participating in class was anxiety-provoking for her to the point that she felt paralyzed during class discussions. Additionally, she contrasted her experiences in other courses, such as women and gender studies, where she felt more visible. Rekia's differences in classroom engagement across different course types further highlighted her partial visibility. For example, in the women and gender studies class, she felt supported, which allowed her to engage more freely and bring her diverse perspectives to the discussion. Notably, Rekia's experiences further emphasized the importance of diverse and inclusive learning environments to foster meaningful dialogue. Additionally, Rekia's experience is another example of a participant who purposefully sought out classroom settings in which other women and persons of color were present. Rekia

also employed strategies to increase her visibility in classes where she feels partially visible. She shared,

> So, once I realized participation was going to be an issue with me this semester, I went to office hours, and I sat there, and I spoke, and he was like, "How about we do this? Now, he emails me questions that he knows he's going to ask the class, and I pick which one I'm going to answer, and then I get called on. So, kind of like to the class, it's like, "Oh, you know, he's just calling on Rekia. But that was when we were in person. That hasn't really happened too much, and I understand everything that's going on, but that was his plan for me. Like, that's how we're going to get you to talk. Do you know what I'm saying? And I thought that was really helpful, but I feel like, university wide, I don't think professors would be that open to that because, in their head, it's like, "What's the big deal? Just talk." But I don't think they realize the genuine discomfort.

In order to increase her visibility and sense of belonging, Rekia devised a creative solution. She requested that her professor pre-assign questions to her to ensure she would be included in class discussions and could contribute meaningfully. Despite this, she noted that many professors at her university would not be willing to make these accommodations since they seem unreasonable or cumbersome to some professors. To highlight how salient her identity as a Black woman became in class discussions, she added,

> For example, I remember one time in a class, we were talking about implicit biases, and we had to take the quiz, and it's like, "Oh, what color do you associate with this man?" It was really weird. So, there were people like, "Oh, so let's be honest and be comfortable. What did you guys get on your implicit bias?" So, all the White kids were like, "Oh, for the gun one, I got African-American as like the most likely whatever." I was like, "This

is the one class I cannot shut up." So, I raised my hand and was like, "Well, for me, you

know, for the gun violence one, I got White people since they're the ones shooting up the

classrooms, and I just went off." After that, I did not see anybody nodding. I just felt

really uncomfortable. I knew I was right because you can look at the statistics, but I was

still kind of like, "Hm." I was really second-guessing myself, and the professor was

nodding. You can tell she was freaking out because the one Black person was like,

"Listen."

In the class discussion, Rekia experienced unequal social power, where her White peers linked

Blackness with gun violence. Thus, Rekia felt othered by her White classmates during this

discussion. She stood out as the only person of color in the room. Additionally, she felt

compelled to address problematic prejudices about race that went unaddressed by her professor.

Nevertheless, when she referred to statistics on gun violence, she felt even less at ease and

partially visible. In that instance, her racial identity was the focal point of her classmates'

attention, invalidating her thoughts, ideas, and opinions.

 Overall, each participant's account highlighted how visibility conditions shape and

influence the ways in which Black women are perceived, valued, and evaluated in classroom

spaces at PWIs. Our analysis of participants' experiences revealed several similarities and

differences. Talisa and Latoya, for instance, experienced low distinctiveness in the classroom,

resulting in peers and professors undervaluing their uniqueness and relevance. Thus, Black

women's subordinate status within the social hierarchy became reinforced in their classrooms,

and their classmates missed out on their unique perspectives during class discussions.

Nevertheless, Latoya's sense of belonging was greater than Talisa's, because she chose to

assimilate into the White majority class. Still, in doing so, she lost her voice and experienced the burden of tokenization.

Furthermore, Claire and Rekia experienced high levels of distinctiveness since they were the only Black women in their courses. However, their high distinctiveness also made them feel othered and exposed them to greater scrutiny in class. On the other hand, Claire felt a strong sense of belonging, whereas Rekia felt a low sense of belonging. Even so, Claire did not experience true inclusion and acceptance, because she had to work twice as hard in class to demonstrate her abilities and felt valued only under some circumstances. In Rekia's case, her low sense of belonging caused her to feel isolated and doubtful about her academic abilities.

In general, it was evident that participants attempted to maximize their belongingness and distinctiveness but did not possess the power to gain visibility for themselves or their work. As a result of the unequal power dynamics in their classes, there was a perpetuation of gender and racial inequity in their classes, similar to the experience of Black women in workplaces with a majority of White employees. Therefore, the results of this study highlight a need for a shift in power dynamics to create equitable classroom environments at PWIs so that Black women feel a sense of belonging and visibility in the learning environment.

Discussion

A significant body of research demonstrates how Black women may feel invisible, devalued, isolated, and pressured to conform to Eurocentric racial and gender norms within academic spaces at PWIs (Everett & Croom, 2017; Love, 2021; Stewart, 2017). In the current study, we used an exploratory case study design to consider how four Black undergraduate women navigated experiences of visibility in classroom settings, reflecting the paradox of belongingness and distinctiveness (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Specifically, we considered how

their narratives about academic experiences in the classroom resulted in four conditions of visibility: precarious visibility, invisibility, hypervisibility, and partial visibility. The women's narratives provided a deeper understanding of how Black women's visibility in classroom settings can be affected by their sense of belongingness and distinctiveness. Moreover, we found that they employed a variety of strategies to navigate visibility to be seen as fully and authentically as possible by peers and professors. In what follows, we discuss our findings in relation to extant literature on Black women's distinctiveness and belongingness in organizational settings, review implications for future research, and outline key study limitations.

