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# Learning Race and Racism While Learning: Experiences of International Students Pursuing Higher Education in the Midwestern United States

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## Learning Race and Racism While Learning: Experiences of International Students Pursuing Higher Education in the Midwestern United States

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*Researchers have documented how race and racism influence the college experiences of U.S. citizens. However, research on the ways that race and racism affect international students warrants similar attention. This qualitative study explored how international students learned about U.S. concepts of race and racism and how such concepts shaped their college experiences. The participating international college students learned about U.S. concepts of race and racism through media, relationships, formal education, and lived experiences. They defined these concepts in varying ways and had varying racial ideologies.*

Keywords: *cultural awareness, international students, race, racism, United States*

THE United States is a leading destination for international students seeking to study in another country (Shen & Herr, 2004). During the 2013–2014 academic year, >886,000 international students from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds studied in the United States (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2014). In addition, international student enrollment continues to rise. For example, during the 2013–2014 academic year, international students made up approximately 4.1% of the overall U.S. higher education student population (IIE, 2014) and contributed >\$26 billion to the U.S. economy (IIE, n.d.). With this increasing and significant college student population, it is important to further explore and understand the experiences of international college students so that their experiences can be improved and U.S. higher education institutions can remain a valuable option.

Much of the current literature on international students focuses on their adjustment. Scholars have suggested that cultural, social, and institutional knowledge influences how international students become accustomed to their new environment (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Glass, 2012; Hailu & Ku, 2014; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Mukminin & McMahon, 2013; Xue, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2009). Scholars also have explored how discrimination affects international students in

the United States (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Hecht, Jung, & Wadsworth, 2008; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2009), often bringing attention to their ethnic identities in U.S. contexts and describing how those identities affect their experiences, opportunities, and struggles (Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014; Glass, 2012; Lee & Rice, 2007; Williams & Johnson, 2011). While researchers have begun to explore how international students of color<sup>1</sup> navigate conventions of race in the context of higher education in the United States (e.g., see Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Ritter, 2013), there is room for further documentation of the racial experiences of international students studying in the United States. For example, little is known about nonracial and racial experiences and how these experiences affect the lives of international students beyond international students of color. Also, the informal processes that international students use to learn about the U.S. concepts of race and racism while studying are not well understood.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to filling this void in documentation and understanding. Using a constructivist phenomenological case study approach, we sought to document how 17 international students at one Midwestern university in the United States learned about U.S. concepts of



race<sup>2</sup> and racism and how learning these concepts influenced their college experiences at the time of the study. Similar to Mitchell and Maloff (2016), we defined the U.S. concept of race as “a social construction based on physical characteristics, particularly skin color” (p. 22). In addition, we used Harper’s (2012) definition of racism<sup>3</sup> to guide the study.

Ultimately, this study was shaped by the following research questions: In what ways, if any, do international students learn about the U.S. concepts of race and racism when studying in the United States? In what ways, if any, does learning about the U.S. concepts of race and racism influence the college experiences of international students studying in the United States?

## **International Students’ Experiences in the United States**

### *Academic Experiences*

Although international student enrollment is on the rise on U.S. college campuses, classroom cultures still challenge international students. In the United States, the classroom atmosphere is often more student centered and involves more cooperative learning than in other countries (Hecht et al., 2008; Xue, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2009). Cooperative learning incorporates a strong emphasis on group work and discussion among class members; however, this culture may clash with an international student’s educational culture and customs at home.

According to participants in Xue’s (2013) study, the teacher-centered approach used in many students’ homelands limited the amount of discussion held among students, making it hard for them to enjoy and participate in group work in the United States. Focusing on African immigrant students, Hailu and Ku (2014) found that students had difficulties in the classroom due to various other factors, such as financial problems, lack of culture awareness, time constraints, and inadequate guidance. Furthermore, both these studies noted that classroom participation was linked to another obstacle to academic success for international students: language barriers.

A common theme identified among studies is that the academic success of international students is improved via language proficiency, with some studies arguing that English language proficiency is the most salient factor contributing to international students’ academic performance (Hailu & Ku, 2014; Pathirage, Morrow, Walpitige, & Skolits, 2014; Xue, 2013). International students often take ESL (English as a second language) courses to better learn and understand the English language, prior to pursuing an education in the United States (Xue, 2013). Nevertheless, once international students enter U.S. classrooms, they frequently report difficulties comprehending English as well as struggling with the oral and written forms of English used in class (Hailu & Ku, 2014; Xue, 2013). These language barriers also prove difficult for international students when they participate in

cooperative learning environments involving group work or discussion-based classroom activities and when the need arises to communicate with instructors (Kwon, 2009; Mukminin & McMahon, 2013; Xue, 2013).

In spite of the various academic difficulties experienced by international students in U.S. higher education, they do succeed academically with proper support and guidance. Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) found that first-year international students’ levels of engagement caused them to surpass their American counterparts in academic challenges and student-faculty interactions. Focusing on Chinese international students, Yan and Berliner (2009) found that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were key to their academic success. In 2012, Tauriac and Liem found that high school preparation of Black international students was an important factor for postsecondary success in the United States, highlighting academic preparation as key. In sum, international students face challenges and are successful in the U.S. college classroom. However, these barriers and successes extend beyond academic domains on college campuses; international students’ college experiences also are socially and culturally nuanced.

### *Social and Cultural Experiences*

International students often face barriers when establishing social networks with those from the dominant culture (Pritchard & Skinner, 2002). Trice (2004) found that international students from the Middle East and Africa had the least amount of social interactions with U.S. students. In his study, 48% of international Middle Eastern students and 46% of African students had zero to one interaction with U.S. students per semester. In comparison, western European and Canadian students were more likely than those from other geographic regions to interact with American students.

In a study of adjustment to college comparing international students and U.S. students, Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002–2003) found that 68% of international student participants believed that U.S. students were open to their culture. Nevertheless, a large portion of the international students reported feeling misunderstood, making it more difficult for them to form friendships. In the same study, Rajapaksa and Dundes found that international students were more likely than U.S. students to be unsatisfied with their social networks; also, the perception of their social network correlated with their adjustment.

