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This Qualitative Narrative inquiry explored the experiences of Black graduates from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as they enter into predominantly White working environments. Inspired by a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center's "Being Black in Corporate America" (National Opinion Research Center, 2019) which discovered 58% of Black individuals faced workplace racism, prompting a mass exodus of millennial employees, this study examines the role HBCUs play in shaping Black graduates' ability to navigate racial challenges. Using Critical Race Theory and narrative research, this study evaluates how well HBCUs prepare Black graduates for confronting racism in White corporate environments and explores the strategies these graduates use to cope with challenging encounters.

Using purposive sampling, 8 Black HBCU graduates with post-graduation experience in predominantly White corporate environments were selected to participate. Data collection methods included demographic surveys, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, follow-up conversations, and reflexive journaling. The study's findings determined that HBCU experiences play a critical role in helping participants explore and understand their racial identity. Implications of this study underscore the importance of integrating culturally responsive education into professional development and fostering stronger partnerships between HBCUs and corporations.

This study advocates for curricular enhancements at HBCUs to empower students with strategies for navigating racist encounters while remaining authentic. By addressing

unpreparedness to confront racism, the research highlights the need for cultural awareness in professional development, collaborative efforts between HBCUs and corporations, and inclusive workplaces that encourage open dialogue and support for Black employees. Ultimately, these insights contribute to a broader conversation on racial awareness, preparedness, and navigation for Black HBCU graduates.

Keywords: Black graduates, HBCUs, workplace racism, Critical Race Theory, cultural awareness, professional development, inclusivity, racial navigation.

READINESS FOR RACIALIZED ENCOUNTERS IN THE CAREER PREPAREDNESS OF

BLACK HBCU GRADUATES IN WHITE CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTS: A

NARRATIVE INQUIRY AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY STUDY

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Talia, with a profound commitment to constructing a world where her intellect and "Black Girl Magic" are not merely acknowledged but joyously celebrated. I also dedicate this work to all young Black men and women who rightfully deserve an environment in which their talents and contributions are valued, allowing them to thrive and create a significant influence. It is our shared responsibility to carve out such a place, providing them with the platform to excel and contribute to a brighter future for all.

APPROVAL PAGE

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iv

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the labor market and economy were sent into a COVID-19 pandemic freefall (Shuai et al., 2020). The labor market invariably took a hit, with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reporting a nearly 14.7% unemployment rate in April of 2021 (Graham & Pinto, 2021). However, in a fortuitous twist of fate, a summer of civil unrest in 2020 prompted calls for more diversity in workforces as organizations scrambled to exhibit their commitment to demonstrating a stronger presence of diversity and inclusion (Graham & Pinto, 2021). While increased opportunities for racially minoritized graduates emerged, their retention upon entry into these organizations was not as encouraging (Marcus, 2022).

Then 2023 arrived, and as dust from the pandemic and civil unrest seemingly settled, the nation sadly witnessed a resurgence in the troubling pattern of reinforcing power structures and the promotion of White supremacy through legislative actions that seek to erase Black history and dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives altogether. These circumstances underscore the urgency for understanding how Black graduates from HBCUs in America exist and thrive amid ever-shifting racial dynamics (Cliburn, 2023). Therefore, this Qualitative Narrative Inquiry focuses on Black graduates from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and their preparedness to navigate racist encounters upon entry into White corporate environments. This study provides a unique opportunity to explore the role HBCUs play in preparing Black students for encountering racism in White corporate environments.

Understanding how Black HBCU graduates are prepared to respond to racist encounters is the genesis of this research study. The first section of this chapter establishes the background of the study and defines the overarching issue that the study seeks to address. The chapter's second section clarifies the study's purpose in determining how HBCUs can prepare Black

students for White corporate environments. The third section will introduce the study's significance, exploring Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework used to inform the research design. The next section of the chapter will overview the research questions and design, and the final section will address the content for the remaining chapters.

Context of My Study

In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breana Taylor, and countless others, HBCUs experienced an intensified spotlight as the country contended with racial unrest and inherent tensions between justice and peace (Orr, 2020). Systemic oppression took root in the nation's consciousness, prompting special attention to efforts to diversify everything from corporations to municipalities and universities (Murty & Payne, 2021). While there are studies that focus on encounters with racism that Black people experience when transitioning into White environments (Hall et al., 2011; Holder & Vaux, 1998; Mills, 2020; Schwitzer et al., 1999), there are very few that center on the role HBCUs play in this transition (Njoku et al., 2017; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). As such, my study fills this research gap to examine the awareness (attunement to racial tensions), preparedness (professional development), and navigation (ability to cope with racism) of Black graduates from HBCUs when encountering racism in White corporate environments.

The National Opinion Research Center (2019) at the University of Chicago conducted a study that concluded that over 58% of Black people experienced racism in their jobs, and 38% of Black millennials (23–38 years old) indicated that they are considering leaving their jobs due to such incidents (Bunn, 2019). These statistics highlight the urgency for an empirical study of the experiences of Black graduates from HBCUs when they transition to these environments. Findings from my research will bring attention to the role of HBCUs in a graduate's transitional

2

experience and present implications for introducing instructional methods to assist a prospective HBCU graduate in achieving career preparedness, racial awareness, and corporate navigation. As mentioned, my study incorporated a Narrative Inquiry Research design and was theoretically framed by Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Purpose of Study

One in every 10 college-bound Black students attended an HBCU in 2022 (Shuler et al., 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 74% of the 48,200 degrees conferred in 2021 were to Black students (NCES, 2022). With a growing number of Black students from HBCUs entering predominantly White workplaces, the omission of studies that explore how aware and prepared these students are to navigate through racism and racial encounters is a disservice to the exploration of outcomes Black students achieve from their HBCU experience.

Desire to Learn

Believing that education would equalize the playing field for career opportunities, Black communities have always desired the ability to advance their knowledge through formal education (Allen & Jewell, 2002). While institutions for higher learning had historically been relegated to the White male elite, HBCUs were founded to specifically grant access to educational opportunities for Black students (Brown et al., 2004). Supported by the federal efforts of the Morrill Act of 1890 (Brown & Davis, 2001), the mission of the HBCU was to produce graduates who were leaders in and contributed to their communities, the nation, and the world and to provide teaching, research, and extension and public service through collaborative efforts, which improved the standard of living and quality of life of diverse

populations, including limited-resource persons (The Council of 1890 Presidents/Chancellors, 2000).

At the turn of the 21st century, with even fewer resources than Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), HBCUs could still maintain enrollment growth (Roach, 2001). Overall, students of color would account for nearly 50% of the total increase in college enrollment between 1976 and 1994 (O'Brien & Zudak, 1998). From 1998 to 2008, college enrollments increased by 32%, with most students coming from underrepresented racial minorities (Snyder & Dillow, 2010). When *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) initiated policies to eliminate segregation, critics began questioning the existence and necessity of HBCUs (Esters & Strayhorn, 2013). However, these critiques did not discourage Black students from seeking out HBCUs for postsecondary education because they felt welcomed in an environment that was culturally aligned with their own cultural background (Esters & Strayhorn, 2013).

Studies by Freeman and Cohen (2001) and Dotterer et al. (2009) found that cultural and racial identity alignment enables Black students to thrive academically. Additional research suggests that Black students who attend HBCUs "experience higher intellectual gains and have a more favorable psychosocial adjustment, more positive self-image, stronger racial pride, and higher aspirations" (Freeman, 1998, p. 9). While researchers have studied the overarching legacy and impact of HBCUs (Albritton, 2012; Crewe, 2017; Strayhorn, 2015), fewer studies have explored how these experiences influence Black students' post-graduation once those racial or cultural alignments are less apparent (Berger & Milem, 2000; Fleming, 2001; Gasman & McMickens, 2010; Kim & Conrad, 2006). To this end, three interrelated issues (awareness, preparedness, and navigation) were investigated throughout this study to determine how graduates make meaning of these encounters and transitions.

Centralizing My Inquiry

My study aimed to shed light on the experiences of Black graduates from HBCUs in a way that challenges preconceptions of individuals from predominantly White backgrounds, encouraging a more diverse and inclusive worldview (Delgado, 1989). Centering the stories of Black graduates in this research allows for an orientation to data called "Afrocentric research" (Winbush, 1998), which positions Black people front and center in areas of social science that do not always consider Black people to be the focus of studies. The significance of this study is underscored by the demand to extend HBCU research to encompass an assessment of the strategies employed in preparing Black students for their careers after graduation.

Studies that consider the role of HBCUs in higher education tend to center on educational outcomes such as academic performance (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Davis, 1994; Palmer et al., 2010) belonging within a campus environment (Fleming, 1984; Franklin et al., 2023; Strayhorn, 2020a), measurement of self-efficacy (Brown & Davis, 2001; Fife et al., 2011; Quinlan et al., 2022), student satisfaction (Chen et al., 2014; Flowers et al., 2015; Harper et al., 2004), and cognitive development (Brace, 2017; Palmer et al., 2010; Shorette & Palmer, 2015). However, these studies do not consider the requisite skill sets needed to prepare Black students for entry into racialized environments once they graduate, which is central to this present inquiry.

The Significance of the Study

This study was not intended to dispute any claims to the findings from pre-existing research on student success and outcomes at HBCUs. Instead, it aimed to add a lens to outcomes that extended past Black collegiate development and considered Black students' navigation with racism in post-graduate environments. HBCU leaders and alumni will have a vested interest in this study, as it reveals how current career development practices impact graduates entering

5

White environments and how preparatory methods can be configured to better prepare graduates for the potential of racially charged encounters upon graduation. Additional insights into the lived experiences of Black graduates from HBCUs will enrich pre-existing research and critically assess how the HBCU experience informs career transition and success.

Organizations that tout pronounced diversity initiatives within their strategic plans will find value from the insights presented in this study. They will recognize that ensuring their systems and operations are responsive to all their employees' needs is the only way to have an enriching and inclusive environment. As referenced in a 2019 Harvard Review article, "*Toward a Racially Just Workplace*," there is no better time for an organization to consider transforming how it approaches racial diversity (Robers & Mayo, 2019). The article goes on to say that organizations must embrace a more conclusive revamp of racial conversations, career development management, and reconfiguring of diversity and inclusion programming (Roberts & Mayo, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by CRT (Bell, 1992; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998) to examine the experiences of Black HBCU graduates as they navigate through White corporate environments post-graduation. CRT is the most effective way to explore the narratives of Black graduates from HBCUs and how they experience racism in the workplace because it allows for a social justice research agenda that empowers racially minoritized people while seeking to dismantle racist systems (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT acknowledges the cultural experience of Black communities in a way that centralizes their voice in research findings. By exploring research in this way, these collective experiences can help define the impact of racist phenomena, which influences appropriate navigational tools (Jones et al., 2020; Yosso &

Solórzano, 2007) regards the consideration of culture in an experiential analysis as critical because people recognize the influence of their cultural upbringing when presented with new environments, which often affect how they view their circumstances and experiences.

CRT tenets overviewed here and in Chapter II define the scope of my research design. Through the analysis of the collected narratives, there is evidence to support the connective tissue that exists throughout my research participants' experiences with racism. That is, the root of racism exists through practices generated to discard and disregard Black talent while seeking to appear like the system is working to support the needs of a diverse and inclusive environment. These tenets center on racism's permanence (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), interest convergence (Bell, 1980), Whiteness as property (Dickens & Chavez, 2017), counter storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), differential racialization (Basile & Black, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and critique of liberalism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). This investigation aimed to examine the interaction between individuals and their respective ecosystems to understand how their values, beliefs, and norms are shaped (Raymond et al., 2018). The tenets of CRT which frame this research are listed below.

Permanence of Racism

The awareness of how racist encounters are experienced relies upon acknowledgment that racism exists. Critical Race Theorist Derrick Bell (1992) asserted that racism in the United States is both permanent and pervasive and has become an internalized and institutionalized part of the fabric of American society. Bell (2005) reflected the idea that:

Despite their undeniable progress, no African Americans are insulated from incidents of racial discrimination. Our careers, even our lives, are threatened because of our color. Whatever our status, we are feared because of our color. Whatever our status, we are

feared because we might be one of "them." Success, then, neither insulates us from misidentification by wary Whites nor does it ease our pain when we consider the plight of our less fortunate brethren who struggle for existence in what some social contexts call the "underclass." (p. 312)

The permeance of racism is often manifested in various health disparities for the Black population, including high blood pressure, stress, and emotional instability (Brondolo et al., 2005; Harrell, 2000; Pierce, 1988). Scholars have not studied how the permeance of racism is taught in HBCUs and how students of color are prepared for these encounters post-graduation, warranting the need for this exploration.

Interest Convergence

Derrick Bell (1992) asserted that interest convergence is achieved when Black people advance in civil rights victories where White and Black interests converge. As convergent as the need to fulfill diversity quotas may seem with the genuine aspiration to welcome Black talent into predominantly White workplaces, the reality is that Black individuals often encounter an environment saturated with biases and racial microaggressions (Kwan, 2015; Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). This study considered how prepared HBCU Black graduates were for experiences with racial microaggressions. The analysis was conducted from their stories to explore the emotional toll these experiences have had on their lives. As Yosso et al. (2009) posit, the subtleness of racial attacks causes "mundane but extreme stress" (p. 661). Thus, it is important to investigate the concept of interest convergence, where advancements in diversity often occur when they align with the self-interest of the dominant White majority, whether by fostering the illusion of diversity and inclusivity or by gaining financial benefits due to their diverse status.

Whiteness as Property

Harris (1993) argued that Whiteness evolves from racial identity and morphs into a form of collateral that is affirmed and immensely protected in America. My study explored the culture fit ideology (Saeedi et al., 2020). It aimed to explore Whiteness as professionalism and the expectations placed on Black individuals to conform to a certain cultural environment to fit in. The narratives shared by some of the participants in my study vividly depicted the sense of duty they experienced to conform to their surroundings, aiming to steer clear of coming across as disagreeable or confrontational in their workplace. These techniques included code-switching (Terhune, 2006) or personal oversharing to appear less threatening so that entry into White spaces is unobstructed (Dickens & Chavez, 2017).

Counter-*Storytelling*

In my study, the analysis and findings come directly from the lived experiences of my participants. Counter-storytelling, a narrative technique used to subvert dominant or mainstream ideology, is one of the most effective means to reclaim the narrative that has been issued about marginalized communities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The stories captured throughout my study seek to inspire and provide navigation for the next generation of Black students from HBCUs who intend to enter predominantly White spaces post-graduation.

Differential Racialization

Preparedness to combat "differential racialization," or the varying stereotypes reflected about Black people in popular culture, is important because it impacts how Black Americans are treated in predominantly White environments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). As posited by Delgado and Stefancic (2007),

9

If, in the past, we racialized groups differently based on what we wanted from each—

from the Indians, land; from the Blacks, labor; from the Asians, railroad building and

mining technology, and so on, it stands to reason that we might be racializing them

differently now in terms of what we do not want from them in the way of pushy behavior.

(p. 141)

In the workforce, people of color are often subjected to *differential racialization* based on

the particular interest, profiteering, and exploitation of a culturally hegemonic corporation

(Basile & Black, 2019). It bears consideration that further examination of this ideology will

equip Black graduates with the necessary preparedness for combating these challenges and will

encourage a deeper inquiry into their self-concept and racial identity. Informed by narratives

from HBCU Black graduates, this study provided a platform to support how their encounters

with racism were acknowledged so that systemic constructs that sustain these barriers can be

countered and dismantled.

Critique of Liberalism

Lastly, Critical Race Theorists are often suspicious of liberalism, particularly because

efforts to achieve equality, at times, are only witnessed from what is to be perceived under the

law and through a race-evasiveness lens. This perspective tends to overlook or diminish the

significance of the underlying structural and systemic manifestations of racism, which creates

inequitable conditions for racially marginalized communities. The navigational awareness of

racial encounters requires understanding how the perception of diversity and inclusion is

presented in these environments, from career recruitment to retention (Delgado & Stefancic,

2007). Corporations that simultaneously provide performative partnerships with HBCUs by

promising soft-skill development and professional development workshops but evade

10

responsibility for hiring and retaining Black employees present barriers to career navigation for Black people. Black graduates must also be aware of practices identified as the "siren song of uniqueness" (Basile & Black, 2019, p. 7), where specific Black candidates are perceived as different from non-Black candidates and are found to be within a "narrowly defined narrative of exceptionalism" (Basile & Black, 2019, p. 7). This concept often includes the notion that these Black candidates are somehow better than others in their racial group because they appear superior in a specific proficiency (Basile & Black, 2019). These destructive practices do not present fair access to everyone and relegate some Black people as being representative of the entire Black community. The excerpt below illustrates how privileges that are tied to the "siren song of uniqueness" are conditional and evanescent and end up creating division among racial groups (Basile & Black, 2019):

> The majority gets to think of itself as fair and just while sending the message to the other minority groups in the region that they had better not step out of line … If seduced by your place in the current binary, you neglect to seek solidarity with that smaller group; you can find this strategy wielded against you with devastating effect and by a member of a minority group, not your own, who has been waiting for just this opportunity. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2003, p. 491)

This tenet of CRT helps expose how White organizations' diversity efforts align with their agendas but neglects to investigate whether the methods truly impact the varying layers of inclusion that must exist for synergy within the workplace dynamic.

Research Questions

By extension of Matsuda's (1991) definition of Critical Race Theory, this study's research questions foreground the accounts of racism in workplace experiences to advance the

elimination of racism and racist encounters as part of a broader systemic issue (Solórzano &

Yosso, 2002). Aligned with the study's purpose to explore the awareness, preparedness, and

navigation of racist encounters of Black graduates from HBCUs when they enter White

environments, the following research questions frame this study:

1. In what ways do Black HBCU graduates experience racism when they enter White corporations?

2. To what extent do HBCUs prepare Black graduates for encountering racism in White corporations?

3. What strategies for navigation do Black HBCU graduates initiate when they encounter racist experiences?

Overview of Research Design

A narrative inquiry research methodology is appropriate to answer the study's research

questions because it focuses on the experiences of the individual and situates the sociocultural

influences, institutional narratives, and emotional connections into the storyteller's experiences

(Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Because my research centered on the lived experiences of Black

HBCU graduates transitioning into White corporate environments post-graduation, the

participants' voices, their ability to make meaning of their experiences, and the truth behind how

their interactions with varying structures influence how they respond to challenging situations

guided the study. Data collection for this study involved a multi-method process. First, a

preliminary questionnaire was administered to gather basic demographic information from each

participant (see Appendix A). Then, one-on-one interviews were conducted, followed by a focus

group session (see Appendices B & C). A final follow-up interview was conducted to ensure the

data were appropriately collected. Throughout this process, I maintained a journal to record my

observations regarding participant comments and engagement. In total, the study included eight participants. Additional information regarding methodology and methods will be discussed in Chapter III.

Definitions

Definitions of terms and concepts used throughout this research are presented below:

Alumni—a group of people who attended or have graduated from a particular school, college, or university ("Definition of alumnus," n.d.).

Awareness—"the participants' acknowledgment of the salience of race in their personal and professional lives" (Johnson, 2002, p. 165).

Black—to participate in this study, graduates must identify as having descended from the African diaspora and are referred to as Black or African American (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2002)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)—Analyzes the role of race and racism in perpetuating social injustices between dominant and marginalized racial groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Historically Black College and University (HBCU)—"According to the Higher Education Act of 1965 [HBCUs], are those postsecondary educational institutions established before 1964 with the mission of educating African American students" (Samuels, 2010, p. 326).

Navigation—For this research, navigation is the ability to traverse through racial barriers that conflict with a Black employee's progression and advancement (Jones et al., 2020).

Predominantly White—For this research, a situation or context that has at least 50% or more people who identify as White or Caucasian (Kraft, 1991).

Preparedness—For this research, preparedness references the necessary tools and experiences used to navigate racial encounters while preserving one's own sense of self and confidence (Kruczkiewicz et al., 2021).