Application of the Conditions of Visibility Framework to College Course Experiences

We used McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) conditions of visibility framework to consider Black undergraduate women's experiences. In prior studies, this framework has primarily focused on Black women's experiences in predominantly White workplace settings and organizations (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019; McCluney; Newton, 2023; Rabelo et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2019). In general, the undergraduate women in our study described similar types of experiences in PWI classroom settings as documented in prior studies across other parallel contexts. For instance, Erskine & Bilimoria (2019) investigated the experiences of Afro-Diasporic women in senior leadership roles at predominately White organizations. This study highlighted how Black women often feel excluded in White-dominated organizations, especially when they hold higher-level leadership positions. Additionally, Black women felt pressured to construct a professional image that erased their Blackness and hindered their sense of belonging. Black women also faced tokenism, alongside having their mistakes amplified and becoming isolated members of an out-group. Black women leaders found it exceedingly challenging to break into the camaraderie of White organizational cultures since they received constant

reminders that they did not belong and were viewed as representative of Black professional

women (Smith & Nkomo, 2021). Similarly, our participants experienced tokenization and

constant reminders that they were different. They also spoke of amplified criticism of their work

and the pressure to conform their voice and behavior to fit in. Erskine & Bilimoria (2019) offer a

solution that we did not explore in our study, which is that White women colleagues can help

increase Black women's sense of belonging by leveraging their privileges. Future studies may

consider the effects of White students at PWIs engaging in allyship in the classroom to determine

if this could increase visibility and the sense of belonging of Black women.

Another study that highlighted Black women's work-based experiences was conducted by

Rabelo et al. (2021). This study focused on how the White gaze, or seeing people's bodies

through the lens of Whiteness, affects Black women at predominately White organizations.

Through analyzing 284,00 tweets that included the hashtag #Blackwomenatwork, researchers

identified four mechanisms of the White gaze, which were Whiteness imposed, presumed,

venerated, and forced on Black women's bodies (Rabelo et al., 2021). In this way, Whiteness is a

set of racialized and gendered practices that maintain power through regulating, punishing, and

controlling Black women's bodies in the workplace. Overall, the study's findings illustrated how

Whiteness is often imposed in a workplace setting primarily through adopting Eurocentric

standards as a basis for organization-wide norms and expectations.

Similarly, participants in our study reported pressure to conform to racialized and

gendered stereotypes in the classroom. For example, Talisa discussed her pressure to "self-filter"

and always be perfect in class. Or Claire, who shared how her professor closely monitored her

attendance and singled her out for missing class but did not hold White students accountable.

These pressures negatively impacted our participants and made them feel like they had to prove

themselves constantly. This led to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and anxiety. In addition,

our participants felt that their classmates and professors imposed stereotypes and tokenized them.

Overall, due to the similarity between our study's results and those of studies examining Black

women's workplace experiences, the conditions of visibility framework serve as a valuable tool

for capturing Black college women's experiences in higher education contexts to gain a deeper

understanding of how distinctiveness belongingness affect visibility in the classroom.

Implications of Distinctiveness and Belongingness for Undergraduate Black Women

Participants in our study highlighted the importance of distinctiveness and belongingness

in relation to Black women's classroom engagement in college. For instance, women's

perceptions of class engagement and motivation were directly related to their sense of belonging

(Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Additionally, feeling a sense of belonging to an institution is a

significant psychosocial factor associated with positive academic outcomes (Hausmann et al.,

2007; Shook & Clay, 2012). Thus, when Black women feel alienated in class, their overall

learning experience could become compromised. Furthermore, classroom environments in which

Black women are silenced decrease opportunities for Black women to integrate their lived

experiences with the material they are learning (Porter, 2022). In addition, when professors and

peers exclude Black women from classroom discussions, PWI classrooms run the risk of

becoming intellectual echo chambers for the standards of White middle-class women and limit

opportunities for White students to hear their unique perspectives (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019).

Furthermore, a lack of engagement in the classroom may result in fewer Black women

developing relationships with faculty (Williams & Johnson, 2019) who provide mentorship and

invaluable letters of recommendation for students seeking to continue their education. In this

regard, issues of distinctiveness and belongingness may have a long-term impact on the educational career of Black women.

Moreover, classroom experiences help Black women develop a self-concept and begin viewing themselves as scholars capable of creating knowledge (Winkle-Wagner, 2019). A lack of support and marginalization in the classroom, however, can undermine the ability of Black women to see themselves as scholars with valuable insights to share (Love, 2021) and result in missed leadership opportunities (Rosette et al., 2013). In the long run, this may result in decreased numbers of Black women persisting in higher education (Tinto, 2017). Additionally, universities must increase the number of Black women in administrative and faculty positions since the visibility of Black women in academia could facilitate a stronger sense of belonging for Black collegiate women and create more equitable classroom environments (Roberts et al., 2022). Despite Black college women's challenges, they manage to create pockets within PWIs where they belong and can fully embrace the value and joy in their uniqueness (e.g., sororities, counseling groups, and organizations (Croom et al., 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015). It is worth noting that the responsibility of finding connection and affirmation cannot solely rest with Black women. In response to these experiences, universities have developed programs designed to strengthen belonging, community, and academic performance, such as student honor societies (Gaudier-Diaz, 2019). However, institutions often confuse a sense of belonging with matriculation and retention rates of Black women, without creating inclusive campus spaces where Black women can be fully visible (Love, 2021). Furthermore, the importance of investing in a student's sense of belonging cannot be overstated, as interventions that increase Black women's sense of belonging are linked to improved academic and psychological well-being outcomes (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Individual Differences in Navigating Conditions of Visibility across Contexts within PWIs

Each woman provided valuable insight into their experiences with navigating visibility and belonging. Additionally, it was interesting to observe how each person coped with their circumstances and how this affected their academic engagement. Some participants found that having high or low distinctiveness was more or less burdensome than having high or low belonging. Talisa illustrated how she did not feel like a member of her peer group and how her professors did not value her uniqueness (Love, 2021; Stewart, 2017). Despite this, she always reminded herself of her intellectual value, and she strategically chose to conserve her energy when her peers did not respect her contributions (Newton, 2023). Talisa found her low distinctiveness as more troubling than her low belonging. Moreover, she appreciated the competitive nature of the classroom but felt pressured to achieve perfection in a majority White setting. Still, it was essential for her to stand out since she wanted to have her ideas acknowledged by professors and peers.