While social barriers are common during international students’ college experiences in the United States, researchers have documented that positive social interactions in a host country are important for international students’ development during their time abroad (see Glass, 2012). For example, in a 2014 study, Glass and Westmont found that a sense of belongingness exerted a direct positive effect on academic success and cross-cultural interactions for international and U.S.

undergraduate students. Given these findings, among others, sustained interventions and strategies to welcome and integrate international students in the United States should be continuously improved. Furthermore, attention to race and racism as international students travel to the United States for postsecondary education requires additional attention, given that studies regarding international students often ignore or overlook the salience of race and racism during an international student's transition to the United States.

### *International Students, Race, and Racism*

While extant literature regarding international students, race, and racism is limited, the topic has received some attention in recent years. Nevertheless, studies often focus on the ways that international students face or deal with discrimination (see Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Hecht et al., 2008) or deal with or form their own (racial) stereotypes (see Ritter, 2013; Ritter & Roth, 2015). Less attention has been given to how international students learn about and process these interactions.

Fries-Britt et al. (2014) addressed this gap in the literature when they conducted a qualitative study highlighting how international students of color make sense of race as they are studying in the United States. The authors developed an emergent framework—learning about race in a U.S. context—to explain how international students of color move from an unexamined awareness of U.S. concepts of race and racism to an integrative awareness, where the students began to acknowledge race and racism and how it influenced their lives. Similarly, Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) developed a framework to explain how Afro-Caribbean international students develop ethnic identities within a U.S. context, introducing the “reactions to negotiating ethnic identity” model.

In his dissertation, Ritter (2013) qualitatively explored how East Asian international students learned about racial stereotypes, highlighting negative preconceptions that the students brought with them regarding U.S.-born African American and Latino/a students, primarily due to U.S. media. In 2015, Ritter and Roth documented how U.S. media fostered and reinforced the stereotypical beliefs of international students and how these stereotypes influenced cross-cultural interactions; they recommended intergroup dialogues as a possible intervention.

While scholars have begun to document the racial experiences and awareness of international students, they have primarily focused on international students of color, often limiting their studies to how these students deal with racial and ethnic stereotyping and discrimination. As researchers have documented how race and racism influence the experiences of U.S. students (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), additional research is warranted on how race and racism affect international students. As such, there is room for further documentation on the racial experiences of international students studying in the United States, particularly as it

relates to the ways that international students develop their understandings or learn about race and racism in U.S. contexts.

### **Method**

This study was designed as a constructivist phenomenological case study. Phenomenological studies document the lived experiences of the participants, and case studies are bounded studies exploring a single unit of analysis (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the unit of analysis was one higher education institution located in the Midwestern United States. Utilizing both phenomenological and case study methodologies allowed us to design and analyze a qualitative study that was filled with rich, thick data.

We also embraced a constructivist framework. When conducting qualitative research, constructivists do not attempt to bracket their emotions, feelings, and thoughts during the study, acknowledging that they coconstruct the findings with the research participants as the research instrument (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, using a constructivist approach has proven beneficial in the exploration of college students (see Edwards & Jones, 2009; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; McClure, 2006; Mitchell, 2015). Given this constructivist approach and our open acknowledgment of our roles in the study, it is important for us to share our positionalities—how our lived experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and biases influenced and shaped the study (see Appendix A; England, 1994; Tamale, 1996).

### *Participants and Setting*

We selected the participants using purposeful sampling, which seeks particular insights (M. Q. Patton, 2002). All participants were international college students at one university in the Midwestern United States. The 17 study participants were undergraduate and graduate international students at a large, predominantly White comprehensive public university in a politically conservative and religious geographic area. The university enrolled approximately 25,000 students at the time of the study; approximately 370 international students were enrolled, accounting for 1.5% of the student body. The remainder of the student body was >83% White and 15% domestic students of color.

Following university Institutional Research Board approval, participants were recruited through an invitation e-mail sent by the university's office of institutional research, with permission and support from the director of international students. Using this recruitment process, we did not have access to students' e-mails, and students self-selected to participate in the study by e-mailing the lead researcher (D.M.) to indicate their interest in participating in the study. We also recruited through snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009). In this study, this meant that participants were asked to inform other international students to send an e-mail to the

TABLE 1  
*Participant Demographics (N = 17)*

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Class standing	Major	Grade point average	Length of time in the United States
Babsheriff	Nigeria	33	Man	Graduate student	Education	3.5	1 year
Bibi	Netherlands	22	Woman	Junior	Anthropology	2.6	3 years
Catherine	Zimbabwe	25	Woman	Graduate student	Mass communications	3.8	2 years
Dvyia	India	25	Woman	Graduate student	Computer information systems	3.87	1.5 years
Jack	Bangladesh	27	Man	Graduate student	Criminal justice	3.25	6 months
Jay	Taiwan	21	Man	Senior	Film	3.56	6 years
Julie	South Korea	34	Woman	Freshman	Health administration	—	4 years
Katherine	South Korea	20	Woman	Sophomore	Art	3.9	4 years
Lucky	China	23	Woman	Graduate student	Education	3.6	1.5 years
Natasha	Russia	26	Woman	Graduate student	Education	4.0	6 months
Mimi	Vietnam	20	Woman	Senior	Finance and accounting	3.52	4 years
Mimmi	Italy	—	Woman	Senior	Communications	—	4 months
Pedro	Brazil	20	Man	Sophomore	Finance and business	3.1	1.5 years
Sarah	Oman	24	Woman	Junior	Business administration	2.4	8 months
Strawberry	Mexico	21	Woman	Sophomore	Education	3.6	2.5 years
VD	Vietnam	19	Man	Sophomore	Computer science	3.0	4 years
Zimo	China	24	Woman	Graduate student	Education	3.5	1.5 years

lead researcher if they were interested in sharing their lived experiences. All participants received a \$10 gift card for their time.