Race—A social construct used to establish White supremacy (Akintunde, 1999).

Racial Minorities—For this study, this term is used to characterize non-White groups (Wingfield & Alston, 2013).

Racism—An institutional phenomenon that oppresses people of color due to their distance from Whiteness through discriminatory practices (McWhorter, 2005).

White—a relational identity constructed being unlike certain ethnic or racial others. In this view, Blackness serves as the primary form of Otherness by which Whiteness is constructed. (Hartigan, 1997).

White Corporate Environments—For this study, corporations, environments, organizations, or spaces with 60% employees or more of Caucasian/European origins (Witt Smith & Joseph, 2010).

Summary of Chapter

This chapter serves as a primer to the scope of my research study. Through a CRT theoretical frame, my study produces implications centered on establishing authentic revelation based on lived experiences that can address issues related to Black HBCU graduates and career integration. As a Black woman who entered a predominantly White corporate space post-graduation, this study is very personal. If I can provide some insight regarding healthy ways to navigate challenging racial environments, then the intentions of the study will have been met. More about the researcher and participants' shared identities will be covered in Chapter III.

Dissertation Chapters Overview

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter I included a brief overview of the impetus behind the study. In Chapter II, a review of the literature investigates existing studies that explore the sociocultural factors inclusive of the HBCU experience and outcomes that influence how graduates transition into White environments. Additionally, CRT, as the theoretical and conceptual framework that informs the basis of the study, will be addressed. Chapter III presents the study's research methodology, including instrumentation, research paradigms, data collection and analysis methods, a description of the sample, and the researcher's positionality. Chapter IV covers findings from the inquiry and a detailed analysis of themes. Lastly, Chapter V presents a discussion of the study's findings, along with implications and recommendations for research, practice, and policy.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews literature that foregrounds existing research on Black HBCU graduates' preparedness for racist encounters with predominantly White corporate environments. Psychosocial scholars from Bronfenbrenner (1974) to Tinto (1975) have considered the ecological effects relationships and experiences have had on the development and retention of students. Foundationally, both theorists presented arguments that support the fact that environmental influences play a role in the psychosocial well-being of students. However, neither considered students of color in their studies, thus leaving space for additional exploration that details the environmental effects on interpersonal development for students of color and defines the intrinsic impacts of these effects on their navigation through racist encounters.

Exploring how Eurocentric normativity creates challenging environments is important, particularly for Black communities that are often ostracized or marginalized when present in these spaces (Anderson, 2015). Thus, this study examines how Black graduates from HBCUs experience and navigate encounters in predominantly White environments, focusing on their preparedness for racist encounters, awareness during these situations, and ability to navigate through them effectively. I considered the historical foundation of HBCUs, their impact on Black students, sociocultural factors that influence racial awareness, White workspace interactions, and navigational coping of college-to-career transitions. The chapter concludes with a conceptual framework of the study guided by the amalgamation of existing research.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities Overview and Outcomes

While the creation of HBCUs shifted the demographic makeup of people who now had access to higher education, it would not be done without its own set of barriers, inclusive of limited financial capital and restrictive intellectual resources, as training was limited to

agriculture and vocational education (Albritton, 2012). Ambivalent Southern White conservatives saw little purpose in educating Black people and were cautious to fully engage, as this shift was seen as a threat to their supremacy (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Still, HBCUs persevered and contributed to conferring bachelor's degrees to nearly 90% of all African-American degree holders by the late 1940s (Aspray, 2016).

On the Eve of Desegregation

Despite the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision, which permitted racial segregation in public schools as long as resources were equitable, HBCUs have faced long-standing financial disparities and chronic underfunding (Brown & Freeman, 2002). By 1954, African Americans in the United States accounted for less than 1% of first-year students entering higher education (Harper et al., 2009). When the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation was unlawful in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)*,* access to PWIs for Black Americans was more attainable (Brown, 2001). Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965 enabled federal subsidies issued to these institutions to be used to help sustain their survival. Additional literature suggested that support like Title III had more to do with interest convergence than the genuine desire to provide equitable options for higher learning to Black people (Gasman & Hilton, 2012; Harper et al., 2009). In all actuality, Roebuck and Murty (1993) argued that the federal government's interest in contributing to the sustainment of HBCUs allowed more dollars to be directed to White land-grant universities, further restricting HBCUs to having access to advanced intellectual and educational opportunities.

Efforts to secure and enhance federal allocations for HBCUs have been undertaken through legislative actions such as the reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act in recent decades, leading to sustaining funding, which has contributed to some enrollment increases and

17

access to resources (Fountain, 2021). Given these shifting dynamics within the HBCU landscape, there is a growing need for further research on the educational outcomes of diverse populations, especially as more Black students enroll in HBCUs and graduate into predominantly White corporate environments.

Academic Fortitude of HBCUs

The historic "Talented Tenth" vs. "Industrial Education for the Negro" debate captured in essays between Black scholars W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington ushered in more profound revelations into the purpose of HBCUs and their intended impact on the intellectualism of Black Americans (Du Bois, 1903b). Du Bois and Washington's divergent views on education encapsulated a timeless debate about the intellectual fortitude of Black Americans and their respective integration into a White society in an accepted, respected, and appreciated way:

Du Bois (1903) argued that Washington had a suppressive ideology, stating that:

Mr. Washington distinctly asks that Black people give up, at least for the present, three things—first, political power, second insistence on civil rights, third higher education of Negro youth and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, and accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. (p. 43)

Du Bois believed that HBCUs were responsible for elevating the Black race to be among the intellectually elite (Du Bois, 1903b). Du Bois also felt Black people needed to be trained in philosophy and science, emphasizing relationships between systems of higher education and leadership skills (Barthelemy, 1984). In his argument, Du Bois positioned the integration of Black Americans into society post-graduation as equal contributors to the world's cerebral needs, while Washington ascribed to a belief system more palatable to White Americans (Barthelemy, 1984). Washington believed that positioning Black Americans as skilled laborers would further

18

secure their societal impact while not challenging a perceived White superiority, which, in his estimation, would enable a smoother and more amicable integration into the White society (Albritton, 2012). Washington (as cited in Washington, 1900) argued this belief in "*Education Will Solve the Race Problem: A Reply*" in response to Professor John Roach Straton's article (1900) "*Will Education Solve the Race Problem?*" Professor Straton was a controversial preacher with such disregard for the Black race that he argued it would take more than education to incur societal parity. He believed that Black intelligence is inherently inferior and that the mere existence of Black individuals disrupts a Eurocentric worldview, thus prohibiting Black people from having the ability to compete on an intellectual stage (Straton, 1900).

The "Talented Tenth" debate lingers today. Scholars like Drs. Cornell West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. disavow the Washington ideology. They believe that the consequence of education for Black collegians should extend into ways that confront White supremacy and reject the notion that Black intellectualism is a threat (Gates & West, 1996; James, 2014). In determining how Black graduates integrate into White corporate spaces, this study will continue to explore how Black intellectualism is valued, challenging anyone attempting to withhold access to opportunities unjustly.

HBCU Relevance in the Lives of Black Students

As debates regarding HBCU outcomes continued (Albritton, 2012; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Strayhorn, 2014; Walker & Goings, 2017), the overarching topic of discussion after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was linked to the role of HBCUs in the lives of Black students once entry into PWIs had been extended (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), nearly 90% of Black students attended HBCUs; after this legal decision, that number dropped to about 70% (Albritton, 2012). It declined even further in 1980, as 20% of Black

students attended HBCUs (Freeman & McDonald, 2004). However, it is essential to note that while the enrollment numbers were dropping at HBCUs, the academic performance level for Black students in these institutions exceeded that of Black students at PWIs (Albritton, 2012; Benton, 2001; Reeder & Schmitt, 2013; Terenzini et al., 1997).

As PWIs received more incentives to increase their minority enrollment, their capacity became further extended to issue financial support to students of color who elected to attend their institutions (Harper, 2019). HBCUs have not been given the same amount of assistance and most often are made to seek their own levels of fiscal sustainability (McClure & Anderson, 2020). Thus, HBCUs must call upon their alumni for fiscal support. Alumni typically contribute because they recognize the value of their educational experience, particularly those enrolled when Black people had fewer options to attend college (Mbajekwe, 2006). Despite challenges and opposition, the importance of competing in the global marketplace drives HBCU administration and faculty to operate under clearly defined institutional missions that can help lead them to their desired educational outcomes (Albritton, 2012).

According to the most recent data from the NCES (2022), more than 99 HBCUs serve more than 287,000 students. In 2021, 88% of HBCU students attended 4-year institutions, while the remaining 12% attended two-year institutions. Most HBCUs are in the Southeastern region of the United States. According to the Thurgood Marshall Foundation, the four-year graduation rate for HBCUs as of 2021 is approximately 35% (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, 2021). These statistics indicate the significance of studies like this one as HBCU enrollment increases, and its role in Black students' development, matriculation, and career entry becomes even more significant.

Impact of an HBCU Experience

The impact of HBCUs has been continuously called into question, as noted by the 1992 case of the *United States v Fordice* (1992), where the U.S. Supreme Court raised questions about the educational value of HBCUs (Kim & Conrad, 2006). In this case, Mississippi policymakers called for mergers between HBCUs and PWIs (Kim & Conrad, 2006). As a measure of success, the data was collected and analyzed to determine if students accomplished the intended goal of higher education: degree completion. Kim and Conard (2006) conducted a study that analyzed data through hierarchical linear and nonlinear modeling to determine the impact of HBCUs on the degree attainment of African American students. The study obtained a national longitudinal student data set and conducted the largest longitudinal survey of college students nationwide since 1966, which considered 941 Black, first-year students (Kim & Conrad, 2006). Their study's findings indicated that the college GPA of Black students did not differ between HBCUs and PWIs, which was inconsistent with other studies that used students' GPAs as a comparative reference (Allen, 1987; Allen & Wallace, 1988; Anderson, 1984; Fleming, 1984; Wenglinsky, 1996). While the study proved to be inconsistent with the theoretical finding of Cross and Astin (1981) and Pascarella et al. (1987), which concluded that collegiate experiences have a direct effect on self-concept development, it must be noted that the studies considered different data sets and were administered within another time period. Kim and Conrad's (2006) study did not indicate to what extent the HBCU experience contributes to Black students' perseverance, degree completion, and career integration. My study seeks to contribute to this knowledge gap.

Community Cultural Wealth and HBCUs

Lastly, community cultural wealth (CCW) is one of the most pronounced contributions HBCUs have been known to provide for Black students (Hirt et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005). As

21

defined by Yosso (2005), CCW is "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (p. 154). When CCW is strengthened, it can be used to combat deficit thinking that prohibits Black students from recognizing their ability to contribute. Theorizing the critique of data must be done in a way that discredits deficit ideology (Yosso, 2005). Deficit ideology is a worldview that justifies inequitable outcomes by blaming deficiencies within marginalized communities. To combat deficit thinkers, theorists Shernaz García and Patricia Guerra (2004) found that educators played a significant role and posited that dispelling this deficit thinking required that educators challenge distorted ideas about Black people. Educators must also fight for curriculum to be infused with the ideology that supports the CCW with the beauty and strength within cultures of marginalized people (Yosso, 2005). In addition to conventional teaching practices, an asset-based approach incorporates nurturing elements, like "other mothering," traditionally embraced by faculty and staff at HBCUs, as they assume more parental roles for their students (Hirt et al., 2006). Other mothering is defined as the "nurturing and cross-familial patterns of care found in the African American culture" (Hirt et al., 2008, p. 217). The concept of other mothering has been utilized in a variety of studies and feminist literature as a way to anchor the effects of mentoring for Black students (Hirt et al., 2008; Walker, 2018).

Sociocultural Factors that Influence Racial Awareness and Racism Preparedness

Before college entry, Black students are typically engaged with various racial socializations, particularly related to how their parents prepare them for encounters with racism (Dotterer et al., 2009; Fries-Britt, 2017; A. J. Thomas & Blackmon, 2015). Studies suggest that racial socialization and ethnic identity are essential to promoting resiliency against discrimination (Burt et al., 2017; Liu, 2013; Reynolds & Gonzales-Backen, 2017). A link to

parents' racial socialization practices regarding coping with race-related stress of Black youth has also been studied. Hughes and Johnson (2001) explored the racial socialization process of 94 African American parents of third, fourth, and fifth graders to determine if Black parents' experience with racism predicted how their children would react to negative racial encounters. Findings indicated that children's ethnic identity exploration was directly aligned with how the parents' perceived, experienced, and relayed discrimination to their children (Hughes & Johnson, 2001).

The cultural duality conflict within Black communities is often a barrier to supporting healthy racial identities. First acknowledged in W. E. B. Du Bois's (1903a) *The Souls of Black Folk*, this struggle with *double consciousness* explores the challenge Black people experience when viewing themselves through the lens of a country that detests their existence. Because of this, Black families must often teach their children how to interact effectively between two cultures: Black and White (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Parke & Buriel, 2008; Peters, 1985). Children contribute to socialization by seeking knowledge from their parents (including anyone who provides guidance and support), prompting the parents to reveal their attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and race-related values (Hughes & Chen, 1999).

Sanders (1997) found that Black students with higher awareness of racial barriers demonstrated advanced academic achievement than less-aware students. Dotterer et al. (2009) conducted a longitudinal study of Black youth socialization to determine the correlation between racial identity, racial awareness, and discrimination to the salience of their racial identity; the study found that racial awareness for the families interviewed had more to do with the transactional relationship between the youth and their parents than an unprompted exploration into race. Specifically, if the child shared a racial discrimination or biased encounter with their

parents, their parents were more likely to converse about their beliefs and experiences (Dotterer et al., 2009). Despite literature on the effects of discrimination as a threat to positive ethnic identity or the use of socialization as a protective mechanism, studies have not determined if these protective mechanisms extend beyond Black students' pre- and post-secondary education and into their career integrations (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Stevenson et al., 2002).

Ethnic Identity Development

A growing body of literature speaks to the effects of ethnic identity on academic achievement for Black students during adolescence (Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2016; Miller, 1999; Phinney et al., 1997; Sellers et al., 2006). The question surrounding correlations between race and race relations and the academic performance of Black students contributes to this inquiry regarding navigational techniques students must use when encountering these barriers. Bowman and Howard (1985) furthered this discovery by examining how race-related socialization, motivation, and achievement affected the grades of 377 Black students between the ages of 14 and 24. It was determined from the study that when the youth were introduced to racial barriers and racial integration protocol, they were able to master their school work more effectively than those who knew nothing about racial identity and status (Bowman & Howard, 1985). It stands to reason that if student performance is enhanced when awareness of potential racial barriers is salient, their navigational ability will be sustained throughout their matriculation and entry into corporate spaces.

As studies contend with the effects of ethnic identity on the academic abilities of Black students, it is vital to recognize the factors that support the formation of ethnic identity. Foundational theorist Erik Erikson (1964) determined that identities are typically formed through a conflict between two values or a crisis. Related to identity development, Erikson (1964)

believed that identity development is dependent on "the support which the youth receive from the collective sense of identity which social group assigns to [them]: [their] class, [their] nationality, [their] culture" (p. 93). While Erikson's studies did not center on conditional crises like racism within the Black population, scholars like Kurt Lewin (1948) believed racially minoritized communities needed to associate with their cultural groups to develop a positive sense of self.

Additionally, Jean Phinney (1989) developed studies that specifically targeted American-born Mexican Americans, American-born Asian Americans, American-born Blacks, American-born Whites, and foreign-born Asian students to determine their associations with identity and its cognitive effect on their performance and well-being. Phinney's (1989) study was focused on two aspects of ethnic identity as positioned by Marcia's (1966) search and commitment. With the goal centering on the ability to assess ethnic identity development, Phinney's (1989) study's findings would shape how all ethnicities could make these determinations. The study used a Likert scale questionnaire to measure ethnic search and commitment in college students (Phinney, 1989). The study's findings determined a strong relationship between ethnic identity achievement and self-esteem in minority college students (Phinney, 1989). Phinney's (1989) study most succinctly aligns with Parham and Helm (1985), who suggested that "self-concept may be governed by the way the student handles the conditions of the Black experience" (p. 145).

Additionally, Phinney's framework of ethnic identity development inspired theorists like William E. Cross Jr. (1971), who developed Nigrescence, a model that describes the process of becoming Black or developing a racial identity. Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1995) study on the role of cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in promoting the academic

25

success and identity development of students from diverse backgrounds also expanded Phinney's studies. The amalgamation of findings from these theorists all suggests that Black identity is developed when conditions are presented that challenge consciousness and societal constructs.

Racial Awakenings

As the Black community traverses the varying factors contributing to identity awareness and its manifestation into their self-concept, theorists like Dr. William T. Cross introduced modeling that considered the effects of racist experiences on Black identity and resilience. Guided by his Nigrescence theory (Cross, 1971, 1991), a French word for "the process of becoming Black," Cross's studies have explored the phenomenon of racial awakenings relating to Black adults' experiences.

In Cross's (1971) study, the Nigrescence Theory is used to frame a narrative inquiry to determine how experiences with racial epiphanies affect a Black person's perception of their identity. According to Cross, implications of Blackness and how it shapes a worldview come from the varying levels of associations a Black individual has with racism. In a pre-encounter space, an individual is unaware of their racial identity. When a racist conflict occurs, they move into an immersion experience, bringing racial awareness into perspective and awakening racial consciousness (Cross 1971, 1991). The internalization stage occurs when an individual finds comfort in their identity, and that confidence does not wane amongst relationships with members of other racial groups (Cross 1971, 1991). Lastly, when a Black person reaches the internationalization-commitment stage, they have successfully mastered balancing comfort within their own racial/ethnic identity and the racial/ethnic identities of others (Cross 1971, 1991). I seek to discover how Black students' pre-encounter experiences shape awareness of Blackness until they encounter racism. Suppose they demonstrate a more vital ability to achieve

26

a more secure self-identity during the internationalization-commitment phase. Will they be able to resolve conflicts between their worldview before the encounter and after the encounter?

As more and more instances of racially charged violence in the United States are captured and shared across the globe, society's awareness of racial issues has been heightened, and motivation for antiracist activism has increased significantly (Agarwal & Sen, 2022; Neville & Cross, 2017). In addition, racial triggers like the Trayvon Martin killing, which birthed the "Black Lives Matter" (2013) movement, have created space for more social scientists to develop theories built on the foundational works of identity theorists (Neville & Cross, 2017). This study explored how these racial triggers have created a landscape for White corporate environments that are equally consumed with a societal perception of racial equality while unequipped to ensure Black people are immersed in environments that support and appreciate their contributions.

Cross (1971) defined encounters as experiences that incite a reinterpretation of someone's perception of their race. These encounters are closely related to triggers that alter the mindset of the affected persons and shape how they perceive their self-identity (Jungers et al., 2009; McDonald, 2008; Price, 2009). Grounded in adults' phenomenological understanding of human experiences and guided by the Nigrescence Theory, Neville and Cross (2017) conducted a study with 64 self-identified Black adults. They collected their data using McAdams's (1995) Life Story Interview methodology. As it relates to racial awareness triggers, some interrelated themes that came from their findings are personal experiences and observation of how race plays out in everyday life; how formal and informal education "awakens" understanding of race, racism, and resistance; and political activism that is prompted by some significant injustice either experienced or witnessed (Neville & Cross, 2017).

Identity-Based Motivations

While Neville and Cross's study (2017) signified a relationship between racial awakening and calls to action, does this awareness motivate how Black graduates perceive themselves and navigate racially challenging environments? The integrative and culturally sensitive framework, Identity-Based Motivation (IBM), provides a lens into how identity is dynamically constructed throughout experiences (Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). However, studies have determined that with intervention, social structural factors like familial support and community resources can influence the aspiration-achievement gap for Black students (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). These interventions come from varying influences that impact how Black students overcome constraints imposed by adverse systems (Oyserman et al., 2006; Oyserman et al., 2002; Solberg et al., 2002).

