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Racial Microaggressions Among Asian American and Latino/a Students at a Historically Black University

Robert T. Palmer  Dina C. Maramba

Research illustrates that the enrollments of Asian American and Latino/a students are increasing at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Nevertheless, research on how these students experience the institutional climates of HBCUs is nonexistent; hence, we sought to explore the college-choice process and perceptions of campus climate for Asian American and Latino/a students at HBCUs. One of the salient themes that emerged from this study was participants' experiences with racial microaggressions at a HBCU. This article discusses those experiences and concludes by providing implications for institutional practice and future research.

A myriad of studies on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) has compared the experiences and outcomes of Black students attending HBCUs to those at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). A common thread among this research is that despite being underfunded, HBCUs provide a supportive, nurturing, and family-like environment in comparison to PWIs (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Other research inquiries on HBCUs have focused on an array of topics, including: their ability to produce a higher proportion of Black graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematic (STEM; Perna et al., 2009); the experiences of Black men (Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer & Gasman, 2008); faculty governance structures (Minor, 2005); desegregation (Brown, 2002); and college presidents (Gasman, 2011).

Notwithstanding the significance of this literature, limited research has examined the experiences of non-Black students at HBCUs. For example, a paucity of research has examined the experiences of White students at HBCUs (Closson & Henry, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). Research on Asian American and Latino/a* students at HBCUs is nonexistent. It is important to examine the experiences of these students because recent research has shown that HBCUs are attracting more Asian Americans and Latino/as to their campuses (Gasman, 2012; Lee, 2012). Indeed, while more Black students are opting to attend PWIs, data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that the enrollment of Asian Americans at HBCUs has increased from 2,148 to 4,425 (106%) from 2000 to

* In this study, we use the term Asian American to generally refer to persons who trace their origin to Asian and Pacific Islander ancestry. We also use the terms Latinas and Latinos, or the abbreviation Latino/as to refer to persons who trace their origins to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spanish-speaking Central and South American countries, and other Spanish cultures (Fry, 2007). While we recognize the complexities associated with both of these socially and politically defined racial categories, we acknowledged and preserved the essence of how the participants identified themselves racially and ethnically in this study.

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2010. Similarly, Latino/a enrollment has increased from 6,412 to 12,205 (90%) during the same period (Lee, 2012). Thus, Asian Americans and Latino/as make up 1% and 3%, respectively, of the total enrollment of HBCUs.

While these increases may seem small, given that Adams v. Richardson (1972) and United States v. Fordice (1992) have compelled public HBCUs to increase the racial diversity of their student bodies, the number of non-Black students enrolling in HBCUs may continue to increase (Brown, 2002; Gasman, 2012). Specifically, given that data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) indicate that Asian Americans and Latino/as comprise two of the fastest growing minority groups in the US, more students from these populations may continue to increase in enrollment at HBCUs.

With this study we sought to better understand the college-choice process, perceptions of campus climate, and critical factors to the success of Asian American and Latino/a students at HBCUs. A number of themes emerged from this study; however, one of the most prominent was the students’ recollections of an unwelcoming climate at a HBCU. Many participants expressed that they did not belong at the institution. After reflecting on the participants’ narratives, we noticed that the participants’ accounts were reflective of racial microaggressions, which according to Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271).

To this end, this article will focus on the racial microaggressions that study participants experienced at a HBCU. Indeed many participants discussed experiencing unpleasant stares because of their race or ethnicity, enduring insensitive comments and jokes, and being viewed through the stereotypes of the model minority myth. It is important to point out that participants primarily implicated their Black peers on campus as perpetrators of racial microaggressions, and not the institutional community overall (e.g., faculty, staff, and administrators). The subsequent sections of this article will review two critical bodies of literature to help contextualize the experiences of the Asian American and Latino/a participants as well as their Black peers on campus. First, we will draw from literature on sense of belonging to provide context for why Black students attend HBCUs and what the Asian American and Latino/a participants are yearning for at these institutions. Second, we will provide an overview of Asian American and Latino/a students’ experiences with racism and racial microaggressions on college campuses to help further contextualize the significance of this study.

**Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging is conceptualized as psychological processes connected with the students’ adjustment and transition into college. Various types of social and academic integrations affect students’ sense of belonging, which, in turn, affects students’ intention to persist (Strayhorn, 2012). Schlossberg’s (1989) work on mattering provides a lucid definition of belonging. Specifically, Schlossberg underscores the importance of students’ feeling like their presence on campus is noticed and valued by others, such as faculty, staff, and peers. Research has shown that Black students attend HBCUs because they believe they will feel a sense of belonging (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). This sense of belonging manifests in Black students’ feeling connected to their roots and to the Black American culture (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Furthermore, research has shown that the sense of belonging for Black students at HBCUs is manifested by a supportive,
affirming, and nurturing environment, which helps to facilitate their self-efficacy, racial pride, psychological wellness, academic development, and persistence (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

HBCUs have always been open to diverse racial and ethnic groups, yet the student enrollment of the majority of HBCUs is still predominantly Black. While the enrollment of non-Black students has increased throughout the years, some fear that the changing racial demographics could alter the culture of HBCUs, which serves as a critical linchpin to the sense of belonging that Black students have experienced on these campuses (Allen, 1992; Brown, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). However, as HBCUs continue to become more racially and ethnically diverse, HBCU stakeholders have to find ways to ensure that both Black and non-Black students mutually experience this sense of belonging, which has defined the tradition of HBCUs.