Each participant completed a demographic information sheet and chose a pseudonym to represent him- or herself in the study. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants and highlights the diversity of the participants.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data were collected through audiotaped one-on-one semistructured interviews. Using a semistructured approach provided flexibility for follow-up questions and allowed the lead researcher to ask questions not included within the prepared interview protocol, based on the nature of the conversation (Merriam, 2009). The lead researcher was the only one to conduct the interviews.

Questions in the prepared interview protocol covered the ways that participants acknowledged race and racism in the United States, the ways that participants learned about the U.S. construct of race, the ways that participants defined race, and the ways that acknowledging race influenced participants' college experiences (see Appendix B).

Transcripts were created from the audiotapes of the interview sessions and then matched with the audiotapes for accuracy. We then reviewed the interview transcripts to analyze the data, using open and axial coding. Open coding is the process of identifying codes and concepts from qualitative data. Axial coding is the process of making connections among codes to create concepts and connecting concepts to

develop themes (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008, for descriptions of codes, concepts, and themes). Our coding process included going through the data line by line while highlighting salient quotes related to race and racism, then grouping codes into concepts that were further developed into overarching themes (Merriam, 2009). Appendix C highlights the 109 codes, 13 concepts, and three themes that emerged from the study; Appendix D provides details about how we improved trustworthiness in the study; and Appendix E provides an audit trail of the ways that data from the interviews were coded, became part of a concept, and then became part of an overarching theme.

### **Findings**

#### *Learning Race and Racism*

Although the participants were from across the globe, as they reflected on their experience, it became clear that those who acknowledged race and racism learned about these social constructs similarly—through the media, relationships, formal education, and lived experiences.

*Learning through the media.* Participants often discussed their experiences learning about race and racism through media outlets. For example, Sarah (Oman) noted her awareness of race and racism as she reflected on the U.S. television shows that she often watched:

Basically, if you could see the media, it's not just the race concepts, but in the shows, in every show, you would have people from every different race and the shows are diversified. You can see beforehand

if you're exposed to that, to the media. You can see how diverse the United States actually is.

Although she noted that the television shows demonstrated diversity in the United States, Sarah reflected on the ways that television shows negatively portray certain racial groups. In particular, Sarah explained how the media portrayed African Americans in a negative way:

For example, you see Black people are constantly pictured as thugs, or rappers, or people who are just trying to get through [lazy]. They stereotype things even in the media, and I think that's sad because what you get from the media is what gets into the perception, even subconsciously, if people are watching and not realizing that [it is affecting their views]. But it does get into their perception and that becomes, unfortunately, a fact when it's not even a fact.

Overall, students in the study highlighted how international students are receiving messages through U.S. media outlets prior to and upon their arrival in the United States and how messages might perpetuate the development of international students' personal biases against certain racial groups in the United States or how international students, like Sarah, may reject those biases.

*Learning through relationships.* Participants also discussed their experiences learning about race through personal relationships. Relationships varied and included classmates, friends, and family members. Natasha (Russia) offered a story about her friend, whom she described as conservative and religious. Her friend seemed to be prejudiced against Black people in America:

She was telling me that "Oh my God! These Black people are so awful here." I'm like, "Why are you saying this? You never see anyone; you stay in your beautiful house." I was taking a bus now before, you go through the whole [town] and everything and it was like I was the only White girl on the bus. It was crowded, I was like, "Oh my God! I'm scared." This was like in the hood you know.

Natasha appeared to question the racial profiling and prejudice being expressed by her friend, and although Natasha did not completely understand the remarks made by her friend, the remarks altered her perceptions of certain racial groups as she acknowledged that she was the only White person on her bus and was frightened.

Collectively, several participants learned about race and racism from classmates, friends, and family members. A salient theme was that several participants were warned to stay away from Black people in the United States of America, perpetuating the marginalization of African Americans.

*Learning through formal education.* Learning about race through formal education also emerged as a theme as participants reflected on their college experiences. Some learned about race and racism in the United States through formal education in their home countries, while others learned

about race and racism during their studies in the United States. Zimo (China) noted that being an English major introduced her to race and racism:

I was major in English when I was in China, so we've talked about race and when I think of race, I don't know, Black people come into my mind. So when I came here, some people say "Have you ever encountered any racism" because I'm an Asian.

Besides learning about race and racism in their home countries, participants learned about race and racism in their academic courses in the United States. Either participants enrolled in courses where the entire course was about diversity in the United States, or they took a course where diversity, race, and racism in the United States were emphasized. Sarah (Oman) discussed her experience taking a "Diversity in the United States" course:

The readings that I went through, and then we have people speaking up in the class, telling us their personal experiences. You would think a lot of stereotypes or prejudices don't exist anymore, but there is a lot of prejudice that still exists. Those people are classmates in my class and from this generation, and they are going through this. They are still struggling with racism.

Sarah shared how she learned about racial stereotypes and prejudices in the United States from the course content and through the lived experiences of her classmates. Ultimately, the course, combined with the testimonies of classmates, informed her of the racial tensions still prevalent in the United States.

Overall, participants who formally enrolled in courses that discussed race and racism, while openly listening to the lived experiences of others, held more complex or advanced understandings of race and racism in the United States.

*Learning through lived experiences.* Finally, some participants shared their stories of learning about race and racism through their lived experiences, and they were primarily international students of color. Babsheriff (Nigeria) was aware of race prior to traveling to the United States and discussed how he initially thought racism was a historical marker:

[In the] United States there are some grudges which people are dealing with, because back in Africa, we thought the Europeans they colonized Africa, brought them here [to the United States] for slavery. . . . Personally for me, I thought that that's over [racism], but when getting here I could see here that people still have grudges against each other. Whites try to move along their own way and though efforts are being made by government to improve race relations, there's still grudges among Whites and Blacks. . . . Yeah, I understand the concept of race, but I thought the United States had overcome it but with my experience here, I could see that there is still some way to go.