The IBM model assumes that self-concept is multilayered and includes many diverse components typically defined by how it is constructed in context. IBM implies that people are motivated to behave in a way associated with their identity. When that alignment occurs, it feels natural; transversely, behaviors that do not feel congruent with the presumed identity are more challenging to engage (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). IBM highlights the connection between the social and cultural nature of identity and helps to predict how someone will process their identity and subsequent outcomes (Oyserman, 2007, 2009). Interventions are essential to study; IBM demonstrates how parental, curricular, and community interventions motivate students' ability to overcome barriers (Howard & Solberg, 2006; Rivera & Schaefer, 2008; Solberg et al., 2002). In considering the importance of these interventions, this study determined the role socialization, identity awareness, and identity-based motivation play in how Black HBCU graduates are aware of and navigate racist encounters.

The Effects of Racist Encounters in Predominantly White Spaces

It is important to consider how encounters with racism not only shift self-awareness but can derail access to employment opportunities for Black people. While there has been some progress, as of 2020, the Black unemployment rate was still more than twice that of White Americans, and the income-earning potential is nearly half that of White Americans (Ajilore, 2020; McIntosh et al., 2020). While there are studies that explored the labor market outcome for Black students coming out of HBCUs (Allen, 1992; Constantine, 1994, 1995; Ehrenberg & Rothstein, 1994; Fitzgerald, 2000; S. L. Thomas, 2000), more recent studies are needed to determine the significance of this impact on post-graduation labor outcomes.

In 2008, Terrell Strayhorn conducted a study examining the impact of college education on the labor market outcomes of African-American students, guided by human capital theory. The study suggested that higher education leads to increased human capital, resulting in better labor market outcomes such as higher salaries and improved job prospects. However, the research found that graduates of HBCUs faced disadvantages in post-bachelor degree earnings, potentially due to factors like historical discriminatory policies. Implications from this study remain relevant today as continued studies related to corporate navigation for Black HBCU students and their effect on the labor market are warranted.

Black Student Engagement in the White Labor Market

Hite and Bellizzi (1986) surveyed 441 undergraduate marketing students about their internship experiences. They discovered that these internships helped students affirm their job aspirations and prepared them for corporate entry. According to D'Abate and Alpert (2017), studies related to internships or field experience while in college lack empirical data, and even

fewer consider the role race plays in students' preparedness for corporate entry into predominantly White environments (Strayhorn, 2020b).

In another study to interpret how experiential interventions contributed to labor market outcomes for recent Black college graduates, Strayhorn (2008) considered how HBCU graduates and non-HBCU graduates differed on the following labor market outcomes: salary, job status, and job satisfaction. His study considered a sizable national representative data set to determine the effects across varying institutions and majors. In addition, the study controlled for biases that appear when influences of independent variables are not considered. Strayhorn (2008) regarded human capital theory (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1971) as his theoretical frame for the study and presupposed that human capital, referenced through an individual's skills, knowledge, and capabilities, can be applied in exchange for certain labor market returns such as salary or job satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2008). Strayhorn (2008) suggested that interventions like career exposure before graduation are needed to address the effects of racial discrimination and its impact on the career performance level of Black graduates (Strayhorn, 2008). The present study sought to extend this research to determine how encounters with racism throughout these inventions or corporate engagements surface within a Black HBCU graduate's ability to navigate and succeed within their occupation.

While there was no statistical difference between GPA and internships in Strayhorn's (2008) study, there was an indication that students who engaged in internships had better job satisfaction than those who did not (Strayhorn, 2008). Strayhorn (2020a) explored the experiences of HBCU students in internship programs versus those of their White counterparts and further investigated the relationship between Black students who had internship experiences and their academic performance. Strayhorn's (2020a) findings were analyzed through a one-way

analysis of variance (ANOVA); the relationship between internship participation and academic performance was also evaluated. Results from that analysis indicated that the findings were not statistically significant; the average grades for Black students at HBCUs with internship experiences did not vary between same-race peers with no internship experience (Strayhorn, 2020a). Strayhorn's (2020a) findings, going against the conventional hypothesis, did not suggest a correlation between GPA, internships, and academic motivation.

Negotiation of Cultural Racism and Discrimination

As normative as the permanence of racism is to the fabric of this country, Americans remain deeply segregated in environments such as higher education, workplaces, residential areas, and churches (Anderson, 2015). Despite a Black person's best attempts to fit in or evade the stereotypical perception of who they are and their capabilities, significant barriers remain to professional advancement (Pearson et al., 2008). A study that explored how Black men encountered racism in corporate environments discovered that they did not have to experience overt racism to feel certain levels of discomfort and anxiety (Hudson et al., 2020). The participants recalled feelings of ambient shifts when they entered a room of White people. They recounted their uncomfortable conversations regarding perceiving a Black man's physicality versus the stereotypical assumptions of their demeanor and capabilities. They referenced contending with the advisement of White colleagues to engage in conversation about their education and children to secure a sense of safety and familiarity with those in these White spaces (Hudson et al., 2020). A perceived relatability within the Black man's presence would make them appear less threatening to their White colleagues and more connected to the contrived normativity within a Eurocentric corporate culture.

In *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois (1903) famously referenced the Black person's struggle—the constant interplay between how to navigate double consciousness--"this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 2). The decision also remains as to whether there is value in resisting racism. Some respondents from the Hudson et al. (2020) study felt assimilation was necessary while suppressing the notion that they represent the whole of Black communities, while others argued that they would rather be themselves despite perception or racist encounters. Whether treatment is ambiguous or overtly discriminatory, studies like these demonstrate the stress Black graduates experience when maneuvering through these White corporate environments. Additional studies, like Hudson et al. (2020), will help support the ongoing conversations surrounding preparedness for racist encounters and protection from adverse effects.

Race Evasiveness and White Fragility

As Black people continue to negotiate how to move in and out of racist systems, there is important coded language to recognize so that covert attempts to discriminate against Black people can be challenged. This language typically shows itself in the form of liberalism or racial evasiveness. Bonilla-Silva (2006) developed four frames of race-evasive ideology: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. These frames seek to define how race evasion, avoidance or denial of acknowledging the significance of racial differences, occurs in everyday interactions, from believing everyone has access to opportunities regardless of their skin color to blaming racial groups for their inequitable experiences to the idea that racism no longer exists and is a thing of the past. In a study conducted by Jayakumar and Adamian (2017), 18 White students who attended an HBCU were interviewed to determine

how they respond to the awareness of racial inequalities while maintaining their privilege. Their study explored how race-evasive ideology operates in places where White privilege is threatened despite the shifting of racial consciousness and how White people either accommodate or challenge race evasiveness (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017). The assumption is that before entering the HBCU, White students had minimal exposure to Black communities beyond White neighborhoods and spaces; thus, their ability to interpret racial basis may be skewed (Smith et al., 2007). This predisposition contributes to the prevalence of race-evasive ideology and must be addressed.

Jayakumar and Adamian's (2017) study uncovered that White people with access to Black people and knowledge of racist systems still appeared to have a heightened level of White fragility and discomfort of White individuals with the topic of race and racism when approached with racial exposure or awareness (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017). There is a fifth frame of race evasiveness that Bonilla-Silva (2006) presented that considers a disconnected power-analysis frame. A detached power-analysis frame identifies the disparity in power among racial groups in society and uses that to structure associations (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In other words, when White people are conscious of shifts that need to be made to accommodate racial awareness but do not work to abolish systems that could alter racism or racial ideology, Black people remain subjugated to oppressive environments. When power analysis is re-engaged, important antiracist language emerges, and White people can take ownership of their privilege to call out racist systems. Unfortunately, Jayakumar and Adamian's (2017) findings suggested that White people tend to actively reconstruct race evasiveness to maintain personal comfort and avoid racialized vulnerabilities that inevitably preserve White supremacy ideology. The narratives in this study serve to determine if instances of race evasiveness appear in interaction amongst non-Black

33

counterparts. These occurrences could be a barrier to comfortability in the workplace, advancement opportunities in the workplace, and the ability to contribute and thrive.

Relationships between Racial Identities and Perceptions of Discrimination

As scholars explore factors that influence how Black people see themselves within White spaces and how integrative racist experiences impact self-concept, predictors for the perception of racial discrimination are constructed (Bernard et al., 2017; Hall & Carter, 2006; McClain et al., 2016). Hall and Carter (2006) presupposed that how a Black person experiences discrimination is directly related to their awareness of the role race or ethnic identity plays in their lives. Studies like these (Bernard et al., 2017; Hall & Carter, 2006; McClain et al., 2016) demonstrated that Black students with more understanding of their identity would recognize instances in which biases or microaggression occur, which would then determine how they navigated through those experiences. Hall and Carter's (2006) study explored comparisons between Afro-Caribbean and Black Americans as it related to how ethnic identification could be used as a predictor when added to racial identity, mainly regarding an individual's racial discrimination perception. This exploration also determined intragroup dynamics with the Black North American population. The complexity of this study resided within the distinction between ethnic identities, which was more salient within the Afro-Caribbean population than racial identity. Racial identity assumes a measure of Whiteness based on interactions with the White community and how Black people perceive their identity. In Afro-Caribbean culture, there was more of a desire to establish ethnic identities that recognized the relationship to their culture. This distinction is how Afro-Caribbeans combated negative stereotypes that they perceived the White population had for Black Americans (Alfred, 2010; Fanfan & Stacciarini, 2020; Hall & Carter, 2006).

In comparison, Black Americans tend to lean more toward similar racial group identities because it grants access to economic and educational opportunities afforded to those who identify within their racial associations (Hall & Carter, 2006; Mendelberg et al., 2017; Ray, 2013). Hall and Carter (2006) conducted a study that included 82 participants of Afro-Caribbean descent. They were given the long form of the Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Helms & Parham, 1996), which utilizes a 50-item self-report measure that assesses Black Americans' racial identity status attitudes. To measure ethnic identity, Phinney's (1992) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure was used. Lastly, a Perceived Racism Scale (McNeilly et al.,1996) was utilized to measure the frequency of exposure to racist incidents in various settings. Consistent with the findings from Rumbaut (1994) and Waters (2001), Hall and Carter (2006) revealed that second-generation Afro-Caribbeans had significantly higher internalization attitudes than first-generation Afro-Caribbeans. These results suggest that Afro-Caribbeans born in the United States exhibited greater racial awareness and socialization, resulting in a heightened sense of racial group identity and orientation. Also consistent with previous research (Gopaul-McNicol, 1993; Waters, 1996, 2001), Hall and Carter's (2006) study did not find a significant relationship between generational status and ethnic identity, suggesting that where someone was born does not affect their perception of ethnic identification. However, the study also revealed a meaningful connection between racial and ethnic identity. These findings, aligned with the definition of pre-encounter, illustrate a contrast in attitudes before and after individuals encountered racism. Before the encounter, they held more idealized views of Eurocentrism, which means they may have had more positive associations with European cultural influences. However, after experiencing racism, their perspectives became more skeptical and racially conscious, which indicates increased awareness of racial issues and a decreased trust in Eurocentric ideas (Cross, 1991).

Coping with Racist Encounters

For decades, scholars have been trying to assess the characteristics that allow some African Americans to enter worlds that are determined to keep them out (Kambon & Bowen-Reid, 2010; Woldoff et al., 2011). Inevitably, traversing racist environments takes a mental toll on Black communities, leading to stressors they must effectively manage to achieve success, often resulting in experiences of racial battle fatigue (Brondolo et al., 2009; Franklin, 2016). The call to mobilize strategies to control stressors is a survival tactic. If racial stressors are not recognized, they can cause physical impairments like depression, hypertension, or heart disease (Brondolo et al., 2009; Lewis-Coles & Constantine, 2006; Mickelson et al., 1999; Paradies, 2006; Steffen and Bowden, 2006). Bridges (2011) explored racial identity's impact on developing healthy coping strategies for African-American men in predominantly White spaces. This type of research supports the intent of this study, which is to explore the effect HBCUs have on the development of racial identity salience when confronted with racially charged environments.

Using a phenomenological methodology, Bridges (2011) utilized focus groups to collect data, focusing on the perspectives of Black males and their daily encounters with racism. To assess participants' racial identity, Bridges utilized Cross's (1991) Racial Identity Scale (CRIS), a set of questions designed to gauge attitudes within the focus group regarding the four stages of African-American development. Bridges's (2011) preliminary assessment was given to determine the saliency of participants' racial identity to their behaviors. Still, the majority landed in the Internalized Multiculturalist Inclusive range, indicating that the participants in the study seemed to have balanced their own identity against others who did not share their identity. Cross (1991) defined internalization as individuals who "give high salience to Blackness," with Black

Nationalists having "little room for other considerations" and multicultural nationalists as having "many saliences" (p. 210). "Withdrawal" and "assertion" were the primary descriptors used by the participants when discussing how they responded to racist encounters (Bridges, 2011, p.163). Neither presents the healthiest means for confronting racism, as both withdrawal and assertion can prompt behaviors that disregard the long-term effect racism can have once it becomes manifested in everyday operations. As an expansion to Bridge's study, scholars Ogbu and Simons (2022) examined the educational experiences of African Americans within the context of their cultural identity and societal structures. Their work highlighted the impact of cultural identity on academic achievement, the role of institutional racism in perpetuating educational disparities, and the importance of community and cultural capital. It is incumbent upon workplace organizations to ensure that all employees enter healthy work environments. Thus, implications of this study could also be applied to predominantly White corporate environments such that initiatives like mentorship or an increase in Black leadership could help welcome employees into more equitable and inclusive environments.

Shifting Identities

To navigate through racist encounters in the workplace, Black people frequently find themselves shifting identities so that they appear to be more acceptable in White environments. This modern-day colloquium is called "code-switching," adjusting behavior to fit a particular social group or situation's expectations or norms (Dickens & Chavez, 2017). This strategy, which some Black people utilize, aims to avoid encounters with racially discriminatory behavior (Dickens & Chavez, 2017). In studying how women developed coping strategies to navigate cultural bias, Dickens and Chavez (2017) applied a phenomenological lens to the ecological systems theory to examine how race, gender, and class identities shifted among recent college

graduates. Their study, which pulled data from semi-structured interviews, exposed two significant consistencies among the women interviewed: both costs and benefits of shifting identities. As defined by the research of Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004), identity shifting can be both conscious and unconscious behavior from which the person of color alters their speech, dress, or behaviors to conform to dominant corporate culture standards. Dickens and Chavez's (2017) findings suggested that the benefits of being able to code-switch resided within the potential to advance for Black women who alter their behaviors to build and maintain personal and professional relationships. This theme seemed to be aligned with the concept of *cultural imperialism*, "the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (Young, 1990, p. 59).

The alternative side of code-switching is the cost of being performative and inauthentic. Dickens and Chavez's (2017) study suggested that when confronted with racism, some Black women choose to be silent, which often causes them to retreat in isolation and become mentally detached from their work environments (Dickens & Chavez, 2017). Earlier studies that support Dickens and Chavez's (2017) findings are Derald Wing Sue (2010), who shed light on the subtle forms of racism and discrimination that individuals, including Black women, may encounter in their workplaces, and Patricia Collins (2015) and her study on intersectionality and its influence of her experiences, including responses to racism and discrimination in the workplace. Dismantling and challenging stereotypes is a way to confront racial and racist ideologies. Shih et al. (2013) called this *stereotype reassociation*, where individuals coped with racist encounters by disassociating negative stereotypes and strengthening their association with positive identity traits. However, this practice often leans into the "Model Black Citizen" labeling, where a Black person feels responsible for representing their cultural community, including their own family

members, in professional settings (Dickens & Chaves, 2017). Consistent with this study are the works of Steele and Aronson (1995, 2004), who explored stereotype threat, where individuals from stigmatized groups may conform to or be affected by stereotypes. Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological system theory defined an exosystem influence as the interconnectedness between environments where the individual does not have an active role in their respective context. Interestingly, my study participants indicated being unaware that they were even performing or shifting their behaviors, as they were used to navigating between bi-cultural worlds.

Coping Strategies

There has been an increase in studies exploring how Black people cope with racial stressors; these studies have provided evidence of effective coping strategies (Belgrave & Allison, 2010; Bridges, 2011). Belgrave and Allison (2010) defined coping as the ability to conquer environmental detractors crafted to cast doubt and despair when previous attempts to disrupt these systems have proven ineffective. These studies are critically important because they helped to identify how Black employees maintained their mental health and stability amid racist encounters. These discoveries sought to avert the negative consequences of racial stressors like cancer, cardiovascular disease, and substance abuse (Bridges, 2011). Redirecting the behavior of the environment could look like creating levity or relatability amongst colleagues such that a collegial corporate environment is possible or mindfulness techniques that enable the Black employee to refocus calmly and center thoughts such that the behavior of others does not affect their spirit. Because not everything works for everybody, racially marginalized groups tend to develop a broad range of racism-related coping responses like active resistance, seeking support, establishing cultural connection, and self-care to allow them to adjust to the situation as warranted (Brondolo et al., 2009). In identifying which strategy to use, Mellor (2004) suggested

focusing on the distinction between tasks that prevent personal injury (i.e., denial, acceptance) from those that seek punitive action for racist encounters (i.e., assertiveness, aggressive retaliation). Unfortunately, there is no epidemiological population data on strategies most used to cope with racism (Brondolo et al., 2009). Krieger and Sidney (1996) considered a population-based sample of over 4,000 Black and White men and women and asked how they handled racial discrimination. Of the respondents, 86-97% said they would talk to someone when encountering racist conditions. However, whether their action would address or accept the situation was varied (Krieger & Sidney, 1996).

Phinney et al. (2001) aligned developing ethnic identity to stress-reducing racial buffering effects. Racial/ethnic identity development serves as a coping mechanism because it strengthens an individual's self-esteem because of their historical and experiential awareness of their own group's excellence and social position (Brondolo et al., 2009). Racial/ethnic identity can also help to distinguish between an individual's feelings about being targeted personally versus being targeted as a member of a particular group (Cross, 1995). The physical effects of racial/ethnic identity have been studied by researchers like Clark and Gochett (2006), who found a relationship between regard for self with cardiac and stroke volume when an individual was confronted with racial versus non-racial stressors. In addition, Torres and Bowens (2000) reported findings that revealed positive correlations between the Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale internationalization attitudes and the systolic blood pressure to racial and non-racial stressors. The study indicated that the expectation of racism allows individuals with Black-oriented identities to be better prepared to confront racism. Social buffers were a significant controller for coping with these racist encounters (Sarason et al., 1983). Social support from friends, family, and community members helps affected individuals get through these

experiences (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). In many cases, these group members can be mentors or advisors to help guide individuals to the best and most constructive way to deal with racial aggressors (Brondolo et al., 2009).

Another method of coping with racist encounters is more visceral—anger (Mellor, 2004). Anger coping strategies address two goals: to motivate the aggressor to change their behavior and to work within one's ability to withstand the emotional burden created by anger (Swim et al., 2003). However, it is essential to acknowledge that anger expressions could lead to anxiety about retaliation or abandonment if the Black person's behavior threatens social relations (Brosschot et al., 2006).

Conceptual Framework

The interwoven concepts that align with this study are explored through four interpersonal considerations of the Black HBCU graduate: development and exposure, equity and excellence, identity and achievement, and navigational strategies. The inner workings of these concepts compose what I call the *Racial Readiness for Career Preparedness* Conceptual Frame (Figure 1). This framework was derived from the referenced literature regarding Black student awareness, preparedness, and navigation of racial encounters: racial socialization (Dotterer et al., 2009; Miller, 1999; Phinney, 1989; Sanders, 1997): the role of HBCUs (Albritton, 2012; Allen & Jewell, 2002; Du Bois, 1903b; Harper et al., 2009); the subsequent preparation for entry into White corporate environments (Anderson, 2015; Hite & Bellizzi, 1986; Strayhorn, 2008, 2020b); and the salience of Black individuals' identity amidst racist encounters and differential racialization (Cross, 1971, 1991; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Neville & Cross, 2017). Lastly, this framework considers a Black individual's ability to navigate these encounters through their use of coping strategies like shifting identities (Dickens & Chavez, 2017), focusing

on problems and emotions (Brondolo et al., 2009; Krieger & Sidney, 1996; Mellor, 2004), confrontation/suppression (Mellor, 2004), and identity-related coping strategies (Cross, 1995; Phinney et al., 2001).