Research on Asian Americans and Latino/as Regarding Racism and Racial Microaggressions

Racial microaggressions are subtle forms of racism that may be intentional or unintentional, and have the propensity to produce feelings of degradation, to erode self-confidence, and to induce psychological stress. Over time, stress caused by these assaults can engender mental, emotional, and physical problems. For college students, racial microaggressions can deprive students of psychological energy and cause them to fail or drop classes, change majors, or prematurely depart from an institution (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007) highlighted the erroneous assumption that Asian Americans experience little in the form of racism, an assumption rooted in the notion of the model minority myth. Nevertheless, in a qualitative study that Sue, Bucceri, et al. conducted with 10 Asian Americans from various ethnic communities† (8 of whom were college students at a PWI and 2 who were working professionals), they found that participants experienced various forms of racial microaggressions. For example, some of the participants explained that they were frequently viewed and treated as foreigners, stereotypically viewed as highly proficient in mathematics and science, experienced invalidations of their experiences with racism and discrimination, and were treated as second-class citizens, while their White counterparts were given preferential treatment as customers. In their quantitative study of 143 Filipino American college students, Museus and Maramba (2011) and Maramba and Museus (2012) further highlight how the model minority myth leads to generations of racial stereotypes and misleading assumptions about Asian Americans. They challenge these assumptions by discussing the academic struggles of Filipino American college students and by emphasizing how cultural connectedness helps facilitate the students’ sense of belonging. While not discussing the model minority myth directly, Yoo and Castro (2011) provide additional context regarding how racism impacts the academic motivation of Asian American college students. Specifically, in a quantitative study of 155 Asian American students enrolled in a larger Midwestern university, Yoo and Castro found that perceived racism affected US-born Asian Americans differently than it had those who were foreign-born: whereas perceived racism increased the academic motivation of

† Asian Americans comprise a diverse ethnic group consisting of 48 different ethnic subpopulations that vary in characteristics, including national origins, immigration patterns, language, and socioeconomic status (Museus & Maramba, 2011).
US-born Asian Americans, it had the opposite effect on foreign-born students.

Similar to Asian American students, Latino/a students have had experiences with racial microaggressions at PWIs: for example, although not referring to racial microaggressions explicitly, to investigate Latino/a students’ perception of the racial climate on campus and its impact of their sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter (1997) sent 493 students the National Survey of Hispanic Students (NSHS), which 287 students completed and returned. Results from this survey indicated that Latino/as felt invisible on college campuses, and this feeling affected their perception of the institutional climate and their attachment to it. This experience is akin to what Sue, Bucceri, et al. (2007) articulated as invisibility, a form of microaggression where people of color are overlooked and ignored.

Similar results emerged for Latino/a students when Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) used data from 203 students who completed both the NSHS and the Student Adaptation College Questionnaire to understand factors affecting adjustment to college for this student demographic. Specifically, Hurtado et al. found that Latino/a students reported experiencing discrimination, which impeded their attachment to campus. Other researchers found that Latino/a students have felt excluded from campus life and were held to lower expectations by faculty due to racial microaggressions. Specifically, Yosso et al. (2009) conducted a study with 37 Latino/a students from three PWIs who reported experiencing interpersonal microaggressions, racial jokes as microaggressions, and institutional racial microaggressions. These participants responded to the challenges by building academic and social counterspaces, which provided a safe space to help them navigate the negative campus climate they encountered.

Furthermore, in a study focused on the impact that Chicano studies had on the college transition experience for 19 first-generation Latino/a students attending a PWI, Núñez (2011) indicates these classes helped students to develop greater awareness of their community heritage, promote meaningful interactions with faculty, and provide a counterspace to better handle racism and discrimination. In addition to Núñez’s study, Reynolds, Soneva, and Beehler (2010) explored the experiences that 76 Black and 75 Latino/a students had with racism and its impact on them academically and psychologically. While they found that racism created stress, which impacted the academic motivation of both groups, Reynolds et al. noted that Black students experienced more amotivation (lack of motivation) than their Latino counterparts.

According to Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007), there are three variations of racial microaggressions. A microassault is similar to blatant racism and includes using derogatory language and behavior to attack someone based on their overt or perceived racial differences. Microinsults are exchanges that denote insensitivity or disregard for a person’s race or identity. An example of this is assuming that all Asian Americans are skilled in mathematics and science, which views Asian Americans through the stereotypical lens of the model minority myth and fails to recognize their individuality or uniqueness. Microinvalidations are experiences or interactions that “negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007, p. 274). Characterizing a person as hypersensitive because the person wants to report an encounter with racial or gender discrimination is an example of a microinvalidation. This example illustrates that the person’s claim of discrimination is not taken seriously and is categorized as an issue that has no merit. Indeed, while research highlighted in this section indicates that researchers have investigated the
campus experiences of Asian American and Latino/a students at PWIs in general and their experiences with racial microaggressions on these campuses specifically, we explored racial microaggressions among Asian Americans and Latino/as at a HBCU. Given the lack of such empirical research, this study provides critical insight into the campus experiences of Asian Americans and Latino/as at HBCUs.