Participant Catherine (Zimbabwe) discussed how she experienced racial microaggressions<sup>4</sup> directly from her professors and classmates:

I remember my first class I was the only person of color in the class. I could feel that the tension. . . . First day of class you go around introducing each other and all that. You can feel it. People expect you to conform to their stereotypical views or what they've learned from the media here and all that. . . . When I started talking, I could tell like their facial expressions that they were shocked. . . . First of all, I'd never gone outside of Africa. I had traveled within Africa. I'd never actually been outside of Africa besides coming here. I think with them it was an educational moment, I should say. I think the media here encourages ignorance. I don't know why. I feel like socially it's somewhat of a barrier.

Participants who were international students of color described navigating discrimination in an educational setting and how challenging it was for them. Furthermore, they reflected on these experiences through racial and national/ethnic lenses, highlighting their awareness of race and racism in the United States and the complexities of understanding and learning about race and racism as international students. The complexities of the participants' understandings of race and racism in the United States were further highlighted when they were asked to define race.

### *Defining Race*

Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed varying definitions for race, and many students had difficulty in defining race. Although each student ultimately provided a definition for the term, almost half initially replied, "I don't know" or said that they did not know how to explain race. Nevertheless, definitions emerged that connected race to color, physical features, culture, ethnicity, nationality, geography, biology, and racism.

*Race as color and physical features.* When asked to define race, more than half the participants included color in their definition. VD (Vietnam) defined race simply as "the color." Babsheriff (Nigeria) mentioned the colors white, black, and yellow in his definition. Furthermore, others connected color with specific physical features, such as skin. For example, Lucky (China) stated, "But here, I think race means maybe people judge their race by their appearance, like the skin color and what they are looking like." When asked about why she self-identified as Asian, Julie (South Korea) explained, "Because I have the traditional characteristic appearance. I have black hair, brown eyes, and then not dark skin but not bright skin." These participants identified observable color and physical features as the primary characteristics of race.

*Race as ethnicity.* Another commonality among definitions was the term *culture*, though its application varied. When asked to define race, Jay (Taiwan) stated, "Race, it's a social group that have similar shared culture, cultural identity, I guess." Katherine (South Korea) argued that race is more cultural than physical, stating, "Race is like people group

that they share different culture background. That's how I define race. Also color, but I think more like culture." Subsequently, several participants specifically paralleled race and ethnicity. For example, Julie (South Korea) defined race as the division of ethnic groups: "I can say, like I can divide into the ethnic group, according to ethnic group. So Asian or African American, Caucasian, or Indian."

Some definitions connected color, culture, and behavior. Strawberry (Mexico) shared, "I guess it's . . . your background, how you were raised. I guess you can say your skin color, your beliefs, how you act." Natasha (Russia) also included cultural behavior as an intrinsic component to race, expressing confusion with Barack Obama's behavior, as it did not conform with her prescribed culture for Black people:

Sometimes like when you look at Obama for example, like he was raised in a White family I think. So I don't think he is really Black because he doesn't have this kind of culture. Or maybe outside all these cameras and everything and family he acts like a Black person, but I don't really know.

These statements reveal that some students defined race beyond color and described racial groups that share common culture, ethnicity, experiences, and behavioral conventions.

*Race as a marker of geographical origin.* A few participants connected race to geographic region or nationality. Lucky (China) included national origin in her concept of race, stating, "Race means people are originally from different . . . countries. What is their original place?" Mimi (Vietnam) shared, "I think races show where you're from and what's the histories of it." In her definition, Sarah (Oman) mentioned that U.S. national identity encompasses diverse geographic origins characterized by race:

You have a lot of races here. People from Asia . . . from Africa. You have natives. You have European Whites. Then all of these races just are in the United States. I don't think you get to see that a lot in other countries, even if there are a lot of immigrations in other countries. But here people have been here for generations. That they are actually Americans but they are from different backgrounds.

These statements link race beyond culture toward national and regional identities.

*Race and discrimination.* Finally, a fourth definition connected race with discrimination. Dvyia (India) defined race as a "cultural barrier" between people. Babsheriff (Nigeria) defined race as a classification that perpetuates discrimination, stating, "People have used [race] to discriminate against each other." After stating that race extends beyond skin color or one's ancestral geographic origins, Jack (Bangladesh) broadened the definition of race to include "any prejudiced

way to make difference between some group of people and between communities.” Catherine (Zimbabwe) added, “It’s how people conceive you by your color. That would describe it. You’ve got prejudices and stereotypes that are made because of your color, the color of your skin.” These testimonies shared a sentiment that race is a classification that perpetuates or enables discrimination.

Collectively, how participants defined race varied. For some, it revealed the cognitive dissonance that they experienced as they learned about race and racism, but they could not put their finger on a finely tuned definition. For others, their understanding of race and racism became clear as they connected race to phenotype; beyond that, though, they tied race to racism by discussing discrimination, prejudices, and stereotypes. It was these varying definitions and understandings of race and racism that informed the participants’ racial ideologies.

### *Racial Ideologies*

The five concepts in the third and final theme dealt with participants’ beliefs about race and racism.

*Making race an issue.* Several participants noted that they believe that the United States and U.S. citizens force race to be an issue, often stating that everyone is the same and they did not see difference. “Forcing the issue” often confused participants who had no knowledge of race and racism prior to arriving to the United States. For example, Sarah (Oman) expressed her frustration as she discussed racial categories such as Black, White, Hispanic, and so on: “It’s irritating, because why do these names exist in the first place? And then why are they still there? It just becomes a part of our lives because it has been there forever since God knows forever.” Sarah realized that racial categories are woven into the fabric of U.S. culture, but even with her understanding, she questioned why the United States continues to use racial categories.

Zimo (China) compared the United States with China as she reflected on why the United States continues to use racial categories and make racial distinctions. She also shared a racial incident that recently happened on campus when a student drew a picture of a Black person with a noose around their neck: “I saw the picture, it’s very simple, and if that happened in China no one would care. It’s not a big deal, but here it’s posted on news and everywhere; almost everyone on campus knows about that, so it turns out to be a very big issue.” Sarah’s and Zimo’s quotes highlight a common view expressed by participants who were aware of race and racism in the United States and wrote it off as no big deal. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that race and racism exist, while others simply wrote it off as something that did not exist.