As reflected in Figure 1, the optimal approach to ensuring a congruent integration of Black graduates from HBCUs into predominantly White environments involves a heightened recognition of racism, the implementation of interventions aimed at enhancing graduates' readiness to face racism, and the application of navigational strategies that facilitate a smooth transition. First, the individual is made aware of race through familial socialization. Rotherham and Phinney (1987) defined familial socialization as how individuals, particularly children, acquire perceptions and values of an ethnic group and how they see themselves within that group. Rotherham and Phinney (1987) contend that Black children not exposed to race or racism are more unprepared for racist encounters. However, there is a careful balance in this education so that Black children do not feel that they are somehow inferior. As a result of this socialization, sources of motivation are found in reinforcing positive affirmations and cultural pride. This awareness and pride are then further enforced by their HBCU experience, which grants a similar sense of community cultural wealth (Anderson, 2015; Hite & Bellizzi, 1986; Strayhorn, 2008, 2020b). From there, the Black student is fully engaged in identity exploration, prepared to enter the predominantly White corporate environment, and equipped to recognize the differential racializations they may encounter (Basile & Thomas, 2022). Lastly, as Black graduates navigate these environments, they apply coping mechanisms to help mitigate the effects of racist experiences. They call upon their awareness and preparedness skills to call out racist systems that contribute to adversity in White spaces.

Figure 1. Racial Readiness for Career Preparedness
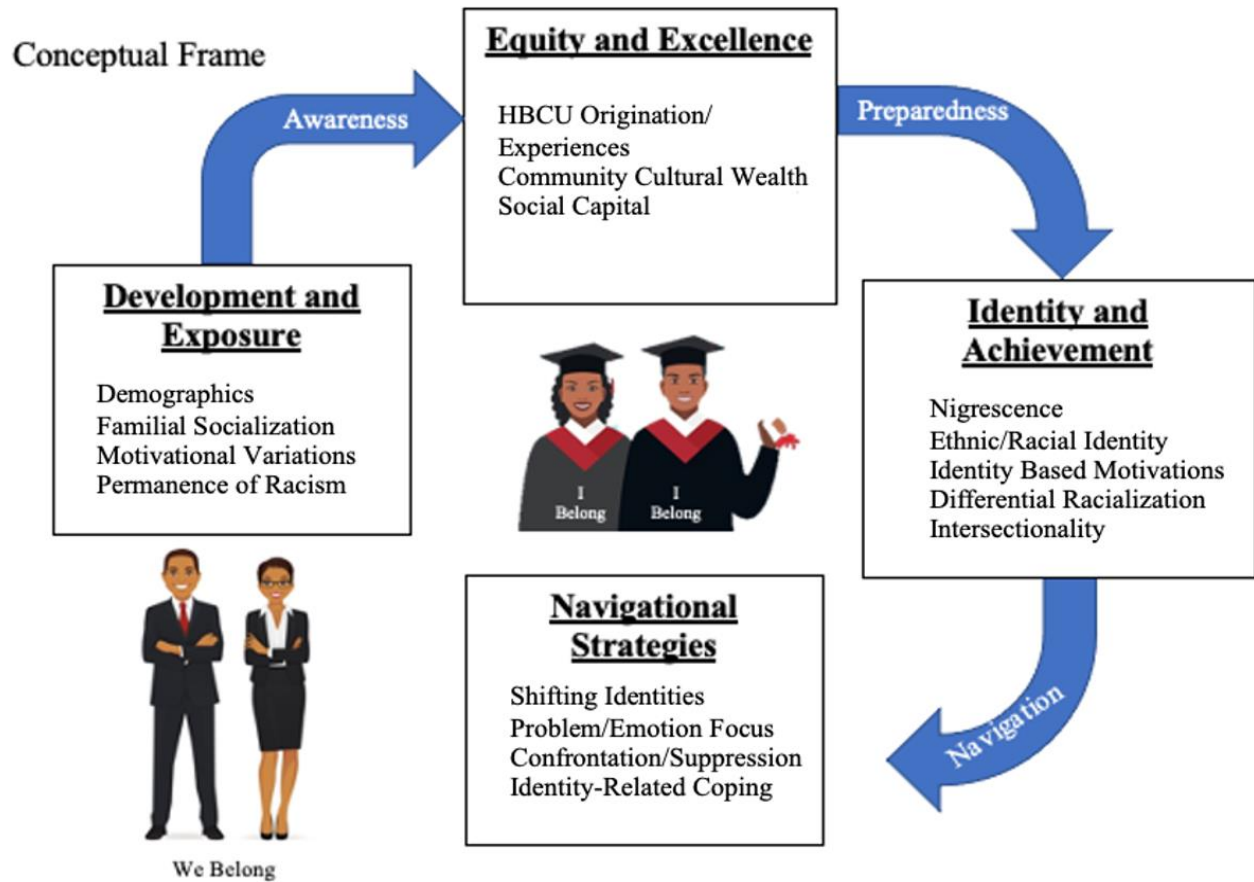
I have identified four prominent themes from the literature review that were further explored throughout my study. These themes were chosen because they significantly impact participants' awareness, preparedness, and navigation when encountering racism. The initial stages of identity development, influenced by familial support and community capital, are pivotal in shaping their awareness and exposure to racial issues. The participants' self-concept, intertwined with their experiences at their HBCU, plays an important role in providing them with the tools to address challenges related to race and racism. Then, the empowerment of these experiences to their self-confidence stemmed from a renewed sense of identity through their HBCU experiences and experiences that enriched their community cultural capital, enabling

them to approach the White corporate environment with heightened awareness and preparedness. Lastly, the study explored participants' coping and navigational strategies to overcome barriers and succeed in facing racist challenges.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

CRT is a useful theoretical lens for understanding and deconstructing issues of race and racism in U.S. contexts (Bell, 1987, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Solórzano and Yosso (2000) referenced CRT as the fabric of higher education by acting "as a social justice project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community" (as cited in Villalpando, 2003, p. 623). Derrick Bell (2005) summarized CRT as "writing that embraces an experientially grounded, oppositionally expressed, and transformatively aspirational concern with race and other socially constructed hierarchies" (p. 80). Bell's (2005) claim postulates my study to understand the role HBCUs play in preparing students for challenging experiences.

It is essential to call out the systems that present barriers to this entry to put the appropriate lens on the inquiry surrounding Black graduates and their experiences in White corporate spaces. It is also vital to center the voices of Black graduates from HBCUs who have developed coping mechanisms to navigate within these spaces. The tenets of Critical Race Theory enable a depth of study into variables that affect Black graduates' career satisfaction and performance levels when they enter White corporate environments. This study utilized narrative inquiry to collect data to investigate further the role HBCUs play in the navigational experiences of Black students in White corporate environments.

My Study, Through a Critical Race Theory Lens

CRT, when used as a framework, enables scholars to recognize the effect of race and racism on their daily lives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It also places the historical impact of race in this country as central to how racism is manifested into practices with such precision that some do not even recognize that they are being discriminated against (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT is the most effective means to frame and articulate the stories of HBCU graduates who experience racism in the workplace because it allows for "meaningful learning and research using antiracist methods" (DeCuir Gunby, 2021, p. 1). More specifically, by unpacking and bringing awareness to systemic issues that get in the way of Black career progression and success, we can get to a more comprehensive understanding of the varying layers of the societal, institutional, and cultural oppression that threaten the persistence, sense of belonging, and acceptance these graduates encounter. Within CRT are the following tenets: the permanence of racism, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, counter-storytelling, differential racialization, and critique of liberalism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These tenets are discussed below.

Permanence of Racism

Racial constructs retain a socially constructed hierarchy in this country, with the White majority remaining on top of that structure (Bell, 1992). There is a power dominance matrix centralized on the purveyance of power in this country and the intentionality of those with power to control how much or how little political or social capital is given to Black people. A critical piece of this conceptual framework resides within an individual's ability to be aware of race and the effects of racism when encountering racial barriers. As a product of upbringing and familial

45

socialization, research has proven that this awareness and a positive racial identity build resilience to racism (Marcelo & Yates, 2019).

Interest Convergence

While racism is an ordinary and malignant fixture within the fabric of this country, the subtle and covert means by which the appearance of equity is contrived while satisfying an overarching White interest is just as jarring. Derrick Bell (1980) believed that Black civil rights victories most always met the requirements of White interest. As mentioned earlier, the origination of HBCUs met the needs of the White elite, who wanted to appear generous by allowing educational resources to be dispersed within the Black community but not so much that it took away from their exclusive access to quality resources. This study will consider how interest convergence emerges in how access to opportunities presents itself for Black students at HBCUs.

Whiteness as Property

This study investigates whether these graduates' perceptions of microaggressions or racist encounters stem from tensions within this culture fit ideology. As mentioned in the Review of Literature section, shifting identities or code-switching is also an example of how the perception of one's Eurocentric alignment grants advancement opportunities and acceptance (Dickens & Chavez, 2017).

Counter-Storytelling

By utilizing a narrative inquiry approach in my research design, the centering of the communities whose experiences demark the foundation of this study is captured. The grounding of counter-storytelling by having participants speak honestly about their experiences navigating racism in corporate environments will engage a level of authenticity that seeks to initiate a call to

action by challenging how White corporate environments welcome Black employees. Through counter-storytelling, this study aimed to reject deficit narratives deployed to justify why some Black graduates from HBCUs experience challenges in their transition from college to career (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Differential Racialization

As defined by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), differential racialization is the "process by which each racial and ethnic group comes to be viewed and treated differently by mainstream society" (p. 172). Implicit biases, internalized belief systems, and values ingrained from respective social systems promote assumptions about various ethnic groups and how to engage with them. As a result, ethnic groups must circumvent stereotypes that often create barriers to entry and acceptance into mainstream spaces.

Critique of Liberalism

The danger in liberalism and race evasiveness is that it disregards individualized issues and considers a more generalized view of cultural conflict and differences (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Calling out the limitations of liberalism enables inequities to be dismantled. The standard consideration of liberalism in higher education studies is that equal opportunity to enroll in college exists, educational resources necessary to succeed are extended, and freedoms to exist and persist are there for everyone (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The present study challenged this idea and considered the reality of how racial aggression frames the experiences my participants recalled through their stories.

A problem with liberalism in recruiting HBCU grads is that corporations tend to tier their diversity recruitment strategy to top-tier HBCUs. They seek to fulfill their diversity quota but only consider one or two well-funded HBCUs with more commercial notoriety. This may satisfy

their needs for diverse hires. Still, it limits access by only recruiting students from a handful of institutions, spurring unnecessary tension for Black students in competing HBCUs that are not on their list (Gray, 2021). This study aimed to call out ideology that rejects racism as a relevant problem and considers race evasive practices as a solution to equity building.

Summary of Literature Review

This literature review highlighted the history of HBCUs, their significance in providing academic opportunities to Black students, and the exploration into the need for additional studies because of the increase of Black graduates entering into predominantly White corporate environments. The review considered the pivotal role of community cultural wealth and sociocultural factors in shaping the identity development and racial awareness of HBCU students, motivating them to succeed academically and confront the effects of racist encounters. This chapter also underscored the importance of various interventions like internships to grant experiential opportunities in corporate environments before graduation. The exploration into race evasion as a coping mechanism and the multifaceted strategies employed by Black students, including confronting racism and shifting their identities as they transition from HBCUs to predominantly White corporate environments, was also considered. Overall, this body of research identified the resilience, awareness, and determination of Black students from HBCUs in navigating the challenges of racism and striving for success in diverse academic and professional settings. This study aimed to strengthen previous findings and add context to gaps in exploring this occurrence within today's relevance.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter overviews the research methodology used to examine Black graduates from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and their preparedness to navigate racist encounters upon entry into White corporate environments. As complex and layered as White supremacy and racism are, it was necessary to incorporate qualitative methods informed by CRT to call out and hold accountable systems that deem injustice a normal state of Black existence in this country. As defined by Creswell (1994), qualitative research is "… an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (pp. 1–2). It is critical when considering this research tradition that the inquiry allows space to "analyze, question, and express ideas creatively" (Dixson, 2005, p. 107). Because the nature of CRT is about dismantling racism and bridging understanding to the lives of marginalized communities, my approach to this research study aimed to encourage scholars, educators, organizations, and students to think about the role each played in shifting the way Black graduates enter into their careers and navigate racial encounters (Crenshaw, 1991). This approach also established a collective and collaborative process to minimize power relationships between the researcher and participant.

I will first discuss my rationale for using narrative inquiry to design the study. I will then provide an overview of my research design, sampling methods, data collection methods, instrumentation, and data analysis methods. Next, I will discuss how I ensured trustworthiness and validity. Finally, the chapter concludes with an exploration of the researchers' reflexivity.

Narrative Research in Qualitative Design

Narrative research is a Qualitative methodology that conceptualizes the human condition by retelling lived experiences (Josselson, 2010). This research design has gained legitimacy in education and professional development activities (Avidov-Ungar, 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) identified common characteristics within narrative inquiry as inclusive of the retelling of personal experiences and individual interactions with others. The philosophical thoughts of John Dewey (1938) support the exploration of an individual's experience as a lens into understanding that person. One aspect of Dewey's philosophy considered an individual's experience as continuous, where one experience leads to another experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Capturing these experiences and the connectivity between emerging concepts is what Berman and Smyth (2015) positioned as the ontological dimension of Qualitative research, which focuses on "describing the context of the research and the key concepts and relationships between those concepts that exist in that context" (p. 130). The incorporation of Narrative Inquiry in this study is significant, as societal constructs impose a normative framing of marginalized communities as incapable of performing or competing within majority-White systems. In contrast, the participants of this study provided a counternarrative, challenging how Eurocentric viewpoints of Black people engaging in White organizations are frequently skewed toward a stereotypical deficit ideology.

The research questions in my study sought to examine how HBCUs are valued in the lived experiences of Black graduates who navigated racial challenges in White spaces. The importance of the relationship between the emerging themes helps configure a higher level of conceptualization that directs how the data is collected and how the problem being researched can extend past recognition and move toward theorizing a solution. In considering a CRT

framework, I critically assessed the experiences of my study participants as they retold their stories and made meaning of their experiences.

CRT is a standpoint epistemology used within a critical paradigm (Glesne, 2015). Standpoint epistemology is "positioned in the experiences, values, and interests of a group that has traditionally been oppressed or excluded" (p. 11). As data collection through interviewing and focus groups ensued, the participants' ways of knowing were well explored, and how they interpreted their encounters was brought to light.

Critical Research Paradigm and CRT

The critical paradigm adopted in this study aligns with the lens of CRT, as outlined by scholars such as DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2019) and Delgado and Stefancic (2017). Through this framework, the research prioritizes exploring how Black graduates from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) enter predominantly White spaces when pursuing their careers. It specifically seeks to establish a connection between their pre-collegiate socialization experiences and their HBCU education. The study considered how these early life interactions and HBCU experiences contribute to the preparedness of Black graduates to navigate racially challenging environments. This approach involves critically analyzing the collected data to understand the origins of the issues under investigation and their implications for the participants, aligning with the principles of CRT. Critically analyzing the data allowed a focus on how the presented issue originated throughout the research participants' contribution to the study (Devine, 2021).

Constructing Knowledge and CRT

From an epistemological standpoint, knowledge creation relies heavily on how information is gathered and from which source it is dispatched (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Critical

Race Theory is an appropriate means to carry out this research and is used to support and challenge epistemological beliefs through narratives and counter-stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Societal norms are further challenged by deconstructing how knowledge is formed (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Social constructionist Vivien Burr (2003) believed that knowledge is sustained through how people interact with the world. The perception of what is true relies upon how the person engages with social processes and interactions rather than objective observation. The CRT framework guided my knowledge production as a researcher and brought context to how the research participants made meaning of their experiences when encountering racism in White environments.

A CRT framework challenges how general knowledge is constructed through the stories of impacted people and informs how I conducted my research (including methods for data collection and analysis; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). In addition, there is a necessary unlearning of Eurocentric ideology that assumes Black graduates from HBCUs cannot withstand racial challenges or rigor in White environments because of their limited exposure to White populations. A CRT lens gave me insight into the varying layers of this issue so that systems created to present barriers for Black HBCU graduates could be called out and dismantled. Incorporating narrative inquiry is important to capturing authentic stories by "talking directly to people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature" (Creswell, 2009, p. 40). The narrative data analysis centers on using direct quotes, which enhances the retelling of the participants' experiences by using their own words to understand the emerging themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

<center>**Methods**</center>

This study aimed to identify how the saliency of an HBCU experience contributed to the navigational ability of Black graduates when encountering racism in White spaces post-graduation. The following research questions were employed to address this:

1. In what ways do Black HBCU graduates experience racism when they enter White corporations?

2. To what extent do HBCUs prepare Black graduates for encountering racism in White corporations?

3. What strategies for navigation do Black HBCU graduates initiate when they encounter racist experiences?

Participant Criteria

Through my former position at the HBCU from which the research participants graduated and my awareness of its alumni, I identified graduates who could speak to their respective experiences in thoughtful and reflective ways. In support of my selection criteria, the participants had to be of Black/African-American descent (for this study, the ethnic references are used interchangeably) and have transitioned to a predominantly White corporate environment post-graduation. Participants were selected based on these criteria to fulfill the study's purpose.

Sampling Strategies

Purposive sampling was utilized to select my study participants (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which the researcher can use judgment when selecting who should participate in the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further supported by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) is criterion-based selection. The criterion-based choice is a great way to identify people who can immediately contribute to the study's

outcome (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my study, I sought to include Black graduates who attended an HBCU and had experience working in a predominantly White corporate environment post-graduation.

Sample Size

While there is no unified method for determining the appropriate sample size for a narrative study, the consensus is that an investigation should have anywhere from 6-20 participants to capture the best illustration of the participants' experience while ensuring that saturation occurs to get to a comprehensive analysis (Connelly & Clandinin,1990). Additionally, because of the rigor required for a narrative interview, it is recommended that the participants are interviewed twice to ensure the stories as told are appropriately explored (Kim, 2016). For this research, I elected to consider a sample size of eight Black HBCU graduates. Outreach to my participants occurred through email messages and phone calls.

Participant Recruitment

To initiate the recruitment process, I sent an initial email to potential participants, including a demographic survey linked to the message (see Appendix A). This survey aimed to gather essential information about the participants and their eligibility for the study. Within the demographic survey, I incorporated a calendly.com link that allowed participants to indicate their availability for further engagement. This feature streamlined the scheduling process by enabling individuals to select convenient time slots for the study's one-on-one interviews. Once the availability was determined, a Zoom calendar invite was created and shared with each participant.

Data Collection Methods

I administered a brief demographic survey and facilitated a 60-minute, one-on-one narrative interview with each of my eight participants to better examine their experiences and commonalities. I then conducted two collective focus groups, allowing all participants to have a communal discussion of their experiences so that I could account for the alignment and similarities between their experiences to those of their counterparts. Lastly, I conducted member checking, which encompassed returning to the study participants to validate or verify the accuracy and interpretation of the data collected (Birt et al., 2016). I followed up with a conversation with each study participant to ensure participant validation.