METHODOLOGY

Geographic Location

This study was conducted at East Coast University (ECU, a pseudonym), a public, doctoral research HBCU located in an urban, metropolitan city in the mid-Atlantic. We selected ECU out of convenience because we had professional relationships with administrators and staff who helped us to gain access to the student population. Approximately 8,018 students were enrolled at ECU when data were collected. Approximately 82.0% of the students were Black with minorities including White (3.2%), Latino/a (2.5%), Asian (0.7%), and Native American (0.2%). Other populations enrolled when data were collected included international students (4.6%), multiracial students (2.6%), and students whose race or ethnicity was unknown (4.2%).

Using in-depth interview methods, we sought to explore the academic and social experiences of a particular group of students situated in a particular context: thus, the study’s epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning through human interactions (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006). Given that Charmaz (2000) recommends that grounded theory strategies can be incorporated into other qualitative perspectives, tenets of grounded theory strategies were incorporated into the research process. These strategies were not bounded to the interview process, but occurred throughout the research process and included continuously asking questions, utilizing research notes, and exploring hunches. To this end, this study did not employ a pure grounded theory approach.

Participants

To recruit participants, we sought the help of staff, administrators, and graduate students at ECU to select students who met the study’s criteria of identifying as an Asian American or Latino/a student. Specifically, these individuals sent out announcements about the study by e-mail to various student listserv categories, resulting in 7 participants who contacted the researchers to indicate their interest in the study. Administrators at ECU also referred 2 students, while 3 additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling, the process of asking those who have participated in the study to refer others who meet the study’s criteria (Jones et al., 2006). Overall the sample consisted of 12 students, 6 of whom were Asian Americans and 6 Latino/as, with ethnic backgrounds that included Bengali, Chinese, Dominican, Filipino, Mexican, Panamanian, Puerto Rican, Nepalese, and Vietnamese. The majority of the participants were women, specifically, the study included 7 women and 5 men. Although the participants self-identified as Asian American or Latino/a, 3 of the Latino/a participants had physical characteristics (e.g., skin tone) similar to Afro-Latinos. A person who identifies as Afro-Latino is a Latino of African descent. Afro-Latinos comprise 1.5% of the Latino population in the US. Most Afro-Latinos are descendants of slaves brought to the Americas (Núñez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vázquez, 2013). Afro-Latinos comprise the majority of the population in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. In countries such as Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, they form a critical minority. Although they constitute approximately 150 million of the population in Latin America, Afro-Latinos are one of the poorest and marginalized groups in this region (Seelke, 2008).
observations because we want to be transparent, and we feel by including this information about the participants, it will help researchers generate new and significant research implications related to non-Black students at HBCUs in general and Afro-Latinos specifically.

The participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 26 years, and their majors consisted of education, electrical and computer engineering, business administration, nursing, sociology, family and consumer science, and political science. Eight students reported that they were first-generation college students (i.e., from a family where no parent or guardian has earned a baccalaureate degree; Choy, 2001). Six lived in urban cities, four in suburban cities, and two in rural environments. Information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

### Data Collection

We conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview, which ranged from 90 to 110 minutes with each participant. As an incentive and recruitment method, all participants received a $20 gift certificate for their participation. Prior to beginning the interviews, participants signed a consent form and completed a brief demographic form. The demographic form allowed the researchers to collect information such as the participants’ age, race and ethnicity, and college major.

During the interviews, participants were asked about their reasons for attending ECU, their perception of the campus climate, and factors critical to their retention and persistence. Although a standard interview protocol was used to conduct the interviews, discussions often became conversational,
which allowed the researchers and participants to mutually share experiences relevant to the topic of discussion, encouraging deeper reflection among participants. Examples of questions include: (a) What are key factors that you perceive as contributing to your academic success? (b) What were obstacles to your academic success? (c) How did you overcome those issues? (d) What has been your greatest challenge as an Asian American [or Latino/a] at this institution? and (e) How have you been able to deal with or overcome that challenge? Observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview were recorded throughout the process of data collection. Specifically, research notes were made about observations of participants’ body language, ease at answering the questions, and willingness to provide depth to their responses. These aspects of the notes were shared throughout the analysis process. We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with four participants, which ranged from 15 to 25 minutes. The decision to conduct these interviews was prompted by listening to the digital recordings and consulting field notes for each person we interviewed and discerning that we missed opportunities to probe or clarify responses. Phone interviews were conducted because the researchers and the participants had difficulty scheduling a subsequent face-to-face interview.