*I don’t see race and racism.* Some students within the study simply did not have racial ideologies, and if categorized under a racial ideology, they would be considered as being

oblivious to race. In VD’s (Vietnam) case, he simply wrote off the notion that race and racism exist, stating, “I don’t really care about it.” While he agreed that race was grouping by phenotype, he stopped short of believing that race led to racism noting, “[Discrimination is] not really true. For me it’s not true,” and later stated, “Different people have different skin colors, but they are not discriminated against.”

Overall, participants who fell within this racial ideology understood race as a social construction. But either they refused to acknowledge that the construction could lead to discrimination, or they acknowledged that racism exists but, for them, did not make sense; this kept them oblivious.

*Racially aware.* While some participants were oblivious, others, who were primarily participants of color, carried a racial awareness—often muddled by nationality, ethnicity, and confusion about what type of discrimination they were facing when things happened to them or other international students of color. Pedro (Brazil) was quite in tune with race because Brazil also deals with constructs that affect groups of people. As he articulated his awareness, he spoke about affirmative action challenges in U.S. news:

For example, in Texas there was a case where this girl who was White and she didn’t get into school because of, I don’t know if you heard of color-blind policy in admissions. When I look at race, people often think that African Americans are getting benefits from the government and higher education institutions simply because they are African Americans. When you look at the statistics and you see where most African Americans come from, and the struggles that the United States has in education, and the lack of investment in inner city high schools where most kids are Hispanics and come from minority backgrounds.

While Pedro did not complete his thought, his knowledge of affirmative action is a clear indication that he is racially aware and sees racial inequalities in the United States.

Although racial awareness was on a spectrum, it is important to note that participants of color were more racially aware, often because of their lived experiences in the United States.

*Experiences with racial discrimination inform beliefs about race and racism.* Some participants had either experienced racial discrimination personally or learned about racial discrimination through the experiences of others. Participants who were aware of racism and racial discrimination used their racial awareness to shape their views on various topics, such as employment, equity, student interactions, and their environments.

For instance, experiences with racial discrimination in the classroom environment informed students’ views and caused some participants to form negative feelings toward student-to-student interactions. For example, Julie (South Korea) reflected on an experience of a racially minoritized friend, who had shared with Julie that her views were not valued or considered in a discussion with group members:

One of my friends told me she was in a group project and she really tried to participate in the project but somehow she could feel some isolation from the other group members. So when they talk about something, somehow she could not speak a lot. The other students might have spoken like 10 times, but she could only speak like three or four times. So somehow they just ignored her when they discussed something.

Catherine (Zimbabwe) highlighted an intersectional<sup>5</sup> understanding of discrimination as she noted that her group members treated her differently, though she could not totally assign it to either race or gender:

I wouldn't put race as being in the forefront of me not getting along in the groups and stuff. Right now I'm in a group and I'm the only girl in four guys. Four White guys by the way, Caucasian men. I can't say it's the race thing; it could also be the woman thing.

Overall, the racial discrimination that participants experienced or learned about while in the United States influenced the way that these students felt about their environments, opportunities, and interactions with others and often reflected a racial awareness.

*Stereotypes.* Finally, participants of the study discussed in their interviews various stereotypes that they had witnessed, heard of, or experienced in relation to expectations of certain racial groups in the United States. These experiences with stereotypes ultimately affected their experience on campus and in the United States. Some participants shared stereotypes that they were taught before entering the country, while others learned about them once they arrived in the United States. Mimi (Vietnam) reflected on her academic interest and the model minority<sup>6</sup> concept:

You know how sometimes people just say, "Oh, Asians are good with numbers" or some other race is good with other stuff. . . . When I was freshman and sophomore, it did show that way [that she was good at math], but as I moved towards graduation, I know that it's just partly the individual, it is not about race.

Aside from the racial stereotypes to which participants were subjected, their racial ideologies were formed by listening to others' lived experiences or by perpetuating stereotypes based on what they learned. Through listening to others' stories, some participants developed new beliefs about individuals regardless of race or cultural background.

For some participants, stereotypes were debunked as they interacted with people from backgrounds that differed from their own. For others, stereotypes were perpetuated as they chose to avoid certain racial groups based on stereotypes that they were told to believe.

### Study Limitations

The study limitations included interviewing students at one moment in time rather than longitudinally. Given that

there are various definitions of race and racism and that views on race and racism constantly change, this point should be acknowledged. While uncertain, another possible limitation might have been language barriers. For example, participants often needed the lead researcher to repeat several questions and define certain words and phrases throughout the interviews. Furthermore, the participants all arrived in the United States at different times and were from countries where discussions or acknowledgments of race and racism might be more prevalent (i.e., Brazil); therefore, some students may have had more time to reflect on race and racism in the United States than others.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, we found that the participants in this study often learned about race and racism in indirect ways. As articulated in the participants' definitions, their racial awareness varied across the spectrum. While this is also true for U.S. citizens, transitions for international students are unique and require intentional and directed support. Participants often expressed discomfort or a lack of knowledge when discussing race and racism in the United States, perhaps partly because international students may feel disconnected from race and racism in the United States as a result of their different lived experiences in their home countries (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). Some participants shared that race is not used as a social construct in their respective countries of origin, often noting that they are all the same. Others also made this distinction but highlighted their awareness of race and racism in the United States. After traveling to the United States, many participants were surprised to witness the extent to which race and racism are emphasized. This is a unique situation for international students, who are forced to learn about race and racism while learning U.S. culture and their chosen fields of study.

Beyond recognizing that race and racism exist in the United States, some participants, particularly participants of color, were subjected to racism. This is not a surprising finding, because previous studies found that international students of color are more likely to experience discrimination when compared with their White international student counterparts (see Constantine et al., 2005; Lee & Rice, 2007). These findings were confirmed in a qualitative study by Fries-Britt and colleagues (2014), who developed an emergent framework for learning about race in a U.S. context. A distinction between that study and the present one is that students in their study experienced racism but did not associate the discrimination as an act of racism or resisted the effect of racism on their experiences.