Data Collection

After approval by the UNC Greensboro Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this current study, I began the data collection process encompassing demographic surveys, one-on-one interviews, two focus groups, a follow-up conversation, and reflexive journaling. A demographic survey was administered to gather foundational information from the participants, after which they selected a convenient time for conducting individual one-on-one interviews. After completing the one-on-one interviews, I sent another email to participants to identify a suitable time for conducting the focus groups. The email requested that they indicate their availability through doodle.com. I soon discovered that only half of the participants could commit to a specific time, while the remaining participants had conflicting availability. To address this, I facilitated two focus groups, each with four participants. A final follow-up interview was conducted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data from the participants, allowing for any additional questions or clarifications to be addressed. Facilitating the data collection in this way ensured the study's validity was secure and valuable insights emerged.

Demographic Survey

Demographic surveys determined the appropriateness of the study's sample in contributing to an in-depth examination of the issue (Connelly, 2013). The demographic survey was distributed through Qualtrics in an email to all the study's participants (see Appendix A). Upon completion, the responses were compiled and kept in a password-protected Excel spreadsheet in Box. Doing this before the interview gave me, as the researcher, the ability to frame the context being articulated by my participants and allowed me to collect the necessary demographic data without absorbing unnecessary time from my interviews. The questions asked in the survey were age, ethnicity, gender, hometown, parents' education, the highest level of school completed, employment status, graduation year, major, and marital status. Collecting demographic information enabled me, as the researcher, to determine contextual, intersectional, and systemic factors that influence my participants' responses to racist encounters.

Table 1. Demographic Survey

Name (Alias)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14
Name (please do not use real name, select pseudonym)	What ethnicity do you identify?	What gender do you identify? - Selected Choice	Age	Where are you from? (City, State)	Racial demographics of hometown (of more than +50% of a particular ethnicity)	Collegiate Major (Undergrad)	Graduation Date (Undergrad)	Current Employment Status	Years Employed	Education level of parents - Highschool	Education level of parents - College	Education level of parents - Graduate	Education level of parents - Certification	Education level of parents - Military
Bob Barker	African American or Black	Male	21-25	Colerain NC	African American or Black	Business Entrepreneurship	05/2021	Employed	6-10 years			Mother		
Ciara	African American or Black	Female	21-25	Henderson, NC	African American or Black	Computer Science and Business	May 2020	Employed	0-5 years	Mother,Father				
Aria	African American or Black	Female	26-29	Woodbridge, Virginia	Multiple Ethnicities	Business administration	2018	Employed	0-5 years		Father	Mother	Mother	Father
Naomi	African American or Black	Female	26-29	Jacksonville NC	European American or White	Accounting	May 2018	Employed	0-5 years	Father		Mother		
Dewayne	African American or Black	Male	35+	Rocky Mount NC	European American or White	BS Computer Information Systems	5/10/2014	Employed	16+ years	Mother,Father			Mother	
Ashley	African American or Black	Female	30-35	East Orange, NJ	African American or Black	Accounting	2016	Employed	6-10 years	Mother,Father	Mother	Mother	Father	Father
Pat	African American or Black	Male	26-29	Warrenton, NC	Multiple Ethnicities	Business Administration & Finance	2017	Employed	6-10 years	Mother,Father				
Nia	African American or Black	Female	26-29	New Jersey	Multiple Ethnicities	Business Administration Marketing	2016	Employed	6-10 years	Mother,Father	Mother, Father			

Participant Interviews

Upon completing the demographic survey, I took 2 weeks to secure 60-minute, face-to-face or Zoom interviews with each participant. Recognizing that my participants' busy schedules

would prevent face-to-face engagements, I opted to interview via Zoom. A Google meeting request was sent to each participant to secure the date on their calendars. All interviewees completed a consent form to participate in this research study. The 60-minute interview was recorded and transcribed via Zoom. I also took notes in my reflexive journal to record my interpretation of the participant's responses. After the query and recording, I shared my notes and transcriptions with the participants in a respondent validation interview to ensure I had collected their responses accurately. I centered my theoretical framework on the interview protocol by recognizing the systems of influence that create barriers to entry and belonging for Black HBCU graduates when navigating White corporate environments.

Interview Protocol

The interview consisted of 22 guiding questions that delved into various aspects of the participants' lives, including their background, home life, educational journey from pre-collegiate to collegiate level, sense of belonging, work integration, self-perception, and personal ideology (see Appendix B). While the questions offered a foundational structure for the inquiry, a semi-structured methodology enabled a more thorough and comprehensive examination of the subject matter (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). The interview questions intended to consider how the varying influences within my participants' experiences guided how they could adapt to racially adverse environments (Guan et al., 2013; Zacher, 2014). The study's conceptual framework guided my interview protocol. The interviews began with exploring how my participants were made aware of racism within their pre-college socializations. These socializations include familial associations and conversations about race, youth organization experiences, or community service activities before collegiate enrollment. Next, the study investigated whether those who identified having pre-collegiate socialization experiences with race found more

success entering and navigating White spaces. From there, further analysis determined an HBCU's role in how Black students' assumption of White space navigation was either supported or challenged.

Focus Groups

My research design included using two focus groups to support the data collection. Focus groups allowed me to evaluate interactions inside the group, identify the similarities among experiences, and allow for free discussions regarding their experiences with racism (Mishra, 2016). Two focus groups were conducted via Zoom. According to Turner et al. (2011), it is helpful for the moderator to have a shared identity to maximize the survey participants' comfort level and encourage their ability to share their experiences freely; therefore, I moderated the focus groups. The focus data group was transcribed from the discussion group, along with the moderator's reflections and annotations (Mishra, 2016).

Focus Group Protocol

As the focus group facilitator, I reacquainted myself with the participants and overviewed the study. I utilized a script to explain the study's purpose and focus group protocol. The purpose of the focus group was to collect collective insights, shared experiences, and group dynamics related to challenges and racism they have encountered during their transition and work in these settings. It allowed for the exploration of group dynamics, consensus on common themes, and the potential for participants to build upon and validate each other's experiences. I began the conversation by asking probing questions about the participants' experience discussing racism in their homes. This initial inquiry was a foundation for exploring their pre-collegiate understanding of racism. Subsequently, the discussion evolved to explore their specific encounters in predominantly White environments and the approaches they adopted to navigate

the accompanying challenges (see Appendix C). Upon conclusion of the focus groups, I thanked the participants, and I acknowledged that these answers, along with the synthesis of their interviews and my personal reflexive journal, would bring important light to a complex issue in hopes of providing meaningful implications to how HBCUs prepare students for entry into White corporate environments post-graduation.

Initially, I had planned to organize the focus group in person at the alma mater of the study participants. However, despite multiple attempts to secure a suitable location and agree upon a mutually convenient time, it became evident that coordinating these logistics would be challenging due to participants' busy schedules. Therefore, it was decided that conducting the focus groups via Zoom would be the most efficient and timely approach to facilitating this important conversation.

Reflexive Research Journal

Smith (1999) described research journals as vital to "enhancing ethical and methodologic rigor" (p. 356). Considering the complexity of this study and the desire to appropriately account for the varying experiences uncovered throughout the discovery process, personal reflections and documentation throughout the progression of the study were critical to the advancement of the research findings (Thorpe, 2010). Reflexive research journals assisted in how the researcher made meaning of their encounters.

Member Checking

Following the data collection, participants were actively engaged in the member-checking process. They were invited to review the notes, summaries, and key findings I derived from their individual interviews and focus group sessions. This collaborative step allowed participants to validate the accuracy of the information collected, verify that their perspectives

were faithfully represented, and identify any discrepancies or nuances that may have emerged during the discussions. Through their feedback, they contributed significantly to the overall trustworthiness of the study, reaffirming the authenticity of their narratives. This process ensured that the final analysis truly reflected the voices and experiences of the participants who generously shared their stories.

Data Analysis Methods

In this study, I applied a reflexive thematic analysis to uncover central themes and establish meaningful connections within the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis phases considered data familiarization, initial code generation, generating (initial) themes, theme review, theme defining and naming, and report production. A reflexive thematic map illustrating how I applied this method to my findings is found in Chapter IV.

Thematic Analysis (TA) Evolution into Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

It is important to recognize that Thematic Analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), has recently been refined (Byrne, 2022). In so much that Braun and Clarke themselves have spent the past few years ensuring researchers adhere to the reflexive part of the thematic analysis, which is now referenced as Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2019, 2020). RTA is about the researcher's "reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process," as codes illustrate the researcher's interpretations, similarities, and patterns across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis is an effective approach for conducting this narrative inquiry study due to its flexibility and compatibility with the exploratory nature of narrative research (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In narrative inquiry, the emphasis is on understanding

individuals' lived experiences and the stories they share (Byrne, 2017). Reflexive Thematic

Analysis aligns well with this objective because it allows researchers to identify and interpret

themes and patterns that emerge organically from participants' narratives. This method

recognizes that narrative inquiry is, by design, subjective and reflexive. It underscores the

significance of the researcher actively reflecting on their own perspectives and becoming more

intrinsically involved with the data during the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

CRT further supported the decision to employ RTA for this study. CRT recognizes the

significance of understanding and challenging power dynamics within society, particularly those

related to race and ethnicity. In analyzing narrative data, a CRT lens considers the complexities

of lived experiences and the role of power and social structures in shaping them (Gillborn et al.,

2023). Reflexive Thematic Analysis provides a framework that allows for a deep exploration of

these complexities and examines how participants' narratives are influenced by, and, in turn,

influence, issues related to race, identity, and equity (Braun & Clarke, 2022). By utilizing RTA

within a CRT framework, this study sought to uncover and critically examine how race and

power intersect with the participants' personal narratives, thereby contributing to a more

comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Data Familiarization

The first stage in RTA is data familiarization. As Byrne (2022) suggested, listening to the

interview in its entirety before transcribing is an effective means of achieving comfort with the

data. This process allows for an unobstructed confluence of understanding to occur without

distraction. The meaning behind the phrasing and tonal expressions can be better understood.

After reviewing the interview, focus group, and follow-up, I utilized Zoom's transcription

features to transcribe the interviews. Subsequently, I reviewed and edited the transcriptions to

correct any inaccuracies or misinterpretations. By carefully analyzing the literal translation and consulting my reflective journal, I gained meaningful insights and a deeper understanding of the participants' responses. During this process, I began mapping the emerging themes in preparation to start identifying appropriate codes.

Generating Initial Codes

With the deductive approach to analyzing the data, initial coding is drawn from the existing literature on the topic of inquiry or what I know as the researcher about the topic (Pandey, 2019). My research applied a deductive approach by "basing analysis on pre-existing theory" (Gale et al., 2013, p. 3). Coding allowed me, as the researcher, to connect ideas and concepts and elucidate how the varying themes supported or contradicted the guiding research (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011).

I defined my coding strategy for the reflexive thematic analysis process based on what Saldaña (2014) refers to as the "Affective Method" (see Appendix D). There are three subcategories of Affective Methods: values coding, versus coding, and evaluation coding. The values coding process considers what we feel about ourselves and what we think and feel is true, formed from our knowledge or experiences, and is categorized into values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2014). Versus coding methods help clarify two approaches to a research inquiry (Saldaña, 2014). Underlying similarities and constant associations are considered throughout this method. Finally, evaluation coding considers qualitative data that assigns judgments about its worth or significance to the study and is used primarily in policy studies (Saldaña, 2014).

For this study, I elected to consider a values coding approach. This method allowed for a more conclusive consideration of a person's intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cultural constructs within their experiences—and how those constructs shaped their values, attitudes, or beliefs

(Saldaña, 2014). According to the *Handbook for Qualitative Coding* by Saldaña (2016), an *attitude* is "the way we think and feel about ourselves, another person, thing, or idea" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 131). For example, phrases that revealed the participants' emotional responses to racist challenges were categorized into "Attitudes." Phrases such as "I tend to suppress my feelings" or "I'm flexible" were considered to provide context regarding how they categorized their feelings in response to encounters with racism. A *value* is "the importance we attribute to ourselves, another person, thing, or idea" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 131). Expressions from the study that contained concepts associated with "Motivation" were grouped under the "Values" category. This classification was made because motivation is closely tied to what individuals consider significant to them. Thus, phrases like "feeling accepted is important to me; when you don't have that, it makes the job a lot harder" were grouped into this coding category. Lastly, a *belief* is "part of a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 132). I incorporated expressions from the study participants that explored acquiring knowledge and attitudes in this category. Phrases such as "I tend to question why certain things happen to me because of my race" were specifically included in this grouping. Chapter IV further explores how the emerging themes cluster around the corresponding subcategories.

Searching for Themes

After the data were in an Excel spreadsheet, I shifted my focus from the individual dataset to the collective interpretation of the aggregated data (Byrne, 2022). At this point, the data started to take shape and could then be categorized amongst the emerging themes or sub-themes. While it is important for the data to inform the emergence of themes, it is equally important to be open to letting go of anticipated themes that may not manifest as expected. A

miscellaneous theme could be assigned to determine at a later date its importance for inclusion (Braun & Clarke, 2012). After this analysis, a thematic map took shape, and a visual synopsis of how the themes congregated within the data was developed (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Reviewing the Themes

Next, the themes were reviewed concerning the coded items and the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2020). At this time, I was able to assess whether the emerging themes accurately interpreted the data as reflected and whether they addressed the research questions concisely. Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 65) presented a series of questions that were helpful in this assertion:

- Is this a theme (it could be just a code)? For example, motivation to belong, which in a broader context is more likely a theme, versus feeling accepted, which can be considered a code to categorize data segments.

- If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)? Motivation as a theme was useful in determining whether Black students from HBCUs are prepared for racist encounters and whether adversity would influence their ability to stay in an organization.

- What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)? By framing motivation as a theme, I focused on collecting data that directly contributes to a comprehensive understanding of motivation, including its patterns, consistencies, and relevant contextual information. Data that fell outside the purview of this theme were excluded from my analysis. Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)? Multiple participants indicated that motivation is part of their experience.

- Is the data too diverse and wide-ranging (does the theme lack coherence)? With careful definition of what motivation means to the participants, the theme can be focused and applied.

Defining and Naming the Themes

At this phase, I thoroughly analyzed the thematic framework (Byrne, 2022). I aimed to choose compelling and descriptive ways to represent my themes effectively. The theme names were carefully considered to capture the core concepts and be easily understood by readers. As a result, my themes directly aligned with the dataset, encompassing key aspects such as socialization, motivation, problem/confrontation, community cultural wealth, HBCU experiences, ethnic identity awareness, the permanence of racism, identity-related coping, and shifting identities. As considered through RTA, I immersed myself in the data and practiced open coding, which allowed me to recognize patterns and see how the theme developed in interrogating my data. This is important because it prompted a deeper investigation into what participants said and contextualized this interpretation based on extant literature.

Validity

Facilitating an initial interview, a subsequent discussion, and two focus groups enhanced the necessary triangulation to validate the emerging assumptions drawn from the data (Bashir et al., 2008). This narrative inquiry aimed to empower the participants to share their stories, allowing my questions to serve as a guiding force to help them recognize and recollect the importance of specific experiences in their career progression.

Triangulation is a qualitative research strategy that tests the validity of the findings by collecting information from varying sources (Carter et al., 2014). In addition, member checking is a valuable validation technique, as it requires the data or results to be returned to the

participants to check for accuracy in reflecting their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). Member-checking involved inviting the participants to assess the accuracy of how their experiences were portrayed in the study. This was accomplished by sharing with them my journal notes and querying the participants about the accuracy of the insights and whether they wished to contribute any additional details. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also allowed for a more open-flowing conversation and more opportunities to build rapport and relationships among my participants, which granted the appropriate level of comfort (Wengraf, 2001).

Ethical Considerations

Because of my positionality, I acknowledged my role as both an outsider (researcher) and insider (a woman of color who has experienced White corporate environments; Johnson-Bailey, 2003). This interaction also granted an added layer of trustworthiness, as my reflexivity is deeply rooted in similarities between my personal and professional experiences and those of the participants. However, I acknowledge that being a woman does not grant me entry into every experience, as Black men may have another experience uniquely positioned to their gendered positionality.

I needed to protect my participants' confidentiality so they would feel comfortable retelling their stories to me. As defined by Berg (2004), confidentiality is "an active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the subject's identities" (p. 65). I would not want to be responsible for the possibility of retaliation from employers by naming them or the participants. The interviews were conducted via Zoom recordings along with their assigned pseudonym, self-assigned by the participants. The joint accounts of the focus group captured the discussion and the individual contributions. Each person participating in the study completed an IRB-approved informed consent agreement to identify how the information

66

was collected and how the data were filed. Acknowledging the importance of confidentiality to the study's integrity and its participants' protection is an important goal for a researcher (Berg, 2004).

Data assessment is critically important to the discovery that occurs within a research study. However, it is vital to consider the researcher's positionality to contextualize how the data collected is interpreted. In the next section, I offer an overview of who I am as the researcher, how I approached this topic for my dissertation, and my beliefs about racism in predominantly White corporate environments. Throughout my study, I reflected on how I felt in a journal to account for my assumptions while identifying "ah-ha" moments or places where revelations occurred. My journaling allowed me to make sense of the data and allowed the appropriate distinction between emotional reactions to data versus personal accounts of individual experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Limitations

When considering the experiences of Black HBCU students with racism in predominantly White environments, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations and biases that might appear in the study. Acknowledging my affiliation with the HBCU attended by the study participants is important. Due to my personal connections and familiarity with some of the participants in the study, there was a possibility of unintentional bias in the recruitment process. This bias could have inadvertently influenced the sample, potentially leading to a selection of participants with specific perspectives or experiences. As a Black woman with corporate experience, my insight and perceptions influenced how I interpreted and analyzed the data. While this approach was considered throughout my research methodology, I had to remain as neutral and objective as possible throughout the study, recognizing the participants'

experiences were not mine. Acknowledging that findings from an HBCU or a small sample of graduates may not represent all HBCUs or the broader experiences of Black students in predominantly White environments is important. The accuracy of their recall of experiences when engaging in discussion may have impacted the reliability of the data collected. It was expected that individuals would downplay or forget certain incidents while others would overstate them. Additionally, because of the topic's sensitivity, participants could have been reluctant to share certain experiences or feelings, particularly if they fear repercussions or judgment. This could have led participants to understate their experiences or relay them in more diplomatic ways. In addressing potential biases, I adopted a methodology that clearly articulated the study's scope and limitations.

Researcher's Reflexivity

The year was 2001, and I was a new graduate entering my first corporate experience post-graduation. With a degree in Marketing, I was ready to take the world by storm. However, as a Black woman in a predominantly White corporate environment, I had no idea what I would encounter as I navigated my way into my first job. I grew up in a White neighborhood, attended a White high school, and graduated from a predominantly White institution (PWI). So, how was I to know I would fall victim to racial microaggression or biases? Until then, I felt accustomed to environments where I was the only person of color. However, I soon discovered how these tensions would present me with the most challenging times in my professional life.

I accepted the position of Data Reporting Specialist for a Fortune 500 company post-graduation. I was responsible for creating campaigns to support the sales team in their pursuits to exceed corporate strategic goals. My manager was a White man who had high expectations of my capabilities but understood the learning curve I was presented with, being a recent graduate.

He consciously placed me in a cubicle outside his office so he could be close by to ensure I was mastering my assignments. My supervisor had no administrative assistant and never treated me as such. However, everyone else in the department could not seem to comprehend that I, a young Black woman placed in a cubicle beside my supervisor, was not, in fact, his administrative assistant. After numerous episodes of people dropping by to inquire about his schedule, it was apparent that I would not be seen as the specialist I was hired to be, even in my best attempts. I would be as I was perceived to be—his assistant.

This occurrence and countless others made me want to assess the role racism plays in how Black employees are welcomed into and advance within predominantly White corporate environments. As my career progressed and opportunities abounded, I found myself in the role of Marketing/Communications Director at an HBCU. Having nearly 12 years of interactions with Black students at an HBCU, I often wondered if they experienced the same things I did when they entered their respective career opportunities. More specifically, I wanted to assess HBCUs' role in how Black graduates experienced these encounters. In my experience, I found myself in a situation where my White manager was aware of my role but did not intervene to correct those who mistakenly assumed I was his administrative assistant. This raised questions about the responsibility for challenging the stereotypes that underlie such occurrences. Did the answers reside within the Black employee experiencing the racist encounters? Is it the White manager who knows the truth but refuses to challenge assumptions, or is it the system that supports an environment that allows for stereotypes to be made in the first place?

