Toward an Understanding of Misandric Microaggressions and Racial Battle Fatigue among African Americans in Historically White Institutions

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We all say we hate [the University of] Michigan, but at the same time we know what a Michigan degree can do for us.

» African American University of Michigan student

African American men live a life filled with racialized paradoxes. On the one hand, they are told that institutions of higher learning—particularly historically White institutions (HWIs)—are places where, through hard work, they can achieve the so-called American dream. Yet, for far too many young Black men HWIs represent a campus racial climate that is replete with gendered forms of racism and blocked opportunities not unlike the urban environments they navigated prior to their arrival to a postsecondary campus. Upon arrival to these campuses, they soon learn

The term historically White institutions is used in this chapter instead of “predominantly White institutions” to emphasize that the gross numbers or percentages of White American students have less to do with constituting the majority population on collegiate campuses than with the historical and contemporary racialized infrastructure that exist there, as witnessed in the current campus racial culture and ecology.
that racism, in its contemporary form, is pervasive; that Whites still benefit at the expense of Blacks and other groups of color; and that anti-Black male stereotyping and marginalization—or "Black misandric microaggressions"—causes them huge undue stress, what I term as racial battle fatigue. Racial battle fatigue is the psychological, physiological, emotional, and behavioral toll placed on People of Color who are responding to daily racial macro- and microaggressions.

On many HWI campuses today, Black males are still viewed as outsiders or illegitimate members of the academic community. As a result, it is common for Black male students to believe that their lives are constantly in danger from Black misandric agents, environments, and conditions (Pierce, 1995; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). It is also common that these conditions produce emotional and physical distress, or racial battle fatigue, from frequently confronting racially based dilemmas as part of their postsecondary experiences.

Given the restrictions of time and space, this chapter will discuss only those racial dilemmas that are the most critical, mundane, and yet least often related to Black college men's psychological and physiological health. These include Black misandric microaggressions such as when Black male students are stereotyped as troublemakers, suspected of antisocial behaviors without requisite justification or evidence, and placed under increased surveillance by police and citizens as they move on- and off-campus (Smith, 2004; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006). This chapter specifically focuses on the Black male collegiate experience at HWIs in the state of Michigan by comparing it to that of Black college men at several peer institutions, including Harvard University, the University of California–Berkeley, and the University of Illinois. This comparison was conducted to determine whether the problems identified in Michigan are institutional (e.g., a "Michigan problem") or systemic (e.g., a universal problem with material, social, and ideological realities that are imbedded in all HWIs).

**Understanding Racism, Black Misandric Microaggressions, and Racial Battle Fatigue**

But as far as [racist] attitudes and stuff like that . . . stuff happens every year. I mean I don’t see it changing much.

» African American male, University of Michigan student
One of the most comprehensive definitions of White racism, in the U.S. context, is that of a “socially organized set of practices, attitudes, and ideas that deny African Americans and other people of color the privileges, dignity, opportunities, freedoms, and rewards that this nation offers White Americans” (Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2001, 17). Bonilla-Silva (2001) adds to this understanding by suggesting that the foundation of racism is not solely based on the ideas that individuals may have about others, but the social edifice erected over racial inequality. He adds, perhaps optimistically, however, that if racial inequality and the practices that maintain it are eliminated, “Racism and even the division of people into racial categories will disappear” (22).

Pierce (1970, 1975, 1995) characterizes racism as a public and mental disorder based on the false belief, despite evidence to the contrary, that innate inferiority correlates with dark skin color. When examining “the substance of today’s racism,” Pierce (1974) contends, “one must not look for the gross and obvious”; rather, one must identify and measure the impact of what he calls the “subtle, cumulative miniassault” of racial microaggressions (516). In adapting Pierce’s work, Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) define racial microaggressions as (a) subtle verbal and nonverbal insults directed at people of color, often automatically or unconsciously; (b) layered insults based on one’s race, race-gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (c) cumulative insults that cause unnecessary stress to people of color while privileging Whites.