Some participants in the present study experienced racism and acknowledged it as such but could not make clear distinctions among what they thought could be racism, nationalism, and, in one case, sexism. This highlighted the

intersections of their multiple identities and the problem with trying to tease out one social identity where one is being marginalized the most (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthermore, note that none of the participants who expressed feeling microaggressions, discrimination, or stereotypes were from European countries. This highlighted what McIntosh (1988) coined *White privilege*, “an invisible package of unearned assets” (p. 1) that White people are afforded because of the complexion of their skin or phenotype.

Among the participants’ reflections, many of the students discussed their learned perceptions about African Americans, and these perceptions were overwhelmingly negative, which is troubling. Participants expressed discomfort around African Americans as a result of what they learned from peers, family members, and media outlets. Furthermore, students rarely had thoughts about other racial groups prior to arriving in the United States. In comparison, Ritter (2013) found that stereotypes were common for East Asian students, who learned stereotypes primarily through media. The present study extends the literature, finding that students from European and Asian countries shared similar stereotypes but learned them in diverse ways. What is promising is that students also expressed how they realized that African Americans do not always fit within the ways that the media portrays them. Still, some students expressed their uneasiness around African Americans simply as result of what they learned from others and not through personal interaction.

In terms of defining race, participants in the present study provided diverse definitions for race, focusing primarily on four areas: color, ethnicity, geographic origin, and discrimination. The initial tendency for students to state that they did not know how to define race again parallels the findings of Fries-Britt and colleagues’ (2014) study, where international students of color did not understand race in the United States. The diversity of opinions about race for international students included in this study and others demonstrates the array of perspectives and experiences that they often bring to the process of learning and understanding race—a process that U.S. citizens struggle with themselves.

Notable was the tendency for these students to use *race* as a synonym for *ethnicity* or *nationality*. The participants spent a significant amount of time connecting race to culture, social norms of behavior, nationality, and geographic origins. For many, their definitions of race were intersectional, seamlessly intertwined with concepts of ethnicity, culture, and nationality. Fries-Britt and colleagues’ (2014) study also found that international students included culture and ethnicity in their definitions of race, neglecting to identify ethnic and national diversity within racial groups. Furthermore, based on the continental diversity of the participants in the present study, this salient pairing of race and ethnicity could be a result of the some students’ simultaneous status as cultural and racial minorities in the United States. Several students in the study come from countries

that are significantly less diverse than the United States (e.g., China, the Netherlands, South Korea). The tendency to connect race, culture, and nationality also may result from socialization in a country whose national identity is monoracial or where racial constructs simply do not exist.

Furthermore, the inclusion of discrimination and prejudice when defining race demonstrates an awareness of racism and social and political inequities in U.S. society. Those who connected race with discrimination often mentioned personal experiences with racial prejudice during their time in the United States. This also connects to the findings of Fries-Britt et al. (2014), as international students in their study examined the concept of racial identity in the United States after exposure to racial encounters during their travels. This is noteworthy, demonstrating that international students often learn about race and racism as innocent bystanders in the U.S. cultural milieu.

### *Implications for Practice*

Participants learned about race and racism in four ways, but one way in particular was through media and television, which is consistent with Ritter’s (2013) findings for East Asian students. Because of media exposure, participants noted that they arrived in the United States with negative preconceived notions and formed stereotypes about racial groups, particularly African Americans. If learning about the United States through media is common among other international students, they may have a difficult time interacting with certain racial groups due to stereotypes, prejudice, and fear. To ensure that international students are building meaningful connections across the diversity of students, faculty, and staff at U.S. colleges and universities and have a grasp of the concepts of race and racism in the United States as they pursue higher education, institutions must be proactive in building cross-cultural connections and directly addressing race, racism, and stereotypes early in international students’ educational careers.

Possible ways to improve cross-cultural and interracial exchanges include offering and promoting formal courses that deal with race and racism in the United States, as highlighted by our participants. These courses could be recommended by academic advisors and international student officers as a way of acclimating international students to U.S. cultural norms. Still, simply introducing international students to these concepts through the curriculum is not enough, and we recommend intergroup dialogues as a process for acclimating international students to U.S. racial constructs. Intergroup dialogues are conversations “where students study structural racism in society, dissect media images, and examine the dynamics of privilege and oppression through collaborative team building exercises” (Ritter & Roth, 2015, p. 33). Providing international students the space to learn about race and racism beyond the academic

setting may prove useful to those who cannot afford to take such courses or who may have anxiety about taking courses related to race and racism for academic credit; it might also be more flexible for international students who would like to attend these conversations periodically. Whatever the intervention, participants noted that they struggled with learning about race and racism while learning in their field of study. As such, intentional programming must be designed to improve their college experiences and, more broadly, their experiences in the United States by introducing them to the concepts of race and racism to develop their intercultural competence as U.S. students.

Some participants in the study expressed uneasy feelings regarding incidents with professors and classmates that they attributed to their race, ethnicity, or nationality. International students often come from educational systems and cultures that are different from those in the United States. Because of this, many international students may not know that they have a right to report bias incidents, using the appropriate channels at their respective institutions, and they may not question a professor's comments out of respect or because of previous cultural norms. While bias incident reporting might be covered during student orientations, international students must be reminded of their rights throughout their educational experience due to their unique experiences. Empowering international students by reminding them of their rights might improve the social integration of international students, particularly international students of color. Still, we offer this recommendation acknowledging cultural differences and recognizing that students have a choice in how they use bias incident processes.

Although international students from countries outside of Europe are more likely to experience racism in the United States, most do not come to the United States prepared to be stereotyped and minoritized, which could have academic, social, and psychological influences on international students. Given this, institutions should be proactive in highlighting resources across the campus that international students can access as they deal with the process of learning race and racism while pursuing their degree. While interventions should be contextualized, developing staff who work specifically with international students and having dedicated services for international students might prove useful.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

Given the findings within this study, we offer several recommendations for future research that might expand on what scholars and practitioners know about the racial awareness of international students when matriculating at their respective institutions. First, we suggest studies across diverse institutional types (e.g., predominately White institutions, historically Black colleges and universities, public institutions, private institutions) and across different geographic locations.