CRT acknowledges the importance of amplifying 'voices of color,' recognizing that individuals from marginalized racial backgrounds are uniquely positioned to speak on behalf of their own communities regarding race and racism. It acknowledges the lived experiences of

people of color who regularly encounter racism and emphasizes their capacity to discuss these experiences in ways that may differ from those of individuals from White backgrounds. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additionally, it acknowledges that every person's experience with racist encounters is unique, but collective voices of marginalized communities carry greater strength when advocating for change (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). My personal background as a Black woman who worked at the HBCU attended by the study participants and my prior experience in a predominantly White corporate environment influenced the participants' experiences in the study through cultural understanding, awareness of racial dynamics, and considerations related to potential bias. I actively managed these influences throughout the research to ensure the study's validity and maintain the participants' trust. I feel honored to have taken on this responsibility. Highlighting voices from communities affected by racism can invariably guide Black students' preparedness for racist encounters and call out organizations that harbor environments that spur racial aggression.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research design and data collection method undertaken in this research study. The data collection phase involved demographic surveys, one-on-one interviews, two focus groups, and maintaining a reflexive journal. These methods were selected to capture a holistic view of the experiences and perspectives of the eight study participants within the context of their transition from HBCUs to predominantly White corporate environments.

The subsequent data analysis phase embraced an RTA approach, which allowed for a deeper exploration of the data collected. RTA provided the flexibility needed to delve into the complexities of our participants' narratives, ensuring their voices were heard and their

experiences fully understood. In line with the research's emphasis on factors contributing to how the participants experience racist encounters, I incorporated Saldaña's (2014) Values Coding method. This method aided in systematically categorizing data, guiding the analysis towards a deeper understanding of how the collected data would be grouped and analyzed.

Combining these data collection and analysis methods yielded a strong foundation for my study's findings and insights. The subsequent chapters will dive into the emergent themes and offer a comprehensive exploration of the experiences and challenges faced by our participants during their transitions from HBCUs to predominantly White corporate environments.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to evaluate the experiences of Black HBCU graduates as they enter into predominantly White corporate environments post-graduation. The primary research questions guiding this study are: How do Black HBCU graduates encounter racism upon entering White corporations? To what degree do HBCUs equip Black graduates to confront racism within White corporate environments? What approaches do Black HBCU graduates employ when faced with racist experiences? After distributing a demographic survey to all participants, I conducted eight one-on-one interviews (Appendices A and B), two focus groups (Appendices C and D), and member-checking meetings and maintained a reflexive journal. These data collection tools were utilized in pursuit of addressing the research inquiries. In alignment with the narrative research methodology, the data collection for this study was gathered to construct and comprehend narratives, enabling a thorough exploration of participants' experiences and stories within a qualitative framework (Prior, 2018). As reflected in Table 1, the participants' graduation dates ranged from 2014 to 2020. The participants used self-appointed pseudonyms, which is how they will be named throughout the findings to maintain their confidentiality.

This chapter begins by presenting the study participants' profiles, which is how I familiarized myself with the data. I then explore emergent themes that came from the respective profiles of the participants and reflect on how the themes addressed the research questions and their overall intersection with varying CRT tenets.

Participant Profiles

Naomi

Naomi is a 2018 graduate from an HBCU. She is originally from Jacksonville, NC. Primarily raised by her mother and grandmother, her grandmother's ex-husband was in the military, which is how she ended up in Jacksonville (a military town). At age 16, her father came into the picture. Her mother graduated from law school (at the same HBCU Naomi attended) and was the one who put a great emphasis on education. As a child, Naomi attended a predominantly White Christian private school and then went on to a more diverse public high school.

Naomi graduated with an accounting degree in 2018 and went on to employment at one of the Big Four accounting firms. While in college, she indicated some experiences that helped shape her career growth and development, including interning at an accounting firm, attending a National Association of Black Accountants (NABA) conference, and a Summer Institute for Emerging Managers in California. Despite her deep appreciation for her HBCU experience, she recognized the complex dynamic she shared with certain Black faculty members. Despite her status as a top student, they occasionally scrutinized her appearance, particularly when she chose to wear a short shirt or skirt to class.

As she matured into her career, she began to become more aware of racialized aggressions in the workplace. She expressed some challenges being socialized in predominantly White corporate environments, with the unappreciation of her work, feelings of exclusion, and the tendency she had to second-guess herself. However, she is now in a job that makes her feel more comfortable being herself. She acknowledged belonging as an important motivation for her, she reflected that it makes her job easier, and is grateful to have found a job that aligns well with her needs and work style. To cope with work-related stress and feeling excluded or

unrecognized, she exercises regularly and gets relaxation massages. Setting boundaries and prioritizing mental health is important to her, including eating clean and taking mental health days off when needed. She prioritizes her physical health, kindness, positive relationships, and financial stability.

Overall Reflections – Naomi

Naomi's experiences reflect some of the core concepts explored within CRT, such as the impact of race in shaping individual experiences as she navigated her initial corporate entry as an intern, the recognition of the dynamics of power and privilege in predominantly White spaces she experienced when her work was discounted, and the recognition of racialized aggressions in the workplace.

Naomi's understanding of her racist encounters aligns with CRT's focus on lived experiences and the examination of structural and systemic racism. Her journey from growing up in a predominantly White environment to encountering racialized aggression in the workplace highlighted the ways in which racism can manifest in personal interactions, organizational dynamics, and societal structures. Recognizing the complicated dynamics of her relationship with her Black family, who offered guidance on her professional development and appearance to emphasize the importance of making positive impressions due to her high academic standing, demands a delicate balance between appreciating authenticity and acknowledging the significance of intellectualism.

Her coping mechanisms and focus on self-care demonstrate her agency in navigating and resisting racial inequalities. CRT acknowledges the importance of self-care and well-being in the face of racism and advocates for individual and collective action to challenge systemic injustices (Yosso, 2005).

Ashley

Ashley graduated in 2016. She identified herself as being from the inner city of New Jersey, recounting her journey that involved shuttling between her home in that urban setting and predominantly White areas where she attended school. Her experiences encompassed navigating diverse cultural environments and wrestling with the intricacies of race and identity, all of which were shaped during those moments. She was one of the few Black students in classes and transitioning from predominantly Black schools to White schools when she was growing up was challenging for her. Her parents are in education and technology which provided exposure to different perspectives. She referenced that she attended schools named after Black leaders and a performing arts school which helped shape her identity.

She reflected that the staff at the HBCU she attended used fear tactics to prepare her for what she may encounter post-graduation, leading her to feel disillusioned as she felt that they seemed to undervalue the significance of embracing one's true self in a professional role. She said she experienced mistreatment and judgment from Black faculty, faculty who made assumptions about her appearance and personal life decisions, neglecting to recognize and see her for who she was. This contributed to an apprehensive transition for her into a predominantly White corporate environment.

Anticipating that she might be the only Black woman in the office, she sought out networks with other Black professionals and actively pursued opportunities for mentorship. She recognized that managing microaggressions involves self-care, education, seeking support, setting boundaries, and self-advocacy. She referenced how exhausting it is, at times, to have to constantly manage self-awareness, cultural code-switching, biases, and navigating

communication barriers. Resilience, being goal-oriented, and being solution-oriented helped her navigate through racist encounters.

Overall Reflections – Ashley

Growing up in predominantly White areas and being one of the few Black students in classes highlights the racial dynamics Ashley had to navigate. This reflects CRT's focus on the experiences of racially minoritized populations and the ways in which race intersects with power structures and institutions.

Ashley's experience at her HBCU, where she felt undervalued and her true self was not recognized, points to the presence of systemic racism and institutional dynamics within educational settings. It is important to call out such power structures and the impact they have on individuals from marginalized communities, even if the perceived power structure would seemingly align because of the shared cultural origin. Scholars have explored the concept of professionalism as being a product of White supremacy (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Goodridge, 2022). They argued that professionalism is rooted in White supremacy, as it can reflect and perpetuate systemic inequalities based on dominant cultural norms. Ashley believed that the Black faculty she encountered at her HBCU in many ways enforced this alignment with White, middle-class values, making it difficult for her to want to conform as she had a strong desire to live in her authenticity, which would extend past their perception of how she should be.

When she transitioned into her career, she proactively sought connections with Black professionals and mentors, demonstrating an awareness of the importance of support and guidance from individuals who share similar experiences. This aligns with CRT's emphasis on the role of community and collective action in addressing racial inequalities and navigating racist encounters (Fripp & Adams, 2022).

Her strategies for managing racist encounters, such as self-care, education, setting boundaries, and self-advocacy, reflected the agency and resilience emphasized within CRT. CRT recognizes the importance of individual and collective action in challenging systemic racism and promotes strategies for self-empowerment and resistance which is something that Ashley prided herself on being able to do (Cloud, 2013).

Ciara

Ciara is a 2020 graduate from an HBCU. She was born and raised in Virginia. She attended a predominantly White, private, religious academy that lacked diversity. She desired to attend an HBCU to avoid being a minority but still had a "bougie Black girl" image due to her background in predominantly White spaces. She grew up in a loud and vibrant home environment until her parents' separation, which negatively impacted her middle and high school years. She experienced significant moments in life, including participating in a competitive choir, going to New York to perform, getting into college, becoming a homeowner before turning 25, and engaging in modeling and pageantry.

She was involved in various activities during high school and college, such as Junior Civitan, church activities, foreign language programs, and mentoring programs. She recalled being involved with modeling and pageants at her HBCU as making a profound impact on her confidence and self-image. Her sense of belonging in modeling and in creative spaces allowed her the ability to freely express herself. She mentioned that her motivation and level of vocalization varied depending on the space she was in.

Transitioning into a predominantly White work environment was an interesting experience for her. She felt somewhat prepared, having been hired through a diversity program at her workplace. Initially, it was evident that the Black employees were being treated differently as

diversity hires, which caused rifts and discomfort. When interacting with colleagues from non-HBCUs, it became apparent to her that their experiences and treatment were not the same. Instead of fostering relationships, there was a divide between HBCU and PWI (Predominantly White Institution) hires. She was vocal in her discontent about the situation. Unfortunately, all the HBCU hires, including her, eventually lost their jobs, and there seemed to be a racist motive behind the dismissals. The managers who fired them were even promoted.

In terms of coping with racism, she mentioned adapting her approach based on the situation– either shutting down completely or addressing issues with her boss. She expressed appreciation for her boldness, big heart, and evolving style. She considered success as trying new things, regardless of the outcome, and emphasized the importance of love, friendship, and opportunities that money can't buy.

Overall Reflection – Ciara

Ciara's experience of being perceived as a "bougie Black girl" even at the HBCU she attended, highlighted how racial stereotypes can shape perceptions and expectations for Black individuals who might not fit the social construction of "Blackness." CRT recognizes that stereotypes and biases can influence how individuals are treated and understood within society, even amongst their own intra-racial group. Ciara's experiences encompassed multiple dimensions of identity, including race, class, and possibly gender. Scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) believes that this type of recognition is important as systems of power and oppression, such as racism and sexism, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. CRT emphasizes the importance of understanding how these intersecting identities influence one's experiences of marginalization or privilege.

As a Black woman, Ciara's desire to attend an HBCU reflected a recognition of the importance of being in a more inclusive and representative environment. When she entered into her corporate experience post-graduation, she experienced differential treatment of Black employees and the dismissals of HBCU hires in the workplace indicated that the presence of racism and discriminatory practices existed in her workplace. Racism is not limited to individual acts of prejudice but is embedded within systems and institutions. Ciara's boldness is quite prominent as her willingness to address perceptions of injustice despite the potential of repercussions or career sustainability is shown throughout the stories she told.

Bob

Bob graduated in 2021. He is from Bertie, a small town in eastern North Carolina. Limited opportunities existed with education and career prospects in his hometown. His high school graduating class was small and job options included working at Perdue, driving to Newport News for shipyard work, or working at Amazon or a distribution center. His family situation involved a single parent, the passing of an older brother, and having to care for two younger siblings who are 17 and 12 years old.

He discussed the reason why he decided to pursue education at his HBCU was because he desired greater opportunity than what was in his hometown. He reflected on his difficult family dynamics and challenging living conditions. These dynamics included a strained relationship with his mother and a tornado hitting their home. He developed a love for learning and a desire to pursue higher education from a high school English teacher. He felt that this mentorship was critically important in his ability to apply for college.

When he transitioned to working in a predominantly White corporate environment, he described an incident that raised questions for him about his racial encounters. While he was

unsure if he could call it racism, he recognized that there was an expressed uncertainty of his ability to manage a process. After a mistake was made by a manager he collaborated with, it became evident that due to his appearance and background, his abilities were being questioned and people would be more apt to believe the manager than him. He sought his motivation from a pronounced desire to provide for his family and advance within his career.

Overall Reflections – Bob

Bob's upbringing in a small town with limited opportunities reflects the structural inequalities and systemic barriers that CRT aims to address. Marginalized communities often face disadvantages in education, employment, and access to resources due to larger power structures. Bob's experiences encompass multiple dimensions of identity, including race, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics. The intersectionality of these identities and how they interact to shape individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege is to be called out and acknowledged.

His encounter with a manager in the workplace, where he perceived biased behavior and unequal treatment, highlighted the presence of racial biases and the potential impact on his experiences. A primary CRT tenet is the acknowledgment of the permeance of racism and its potential to be embedded in institutions and systems. Bob's recognition of the incident in the workplace as potentially influenced by racial biases demonstrated an understanding of subtle forms of racism. CRT highlights the importance of acknowledging and challenging these subtle manifestations of racism that may not be overt but still contribute to racial inequality. Bob's sharing of his experiences, including limited opportunities, challenging family dynamics, and the workplace incident, aligned with the CRT practice of personal narrative and counter-storytelling.

The expression of his experiences in order to give power to the ability for others to challenge dominant narratives is incredibly important and highlighted the lived realities of racism.

Dewayne

Dewayne graduated from his HBCU in 2014. He is from a small city outside of Fayetteville, NC. It was in high school when he decided to pursue a military career, especially after positive aptitude test scores indicated that this should be the track he considered. While he entered into the military after high school, he soon realized the importance of further education and wished he had pursued that first. He faced challenges and interruptions in this pursuit but remained determined to succeed. He mentioned the passing of his grandmother and his parents' separation as factors that influenced the way he encountered challenges. He lacked confidence and financial support from his family, leading him to see the military as an opportunity for skills and assistance with college.

He attended a local community college and later transferred to an HBCU to complete his undergraduate work. He found a supportive environment at his HBCU and highlighted the contrast with his previous community college experience. Initially, he considered majoring in business management but changed his focus to computer information systems after observing the competition among business management students. He found that he was able to quickly understand technology concepts and after having a discussion with the Information Technology Department Chair, he realized the need to be more dedicated and focused on his studies. He participated in several co-curricular experiences while in college and was part of an internship program.

When he graduated and transitioned to working full-time in a predominantly White corporate environment, he expressed that deep down, he had reservations about being in the new

environment, likely due to the fear of facing discrimination or being perceived solely as a diversity hire. However, instead of allowing those reservations to discourage him, it fueled his determination to prove his worth and excel in the environment. He felt motivated to showcase his abilities, learn more, and progress further.

In relation to racism, he questioned whether he is seen as a valuable contributor or merely a token representation of diversity. Over the years he has employed several coping strategies to manage racialized situations. He mentioned the importance of telling himself that he deserves a place or a seat at the table regardless of the circumstances he may find himself in. He mentioned prayer and seeking guidance and support from mentors as ways to elicit comfort, advice, understanding and empathy.

Overall Reflections – Dewayne

Dewayne's experiences of growing up in a marginalized community with limited opportunities and facing financial challenges reflect structural inequities rooted in systemic racism. These factors represent broader social and economic structures that disproportionately affect racial minorities. Dewayne's concerns about discrimination and the fear of being seen solely as a diversity hire uplifted his racial consciousness and awareness of racial biases in the workplace. Dewayne's positive experience at his HBCU, where he found a supportive and inclusive environment, aligns with the significance of safe and empowering spaces for racial minorities. It underscores the value of institutions that validate and uplift marginalized voices, countering the exclusionary practices often found in predominantly White institutions.

His desire to excel in a predominantly White corporate environment demonstrated his resilience in the face of potential discriminatory challenges. CRT would acknowledge the importance of individual agency and resistance to systemic racism, while also recognizing that

individual efforts alone cannot dismantle entrenched structures of inequality (Poole et al., 2020).

Dewayne's questioning of whether he was seen as a valuable contributor or merely a token representation of diversity reflects CRT's critique of tokenism in workplaces. Tokenism can perpetuate power imbalances and maintain the status quo, often leaving individuals from underrepresented backgrounds feeling marginalized and lacking a true sense of belonging (Turco, 2010).

Dewayne's coping strategies, such as positive self-talk, seeking guidance from mentors, relying on prayer, and connecting with others who share similar experiences, highlighted his proactive approach to managing racialized situations. CRT would recognize the importance of individual and collective strategies to navigate and challenge racism within personal and institutional contexts.

Nia

Nia graduated from her HBCU in 2016. She is from Trenton, New Jersey, and recalled having a dual life, with one experience at her predominantly White grade school and another in her neighborhood with local kids. She was involved in various activities during high school, including a diversity club called Any Town, a yearbook club, sports, and track and field. She also participated in community service activities with her mom. Her involvement in diverse activities allowed her some insight into cross-cultural engagement which assisted in her ability to traverse through varying experiences.

She described instances of what she considered to be subtle racism during high school. She said that in her high school administrators assumed she was a translator for African visitors because she is Black. She was also expected to be the spokesperson for the Black experience. While in college, she described an experience she had as a social media intern. She faced

difficulties in her role and sought guidance from the Vice-President (VP) of marketing, who happened to be a White woman. However, the VP reacted negatively, leading to Nia's firing. Another Black woman within the company later rehired Nia, but the VP criticized this decision. The incident made her hesitant to ask for help and highlighted a lack of support within the organization. This incident suggested a potential instance of racism based on unfair treatment due to race.

Nia acknowledged the importance of her support system, coping mechanisms, and understanding differing perspectives when addressing racism. She suggested that her upbringing and experiences have led her to resilience and emotional detachment when experiencing racism. She mentioned that code-switching is one of the most challenging parts of navigating a predominantly White corporate environment. There is also preconceived value put on where an individual goes to school and the frustration of not being understood or represented in certain contexts. She raised concerns about the performative actions of companies to try to solely meet diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) checkboxes but still lack diverse representation. She desired to be a conduit for change so that she may influence organizations to consider more genuine engagement in racial justice efforts.

Overall Reflections – Nia

Whiteness as property is a concept that explores how being White in a predominantly White society grants certain privileges, advantages, and social status. As Nia was reflecting upon her upbringing, the duality of transitioning in and out of her neighborhood (all Black) to an all-White school, I thought about how this navigation presents its own challenges and dynamics. I, too, have had experiences in my upbringing navigating spaces where the dominant culture and norms aligned with Whiteness, which left me searching to figure out how to fit in along with my

social status. She reflected on this as a barrier to her socialization. Nia's coping mechanisms, such as not taking things personally, making jokes, and recognizing differing reactions among individuals, reflected her engaging in emotional detachment when experiencing racism.

Nia's narrative highlights an assumption made about her, as a Black person, being a translator or spokesperson for African visitors. Her recounting of an encounter with the Vice President during her first internship underscores the presence of subtle racism and the underlying power dynamics often found within institutional settings. Nia's admission to the fact that she is hesitant to ask for help and the lack of support within her organization underscores the challenges faced by Black individuals in predominantly White workplaces in feeling like she could trust her colleagues. Her acknowledgment of utilizing tactics like code-switching to manage White environments is very common in navigating these encounters (Terhune, 2006). Additionally, her emphasis on empathy, cultural awareness, and understanding differing perspectives align with the social construction of race tenet of CRT, which calls for recognizing the complexity of racial dynamics and the need for cultural competence.