In contrast, Latoya placed a great deal of significance on belongingness, so much so that she attempted to assimilate with her White classmates as much as possible. As Latoya described, she felt pressured to assimilate to feel a sense of belonging, but at the cost of feeling marginalized (Shore et al., 2011). Moreover, Latoya was more comfortable with her low distinctiveness since she feared being othered by her classmates if she stood out too much in class. When her race and gender seemed particularly salient, Latoya remained silent. She, however, discovered that her high level of belonging came at a price since assimilating led to tokenization as the only Black woman in the class.

Claire's narrative brought hypervisibility into sharp focus. Even though she felt a sense of belonging and distinctiveness, her uniqueness was only appreciated in certain situations (Neal-

Jackson, 2020). Additionally, Claire felt that White professors scrutinized her work more than her White peers (Neal-Jackson, 2020). Her strategy for dealing with hypervisibility was to advocate for herself and consult with professors on assignments and grading expectations. Despite this, Claire did not blame herself or question the quality of her work for the additional scrutiny she received. In contrast, she attributed her classroom difficulties to systemic factors beyond her control.

Finally, Rekia offered insight into what it is like to experience partial visibility. As the only Black woman in her class, she felt out of place, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as gun violence (Ferreira, 2022). Rekia sought out pockets of belonging to counteract the lack of belonging she felt in class (Croom et al., 2017). Additionally, she enrolled in courses that might provide a more diverse learning environment. Her self-advocacy efforts also stood out. As part of her efforts, she provided class feedback to her professors and requested accommodations to enable her to overcome barriers she encountered in the classroom. Even so, it is unfair that Rekia had to go to such lengths to succeed and feel a sense of belonging. Accordingly, Rekia's experience illustrates the complex interplay between individual characteristics (for example, being outspoken versus being reserved) and the varying classroom contexts that significantly affect Black women's visibility in the classroom. Not only did Rekia's extraordinary efforts demonstrate her resilience, but they also highlighted the uneven playing field that Black women face in the classroom.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

In evaluating the findings and contributions of this study, it is essential to recognize its strengths and limitations. A key strength of this study was its exploratory case study design, which allowed us to uniquely assess the applicability and fit of the conditions of visibility

theoretical framework in a higher education context. Also, the study design captured important contextual factors, which assisted in revealing identified patterns, relationships, and potential explanations that can guide future research. Additionally, the case study designed allowed us to shed light on the complexities and challenges faced in real-life scenarios. Our practical orientation increases the potential for findings to be directly applicable and useful for practitioners, college administrators and professors.

In contrast, we did not engage in member checking (i.e., returning data or results to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experience; Berg, 2001), which could have served as a more robust measure of reliability. Additionally, the current case study focused on Black women's experiences at PWIs; in the future, scholars should consider how belonginess and distinctiveness operate in other university settings, as well (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Strayhorn, 2023). Furthermore, our study focused exclusively on Black women's experiences in the classroom, and not on Black men or women with other marginalized racial/ethnic identities. Also, Black women's sense of belonging and visibility may vary across different spaces on campus (e.g., the general campus vs. in class; Newton, 2023). Thus, our specific focus on classroom experiences only captured a slice of their overall college experience, so we may have overlooked other important comments about visibility from interview questions about their general sense of adjustment or satisfaction at the university.

In addition, researchers proposed that various factors, such as White allyship or White colleagues, leverage their power and privilege to interrupt the status quo of predominately White corporate leadership by engaging in prosocial behaviors, which could increase psychological safety for Black women (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). Psychological safety within a work environment is critical to Black women having the freedom to express themselves and work

without fear of negative consequences to status, self-image, or career (Rabelo et al., 2021). Future studies might consider whether White allies in the classroom might disrupt the status quo of predominantly White classrooms in a similar manner. Researchers may also consider how to implement pedagogical methods that do not privilege White middle-class perspectives by diversifying the reading and topics covered in courses. Furthermore, exploring what types of institutional policies or efforts increase Black women's distinctiveness and belongingness in ways that are not tokenizing and feel affirming for Black women would be fruitful in creating actionable steps to improve classroom experiences. Finally, a longitudinal study of Black women's relationships with belonging and visibility would provide insight into how Black women prioritize belonging during college and how their strategies change over time to deal with the distinctiveness belonging paradox.

Conclusions

Due to gendered and racial discrimination, Black women must navigate conditions of visibility and varying levels of belongingness in classrooms at PWIs. Despite these challenges, Black women continue to advocate for themselves and employ strategies that allow them to represent themselves authentically. However, institutions play an essential role in fostering or thwarting belongingness. It is important to note that despite the perceptions of others, and their experiences of othering, being undervalued, and tokenized, the Black women in our study achieved academic success. The study demonstrates the resilience of these women and highlights that although belongingness and visibility are important, Black women remain determined to succeed regardless of their circumstances. Furthermore, this qualitative case study provides evidence for the validity of applying McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) theoretical framework, developed in workplace environments, to the college classroom experience of Black women.