Because context influences students experiences, we are now interested in how certain institutional types and diverse geographic locations might influence how racial awareness is developed for international students.

Second, future research exploring the ways that students develop their definitions of race and racism longitudinally could add to the literature and prove useful in higher education as it seeks to support international students. Understanding students' preconceptions of race in the United States before or shortly after arrival and how those perceptions change over time may benefit higher education professionals seeking to aid international students through their racial identity development, particularly for students who might make the United States home beyond their postsecondary experience. For example, a longitudinal qualitative study where international students use daily diaries to document their learning could prove beneficial. Similar to what Fries-Britt et al. (2014) recommend, studies conducted to determine the race salience of international students from their arrival in the United States until their departure to their home countries would provide longitudinal data of their changed racial awareness as a result of studying in the United States and how their changed racial awareness might influence their lives beyond their college experiences.

#### *Conclusion*

Discussing race and racism can be difficult. Nevertheless, these conversations need to happen to empower international students and improve their postsecondary experiences and their experiences beyond college and university campuses. The United States is a top destination for international students who travel to complete their postsecondary schooling. Preparing students for their journey by discussing U.S. culture, in particular race and racism, might improve their educational and overall experiences; it is an obligation for educators of an increasingly diverse and global society.

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#### **Notes**

1. International students of color are defined as international students who would be considered racial minorities in the United States based on skin color.
2. The term *race* encompassed both race and ethnicity throughout the study, with a focus on skin color being important in defining the U.S. construct of race.
3. Harper (2012) defines *racism* as follows: "individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritized

persons”—meaning that *minorities* are minorities only in the context of racial power and privilege; as “structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity”; and as “institutional norms that sustain White privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized persons” (p. 10; for an overview of race and racism within the United States, see Rogers, 2015).

4. *Microaggressions* are “subtle, covert racial attacks that are often subconscious in nature” (L. D. Patton, 2009, p. 723).

5. *Intersectionality* can be defined as “the intersection of salient socially constructed identities and the extent to which individuals or groups are oppressed or marginalized as a result of interlocking, socially constructed systems of oppression associated with those identities” (Mitchell, 2014, para. 2).

6. The *model minority myth* stereotypes a group based on social identities (e.g., Asian Americans) by labeling them with positive traits (e.g., hardworking, overachievers, good at math; Chang, 2011).

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## Appendix A

### Researchers' Positionalities

D.M.: I am an African American man, and as a critical scholar, I often explore the ways in which race, gender, and identity intersections influence higher education contexts at various levels of analysis. Moving U.S. higher education institutions and, ultimately, the United States further toward social justice is the goal of my research and scholarship. As an African American man reared in the United States, I have been minoritized, stereotyped, and oppressed, and I bring these experiences with me as I coconstruct critical qualitative studies with research participants.

T.S.: I am an African American woman, and I do not have vast knowledge regarding the experiences of international college students once they arrive in the United States. However, I am an advocate for social justice and furthering an understanding of the negative implications race and racism have in the United States. I believe that race and racism as social constructs have negative implications and are perpetuated through power and privilege held by White people. During this study, I brought my lived experiences with racism and stereotyping as an African American; I could not leave it behind.

J.M.: I identify as a Black American woman who continually strives to work and operate using a global framework.

I have worked directly with international college students for a number of years and personally understand some of the difficulties they face because of race and racism. I brought this experience to the study. As a Black woman living in the United States, I am forced to deal with systems of oppression and marginalization daily.

K.T.: I identify as a White woman. I grew up in a predominantly White community and attended predominantly White primary, secondary, and postsecondary schools. For the majority of my life, my race was not salient to my identity. Being White, my racial identity has always been very fluid and nebulous. Before college, my primary source of socialization to race and racism came from the media, my community, and my parents. I understood that my race provided me with long-established social status and afforded me unearned privileges. It was not until college, however, that I explored the topics of race and racism in detail to understand the ways in which they are interwoven into the fabric of U.S. culture and existing policies.

## Appendix B

### *Interview Protocol*

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How, or why, did you decide to study in the U.S.?
3. What are some cultural norms in the U.S. that you have noticed are different from the cultural norms in your home country?
4. What were your academic and social expectations in attending a university in the U.S.?
  - a. What influenced these expectations?
5. Tell me about your experience as an international student studying in the U.S.
6. How aware are you of the concept of race?
7. How would you define race?
8. How do you feel about the concept of race?
9. Did you understand the concept of race before coming to the U.S.?
10. Do you identify with a racial group? If so, what do you identify as and why?
11. Have ever been discriminated against because of your race/ethnicity?
  - a. If yes, give me an example.
  - b. How did it make you feel?
  - c. Did you initially know it was because of your race/ethnicity? If not, when did you become aware it might have been because of your race/ethnicity?
  - d. What did you do when you experienced this discrimination?
12. In what ways, if any, has your understanding of race influenced your overall college experience?

13. In what ways, if any, has your understanding of race influenced your involvement in cocurricular or extracurricular activities at the university?
14. In what ways, if any, has your understanding of race influenced your relationships with family and friends from your home country?
15. In what ways, if any, has your understanding of race influenced your relationships with faculty and staff at the university?
  - a. Do you have a faculty or staff mentor on campus that you depend on?
16. In what ways, if any, has your understanding of race influenced your relationships with other students at the university?
  - a. Do you have a friends/peers on campus that you depend on?
17. In what ways, if any, has your understanding of race influenced your persistence towards graduation?
18. What campus programs, if any, are important to you as an international student?
  - a. Are these programs important because of your— or understanding of— race?
19. Is there anything else you want to add about your college experience or the concept of race?