Given the ubiquitousness of racism, racial microaggressions are not unique to Black men or to African Americans. Their withering effects are felt by all non-dominant racial and ethnic groups in the United States, individually, collectively, and cumulatively. Distinctive types of microaggressions, however, can target one group while avoiding another. Black misandric microaggressions are those racial microaggressions that specifically target and affect Black males.

Black misandry is an exaggerated pathological aversion toward Black males that is created and reinforced in societal, institutional, and individual ideologies, practices, and behaviors including scholarly ontologies (or understandings of how things exist), axiologies (or values such as ethics, aesthetics, religion, and spirituality), and epistemologies (or ways of knowing). Like Black misogyny, or aversion toward Black women, Black misandry exists to justify and reproduce the subordination and oppression of Black males while concomitantly erecting edifices of racial and gender inequality. As a result, Black males on HWI campuses tend to be
marginalized, hated, rendered invisible, held under suspicion, put under increased surveillance, or assigned to one or more socially acceptable stereotypical categories (e.g., lazy, unintelligent, violent, hypersexual, athletic, etc.) without regard for their individual character or status.

**Racial Battle Fatigue: The Slow (but Silent) Killer**

Black male HWI students are routinely confronted with forms of racial discrimination for which many have only limited energy, resources, or counterstrategies to cope and resist (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006). These additional experiences are unnecessary burdens that further complicate the competitive process of completing a postsecondary degree. According to Steele (1997), Black college men, like those at the University of Michigan, reported being perplexed, aggravated, stunned, and irritated by the lack of protection their academic achievements provide them, especially from racist stereotypes. When these young men, who have survived earlier structural obstacles and achieved identification with the educational domain, are faced with the burden of having to endure racist stereotypes even while on campus, the emotional impact is enough to threaten their future achievement. Some even totally “disidentify” with the academic domain, Steele asserts. According to Smith (2004), the diagnosis is racial battle fatigue. The symptoms: increased levels of stress, resulting in both psychological symptoms (e.g., frustration, shock, anger, disappointment, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, fear) and physiological symptoms (e.g., headaches, teeth grinding, chest pain, shortness of breath, high blood pressure, muscle aches, indigestion, constipation, diarrhea, increased perspiration, fatigue, insomnia, frequent illness).

The notion of racial battle fatigue synthesizes and builds onto the traditionally discipline-specific research literature and studies of the stresses associated with, the responses to, and the coping strategies for racism (Pierce, 1974, 1975, 1995; Smith, 2004; Willie & Sanford, 1995). It further draws upon the literature on combat stress syndrome (also known as combat stress fatigue, combat trauma, combat injury, or post-traumatic stress disorder) to conceptualize the debilitating effects of living and working in a hostile environment (Shay, 2002; Shay & Munroe, 1999; U.S. Department of the Army, 1994). Racial battle fatigue is manifested when
the physiological, psychological, and emotional strain imposed upon persons belonging to racially marginalized, oppressed, and stigmatized groups becomes too much to bear. A certain amount of these individuals’ emotional and physical energies that could otherwise be used for productive and creative intellectual ideas and professional development goals are dedicated instead to fighting against or warding off the daily doses of racism, or macroaggressions and microaggressions, they encounter.

The most horrific and extreme consequences of racial battle fatigue is that it kills people. Of the slightly more than 1 million people of color among the nearly 9 million Michigan residents recorded by the 1970 Census, 95% were Black. Of these, 75% lived within the city limits of Detroit, compared to 10% of the state’s White residents. Within a 10-year period (from 1959–61 to 1969–71), the life expectancy at birth for Black and White females increased by about one year. For White males, life expectancy essentially remained unchanged. For Black males, however, life expectancy decreased by more than three years during this same decennial period. In 1969–71, life expectancy for Black males was 61 years. For White males it was 68 years; for Black females, 69 years; and for White females, 75 years. Between birth and death, these data suggest that there were major differences in the quality of life for each of these groups.