Researchers’ Positionality
For any qualitative study it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones et al., 2006). This research was conducted by a Black male and a Filipina American; both were affiliated with a PWI when data were collected. Our scholarly interests are similar in that they assess campus climate across institutional types, investigate factors promoting the success of students of color, and examine racial/ethnic disparities in college student outcomes. Despite our current institutional affiliations, similarities in our research interest, and passion for advocating for the continued relevance of HBCUs, the Black male researcher attended a HBCU for his graduate training, whereas the Filipina American researcher attended PWIs for all of her educational training. Given that the Black male researcher spent extensive time on the campus of a HBCU as a graduate student, he noticed that many non-Black students he encountered appeared lonely and seemed out of place on campus. These observations served as hunches about the experiences of non-Black students at HBCUs, and they informed the development of questions used in this study. At the same time, we allowed the findings to emerge independent of our past or previous observations. Member checking and peer debriefers also helped to make certain that the findings were accurately reflective of the participants’ voices. As researchers, we believe an increased level of trust and comfort was established immediately with participants, largely due to our self-disclosure during the interviews. Specifically, we were able to relate to participants by sharing our own experiences of being students at diverse institutional types (e.g., PWIs and HBCUs), which seemed to help relax the participants and normalize some of their experiences. Evidence of participants’ sense of comfort was seen after the conclusion of the interviews when some of them thanked us for being interested in their stories and allowing them an opportunity to talk about their experiences at ECU.

Data Analyses
We engaged in the constant comparison of data, including reviewing memos, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns, collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at “all stages of the data
collection and interpretation process, resulting in the identification of codes’ (Jones et al., 2006, p. 44). We read through the research notes and made reflective remarks in the margins to help form initial concepts. As the data became increasingly voluminous, we used ATLAS.ti (version 5.0), a qualitative data management software program, to help organize, manage, and code the data.

We used open coding, which involves analyzing the data line by line to identify initial concepts and categories related to each phenomenon and to allow for themes to emerge from the data and become aggregated into response patterns (Jones et al., 2006). We then performed axial coding procedures to further develop themes and categories. Selective coding was then used to understand the relationships among the various themes and categories. For example, we identified an initial concept that indicated the occurrence of a distinct racial phenomenon. The line-by-line coding of students’ talking about race revealed a similar response pattern, more specifically racial microaggressions. Lastly, axial coding and selective coding were utilized to elucidate detailed examples and accounts of this phenomenon. An example of selective coding for Asian Americans is the model minority stereotype and its association with specific forms of racial microaggressions. Furthermore, memos were made of the emerging concepts and categories to not only refine the categories, but also to understand the relationships among them, bringing together concepts related to various aspects of the participants’ experiences. This process helped us to solidify and cluster the data into the two major themes, presented in the Findings section of this article. In discussing the findings, we present excerpts from the participants’ responses verbatim to preserve the essence of their voices. We used pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To ensure the data’s trustworthiness, we also conducted member checks by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could review transcriptions to ensure that they were not misquoted. As the study progressed, participants were provided an opportunity to review our interpretations of the data. No participants raised any issues with the way their voices or experiences were represented. Lastly, to ensure credibility we used feedback from five peer-debriefers who were well versed in in-depth interview methods and active researchers on HBCUs. Similar to the participants, the debriefers were provided with raw transcripts from each interview and later our interpretation of the data. The debriefers reanalyzed significant portions of the data and engaged the researchers in a series of ongoing discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants’ experiences throughout the research process (Jones et al., 2006). We found this process helpful, because these colleagues could check for potential biases, given that one of us attended a HBCU.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations in this study. This study was conducted with 12 participants at one HBCU; nevertheless, we provided thick description of the institutional context to allow readers to assess the transferability of findings to similar contexts. Moreover, interviews may not be an effective way to collect reliable information when the questions pertain to matters the participants perceive as personally sensitive; thus, a degree of caution should be exercised when interpreting these findings.

Another limitation is that the initial intent of this study was to investigate the college-choice process, perceptions of campus climate, and critical factors to the success
of Asian American and Latino/a students at HBCUs. As indicated, one of the themes that emerged was racial microaggressions and their impact on the participants’ experiences. Had the original intent of this study been to provide an in-depth examination of the participants’ experiences and perceptions of the institutional climate of HBCUs, we would have possibly collected more nuanced data on the ways in which microaggressions shaped the college experiences of Asian American and Latino/a students at ECU. In addition, given that we selected ECU out of convenience and not because it has a sizable enrollment of non-Black students (although with the exception of a few, ECU’s enrollment is consistent with that of many HBCUs), our findings should be interpreted with caution. Finally, although effective, our use of snowball sampling has its limitations, as it may have led to the recruitment of students who had similar experiences, which may differ from the experiences of other students at ECU.

FINDINGS

Two major themes emerged from the interviews. The first theme highlights Asian American students’ experience with racial microaggressions at ECU. Some of the Asian American participants discussed experiences of unpleasant stares and being viewed through the model minority myth. In the second theme, Latino/a students shared reflections of the kind of racial microaggressions they have experienced at ECU. In particular, they disclosed how they experienced uncomfortable stares and endured insensitive comments or jokes, primarily from their peers on campus.

Asian Americans’ Delineation of Racial Microaggressions at a HBCU

Asian American participants reflected on their experiences with racial microaggressions. Kelly, a 20-year-old Malaysian student majoring in business administration, who was recruited to ECU to play on the softball team, shared stories about being stared at on campus. In her mind, she wanted to think it was something she was just imagining; however, when she looked around, she noticed that the stares were not a “figment of her imagination.” She suggested that students at ECU could benefit from being more open-minded and interacting with more racially diverse students:

Like when I am walking around with my teammates, people keep staring at us. I want to really say that it’s just my head thinking they’re staring, but they really turn their head when we walk and it’s just like we’re just regular humans though . . . it’s almost like, I feel like the students are in a bubble themselves, like culturally.