Appendix D

Interview Coping Strategies Handout

Below, we have provided definitions and examples of coping strategies to facilitate our conversation.

Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize the psychological impact of stressful events.

 This is not an exhaustive list, but a set of examples to serve as a guide. We do not want you to feel constrained to only talk about items on this list or feel the need to talk about each of these.

Acceptance: Accepting the fact that the stressful event has occurred and is real

Active or problem-focused coping: Working on time management, asking for support, establishing healthy boundaries, creating a to-do list, making a plan to resolve dilemma)

Behavioral disengagement: Giving up, or withdrawing effort from, the attempt to attain the goal with which the stressor is interfering

Denial: Outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring

Displacement: Taking out our frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects that are less threatening

Emotion-focused coping: Getting sympathy or emotional support from someone

Humor: Pointing out the funny or ironic aspects of a situation

Instrumental support: Seeking assistance, information, or advice about what to do

Mental disengagement: Psychological disengagement from the goal with which the stressor is interfering (daydreaming, sleep, or self-distraction)

Mindfulness: Tools for centering and grounding yourself in the present moment (meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, journaling)

Planning: Thinking about how to confront the stressor and creating a plan of action

Positive reframing: Making the best of the situation by growing from it or viewing it in a more favorable light (e.g., seeing the glass "half full" as opposed to "half empty).

Religion and spirituality: Using prayer, soliciting help from pastor or religious leader, increased engagement in religious activities, or finding comfort in your religion or spiritual beliefs

Substance use: Turning to the use of alcohol and other drugs as a way of disengaging from the stressor

Venting: Saying things to let your unpleasant feelings escape or outwardly expressing your negative feelings

Appendix E

Black Student Mental Health Study Pre-Interview Survey

This survey is intended to help us find out more about your demographic background. Please type in or **bold** your response to the questions & email this back to: sl4xz@virginia.edu. If you have questions about any of the items, we can review them before your interview. Thank you!

1. What is your class standing for this academic year (e.g., first year, sophomore)

2. How old are you? _____

3. What is your gender?_____

4. Did you transfer to your current university from another institution?
   a. Yes
   b. No

   3a. If yes, what university did you transfer from? _____ _____

5. Were you born in the United States?
   a. Yes
   b. No – If no, please specify the country where you were born:_____

6. Are you a first-generation college student? (i.e., first in your family to attend college)
   a. Yes
   b. No

7. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
   a. Heterosexual
   b. Gay/Lesbian
   c. Bisexual
   d. Other (please specify)_____

8. Which of the following descriptions best represents the type of **dating or sexual relationships** you are having now?
   a. Not interested in getting involved with anyone right now
   b. Very interested in getting involved, but cannot find a suitable partner
   c. Casual dating, playing the field, nonsexual
   d. Short-term, commitment free, sexual encounters (hooking up)
   e. Long-term, commitment free, sexual encounters (friends with benefits)
   f. Exclusive, committed, nonsexual relationship with a partner

    g. Exclusive, committed, sexual relationship with a partner
    h. Decline to answer

9. How would you describe your ethnic background? (i.e., African American, Nigerian, etc.)

10. If you had to describe your family's social class background, you would describe it as:
    a. Poor
    b. Working class
    c. Middle class
    d. Upper class

11. What is the best estimate of your family's household total income?
    a. Below $5,000
    b. $5,001-$20,000
    c. $20,001-$35,000
    d. $35,001-$50,000
    e. $50,001-$65,000
    f. $65,001-$80,000
    g. $80,001-$95,000
    h. $95,001-$110,000
    i. $110,001-$125,000
    j. $125,001-$150,000
    k. $150,001-$175,000
    l. $175,000-$200,000
    m. $200,000+

12. Your hometown is: _____ and would best be described
    a. Rural
    b. Small town or city
    c. Suburban
    d. Urban or large metropolitan area

13. In what city/town did you reside before COVID-19?_____In what city/town did you reside after COVID-19 regulations (e.g., classes transferred online, dormitories were closed) were put forth?_____

14. What was the racial composition of the neighborhood in which you lived the longest period of your youth?
    a. Less than 20% Black/African American
    b. From 21%-40% Black/African American

    c. From 41%-60% Black/African American
    d. From 61%-80% Black/African American
    e. From 81%-100% Black/African American

15. What was the racial composition of the high school from which you **graduated**?
    a. Less than 20% Black/African American
    b. From 21%-40% Black/African American
    c. From 41%-60% Black/African American
    d. From 61%-80% Black/African American
    e. From 81%-100% Black/African American

16. What is the racial composition of your undergraduate institution?
    a. Less than 20% Black/African American
    b. From 21%-40% Black/African American
    c. From 41%-60% Black/African American
    d. From 61%-80% Black/African American
    e. From 81%-100% Black/African American

17. How would you characterize your primary household type while growing up?
    a. Married-couple or remarried family household (with stepparents)
    b. Single parent, mother/female head of household
    c. Single parent, father/male head of household
    d. Extended kin (grandparents, uncles/aunts, cousins)
    e. Other - please specify:_____

18. How would you describe your religious affiliation (e.g., Christian, Muslim, and Agnostic)?

19. If you have decided on a major, what is it?

20. If you have changed your major, what was your prior major? If you have changed your major multiple times, please list all prior majors.

21. What was your **mother or primary caregiver's** highest level of educational attainment?
    a. Less than a high school diploma
    b. High school diploma
    c. Some college
    d. Associate's degree
    e. 4-year college degree
    f. Graduate degree (i.e., Master's, PhD, MD, JD, etc.)