By the 2000 Census, the life expectancy and the quality of life for Michigan residents had improved for each group, but more so for some than for others. Seventy-five percent of Michigan’s residents of color were Black, representing a 20% decrease between 1970 and 2000. The majority of the state’s Black residents still lived in Detroit, which was 83% African American (McKinnon, 2001). According to the State of Men’s Health: Michigan 2004 report, women had a longer life expectancy than men (79.3 compared to 74.3 years). White females (at 80.1 years) and White males (at 75.3 years) had a longer life expectancy than Black females (at 75.0 years) and males (at 67.8 years). Although life expectancy increased over time for all groups, the disparities by race and gender remained. The overall life expectancy age for Black males in 2003 was comparable to that of 30 years ago for White males and Black females. Viewed another way, these data reveal that about 40% of Michigan’s Black males never saw the age of 65.

The quality of life for Blacks and other nondominant racial groups was such a major concern that the U.S. Secretary for the Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) convened a task force in 1985 to report on Black and other
minority groups’ health issues (USDHHS, 1985). This report raised national attention by noting that 60,000 excess deaths were occurring annually because of gender-based health disparities, primarily among African American males. In a 2005 report that focused specifically on African American men in Michigan, the first state-level appointed surgeon general in the country, Dr. Kimberly Dawn Wisdom, presented a list of facts that African American men should know about their health and well-being. This report identified the leading causes of death for Black men in Michigan—heart disease, cancer, diabetes-related diseases, and unintentional injuries—and indicated that the death rates for Black men was almost one-and-a-half times more than that for White men. It further indicated that Black men in Michigan were 17 times more likely to die from homicide than were White men, and they were 30 times more likely than White females and 26 times more likely than women of color to have their life end because of foul play. Moreover, Michigan Black males’ probability of dying in early adulthood (ages 30 to 34) surpassed their probability of dying in infancy, an earlier age than that at which the probability of White males, White females, and Black females dying exceeded their rate of infant mortality. For every 100,000 Black males born to mothers in Michigan’s metropolitan areas, 2,680 died in infancy. This risk of death was not met or exceeded again until Black men reached the ages of 30 to 34 years, whereas 3,358 of every 100,000 Black Michigan males who turned 30 years old in 2005 could expect to die before turning 35 years old.

As these reports and studies reveal, Michigan’s Black males are dying in infancy, early adulthood, and pre-retirement age before other racial or gender groups. Not surprisingly, most research studies on health and mortality rates for these and other African American males concentrate on how these men themselves contribute to the inequities (e.g., poor diet, infrequent doctor visits, lack of exercise, or engagement in risky behaviors). Although this focus is important, the influence of stress from racial microaggressions on poor health outcomes also merits serious research focus. Additional attention must be paid to the environmental contexts that produce racial battle fatigue. For example, what effect does growing up in an environment where the life expectancy and the control of the Black male body is constantly under threat play in determining Black men’s health outcomes? Researchers must begin to examine the conditions that lead Black men to heightened exposure to societal risk and racist treatment, and identify the available resources to prevent them (Williams & Braboy, 2005).
The Hidden Cost of Education in Socially Controlled “White Spaces”

The cherished and highly sought after bachelor’s degree oftentimes is cited as a proxy for increased economic returns or socioeconomic status or SES (Cheeseman Day & Newburger, 2002). This measure is also used to explain the presence or absence of various quality-of-life indicators for its possessors. However, recent studies of predominantly Black populations have found an inverse relationship for health outcomes (e.g., rates of hypertension, depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, mortality indicators) between Black male college and high school graduates (Diez-Roux et al., 1999). Although the college graduates had higher incomes, and in all probability better diets and generally improved lifestyles including lower levels of cigarette smoking, physical inactivity, and being overweight; the chronic race-related stressors associated with historically White spaces are suggested as the cause for the rise in poor health outcomes among these men.