Despite showing exasperation as she described this incident Kelly stated that she was increasingly becoming immune to the stares and not allowing them to get to her so easily: “I don’t know if my mentality has changed, like I’m more immune to it. I don’t—what’s the word?—get so aggressive or offended easily.”

Other Asian American participants shared encounters of racial microaggressions. For example, some participants explained that because they are Asian Americans, their peers tend to assume that they are good in mathematics and science, an assumption that is a stereotype perpetuated by the model minority myth. For example, Stacey, a 24-year-old Filipina American majoring in nursing, admitted to having stereotypical views of Blacks before attending ECU. While she shared that her experiences with peers on campus have been positive, Stacey indicated because she is Asian, some students assumed that she was good in mathematics: “When I came to America, like I had stereotypes that Black people are rude and, you know, all the bad things. I haven’t had that here [at
When asked, how her peers at ECU viewed her as an Asian American student, she showed some frustration in describing some of her experiences:

Some of my Black and White friends on campus will say things like, “All Asians are smart in math.” So that’s the first thing they say. I tell them, “No, it’s not true: not every Asian is smart,” but they think I’m . . . kidding.

Similar to Stacey, Steward, a 24-year-old Nepalese student majoring in electrical and computer engineering, explained that some of his peers on campus only befriended him “because Asian Americans are supposed to be good in math.” Although Steward confessed that he likes math, he expressed that his friends on campus seemed to lack a genuine interest in getting to know him and were only interested in him helping them with math assignments. “My friends at [ECU] never invite me to parties and want to hang out with me, but when they need help [with math work], they are extra friendly.” Laura, who transferred to ECU from a community college, echoed Stacey’s and Steward’s sentiments about how their peers assumed that they were skilled in mathematics. Laura, a 22-year-old Chinese American student majoring in education and vocal performance, who is also in the gospel choir at ECU, noted that because of this assumption, some of her peers tend to ask for help with their math homework.

I have to be honest: they have a stereotype of Asians being good at math. . . . At times, some students at the dinner will ask me to help them with math, but I can’t because I’m not that good. But I’m like, “I can help you in English, history, or any other subject, just not math.” . . . It doesn’t insult me or anything; I just find that very funny and somewhat entertaining. And what I said before—when I hang out with my friends, a lot of other people perceive that I am an engineering major or pre-law, but I’m not. Everyone thinks that I’m in one of those majors instead of education.

Laura also mentioned that when she first attended ECU, students made fun of her and would make comments about why she came to ECU. “It was kind of insulting, but I didn’t really let it get to me. But they would say, ‘Why is she here? This is a Black school. She’s Chinese.’” Although Laura appeared somewhat amused while she described this incident, she further explained that the teasing and questioning dissipated after her first year.

Interestingly, as these participants shared stories of how they were viewed through the model minority myth, they did not appear to be upset. Instead, they discussed their stories casually. Nevertheless, some participants, such as Stacey, used conversation on this topic as a teachable moment by introducing counter perspectives to encourage their peers to think differently.

Reflections of Latino/as on Racial Microaggressions at a HBCU

Similar to the Asian American participants, many of the Latino/as discussed accounts of microaggressions they have experienced at ECU. For example, many of the Latino/a participants shared stories of how they were ridiculed, bombarded with stares, and experienced incidents of insensitivity, which caused them to feel unwelcome at the university. For example, Rachelle, a 21-year-old Panamanian student majoring in political science and a member of the softball team, shared reflections similar to her Asian American teammate, Kelly, about racial microaggressions she experienced at ECU. She explained that when she first arrived on campus, she was walking with a teammate and as they stopped to sit down, she noticed other students staring, which caused her to
feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. As time progressed, and students became used to seeing her on campus, Rachelle confessed that the staring dissipated, but periodically, she still noticed people staring:

The first week I came here, me and another teammate, we came up together and we were just sitting in there. And it's just like, there's a difference between 'Oh look, like they are here'. . . students were dead-on staring like in a very rude way. And it was just that first whole week, and I guess then people sort of got used to it, but yet they still you know, give a look and look at us, like, 'What are they doing here?'

Another participant, Michelle, a 20-year-old Mexican American student majoring in sociology, who also played on the softball team, contextualized this sense of reluctance by some in this HBCU community to welcome non-Black students. In particular, she described an unsettling event:

One time me and my friend—she's Caucasian—last year was our first year here, so it was probably around the first or second week: we're just walking and [we see] this older [Black] woman and her daughter walking by just looking at the campus. The lady, she stops and says to the girl, “You see that right there?”—pointed at us—“You wouldn't have seen that 20 years ago.” I'm like, “Yeah, we're not a zoo though.” Like, we aren't used to that, and it was just like daylight, like, “We clearly hear you. Yeah, we see you pointing.”