Aria

Aria graduated from her HBCU in 2018. After conversing with her I realized that she grew up in a rural area mainly around women with very limited exposure to male figures. She attended school in a White suburban area prior to attending an HBCU. She was excited to receive a job before she graduated but she entered into her career during the Covid-19pandemic, so she felt that all she prepared for in college would go to waste because she was entering into her work life virtually.

She considered her family life to be "slightly chaotic." Living with multiple families under one roof while her mother and grandmother took care of them all, led to her desire to build

a life that was different from the one she had growing up. When considering colleges, she was unaware of HBCUs but ultimately desired to attend a university with a thriving information technology program, which led her to her HBCU.

She has several pre-collegiate socialization experiences, including participating in 4-H for tennis and being involved in small summer programs for 4-H clubs. As president, she also joined the IT club and participated in organizations such as Student Support Services, Girls Who Code, and the Google community program. She participated in activities like teaching parents how to use computers at daycare centers and engaging in the South by SouthWest festival's Battle of the Brains. Her family encouraged her scholarly pursuits and ensured she never doubted her capabilities because of her skin color.

She felt very accomplished as the president of the IT club while at the HBCU she attended. It was important to her because it allowed her to bring a voice to the table and encourage women to participate in the tech field. She desired to empower women, and while she served as a leader, she witnessed more women taking leadership roles in the club.

While in college she had the opportunity to work at Red Hat (a software company). Because of how they developed the internship program she reflected that she felt a strong sense of inclusivity and integration when she worked there. She said that it felt like home. She felt that this was a place where everyone's voice was heard and different identities were acknowledged and respected. Her first integration into a predominantly White environment was positive and set her standards for her expectations of life when she transitioned into her full-time career. Nia found her post-graduation transition to be relatively smooth, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to remote work. During this period, she did not encounter any overt instances of racism.

Overall Reflections – Aria

Aria's desire for independence and her focus on academics as a means to create a different lifestyle align with the CRT principle of emphasizing education as a tool for social change (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Aria's experience as the president of the information technology club, where she encouraged women to speak out in the tech field and witnessed more women taking leadership roles, reflected the importance of representation and empowering marginalized communities. The need for diverse voices and perspectives in leadership positions is important, particularly in challenging existing power structures. Aria's positive experience of inclusivity at her internship with Red Hat resonated with the CRT principle of recognizing and valuing diverse identities and creating inclusive environments. CRT advocates for dismantling systemic barriers and creating spaces where individuals from marginalized backgrounds can thrive and have their voices heard.

Pat

Pat is a 2017 graduate from Warrington, NC. He was raised by a single mother and stepfather. Pat recalled a particular situation when his stepfather physically assaulted him. The police came to his house but did nothing to remove his stepfather from the house. At that moment he lost trust in the system that he thought was there to protect him. The county's resolve was to send a social worker to his home who required them both to attend anger management classes as though that would remedy their problems. This experience shaped the way he handles conflict, especially with older men.

He recognized the importance of getting out of the situation he was in at home, and while his family may not have had the means to support his college entry, he had scholarships that would enable him to pursue higher education, thus relieving the burden on his mother. He is

often plagued with balancing life with health as he lives with Sickle Cell disease, a hereditary blood infection that causes pain crises due to abnormal cell shape and reduced oxygen-carrying capacity. He had a severe pain crisis during his senior year of college, which affected him physically and mentally. Despite this setback, he had supportive professors, connections in his university, and friends who helped him recover and regain his focus.

After graduation, he experienced a cultural shock when working in a company with a majority of White employees. Pat referenced the fact that it was no secret that he joined the organization after graduating from an HBCU, at the personal request of the CEO, whom he had met during a lecture at his HBCU. He grappled with the concern that this connection might lead some to view him as a diversity hire, doubting his ability to handle meaningful responsibilities. Additionally, within his organization, he observed a noticeable shift, echoing changes seen in many other organizations during the George Floyd situation. It was during this period that the organization finally acknowledged the necessity of recruiting more diverse talent and investigating pay disparities between Black and White employees.

Overall Reflections – Pat

Pat's upbringing in a rural area with a strained relationship with his stepfather reflected the power dynamics within his family. The physical altercation involving the police and social worker highlighted how power is exercised and can have implications for understanding encounters with racism. His family's financial difficulties and his reliance on scholarships to pursue higher education shed light on the impact of systemic racism. The awareness of economic disparities and the challenges faced due to socioeconomic circumstances aligned with the CRT framework, which focuses on understanding how racism is embedded within societal structures and institutions.

His experience with Sickle Cell disease and the physical and mental challenges he has faced demonstrated the importance of intersectionality. Intersectionality recognizes that individuals may experience various forms of oppression and discrimination simultaneously based on their varying identities (Gillborn et al., 2023). The symptoms he encountered as a result of Sickle Cell Disease, such as extreme fatigue, may unjustly conform to Eurocentric stereotypes about the work ethic of Black men, rather than acknowledge the manifestation of a chronic illness.

Pat's experience of questioning his belonging in a company with a majority of White employees indicated an awareness of racial dynamics in the workplace. In an examination of workplace environments, it is important to consider power dynamics, biases, and the experiences of individuals from marginalized racial backgrounds. Pat's contemplation of the authenticity of diversity efforts following the George Floyd situation aligned with CRT's call for genuine and sustained efforts toward racial justice. CRT calls out performative actions and highlights the need for substantive change in dismantling systemic racism.

Emerging Themes in Navigating Racism in White Corporate Environments

In the pursuit of addressing my research questions, several themes emerged, offering insight into the experiences of Black HBCU graduates as they navigate White corporate environments. To better understand how these graduates encounter racism, I explored their pre-collegiate exposures, unearthing themes centered around their early life experiences and their "Development and Exposure." Familial socialization, intrinsic motivations, and the presence of racism during their formative years set a critical baseline for how they perceive and navigate racism as adults and through their HBCU experience. Furthermore, as I delved into the significance of HBCUs in their lives, the theme of "Equity and Excellence" emerged,

highlighting the influence of their HBCU experiences in conjunction with their pre-collegiate socializations and accrued social capital. Moreover, "Identity and Achievement" emerged as a central theme, spotlighting the intricate interplay between their various intersectionalities, ethnic/racial identity, and how they are perceived by others through the lens of stereotypes. Lastly, themes related to their strategies for navigating racially charged situations came to light. These graduates employed various coping mechanisms, including shifting identities, focusing on problem-solving or emotional resilience, engaging in confrontations, and seeking supportive networks that aid them in managing identity-related challenges. These themes enriched a collective understanding of the multifaceted journey undertaken by Black HBCU graduates in predominantly White corporate spaces.

Development and Exposure

Demographics

All participants shared a common experience of growing up in hometowns with limited resources, which motivated them to actively seek out opportunities to remove themselves from those areas. Some attended secondary school away from their neighborhood, while others actively pursued resources and experiences that would extend their access and exposure. Their entry into an HBCU marked a significant milestone, as it provided them with valuable exposure to a broader world outside their familiar surroundings. During the study, I engaged with both males and females, and I observed no significant variations in how each gender approached their encounters.

> **Bob:** I am from a very small town in eastern Bertie. I went to a STEM high school, but my graduation class only had 20 students. There [were] not a lot of opportunities in my hometown. If you don't graduate and go to college, you work at Perdue, or you drive to

Newport News to work at the shipyard, or you work at Amazon in a distribution

fulfillment center. I knew if I wanted to do anything outside of that, I would have to

pursue higher education.

Pat: I'm from southern Virginia but [was] raised in Warrington, North Carolina, which is

in eastern North Carolina. Both areas had a very rural, low population. Not a lot of

opportunities as you get through finishing up middle school. I graduated from Warren

County High School and decided to pursue college at an HBCU.

While analyzing the data, I noticed that some younger participants were more inclined to

attribute their challenges to their relative lack of exposure and experience rather than focusing on

racial biases. Conversely, older participants with more extensive workplace experiences were

more likely to recognize these encounters as being racially motivated.

Dewayne: I encountered racism when I was on a rotational program after I graduated

college. For some reason there was this White guy that was determined to make my life

miserable. I get along with everyone but I was the only person of color the program and

this guy would come right out and tell me that I was a diversity hire that the company

didn't really want. This was a peer-to-peer relationship but I was quickly able to call this

out for what it was. I was a little older than the rest of the folks, he was a young guy that

felt like he had something to prove and the only way he thought he could have some kind

of footing on me was to try to minimize my worth with racist remarks.

The fact that many of the participants acknowledged growing up in resource-limited

hometowns indicates the systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized racial

or ethnic communities perpetuating stark economic disadvantages. Their desires to seek other

opportunities outside of their hometowns also signified the stagnation of social mobility and

91

economic advancement for individuals in these areas. There appeared to be some age variances related to how they encountered racist experiences, where younger participants attributed their challenges to expected workplace behavior while older participants were more willing to call out racial biases. This analysis indicates the intersectionality of race, age, and workplace engagement in shaping experiences with racism.

Familial Socializations (Power Dynamics)

The participants also shared the common experience of having a complex upbringing, characterized by parental separation or seeking support from relatives outside the immediate family structure. The dynamics of familial power during their upbringing shaped the experiences that both challenged and supported their approach to difficult times. I recognized that those who acknowledged receiving support, validation, and empowerment from their families demonstrated increased resilience and self-esteem, leading to a greater sense of boldness in their actions. Conversely, those who had to seek this encouragement outside of their family unit often navigated with more uncertainty. Familial support played a vital role in instilling confidence and enabling them to address racial encounters assertively and pursue justice.

> **Ciara:** Growing up my home was loud, fun, with very vibrant people. Very conducive to the creative side of me, anything that I wanted to do it was supported up to a certain point. However, when my parents separated everything went downhill for me which was around middle school and high school. It took me a while to get accustomed to my new normal, splitting my life between two homes and having to navigate a strained relationship with my father. Going to college was a certain freedom for me.
>
> **Pat:** I had a bad relationship with my stepfather. I still struggle with this today. He and I got into a physical altercation when I was 15 going on 16, from something petty like

92

dealing with chores. I would look at him like you know you're not my favorite person, but I still respect you as my mom's husband, my stepdad, the man in the house. But I don't like being disrespected. And something just kind of touched a different nerve and we had a physical altercation. I knew the altercation was not my fault, I knew there were some things I could have done better. But when the police were called and they kept him in the house and assigned as a social worker who made us both go through anger management, I felt the system failed both of us as Americans and as a family. I began to distrust the system that was supposed to protect me.

The participants spoke about their family dynamic and how it affected their upbringing. Critical Race Theory speaks to the intersectionality of race and gender with family dynamics (Delgado, 2010). Their conversations with me were rooted in the influence of familial power and what that support looks like as they made sense of how they experienced life outside of that unit. From experiences with racial encounters to their ability to recognize mistreatment, their upbringing provided direct context to how they responded to these situations. The varying levels of support and empowerment they received within their families influenced their resilience, self-esteem, assertiveness, and ability to navigate racial challenges.

Motivational Variations

When considering the circumstances that motivated the participants to succeed in their respective careers, about half indicated that they did not find the need to belong to be a significant motivator. The other half felt that since belonging was paramount to their drive to succeed, their encounters with racism really had the ability to derail their progress.

Bob: I wouldn't say belonging is my motivation and drive; it comes from my desire to learn more. I wish I could go back to my youth and do education again because now I

love to learn and be challenged. I always feel like the underdog, so I want to do the work and do it well. And that is what drives me; now that I have a family, I wanted to be able to bring in enough income that my wife doesn't have to work or my daughter can have a house with [a] yard.

Naomi: Belonging is very important to me, when you don't have that it makes the job a lot harder, it is another piece of the job that you have to work at overcoming. When you have it you feel like you fit and that your work is appreciated.

I wanted to explore the importance of belonging and its impact on their experiences with racism and success to determine whether racist challenges could derail their career growth and progression. Approximately half of the participants did not consider belonging as a significant motivation for their career success, while the other half emphasized the role of belonging as a driving force to sustain their interest and resilience. While Bob's motivation stemmed from his desire to learn and overcome challenges for his own personal growth, Naomi emphasized the significance of belonging as something that made her job easier and could grant a sense of appreciation for her work. There is, however, a balance between ensuring that their authenticity and sense of self are not swayed so that it aligns more succinctly with the interest of the dominant culture of the employer. In doing so, they could unknowingly slip into environments employers cultivate that give a superficial sense of inclusion, like tokenism or conditional acceptance.

Permanence of Racism

Undoubtedly racism exists. The participants were willing to acknowledge that fact, but it was apparent that familial socialization shaped how they perceived their encounters with racism and sensitivity to cultural biases. In my observations, participants who had more pronounced

awareness of racist encounters shared that their families were open about race, diversity, and equality issues.

When families emphasize cultural identity the individual becomes empowered to identify racism and respond to discriminatory behaviors. Perceiving racism as a persistent and ever-present threat in this country leads to vigilance and preparedness. Simultaneously, this recognition can promote heightened levels of emotional distress, thus psychological protection is important when navigating through these encounters. Individuals who selectively opted to walk boldly into these encounters were more willing to seek collective action and community support to challenge the systems that allowed racism to exist.

> **Aria:** I was born in a rural area being raised around mostly women and not a lot of male figures. Being from a predominantly White suburban culture it was important for my family to instill a sense of pride of my cultural identity. Because of this I was able to be very independent and understanding pretty early on what I needed to succeed despite racial encounters I may experience.

As mentioned earlier when exploring the participants' demography, where they come from and the role their family units play in influencing their sensitivity to racism is essential in exploring how they respond to discriminatory behaviors. As affirmed through the conversations with the participants in my study, when families prioritize discussions about race, diversity, and equality, they are empowered to recognize racism and develop the tools to address it. An awareness of cultural identity contributes to empowerment and the ability to navigate racist encounters. I appreciated Aria's reflection; out of all of the study's participants, she is the only one who acknowledged most emphatically her boldness and ability to call out injustice. Rooted in the strength of those who reared her, her recognition of her family's role in shaping her

cultural identity had great alignment with her perceived confidence and readiness to address racism.

Equity and Excellence

HBCU Experiences

HBCUs play a role in shaping how individuals encounter racist situations through associations with curriculum and programming that promote cultural empowerment, critical race education, safe spaces for discussion, allowing for mentorship and role models, activism opportunities, and allowing for a diverse student body (Hurtado et al., 1998). Black students can access Black faculty with shared backgrounds and experiences and serve as mentors and role models. Black students are also allowed to partake in advocacy and activism, which further enhances their ability to recognize and combat racial injustice.

> **Bob:** As I was volunteering with the EPA as a student intern, I had the opportunity to participate in a capstone presentation in front of the Dean of the School of Business and the Director of Professional Services. It was in that moment that I understood the value of my HBCU experience. I had a great internship experience that challenged me and I was excited to share with leadership that cared. I mean, to be able to share my experience with the Dean, and I was scared, but I delivered my presentation, and I did it well. What I learned about professionalism and about being intentional in my quest for knowledge was from the School of Business.

However, it is important to note that Naomi and Aria shared less positive experiences about their time with their HBCUs. These experiences had a negative impact on their confidence and instilled fear about their post-graduation prospects. These individuals believed that if they were not understood and accepted for their authenticity by the faculty at their HBCU, then their

transition into a predominantly White corporate environment would be difficult. This acknowledgement highlighted the influential role that faculty and staff at HBCUs played in shaping students' perceptions of themselves, their capabilities, and potential challenges they faced when they graduated from the institution.

> **Naomi**: I don't think I had [any] largely negative encounters at my HBCU but I do recall two professors commenting on my appearance the day I came to class wearing a crop top and they would tell me, "You won't be an accountant dress[ed] like that." I was a strong student but they were   critiquing my attire which made me feel like it didn't matter that I was smart I'd only be judged by my attire.

Fundamentally, HBCUs were formed because of the permanence of racism in this country (Harper et al., 2009). Black people were barred from receiving higher education opportunities; thus, these institutions were formed to provide them with that resource. Historically HBCUs have been known to empower Black students, prompt safe spaces for discussion, provide mentorship and networks, and encourage activism and diversity of thought (Carson, 2009). I was interested in the positive experiences that the participants highlighted as it related to how their HBCU prepared them for entry into predominantly White corporate environments. Those graduates expressed that curriculum and programming that promoted cultural empowerment allowed them to develop a strong sense of racial identity and a greater understanding of racial injustice. Having access to faculty whose backgrounds aligned with their own was helpful in their ability to name these instances and feel comfortable operating within them.

It was also interesting to hear from those graduates who acknowledged that not all experiences at their HBCUs were positive. Some had experiences that negatively impacted their

confidence and instilled fear about their prospects after graduation. I was admittedly surprised

that there were some with experiences from Black faculty and staff who instilled some self-doubt

and fear because of their perceptions of what these students needed to know about how they

dressed and how they looked as they prepared for entry into predominantly White environments.

This discovery made it clear to me that managing conversations related to entry into White

corporate environments must be done in delicate and affirming ways such that it does not insult

or discount the Black student's individuality but provides the appropriate context to what should

be considered when entering into predominantly White corporate environments.

Pre-Collegiate Socialization/Community Cultural Wealth

In discussion with the participants, I recognized that their socialization experiences,

namely familial upbringing, educational environment, and community engagement, played a role

in shaping their cultural identity. These experiences contributed to forming a person's

Community Cultural Wealth, including their cultural capital, social connections, and sense of

belonging.

> **Nia:** Both of my homes were extremely loving, [and] both parents prioritized education.
> When I think of my life, I see two different places; I was split between my [mom's] and
> my dad's house, but [I] always had access to my family. Everyone was very supportive. I
> was one of the first few on my [mom's/dad's] side to have a college degree. So, people
> poured a lot into me so that I could succeed.

While a couple of my participants referenced experiences at their HBCU that ran counter

to the anticipated level of Community Cultural Wealth generally associated with Black students

who attend HBCUs, overall, the participants felt that their HBCU helped them secure community

through their emphasis on cultural heritage, affirmation of identities, provision of culturally

relevant knowledge, and fostering supportive networks. By promoting cultural pride, knowledge, and connections, HBCUs empower students to overcome racial barriers, contribute to their communities, and thrive in society.

> **Pat:** I thrived at my HBCU. I had internships while in the business school. I became a regular speaker for the business school, like that was cool. And then, I was part of the Finance Club. And I was Mr. HBCU in my School and Mr. School of Business. While I was Mr. HBCU, I won two national competitions, one in New Orleans, the other one in Missouri for the Mr. HBCU Spotlight. And was Mr. Oratory and named one of the best-dress[ed] HBCU Kings in New Orleans, which brought a lot of positive attention to my university.

I found that a consistent thread throughout my conversations was the acknowledgment of the importance of Community Cultural Wealth, particularly from participants' experiences throughout their upbringing and collegiate associations. The participants reflected that these experiences instilled a sense of pride and self-esteem, enabling them to embrace their cultural backgrounds and resist internalizing negative stereotypes or discriminatory beliefs before encountering them. I recognized those with the most significant collegiate experience seemed to have more ease in transitioning into predominantly White environments. This kind of self-assurance is helpful to withstanding the negative effects of racism.

Social Capital

Social capital plays a role in how Black students from HBCUs encounter and respond to racism in predominantly White corporate environments. Social Capital provides access to supportive networks, including alumni and faculty connections, which offer guidance, mentorship, and emotional support (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Several participants mentioned

the importance of mentors and seeking these network resources in establishing a sense of belonging and validation.

> **Ashley:** In transitioning into an all-White environment, I knew what I was going into and I knew that I was going to be the only Black woman in my department. I had already made connections with other Black professionals, and I started seeking out mentorship for when I was in the workplace, which was very helpful to me.