According to James (1994), for Black women, moving up the SES ladder was inversely related to their self-reported stress, but it was positively related to stress for Black men. Another study found that suburban residence was associated with lower mortality risk for Whites but predicted elevated mortality risks for Black men (House et al., 2000). Williams (2003) suggests that the stressors faced by middle-class Black men may also account for their elevated patterns of suicide risk, which previously had not been very common among this group. Over the past two decades, Williams notes, the suicide rate has remained the same for White men but has expanded markedly for young Black men. These findings suggest the importance of research aimed at determining whether Black men who seek or who are trying to maintain middle-class standing through higher education are being exposed to racism and Black misandric microaggressions that are adversely affecting their physical and mental health.

Black misandric environments, like other “White spaces” in which submission-dominance relationships are present, are characterized by a controlling of the space, time, energy, and mobility of Black males. Such environments typically lead Black males to become increasingly defensive in their thoughts and actions (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Pierce, 1995; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006). As Pierce asserts:
Defensive thinking then becomes increasingly necessary as the victim must anticipate assaults and offensive strategies from the dominator. These assaults may come from any direction, at any time or place. Any person required to manage more uncertainty and unpredictability becomes increasingly wary and hyper vigilant. In essence, the victim’s thinking becomes more focused on general monitoring and surveillance tasks needed to thwart expected and unexpected offenses. (1995, 281)

Black males attending Harvard University, the University of California–Berkeley, and the University of Illinois reported experiencing negative or hostile racial climates and Black misandric microaggressions similar to those experienced by their counterparts at the University of Michigan and Michigan State University (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). In common, these respondents maintained that the HWI climate created and reinforced at least four common Black misandric stereotypes: (1) of Black men as criminals and predators; (2) of Black men as possessors of inner-city, ghetto-specific knowledge and behaviors, (3) of Black men as student-athletes, and (4) of Black men as anti-intellectuals.

For many African American male college students at HWIs, the experience of being perceived by Whites as potential criminals (e.g., shoplifters, rapists, purse snatchers, or carjackers) has become so commonplace that they typically expect, accept or dismiss such perceptions without much direct response (Prillerman, Myers, & Smedley, 1989; Steele, 1997; Swim et al., 2003). However, because Whites on HWI campuses often respond to Black men’s physical presence with a heightened state of fear, Black male HWI students sometimes perceive this false perception as an insult and experience elevated emotional distress as a result. This misperception is nonetheless a reprehensible Black misandric microaggression and a personal and group-level insult to Black males who consider themselves intelligent, peaceful and law-abiding citizens.

The criminalization of African American males was among the most frequent and offensive microaggressions reported by the respondents. It was also the most pervasive and caustic, required the most assertive use of adaptive coping strategies, and had the most lasting effects, encroaching upon all aspects of these students’ lives. Several recalled taking casual strolls on their campuses only to be greeted with fear and contempt by their White counterparts. They related numerous incidents of campus and local police deployment to suppress and control their presence and to keep them in “their place.”
The second form of Black misandric stereotyping experienced by these Black college men was that of their being treated universally as possessors of ghetto-specific knowledge and behaviors, irrespective of the locales in which they were raised. The most egregious shortcoming of this form of stereotyping is its failure to consider the diversity of community and economic backgrounds, tastes, desires, and behaviors that are Black Americans' life experiences. That is, the Whites at these HWIs tended to consider all their Black male counterparts as the embodiments of the worst of urban Black inner-city culture—in other words, as possessing a weak work ethic, along with a proclivity for "gangsta" lifestyles and rap music, violence, sexually promiscuous behaviors, and dysfunctional family values. Across each campus the Black male respondents in both studies indicated that they were frequently asked to demonstrate ghetto-specific behaviors and viewed as having more "street smarts" than "book smarts." Not surprisingly, many reported feeling physically and emotionally drained by their efforts to repudiate these stereotypes.