Although while describing this incident Michelle appeared calm, she explained that it still made her and her friend to feel marginalized and unwanted at ECU, and she felt upset that this happened to her. An incident of this nature is disturbing, and although the perpetrator did not attend ECU, this experience still had the propensity to make students, who already felt at the margins of the institution, feel even more detached from the university. In fact, Michelle noted that if it had not been for the support and cohesion of her softball team, which consisted of a racially diverse group (e.g., Black, Latina, White, and Asian American), she would have transferred to another school. Michelle also shared a story of another experience that occurred on campus during homecoming:

On homecoming we're all crossing the street, and one of our teammates was going to take us to go get something. And so we're about to cross the street. I went a little further than the girls; I speed walk. And I can see a group of [Black] men walking, and just out loud one goes, “Oh my God, there's White students here now.” And I just like sort of turned, and one of his friends starting laughing . . . “She can hear you. What are you doing saying that out loud?” And as I walked by, I said, “I'm Mexican.”

Although Michelle was comfortable describing this incident, she still appeared surprised that this happened.

*Racial passing is defined as identifying and presenting oneself as one race while denying ancestry of another (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). Some of the Latino/a participants who can be classified as Afro-Latinos, though this was not how they identified themselves, discussed being able to “pass as Black” because of their skin pigmentation. As a result, they were privy to conversations that they would not have had access to if they were non-Black. For example, Janet, a 22-year-old Dominican student majoring in family and consumer science, indicated that because she was able to pass as Black, her peers on campus, with whom she was not extremely close, often forgot she was Latina, which provoked them to hold conversations in front of her that ridiculed other races for wanting to join Black organizations or engage in interracial relationships:
On a social level I’ve heard all kinds of stuff. “Why would a person who is not Black become a part of [the National Council of Negro Women]?” . . . Like when people talk about interracial dating . . . I’m not sure if my friends noticed, but my relationship is interracial. Like I think they just, you know, are so used to the fact that I act like them or talk like them and dress like them, that they don’t see the fact that I am Hispanic. So even when they talk about people taking all the good Black men, they’re kind of like really talking about me.

While she described this one incident, Janet appeared relaxed, but she also stated that it still bothered her: “I feel like their comments are negative; I know they may not mean harm by saying them, but they have negative connotations.”

Omar, an 18-year-old Puerto Rican student majoring in electrical engineering, who discussed being able to pass as Black, echoed Janet’s comments about how his peers made comments and jokes when they found out that he was Latino: “A lot of my close best friends called me ‘Puerto Rico’ and always try to make jokes, but they are friendly jokes.”

While Janet and Omar felt that their peers did not mean to be malicious with their comments about non-Black students, Marc, a 21-year-old Puerto Rican student majoring in business administration, who discussed the ability to pass as Black, had a different perspective. He stated that some of his peers on campus were ignorant about other cultures and closed-minded to embracing cultural differences. He also explained that some of his peers were racist and held stereotypical views of Latinos: “Some people here are racist, like they’ll say racist comments. I mean, like somebody asked me where I work. I told them I work on cars, and then they say, ‘Oh yeah that’s right, you’re Hispanic.’ I’m like, ‘What?’” Interestingly, Marc indicated that he came to a HBCU to avoid being harassed because of his ethnicity. He assumed that since he “looked Black” and identified with Black people, he would be widely embraced by the Black community at a HBCU. However, to some extent, his actual experience did not match his preconception.

I wanted to attend [ECU] because I knew I was not going to get picked. . . . So it was crazy, but then when I came here, I thought like, “Okay, I’m around Black people: it’s going to be cool.” But as soon as somebody found out I was Puerto Rican it was like, “Oh, you’re Puerto Rican?” and they were just like making those slick comments. . . . I remember this one time this kid called me a “spic” and I didn’t know what a spic was. So then I Googled it . . . like my anger got the best of me. I Googled from my phone—so I just threw the phone at his head.

While describing this interaction with his friends Marc showed some bewilderment. Marc’s experience is important because while he attended ECU with the intentions of being embraced, he encountered unsettling experiences from some of his peers, which caused Marc to reassess his perception of ECU as being a supportive and inclusive environment. It is interesting to note that the kind of racial microaggressions that Marc as well as the other Latino/a participants experienced differed, to some extent, from their Asian American counterparts. While both groups experienced stares and comments related to stereotypical perceptions about Asian Americans or Latino/as, many of the incidents that Asian Americans encountered with racial microaggressions were based on the model minority myth. On the other hand, some of the Latino participants reported more extreme encounters with racial microaggressions. For example, in addition to experiencing unpleasant stares, some of the Latino/a participants, such as Michelle, discussed experiencing comments that directly
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indicated that some of their Black peers did not want them at ECU. It seems, however, that the closer the participants’ skin tone appeared to that of a White person, the more egregious their experiences were with racial microaggression. Again, Michelle’s experience is a perfect example of this in that some of her Black male peers on campus mistook her for a White person and openly expressed their dismay with seeing someone they perceived as White on campus. Even more so, other Latino/as, such as Marc, reported being called racial epithets.