22. What was your **father or secondary caregiver's** highest level of educational attainment? If you had one primary caregiver, this question can be left blank.
    a. Less than a high school diploma
    b. High school diploma
    c. Some college
    d. Associate's degree
    e. 4-year college degree
    f. Graduate degree (i.e., Master's, PhD, MD, JD, etc.)

23. Please specify if you have any of the following conditions. You may select all that apply.
    a. Traumatic brain injury
    b. Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
    c. Asperger's or Autism Spectrum
    d. Blind or Low Vision
    e. Deaf or Hearing Impaired
    f. Cognitive or Learning Disability
    g. Psychological Condition (e.g., depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder)
        i.   If you are willing, please specify the condition:_____
    h. Physical/mobility condition that affects walking
    i. Physical/mobility condition that does not affect walking
    j. Other – please specify:_____
    k. None

24. How would you describe your skin tone (cocoa, chocolate, sienna, light brown, dark brown, taupe, etc.) & select the image below that best captures your skin tone.
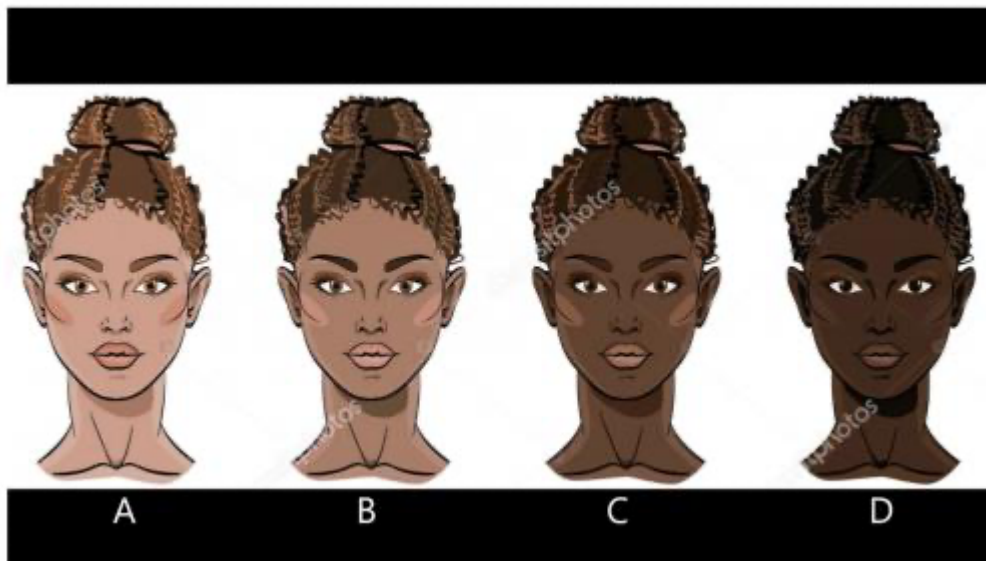
25. Have you ever received mental health services on campus? This can include individual or group counseling, prescription medication, a group support program, or other types of mental health services. **(You can choose to leave this question blank if you do not want to disclose your utilization of mental health services.)**
    a. Yes
    b. No

    25a. If yes, what services have you used (e.g., individual counseling, group counseling, university wellness workshops, psychological testing/assessment)?

Appendix F
Black Student Mental Health Study Interview Protocol

Introduction

        As mentioned in the consent form, I will be audio recording this interview to ensure that I capture your experiences in your own words. Your interview will be transcribed in written form and the audio recording will be deleted. To make sure that we have a verbal record of you consenting, do you consent to this interview being audio recorded and transcribed?

Hi. My name is [insert name] and I am [insert position]. I appreciate your willingness to meet and talk with me today about your experiences as a Black [man/woman]. I have two main goals in talking with you: (1) to talk with you about your perceptions of the campus racial climate, and (2) to better understand your sense of belonging and mental health processes.

Before we begin, I would like to set a few ground rules or general guidelines for the interview. Please speak as freely as you feel comfortable, as there are no right or wrong answers and all the information you provide will remain confidential. The interview contains questions about your mental health and psychological wellbeing, but at no time are you expected or required to disclose any information that you do not want to.

        Feel free to stop me at any time to ask me to rephrase or repeat questions, to ask for time to think about a question, or to tell me if you feel uncomfortable responding to any questions. Some of the questions or topics could trigger strong emotional reactions—especially if recalling a troubling or difficult event—so if you'd like us to take a break at any point or return to a topic at a later time in the interview—I am more than willing to do so.

I may stop you at times to ask you for more information or to clarify information, especially if you use acronyms or if you use short responses such as, "ya know?" I may want to follow up to make sure I am capturing your intended meaning rather than inferring my thoughts about a topic. Secondly, I may define terms that you already know, but I want to make sure that we have a common understanding.