Equally common for these Black male HWI students was being stereotyped as student athletes rather than simply as students attending college on their academic merit alone. This stereotype, according to Stone, Perry, and Darley (1997), presents Black males with a "backhanded" compliment: whether athletes or not, Black men are viewed as having superior natural athletic ability but inferior intellectual ability to Whites and students of other racial/ethnic groups.

The view of Black male students as anti-intellectual, a view the respondents deemed commonplace on HWI campuses, reinforces the notion of Black men as not belonging to the academic community in any important or legitimate way. It also validates the misperception of Black men as intruders, troublemakers, and outsiders on campus until they can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that they belong in college, a stereotype that supports Blumer’s (1958) "sense of group position" proposal. Blumer suggests that racially prejudiced individuals see their group as the basis of comparison for other groups. Hence, viewing Blacks, and Black males in particular, as less intelligent—indeed, as anti-intellectual—supports the White racist view that Whites are more intelligent or superior.

In response to each of these perceived racial microaggressions, African American male students reported feelings of frustration, shock, avoidance, withdrawal, disbelief, anger, aggressiveness, uncertainty, confusion, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear. To be sure, they reported variations in the intensity or severity of the microaggressions experienced. For some, the symptoms were acute, while for others they were chronic; for some, they were simple and singular, while for
others they were multiple and complex. However, there was unanimous agreement among the Black male HWI students across campuses that the college environment was much more hostile and unwelcoming for African American males than for students of other racial and gender groups.

Conclusion

Far too many African American male students on HWI campuses are overburdened with racial “stuff.” The dream of eliminating racism and Black misandry from historically White campuses seems a distant one, however. The discriminatory and stereotypical microaggressions Black men too often face in these historically White spaces place additional stressors upon them that interfere with, if not compromise, their mental, emotional, and physical health as well as their educational achievement. Every aggressive effort possible must be engaged to destroy these social diseases, both vestige and root.

This chapter presented two important theoretical frameworks for understanding the unique experiences of Black males on HWI campuses: Black misandric microaggressions and racial battle fatigue. In doing so, it was intentionally theoretical and discursive, highlighting both the general kinds of environments that cause the physiological and psychological stress-responses of racial battle fatigue in Black males and exposing Michigan’s HWIs as similar to other postsecondary institutions nationwide in their treatment of Black males. Indeed, U.S. higher education is part of a historic and systemic pattern of discrimination—ideological and behavioral—that needs further and continued exorcism. The academic universe is but a mirror image of the larger society. Hence, academia must come to grips with its racist past and take the moral high road to help itself and the larger society develop more healthy social relationships between racial and ethnic groups nationwide.

In Michigan’s historically White institutions of higher learning, as in similar institutions elsewhere across the nation, the academic community has had a long and difficult struggle with its racist past of exclusion and intolerance. Today, Michigan institutions, particularly the University of Michigan, are viewed as leaders in recognizing the benefits from a racially/ethnically diverse campus. Michigan institutions have had to learn how to overcome their painful past in order to create a better future. This community has pursued, with some success, answers to racial
problems, and there is an atmosphere of positive change on campus concerning race questions. This is realized in the representation of racially and ethnically diverse faculty; the opening up of the curriculum to reflect diverse viewpoints; first-class research centers that focus on racial diversity issues in varying social domains; and many top-notch administrators who appear committed to creating a positive campus racial climate. Yet there is still much more work to do in Michigan and elsewhere. In the words of James D. Anderson, “Various solutions to these challenges have been half-heartedly attempted—many of the ‘Band-Aid’ variety. Very few have introduced lasting changes in approaches to educating African American and other underrepresented students. If we expect to successfully educate our college-age students from undergraduate through graduate or professional school, we must support them and find ways of ensuring that success” (2002, 38).

REFERENCES