DISCUSSION

This study is unique in that it focused on Asian Americans and Latino/as at a HBCU. Although these populations are increasing in enrollment at these institutions, research on their experiences is scarce. This study revealed that Asian Americans and Latino/as have experienced incidents on campus that researchers have characterized as racial microaggressions. Sue, Bucceri, et al. (2007) identified three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Two forms were observed among participants in this study. Examples of microassaults include a student being directly called a “spic,” and the incident where an older woman pointed specifically to a Latina student and said, “You would not have seen that 20 years ago,” referring to non-Blacks at HBCUs. These are characterizations of microassaults, because the perpetrators were verbally conscious and deliberate in their statements about the participants’ race and ethnicity. Microinsults were also experienced by the participants in this study. For instance, an Asian American participant was subjected to statements by her non-Asian American peers that “all Asians are smart in math.” Although she tried to counter this, her peers did not believe her. This is indicative of a microinsult: although this may not appear to be rude, it is insulting because it assigns an ascribed intelligence based on race. This statement generalizes that Asian Americans have a specific trait of being good at math. Indeed this type of racial microaggression that the Asian American participants in this study experienced was similar to what participants in Sue, Capodilupo, et al.’s study (2007) encountered at a PWI.

Another example of a microinsult was apparent for students who discussed passing as Black. One participant, who identified as Puerto Rican but shared that he was able to pass as Black, experienced a number of comments about his ethnicity. His friends often made negative comments about Puerto Ricans in his presence. When he later shared with them that he was Puerto Rican, they did not believe him. In fact, they asked him to say phrases in Spanish to prove his authenticity of being Puerto Rican. While on the surface, this can be viewed as a microassault because of the negative comments about other racial and ethnic groups, this can also be seen as a microinsult, because he was asked to speak Spanish to validate his claim of being Latino. In a sense, this experience not only conveyed a sense of rudeness, but placed a psychological burden on the student by forcing him to verify being Latino.

It is important to note that the term passing was not something that we imposed on the participants; rather, the participants used this term when they described their interactions with their Black peers on campus. While much of the higher education literature on Latino/a students does not address the array of diversity that exists among this group (Nuñez et al., 2013), Latino/as are very diverse in terms of ethnicities, skin tone, and geographic locations (Seelke, 2008). As mentioned, though all the participants self-identified as either Asian American or Latino/a, some of the Latino/a participants had physical traits similar to Afro-
Latinos. While Afro-Latinos are not mutually exclusive from Blacks (Seelke, 2008), their Black peers on campus treated the participants differently when they disclosed that they have Latino heritage. Because the aim of this study was not to investigate the relationships between Black and Afro-Latino students, we cannot explain why this occurred. Given this, future research should be more intentional about examining the relationships between Black and Latino students on college campuses in general and HBCUs specifically.

Consistent with extant research on racial microaggressions (e.g., Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Yosso et al., 2009), these experiences negatively affected the participants’ sense of belonging at ECU. It is interesting to note the type of racial microaggressions participants encountered dictated their response. For example, students who experienced microassaults were infuriated by their experiences. In fact, some students reported seeking support from their peers at the institution to try to increase their sense of belonging. Many of the participants who encountered microslights were perturbed by these acts. Nevertheless, some of the participants viewed the perpetrators as not being intentionally mean about making such comments. This may be attributed to the fact that these comments were made by their friends; therefore, the participants did not feel any ill will from them. Even still, these participants expressed that they thought a lot about these comments and pondered why it continued to bother them. Interestingly, Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) observed a similar trend among some of the participants in that study. Specifically, it was noted that because some of the instigators of the racial microaggressions were participants’ peers or neighbors, the participants responded to these incidents by making excuses for friends “by rationalizing away their biases and by denying their own racial reality” (p. 78). Given the similarities between these two studies (i.e., participants were reluctant to characterize their experiences as racial microaggressions when the perpetrators were friends), using tenets of critical theory which emphasize how the dominant culture uses the media and other forms of propaganda to manipulate marginalized cultures to think and act in ways to help maintain the status quo, we felt compelled to characterize their experiences as racial microaggressions. Indeed, we felt that these students were experiencing a racial microaggression, but because they may have been socially indoctrinated from the media, music, or peers to view certain experiences as acceptable, such as “friendly jokes,” particularly when the perpetrators were friends, they did not want to label their experience as a racial microaggression. Our stance was strengthened when participants viewed our interpretation of the data and did not raise any objections or challenges.

Although, for the most part, Asian Americans and Latino/as experienced similar microaggressions, there were, however, slight differences between their experiences. For example, the Latino/as, especially those who discussed being able to pass as Black, felt a different type of microaggression in that they encountered comments made about their ethnic background (not aimed at them personally) within everyday conversations with friends or strangers. For Asian American students, some of the microaggressions were based on the model minority stereotype. Despite these differences, while the outcome negatively affected the sense of belonging for these students at ECU, some participants reported becoming immune to these experiences or using them as teachable moments to educate their peers about cultural differences. This finding is compelling and unique because it stands in contrast to how racial and ethnic minority students react to
racial microaggressions at PWIs. Research has shown that racial and ethnic minority students who experienced racial microaggressions on the campuses of PWIs suffered psychological stress, degradation, and eroding self-confidence (e.g., Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Yosso et al., 2009). While some of the participants in our study did experience some of these issues, others had different reactions.

Furthermore, in some cases, the racial microaggressions that students experienced gradually dissipated as their peers became adjusted to their presence of campus. This finding is another critical difference from the extant literature on this topic. For example, research on minority students who encounter racial microaggressions at PWIs has not indicated that student experiences with these incidents are mitigated over time, but we found in this study that they were.