        I may jot down notes during the interview, especially if there's something I'd like to return to. Let me know if this is distracting or if you'd like to see any of my notes afterwards. Lastly, in order to be conscientious of your time, I will pace the questions to make sure we cover the main points. However, I'm happy to revisit a conversation or dive in on a particular topic if it is something that you have a lot to share.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Part 1: Campus racial climate

1. Let's begin with your decision to attend [undergraduate university]. Thinking back a bit to when you were trying to make the decision of where to go to college…

    a. What were your expectations about what this school would be like?

    b. Have your experiences matched your expectations? How/How not?

    c. *What was your high school like in relation to college?*

2. Next, let's talk about your sense of belonging here at [university], to what extent do you feel a sense of belonging here? In other words, do you feel connected to the campus community?

    a. Can you share with me why you feel this way?

    b. Where do you feel the strongest sense of belonging?

        i. *If they begin to talk about Black student organizations or friends, probe more about these. What types of organizations are they involved in?*

        ii. *What drew them to their friend groups (try to get a sense of racial composition of friend groups if not obvious)*

    c. Where do you feel the least sense of belonging?

        i. *Are there certain places or events that you avoid on campus?*

3. In your own words, how would you describe the campus racial climate at [undergraduate university]? Campus racial climate includes things like diverse student and faculty, readings and assignments that include diverse perspectives, and the nature (positive or negative) of social interactions among students across race/ethnicity. *You can talk about each of these.*

    a. *4th year students matriculated here right after the Trump election. Then, they had August 11th and 12th – many of these students witnessed very racialized events during their time here. You can ask about the Confederate statues or the recent incident with the Multicultural Student Center.*

4. What messages (positive or negative) have you received from peers at your university about your identity as a Black man/woman?

    a. What do you think about these messages?

    b. *Can include Black peers, White peers, or students from other racial groups. Sometimes, I ask about each of these.*

5. What messages (positive or negative) have you received from faculty at your university about your identity as a Black man/woman?

    a. What do you think about these messages?

    b. *Do you have a close faculty mentor?*

6. What messages (positive or negative) have you received from administration at your university about your identity as a Black woman?

    a. What do you think about these messages?

Part 2: Mental Health Processes

We have two remaining sections of questions that focus on mental health and wellness processes. In the first portion, we want to talk with you about your mental health processes before COVID-19, and then we have a few questions in the last section that specifically relate to your

institution's response to the pandemic and your mental health with all of the recent changes.
Does this make sense?

1. Was mental health a conversation in your home, growing up?

   a. How would you say, your parents or guardians, helped you deal with challenging situations? *In others words, what did your parents tell you to do when you are upset? How did they help you cope with your stressful experiences?*

   b. *If they didn't rely on parents much, I usually ask – who did you lean on for support while you were growing up?*

   c. *What drew you to them for support? How did they help you?*

2. Upon entering college, what did you know about mental health? Has your perspective of mental health changed since entering college?

3. When you experience a challenge related to being a Black man/woman, what coping strategies do you use? Examples of coping include: distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, emotional support, instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, and self-blame.

4. What do you think of the counseling services provided at [university]?

   a. Have you ever attended a counseling session at your university counseling center? If so, please describe that experience.

   b. Do you think there are other wellness services available at [university] that are helpful for Black [men/women]? If so, what are they? Have you utilized these services? Why or why not?

5. Would you recommend others visit your university counseling center? Why or why not?

6. If you were struggling with your mental health, who would you be most inclined to call on for support – your family, friends, or a counselor? Why?

   a. *If they bring up social identities, perhaps ask why it matters that others share their social identities when they talk about mental health struggles.*

7. Overall, how do you think your university addresses Black [men's/women's] mental health?

8. Do you think your academics – performance or how much you enjoy classes – are tied to your mental health in college? If so, can you elaborate?

   a. *Is your sense of self-worth tied to your academic performance?*

9. Do you think your mental health is tied to your sense of belonging at college? If so, can you elaborate?

Part 3: COVID-19 Institutional Response & Student Mental Health

This grant was originally designed to tap into Black students' beliefs about campus racial climate and mental health - and was submitted before the rise of COVID-19. Considering recent events, we wanted to ask a few questions about your perceptions of how your university responded to COVID-19 and how you're doing - which is the focus of the final questions.

1. How has your university responded to COVID-19?

   a. How was your academic experience affected?

      i. *How has your family responded to the changes and you being home?*

   b. How was your mental and emotional health affected?

   c. *Do you think your university responded well to students from diverse backgrounds – so lower-income students or students who may not have a safe home background?*

2. What do you think of the university's COVID-19 response?

3. Did your university provide access to telehealth or other mental health services (e.g., online meditation)?

   a. Have you used or do you plan on utilizing any of these mental health services?

   b. If you used these mental health services, what did you use?

   c. If you were seeing a counselor, how did it affect the services you received?

Finally, we want to understand your thoughts about the response from administration, faculty and peers to COVID-19.

4. Did the administration notify you about how to access accommodations related to housing, food, travel, or other basic needs? Was the administration response helpful?

5. What messages (positive or negative) did you receive from faculty at your university in response to the pandemic?

   a. Did faculty provide accommodations related to coursework, assignments, and grading? Accommodations may include extended (or flexible) deadlines, revised assignments, recorded lectures, and flexible office hours.

6. What messages (positive or negative) did you receive from peers at your university in response to the pandemic?

   a. How has social distancing affected your ability to connect with peers?

   b. Have you found new ways to connect with your peers?

7. Overall, how are you coping with the changes brought on by COVID-19 in relation to your college experiences?
   a. *If they are seniors, I've asked about their plans afterwards.*

8. Is there advice you would give to younger Black students about their mental health during their time in college?

Conclusion & Thank You

We're about to wrap up! During our time together, we have discussed a range of topics. I appreciate everything that you've shared about your girlhood experiences and how they've translated into your beliefs as a Black [man/woman] about your identity. I want to make sure I haven't overlooked anything. Is there anything that I did not bring up that you want to add about who you are as a Black [man/woman]?

Thank you for your time and participation. Your responses have been extremely informative and helpful. If at any point after this interview, you would like to talk with me again to touch base about the research, I'm providing a sheet with my contact information. This sheet also has a list of resources on and off campus that provide student services around counseling and social support should you desire connecting with someone about what we discussed during the interview.