## APPENDIX C

### *Themes, Concepts, and Codes*

Themes	Concepts	Codes
Learning about race and racism	Learning through the media	Accepting prescribed racial identity
	Learning through relationships	Achievement despite race/ethnicity African/Black
Defining race	Learning through formal education	Avoiding stereotypes Awareness of existing stereotypes and prejudices Breaking down stereotypes
	Learning through lived experiences	Belonging
Racial ideologies	Race as color and physical features	Black = nice Blacks are negative
	Race as ethnicity	Breaking down barriers Close-minded Color-blind
	Race as a marker of geographical origin	Comfortable with differences Confusion
	Race and discrimination	Connecting with people with similar experience Consciousness/seeing inequalities

*(continued)*

APPENDIX C (CONTINUED)

Themes	Concepts	Codes
	Making race an issue	Cultural differences Cultural shock
	I don't see race and racism	Defining race through science Definition Differences/different cultures
	Racially aware	Different opinions Disconnect
	Experiences with discrimination inform beliefs	Discrimination exists but not for me Discrimination of nationality
	Stereotypes	Diverse friends Everyone equal Expectations Faculty/cultural norms in U.S. classrooms Familial roots Family structure Fitting in Help from American roommate Historical understanding of race History Home sick Identifies with racial groups but doesn't culturally Inclusive faculty Individualism Interest in U.S. culture Intersections of identity Lack of awareness Lack of cultural knowledge Lack of support from peers Language Learned discrimination/discrimination Learned stereotypes Learning racist behaviors Learning from others Learning race Learning race from peers Learning race in home country Learning race in U.S. classrooms Learning through education Little exposure to American minorities Little exposure to diversity in the classroom setting Media influence Mentioning certain races Microaggressions/subtle discrimination/covert racism Misconceptions Model minority Monoracial home country

(continued)

APPENDIX C (CONTINUED)

Themes	Concepts	Codes
		More conservative home country Motivation Nervous to speak to Blacks Neutral Oblivious/race doesn't matter Only heard about (never experienced) discrimination Opportunity/U.S. education provides opportunity Parental influence Peer relationships Perceived discrimination Possible interventions Predominantly White institution Prejudice Proud of race/ethnicity Race Race and involvement Race and student relationships Race defined as cultural Racism is everywhere Race is frustrating Race is important in the U.S. but unnecessary Race is still an issue Race matters but shouldn't discriminate Racial inequity/racial positioning Race should fade away Racial tension Racial/cultural groups and interactions Racist friends Raised awareness Sad Self-identification/identification Separation Shifting racial context Social status Societal context Stereotypes of racist Americans Stereotypes/racial profiling Stranger/outsider Support system U.S. diversity/diversity U.S. exposure/exposure Uncomfortable with race Unfriendly Americans University support Unwelcomed based on racial incident Well traveled White guilt

## Appendix D

### *Study's Trustworthiness Measures*

While quantitative studies are improved by validity, qualitative studies are improved by increasing trustworthiness. We focused on the credibility and reliability of the criteria to improve the trustworthiness of the study. For us, *credibility* dealt with how well the research findings matched the participants' lived experiences, and *reliability* referred to how well the study could be replicated (Merriam, 2009). Internal techniques used to improve the trustworthiness of the study were as follows: (a) including an audit trail; (b) monitoring our biases by analyzing the data independently, then going through a peer-debriefing process; and (c) triangulating the data by comparing the findings to existing literature as part of the discussion.

Our coding and internal peer-debriefing process included the four of us going through each interview transcript individually using an open coding process, developing line-by-line codes, highlighting quotes of interest, and making connections among codes to form concepts. We then analyzed the data as a

team to ascertain the common codes and concepts that emerged after we first analyzed the data individually. Concepts that appeared in three or more of our notes were included as final concepts. When concepts were highlighted by two of us, we engaged in a critical conversation regarding the concept. From there, these concepts were either included or rejected. We then developed overarching themes that connected the concepts by going through an identical process.

To further improve the study's trustworthiness and as another form of peer debriefing, we sent a summary of our findings to two external peer reviewers with expertise in qualitative research methodologies or research on race and racism. In particular, we asked them for feedback regarding the study's design and findings. We also shared the findings with the participants and sought their feedback. Feedback was either incorporated or rejected through a final peer-debriefing process among the four researchers. These practices further improved the credibility of the study. Finally, we provide detailed information about the participants, the setting, and the data collection and analysis procedures used in the study to ensure reliability.

## APPENDIX E

### *Data Analysis Audit Trail*

Participant	Question	Response	Codes <sup>a</sup>	Concept <sup>a</sup>	Theme <sup>a</sup>
Sarah	Is there anything else you want to add about your college experience or about the U.S. concept of race?	For example, you see Black people are constantly pictured as thugs, or rappers, or people who are just trying to get through [lazy]. They stereotype things even in the media, and I think that's sad because what you get from the media is what gets into the perception, even subconsciously, if people are watching and not realizing that [it is affecting their views]. But it does get into their perception and that becomes, unfortunately, a fact when it's not even a fact.	Media influence	Learning through media	Learning race and racism
Natasha	How would you define race? That's how Americans define the different races, but do you have a different definition or is there some other?	Sometimes like when you look at Obama for example, like he was raised in a White family I think. So I don't think he is really Black because he doesn't have this kind of culture. Or maybe outside all these cameras and everything and family he acts like a Black person, but I don't really know.	Learned stereotypes; race defined as cultural	Race as ethnicity	Defining race
Pedro	How do you feel about the concept of race? When you think about the race within the United States context how does it make you feel?	For example, in Texas there was a case where this girl who was White and she didn't get into school because of, I don't know if you heard of colorblind policy in admissions. When I look at race, people often think that African Americans are getting benefits from the government and higher education institutions simply because they are African Americans. When you look at the statistics and you see where most African Americans come from, and the struggles that the United States has in education, and the lack of investment in inner city high schools where most kids are Hispanics and come from minority backgrounds.	Seeing inequalities	Racially aware	Racial ideologies

<sup>a</sup>Required agreement of three or more of the authors.