As briefly noted, one explanation that may provide context for the racial microaggressions students have experienced at ECU may be linked to the fact that some supporters of HBCUs harbor a fear that too much racial and ethnic diversity could change the climates of these institutions. In fact, Brown (2002) and Gasman (2012) noted that some stakeholders of HBCUs feel that the growing racial diversification of HBCUs could radically change the institutional culture, climate, and mission, thereby threatening the historic mission and environment of these institutions. Some also feel that the preservation of the climate of HBCUs is critical because it has been a salient facilitator of Black student success (Brown, 2002; Gasman, 2012). Though some advocates of HBCUs may be inclined to think this way, given that more Black students are attending other venues for their postsecondary education, HBCUs have to be more intentional about not only recruiting diverse populations to ensure their survival, but also supporting and retaining them as well (Gasman, 2012).

Interestingly, the experiences of the Asian American and Latino/a students in this study differed, to some extent, from the literature’s characterization of how White students experience HBCUs. The literature suggests that White students at HBCUs perceive the campuses as friendly and welcoming (Closson & Henry, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). Participants in our study reported the opposite; indeed, they reported both overt and subtle incidents, which for many engendered an unwelcoming campus climate.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The findings of this study have important implications for research and practice. First, the initial intention of this study was to examine the college-choice and success factors of Asian Americans and Latino/as at HBCUs and not necessarily the students’ experiences with racial microaggressions. Therefore, future studies might involve studying specifically the racial microaggressions that students face in the college environment. Also, although this study involved 12 participants, a larger pool of students may extend the findings of this study. Since this is the first empirical study to focus on the experiences of two specific racial groups (Asian Americans and Latino/as) at a HBCU, further examination of these two groups is necessary to provide greater contextual understanding.

Indeed additional research of this topic may yield insight into why some participants gradually became immune to acts of racial microaggressions and what prompted some participants to use these experiences as teachable moments. In addition, given that some Latino/as participants, who appeared as Afro-Latino, discussed passing as Black, future
research should also explore the dynamics between Black and Latino/a students at HBCUs. Moreover, future research should also be more intentional about understanding the experiences of Afro-Latino students. Given that Seelke (2008) noted that Afro-Latinos comprise 1.5% of the Latino population in the US, there may be a large number of this student demographic on college campuses in general and HBCUs specifically; thus, researchers need to provide context about their experiences in HBCUs and beyond.

The findings of this study also have critical implications for student affairs practitioners, administrators, and faculty. As noted, diverse racial populations have always been welcomed at HBCUs (Strayhorn, 2010). Nonetheless, given our findings, the following are considerations to improve upon current practices. First, addressing racial microaggressions from the beginning and throughout students’ college experience is essential to increase potential for a more comfortable environment for all students. Because the perpetrators of the racial microaggressions were the students’ peers, intervention at the student level is particularly important; for example, efforts can take place during orientation, in residence halls, and at the student activities level. To help prevent racial microaggressions, orientation directors as well as those involved in residence halls can further emphasize the values of racial and ethnic diversity through programs and events that discuss these issues. Given that HBCUs have a unique history of advocating for social change and producing leaders who fought to advance civil rights for all, these institutions are well positioned to further encourage these values. An example of this might take the form of student and parent activities during orientation. These areas can be addressed in both first-year and transfer student HBCU orientations. In order to include those who do not live in residence halls, these issues can also be addressed by those involved with all campus planning, such as directors of student activities and advisors to student organizations. For example, these activities might take the form of forums or panels composed of students who are willing to share their experiences with racial microaggressions. Also important in these forums is having student affairs practitioners who are skilled in facilitating such topics. Moreover, it is critical that all student affairs units on campus work together to address racial microaggression issues. Based on our findings, discussions in these forums may involve topics that explore ideas such as what students described as being able to pass as Black and the negative effects of stereotypes such as the model minority myth.

Academic counselors and psychological services can improve on their awareness of the existence of racial microaggressions and how to help students who may be experiencing such incidents. This may help improve students’ outlook on their college experience as well as their own self-esteem. Perhaps cultural programs or specific student support centers can focus on Asian Americans, Latinos/as, and other campus minorities. While this may assist in the recognition of the various cultures, it must also be done with caution so as not to cause a division among students from various ethnic backgrounds, but to encourage interaction among students. At the faculty level, professors may consider being more cognizant of how racial microaggressions might occur in their classrooms. Faculty may improve on addressing these incidents so as to encourage positive classroom discussion and dynamics. For example, acknowledging the diversity of students in their classes may help all students feel included in class discussions. Similarly, given that some of the participants’ peers at ECU seemed to be challenged to fully embrace the increasingly changing demography on campus, perhaps administrators and faculty
should hold periodic forums on campus to discuss with stakeholders the importance of HBCUs recruiting more racially diverse students and the negative impact that racial microaggressions could have on students’ sense of belonging. These forums may weaken the perception among some stakeholders that becoming more racially and ethnically diverse will alter the mission of HBCUs and deprive Black students of opportunities for educational success. Furthermore, these forums may also create buy-in from stakeholders, because they will have multiple opportunities to voice their concerns, which will make them feel that their voice is valued by the university.

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