You will be compensated $20 for your participation in this interview. I need you to fill out your name and email on the consent form so that I can forward your payment.

References

Bell, M. P., Kwesiga, E. N., & Berry, D. P. (2010). Immigrants: The new "invisible men and

women" in diversity research. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 25*(2), 177–188.

Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Allyn & Bacon.

Brewer, M. B. (1991). The social self: On being the same and different at the same time.

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 17(5), 475–482.

Buchanan, N. T., Settles, I. H., & Woods, K. C. (2008). Comparing sexual harassment subtypes

among Black and White women by military rank: Double jeopardy, the jezebel, and the

cult of true womanhood. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 32*(4), 347–361.

Castleman, B. L., Meyer, K. E., Sullivan, Z., Hartog, W. D., & Miller, S. (2017). Nudging

students beyond the FAFSA: The impact of university outreach on financial aid behaviors

and outcomes. *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, *47*(3), 2.

Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006). *Qualitative research guidelines project* (n.d.). Retrieved

November 21, 2022, from http://www.qualres.org/

Commodore, F., Baker, D. J., & Arroyo, A. T. (2018). *Black women college students: A guide to

student success in higher education*. Routledge.

Cooper, J. N., & Newton, A. (2021). Black female college athletes' sense of belonging at a

historically Black college and university (HBCU). *Journal of Negro Education*, *90*(1),

71-83.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence

against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*, 1241–1299.

Croom, N. N., Beatty, C. C., Acker, L. D., & Butler, M. (2017). Exploring undergraduate Black

womyn's motivations for engaging in "sister circle" organizations. *NASPA Journal About

Women in Higher Education*, *10*(2), 216-228.

Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A., & Sheikh, A. (2011). The case

    study approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *11*(1), 1-9.

Dickens, D. D., & Chavez, E. L. (2018). Navigating the workplace: The costs and benefits of

    shifting identities at work among early career US Black women. *Sex Roles*, *78*(11), 760-

    774.

Doharty, N. (2020). The "angry Black woman's" intellectual bondage: Being strategically

    emotional on the academic plantation. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 23*(4), 548–562.

Domingue, A. D. (2015). "Our leaders are just we ourself": Black women college student

    leaders' experiences with oppression and sources of nourishment on a predominantly

    White college campus. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *48*(3), 454-472.

Ely, R. J., & Thomas, D. A. (2001). Cultural diversity at work: The effects of diversity

    perspectives on work group processes and outcomes. *Administrative Science Quarterly,*

    46(2), 229–273.

Erskine, S. E., & Bilimoria, D. (2019). White allyship of Afro-Diasporic women in the

    workplace: A transformative strategy for organizational change. *Journal of Leadership &*

    Organizational Studies, *26*(3), 319-338.

Everett, K. D., & Croom, N. N. (2017). From discourse to practice. *Critical Perspectives on*

    Black Women and College Success, 1(75), 188-200.

Ferreira, R. A., & Santos, M. H. (2022). Gender and ethnicity: The role of successful women in

    promoting equality and social change. *Social Sciences*, *11*(7), 299.

Franklin, A. J. (1999). Invisibility syndrome and racial identity development in psychotherapy

    and counseling African American men. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *27*(6), 761-793.

Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., & Jensen, J. M. (2007). Sense of belonging in college freshmen at the classroom and campus levels. *Journal of Experimental Education, 75*(3), 203–220.

Gaudier-Diaz, M. M., Sinisterra, M., & Muscatell, K. A. (2019). Motivation, belongingness, and anxiety in neuroscience undergraduates: Emphasizing first-generation college students. *Journal of Undergraduate Neuroscience Education*, *17*(2), 145.

Graham, J., & McClain, S. (2019). A canonical correlational analysis examining the relationship between peer mentorship, belongingness, impostor feelings, and Black collegians' academic and psychosocial outcomes. *American Educational Research Journal*, *56*(6), 2333-2367.

Hausmann, L. R., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2007). Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among African American and White first-year college students. *Research in Higher Education*, *48*(7), 803-839.

Hooks, B. (1981). Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism. Boston, South End Press.

Kelly, B. T., Gardner, P. J., Stone, J., Hixson, A., & Dissassa, D. T. (2021). Hidden in plain sight: Uncovering the emotional labor of Black women students at historically White colleges and universities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *14*(2), 203.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 257–277). Sage Publications.

Leath, S., Jerald, M. C., Perkins, T., & Jones, M. K. (2021). A qualitative exploration of jezebel stereotype endorsement and sexual behaviors among Black college women. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *47*(4-5), 244-283.

Leath, S., Mims, L., Evans, K. A., Parker, T. A., & Billingsley, J. T. (2022). "I can be unapologetically who I am": A study of friendship among Black undergraduate women at PWIs. *Emerging Adulthood*, *10*(4), 837-851.

Lewis, J. A., Mendenhall, R., Harwood, S. A., & Browne Huntt, M. (2013). Coping with gendered racial microaggressions among Black women college students. *Journal of African American Studies*, *17*, 51-73.

Love, B. H., Templeton, E., Ault, S., & Johnson, O. (2021). Bruised, not broken: Scholarly personal narratives of Black women in the academy. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 9, 1-23.

Mallett, R. K., Mello, Z. R., Wagner, D. E., Worrell, F., Burrow, R. N., & Andretta, J. R. (2011). Do I belong? It depends on when you ask. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *17*(4), 432.

McCabe, J. (2009). Racial and gender microaggressions on a predominantly-White campus: Experiences of Black, Latina/o and White undergraduates. *Race, Gender & Class*, *1/2*(16), 133-151.

McClain, S., Beasley, S. T., Jones, B., Awosogba, O., Jackson, S., & Cokley, K. (2016). An examination of the impact of racial and ethnic identity, impostor feelings, and minority status stress on the mental health of Black college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *44*(2), 101-117.

McCluney, C. L., & Rabelo, V. C. (2019). Conditions of visibility: An intersectional examination of Black women's belongingness and distinctiveness at work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 113, 143-152.

Miles, S., Jones, B.T., Clemons, K.M, & Golay, P. (2011). "Bein'alive & bein'a woman & bein'colored is a metaphysical dilemma": Black female social integration at a predominantly White institution. In Frierson, H. T. (Eds.), *Support systems and services for diverse populations: Considering the intersection of race, gender, and the needs of Black female undergraduates* (pp. 107-129). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Murphy, M., & Zirkel, S. (2015). Race and belonging in school: How anticipated and experienced belonging affect choice, persistence, and performance. *Teachers College Record, 117*(12), 1–40.

Neal-Jackson, A. (2020). "Well, what did you expect?": Black women facing stereotype threat in collaborative academic spaces at a predominantly White institution. *Journal of College Student Development*, *61*(3), 317-332.

Newton, V. A. (2023). Hypervisibility and invisibility: Black women's experiences with gendered racial microaggressions on a White campus. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, *9*(2), 164-178.

Patton, L. D., & Haynes, C. (2018). Hidden in plain sight: The Black women's blueprint for institutional transformation in higher education. *Teachers College Record*, *120*(14), 1-18.

Phillips, K. W., Rothbard, N. P., & Dumas, T. L. (2009). To disclose or not to disclose? Status distance and self-disclosure in diverse environments. *Academy of Management Review, 34*(4), 710–732.

Porter, C. J., & Dean, L. A. (2015). Making meaning: Identity development of Black undergraduate women. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, *8*(2), 125-139.

Porter, C. J. (2022). (Re) imagining belonging: Black women want more than survival in predominantly White institutions. *Journal of College Student Development*, *63*(1), 106-110.

Rabelo, V. C., Robotham, K. J., & McCluney, C. L. (2021). "Against a sharp white background": How Black women experience the white gaze at work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(5), 1840-1858.

Roberts, L., Nkrumah, T., Valcarlos, M. M., & Agosto, V. (2022). Black women acting against the extremes of visibility in the academy. *Journal of African American Women and Girls in Education*, *2*(2), 116-137.

Rosette, A. S., Carton, A. M., Bowes-Sperry, L., & Hewlin, P. F. (2013). Why do racial slurs remain prevalent in the workplace? Integrating theory on intergroup behavior. *Organization Science, 24*(5), 1402–1421.

Settles, I. H. (2006). Use of an intersectional framework to understand Black women's racial and gender identities. *Sex Roles*, *54*(9-10), 589-601.

Settles, I. H., Buchanan, N. T., & Dotson, K. (2019). Scrutinized but not recognized: (In) visibility and hypervisibility experiences of faculty of color. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *113*, 62-74.

Shahid, N. N., Nelson, T., & Cardemil, E. V. (2018). Lift every voice: Exploring the stressors and coping mechanisms of Black college women attending predominantly White institutions. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *44*(1), 3–24.

Shook, N. J., & Clay, R. (2012). Interracial roommate relationships: A mechanism for promoting sense of belonging at university and academic performance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *48*(5), 1168-1172.

Shore, L. M., Randel, A. E., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., Holcombe Ehrhart, K., & Singh, G.

   (2011). Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research.

   Journal of management, *37*(4), 1262-1289.

Smith, A. N., Watkins, M. B., Ladge, J. J., & Carlton, P. (2019). Making the invisible visible:

   Paradoxical effects of intersectional invisibility on the career experiences of executive

   Black women. *Academy of Management Journal*, *62*(6), 1705-1734.

Smith, E. B., & Nkomo, S. M. (2021). *Our separate ways, with a new preface and epilogue:*

   Black and White women and the struggle for professional identity. Harvard Business

   Press.

Stewart, D. L. (2017). A counternarrative of Black women in predominantly White liberal arts

   colleges, 1945–1965. In Patton, L. D., & Croom, N. N. (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on*

   Black women and college success, (pp. 31-44). Routledge.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). Satisfaction and retention among African American men at two-year

   community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *36*(5), 358-

   375.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2023). Analyzing the short-term impact of a brief web-based intervention on

   first-year students' sense of belonging at an HBCU: A quasi-experimental study.

   Innovative Higher Education, *48*(1), 1-13.

Thomas, K. M., Johnson-Bailey, J., Phelps, R. E., Tran, N. M., & Johnson, L. (2013). Moving

   from pet to threat: Narratives of professional Black women. *The psychological health of*

   women of color. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research,*

   Theory & Practice, *19*(3), 254-269.

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011). A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes of minority students. *Science*, *331*(6023), 1447-1451.

Williams, M. S., & Johnson, J. M. (2019). Predicting the quality of Black women collegians' relationships with faculty at a public historically Black university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *12*(2), 115.

Winkle-Wagner, R. (2009). *The unchosen me: Race, gender, and identity among Black women in college*. JHU Press.

Winkle-Wagner, R., Kelly, B. T., Luedke, C. L., & Reavis, T. B. (2019). Authentically me: Examining expectations that are placed upon Black women in college. *American Educational Research Journal*, *56*(2), 407-443.

Zumbrunn, S., McKim, C., Buhs, E., & Hawley, L. R. (2014). Support, belonging, motivation, and engagement in the college classroom: A mixed method study. *Instructional Science*, *42*, 661-684.