Networks within the HBCU community, such as alumni networks and connections established through faculty and staff, can help counteract systemic barriers in predominantly White corporate environments. However, it is important to recognize that these networks and associations do not eradicate the broader structural and systemic challenges of racism. The dismantling of these barriers will still require ongoing efforts and collective action.

> **Dwayne:** One of the most challenging aspects of working in a predominantly White environment is having to teach my coworkers about diversity and cultural diversity. I am involved in [an] affinity group at my business, and for Black history month they did a story about the Tulsa Massacre and facilitated some walk in my truth panels where they spoke with myself and some of my coworkers about ways we have experienced [discrimination] and were racial[ly] profiled. It was broadcasted, the most ironic part is that my White counterparts were surprised that this would happen to me because of their thought that I'm 'not like the rest of them.' Still not sure what that means, but I realized that there was [a] need for further sessions where more one-on-one dialogue could occur, and so that they could identify their own biases and microaggressions.

The importance of supportive networks, affinity groups, mentorship, and social capital was a consistent thread in my conversations. The HBCU graduates appreciated how this capital

affirmed their confidence and resilience in their shared experiences. I discovered that the value

graduates put in social capital is important for them to gain the support, guidance, and

empowerment they felt they needed to manage racially challenging situations. However, while

social capital is valuable, I could find little evidence that it made any significant difference in

addressing broader systemic challenges. In some cases, networks, especially those within the

graduate's corporate environment, tended to be more symbolic than impactful—providing a

sense of security but not actively addressing issues of oppression in the global corporate sphere.

Identity and Achievement

Intersectionality

I recognized that several intersecting identities shaped how the HBCU graduates

approached racial encounters. Apart from the often-studied gender/race variables, I found their

socioeconomic status and mental/physical health to be just as salient to their identity and

significant to navigating their respective encounters. Pat has Sickle Cell, an illness that

predominantly affects individuals of African-American descent. Apart from the flare-ups from

this illness being prompted by stressors, extreme fatigue may also be associated with certain

accommodations. These accommodations may be more reluctantly distributed because of

presumed stereotypes or simple ignorance surrounding the symptoms of the illness. The

intersection of race and illness can create unique challenges that require a nuanced understanding

and targeted support to address systemic inequalities effectively.

> **Pat:** I have Sickle Cell disease. Sickle Cell is a blood infection, a hereditary blood
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> infection that caused me to be [in] pain crisis because of how the cells are shaped in my
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> body, which causes them not to hold as much oxygen as a normal human. So, entering
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> my senior year of college as Mr. HBCU, I had one of the worst pain crises of my life; it

paralyzed me for like about a week. It was really severe. So, with it putting me on my back for about a week, I was just in a real low moment because I had such a good summer internship, and I was trying to take the energy into the semester. It was just a slow start, but I had some really good professors and made really good connections in the business school, and I had some really good friends [who] supported me through that and allowed me to get back on track. I was able to get back on track by the end of September and finished out the year successfully.

Bob came from a lower socioeconomic background which prohibited access to resources and opportunities. This strain often exacerbated the impact of racist encounters. Bob recognized that he was treated differently in his employment because of the perception that was not as smart as his counterparts because of the way he spoke or his lack of certain experiences. These systemic barriers often contribute to a heightened vulnerability to racism and inequalities.

Bob: I was working on something I needed a signature for reinforcement, and the manager signed for the requestor and approver … apparently this was the wrong process to which I let the manager know, and it blew up, and he essentially accused me of not being smart enough to know the process. He didn't trust that I knew what I was doing. This particular manager had been known for having stereotypical views about Black people and was a self-professed 'Trumper,' so I knew exactly what this was about. After the incident continued to escalate, we realized that I was right all along, and never once did the manager apologize or admit that he was in the wrong.

The concept of differential racialization was most prevalent in the conversations I had regarding the intersectionality of the participants' identities. Discovering the varying identities that shaped how the participants of the study engaged with racialized experiences was

102

interesting. In the case of Pat, the intersection of race and physical health (Sickle Cell disease) created a unique challenge for him and required a nuanced understanding of how his illness is manifested versus people's perception of his ability to do the job. Bob's socioeconomic background spoke to the perpetuation of prejudicial beliefs about his capabilities and character based on what was presumed to be limited intellect given their ideas as to his upbringing and exposure. While the onus should not have to be on the Black employees to feel required to share personal aspects of their lives, a safe and open environment that recognizes and uplifts the intersectionality of their identities will promote a better sense of belonging, growth, and development, leaving less room for racist encounters to exist.

Ethnic/Racial Identity

Some of the study's participants demonstrated attunement to their own identity while being able to name situations that happened because of their identity. I recognized that those who presented a pronounced sense of self seemed to operate out of more boldness and self-confidence than those who questioned whether they were afforded certain opportunities because of their race versus their abilities. As cited throughout the study, historically HBCUs have been a great source for identity development for Black graduates because of their rich acceptance of their cultural heritage. I wanted to determine if this sense of identity originated in their upbringing and/or in their HBCU experience, and if it did, how did it grow, mature, or become challenged as the participant weaved in and out of various experiences.

> **Ciara:** When my parents separated, my siblings took sides, and the relationship between me and my father [was] very strained. He would try to be there for me, but I didn't trust him and didn't try to understand. Thus, I became hyper-independent very young. I pulled on the strength of my mother, a strong Black woman, and I walked in that. When I

encountered the racist situation at my first job, I was able to quickly call out the injustice I was witnessing [and] speak out against it; despite the fact that I was putting my job security in harm's way, I knew I had to speak out.

Ashley: A lot of HBCU students come from these harsh backgrounds, many of them depending on their collegiate experience to give them the structure and self-worth they are looking for. They are, in some ways, parentified and adultified at HBCUs. If they were forced to grow up and have certain responsibilities at home, when they came to college, they experienced a certain freedom—freedom of the stress and the responsibility of life back home. While being challenged to learn who they are and how to be a responsible adult.

In the study, the individuals who were able to recognize situations as racist and find the strength to call it out were the ones who appeared to have a more pronounced sense of self; some attributing it to their upbringing while others felt that their HBCU experience was a contributing factor to their ability to stand up for what was right. Ciara's example above speaks to the power of familial motivations and preparedness to enable individuals to be bold in their journey despite possible repercussions. The conversation prompted inquiries into the significance of one's background, development, and maturation and how these factors influence their navigation through diverse life experiences. Each participant seemed to have a unique perspective on how these roles appear in their encounters.

Ashley's reflections addressed an important point about the role of HBCUs in some students' lives. Students with tougher backgrounds may have a more conflicted sense of their identity or self. When they come to an HBCU they are provided with structure that, in some cases, act in loco parentis (in place of a parent). This grants students the ability to find

themselves without the responsibility of managing the homelife stressors that can put a burden on their own self-discovery (Walker, 2018).

Identity-Based Motivations

A strong ethnic and racial identity can enhance an individual's awareness of racial dynamics and the existence of systemic racism. All the study's participants seem to have had some awareness of their cultural identity as a person of color. However, they were (at times) more reluctant to name some of their experiences as racist situations. They were far more willing to attribute the ignorance of their coworkers or their perceived inexperience in the workplace to why they were treated the way they were than to assign a racist intent behind the actions, particularly those who were a bit younger and had less work experience.

> **Nia:** Truthfully, I try not to take things too personally. I had an internship with this company, and the VP of marketing was a White woman. I expressed to her that I was struggling in my role. I was a social media intern. I was supposed to help generate leads to help with their engagement strategy, [but] when I realized I wasn't having the success I needed to have, I expressed to her that I would need some extra help or wondered if there was anyone on the team   I could talk to about this. She flipped out on me, saying this was the job [you] were hired to do, and she ended up firing me. Another Black woman heard what happened and ended up hiring me, and the White VP flipped on the Black woman [who] hired me, saying she couldn't do that. So, it definitely intimidated me and made me have to think twice about asking for help because the support system wasn't there.

I discovered from my conversations that the strength of ethnic and racial identity appeared to enhance individuals' awareness of racial dynamics and the existence of systemic

racism. While some of the participants demonstrated a level of awareness of the role their cultural identity plays in how they interacted with others, there were some participants who were more reluctant to explicitly label their experiences as racist. I recognized that those with more varied experience and who were a little older seemed to have more attunement to these encounters as being racially motivated.

Differential Racialization

As differential racialization leads to the creation and perpetuation of racial stereotypes and prejudices, it was interesting for me to discover the complexity of this idea through conversations with my study participants. I recognized that White individuals do not always facilitate the act of differential racialization, as some Black people challenge each other based on stereotypical assumptions in the name of helping or guiding someone into a more seamless integration. This act could be deemed a consciousness of White supremacy or a disregard for the individuality and authenticity of what Black employees contribute to a work environment. Therefore, including curriculum or conversations that address workplace challenges Black graduates face in predominantly White working environments requires a delicate and thoughtful approach. Naomi referenced a time when a White office manager attempted to relate to her by using slang and inappropriate jargon. Ashley spoke of a time when Black faculty/staff misjudged her and the impact of those assumptions on her life.

> **Naomi:** I [had] experienced some microaggressions when I was working at my first job after college. The office manager was chatting with me, and she was talking college sports … then she would say stuff like "ok, boo … boo …" I don't think she would have said that to me if I were White, not sure if she thought she was relating to me. I also recall a time when interning my sophomore year at [a] center at a financial firm in Atlanta … I

was working with another girl [who] went to a different University. When we completed the project, people who attended our presentation praised the girl who happened to be of Eastern Asian descent and did not acknowledge my contribution at all. That exclusion felt racially driven as the assumption was that [I,] as a Black woman, could not have handled this kind of assignment when I, in fact, did the majority of the work.

Ashley: A negative experience for me while at my HBCU is how some Black faculty and staff would speak to me. It made it feel like this is what I was trying to get away from … it didn't feel good. A lot of assumption[s] about me based on my hair color or how I acted they [passed] judgment on me without acknowledging that I was a little older of a student and I had a husband and children. Regardless I wanted to be able to explore life without judgment and I didn't always find that there.

I found the theme of differential racialization to be one of the most interesting discoveries from my conversations with the study participants. We so often assume that perception of biases flows from differing cultures when, in fact, there are also intracultural dynamics that are not often acknowledged. The complexity of how differential racialization is intertwined into acceptable Eurocentric normativity is important to uncover. Ashley's narrative was one of two I received that shared a similar story regarding their HBCU experience (Naomi Interview Notes, Appendix B). The idea that some Black people perpetuate stereotypical assumptions to guide or help students make the "right" impression is a slippery slope into a descent into White supremacy consciousness at the disregard for the individuality and authenticity of Black students. While the Black faculty might have been well-intentioned, the balance between offering guidance to Black students about their hair or attire and acknowledging associated perceptions must be approached with sensitivity and thoughtfulness. Naomi experienced a more

107

commonly expressed microaggression when she recalled the White office manager's attempt to relate to her using slang and inappropriate jargon, along with the blatant disregard for her contribution to the project made from assuming that her East Asian counterpart was responsible for the deliverable.

Navigational/Coping Strategies

Shifting Identities

An interesting statement was made in the focus group related to the perils of shifting identity. Some participants referenced experiences of engaging in code-switching to conform to the expectations of the corporate culture. Balancing multiple identities and developing self-awareness and strategic self-presentation is exhausting but has become a normal practice for Black employees in predominantly White environments. However, it is important to address systemic biases and create inclusive workplaces that value and celebrate diverse identities rather than constantly burdening individuals to adapt their identities.

> **Nia:** Code-switching is something we all have had to do. It is like speaking two languages. I have to adjust the way I communicate based on the audience I am speaking with. We must also acknowledge the privilege that White individuals have that Black folks don't, like being able to take off when they need to because they have [familial] backing or support; thus, there is a tendency to lack certain levels of empathy to Black employees that might not have the same privilege. I'm also seeing less and less non-diverse university recruiters trying to recruit diverse students. This is disheartening because certain experience[s] and perspectives can only be understood through lived experiences.

Further aligned with conforming to a Euro-normative ideology, the concept of code-switching is one that many Black employees entering corporate environments must contend with. The conversations focused on code-switching to cope with some of the culturally insensitive discomforts they experience. This is often a strategic practice in self-presentation that allows individuals to face their challenges by balancing their multiple identities. It can also be incredibly exhausting, as reflected in the participants' dialogues. The need to address why an environment for systemic biases exists is important to get to the root of what makes for a solid workplace inclusivity plan where diverse employees are celebrated, not tolerated. To place the burden on the individual to adapt their identity to meet the organizational culture is unfair and often misplaced. Additionally, the recognition of the privilege and circumstances that White employees come from also signifies the need for further exploration of how to exist in an empathic environment that recognizes the way Black individuals must manage challenges in ways that are acutely different from that of their White counterparts.

Problem/Emotion Focus

In listening to the stories of my participants I began to recognize the significant amount of emotional labor required to navigate environments that exhibit subtle or overt racism. In many cases the participants indicated feeling the need to suppress their true emotions to navigate racially charged situations. This practice can lead to stress and emotional exhaustion. These difficulties also impact their mental well-being, contributing to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and potentially depression.

> **Bob:** As difficult as it is at times, I can't let anyone get me out of character; I will not give anyone that pleasure. I can't tell you why they are acting like that; I just have a

tendency to go about my day … writing is helpful to get the emotions out along with therapy.

Pat: I definitely tried therapy once but decided not to continue, although I do encourage others, especially Black people, to give it a try and make their own decision[s] about it. For me, I prioritize productive hobbies and spending time with friends, but I also balance this by completing tasks … I am definitely a "list person," [and] I feel a sense of accomplishment and relief by crossing off tasks as they are completed.

Aria: It is helpful for me to see other people [of] color in tech careers to see how they handle situations. YouTube and Podcasts are a helpful way to do this. Going to therapy and HR could potentially help, or establishing a relationship with your manager that could help that.

Focus group discussions led to conversations about navigating inclusive and supportive environments that successfully prioritize psychological safety. Advocating for their organizations to provide an environment of empathy, openness, grace, and sensitivity to racial awareness is important to encouraging organizations to create spaces where Black students from HBCUs feel comfortable expressing their emotions, addressing racism, and advocating for their rights.

Aria: I started my career and graduated virtually in 2020. It was at that time that I had a two-year rotational program. And, of course, we all were in [an] online chat thread together, which I took the initiative to form. It was important for me to have a cultural community network that I could be aligned with so that I had a place where I felt that grace and space could be extended. This is a safe space for us to speak about our experience and everything [that] is going on with our team.

Nia: That is great, I know that helped your transition.

Aria: It really did. We still check on each other 'til this day. Some people have left the company already, others are still there, but it really does help. It was like a therapeutic session, especially when they are your peers that are going through the same thing.

The emotional labor and the impact on mental well-being are critical to call out, as each participant indicated having to navigate environments that displayed both subtle and overt racism. Some of the conversations were troubling in that the need to suppress real emotions in racially charged situations was often expressed, which tends to lead to mental instability and emotional exhaustion. However, recognizing that expressions of discontent can at times have far greater an impact than the participants were willing to concede, it felt fair to acknowledge the varying methods that are used to combat these situations.

The further emphasis of this occurrence in the focus group discussions emphasized the importance of creating inclusive and supportive spaces prioritizing psychological safety. The study participants advocated for organizations to provide empathy, openness, grace, and sensitivity to racial awareness. The conversations between Aria and Tia further highlighted the significance of cultural community networks in providing a safe space for individuals to share experiences and support each other.

Confrontation/Suppression

Ashley recalled instances where the mistreatment she and her colleagues experienced was so blatantly distributed that she felt she had no choice but to call it out. She was able to challenge the situation actively. She felt a sense of empowerment from being able to name the oppressive system that was creating an uncomfortable environment for the Black employees.

Ashley: Transitioning into a White environment was interesting. I felt a little prepared for entering into my work environment. I got hired through a diversity program through the

111

place I worked. At the beginning it was very obvious we were being treated. as diversity hires. It caused rifts and uncomfortableness. I also recognize the way that the HBCU graduates were being mistreated and neglected whereas the PWI hires were provided with necessary support. When all of the HBCU hires lost their jobs, I knew I had to speak up and alert Human Resources of what appeared to be EEOC violation and they addressed the situation.

Tia managed racist situations by keeping more to herself and not taking it so seriously. In many cases, this approach can result from feeling like she would be considered difficult or fearing some retaliation for speaking against the organization or leadership. However, suppressing feelings and experiences can often lead to emotional burdens, psychological stress, and a lack of authentic self-expression.

Tia: I can see instance[s] of injustice clearly but don't tend to react to it. It just isn't my nature. I don't get that offended by it. I get more offended if someone is questioning my character or work. I do try to educate people, especially after George Floyd to help relate how Black people were feeling at the time and just educating folks of how people feel. I may not have been out there marching but it doesn't mean that I don't care. My husband is in law enforcement, but I do believe that everyone deserves to come home … I just know how to read the room and know when it is best to say something or best to keep quiet.

Related to the idea of what makes some people confront these issues and others suppress these issues, I looked to Ashley and Tia's differing responses. Ashley's upbringing played a role in her preparedness for actively challenging uncomfortable environments. She was socialized in a way that granted her opportunities to be exposed to a variety of people and situations. Thus, her

112

confidence to express herself regardless of her environment appears innate. On the other hand, Nia reflected the tendency to not take certain acts of mistreatment as affronts to her racially. She chose to not take everything so seriously. She did not want to appear combative or challenging. However, she acknowledged the toll this method played on her emotional state, particularly when she felt unable to express herself authentically. Both approaches have their own advantages and drawbacks. Aria must be prepared for retaliatory or uncomfortable environments as a result of her willingness to speak out against challenges while Nia must be prepared for situations to be unchanged because of her unwillingness to address or confront them.

Identity-Related Coping

Most of the graduates in the study displayed attunement to their cultural identity and heritage which enabled identity-related coping mechanisms to be activated (Martin & Barnard, 2013). While some of the participants reflected on having challenges with their HBCU, the majority of participants reflected on the HBCU as a place where their cultural and racial entity was embraced and celebrated, reinforcing their sense of belonging. This coping mechanism helps build resilience and provides a source of empowerment when faced with racism in the workplace.

The network forged by their HBCU association and the subsequent networks they found in their respective workplaces built a community where they could lean on for emotional support, advice, and encouragement which aided in the navigation of challenges with racism. It is also important to explore how the understanding of racial dynamics, history, and social justice play into creating a more inclusive work environment. Bobby referenced the activities the affinity group at his company facilitated.

113

Dewayne: At my HBCU I felt seen. The staff would walk down the hall and greet me, they acted like they wanted to be there. I was feeling a level of support that I wasn't even getting from my own family. This really made me appreciate being part of an HBCU, my family dynamics were so crazy this environment gave me a sense of normalcy and guidance.

Identity-Related coping allows Black students from HBCUs to affirm their own worth, value, and capabilities despite the racism they encounter (McGee & Martin, 2011). The participants referenced the expression of their feelings and outlets through prayer, exercise, and therapy. Equipped with the necessary tools to navigate racism, the study participants are able to enhance their mental and emotional well-being while cultivating a sense of empowerment and agency within predominantly White corporate environments (Holder et al., 2015).

The Black HBCU graduates in the study demonstrated attunement to their cultural identity and heritage which, for them, served as an effective coping mechanism in challenging racialized situations. While some of the participants had less than favorable experiences at their HBCU, overall, they all reflected that it was at their institution that their cultural and racial identity was embraced and celebrated, reinforcing their sense of belonging. Appreciating the impact their experiences at their HBCU had on their collective resilience and ability to withstand racialized challenges is important and is further reinforced by their subsequent workplace networks. The participants expressed the need for exploration into racial dynamics, history, and social justice to create an inclusive work environment that is important to their success. The concept of identity-related coping allows Black graduates from HBCUs the ability to affirm their worth, value, and capabilities despite their racist encounters. This acknowledgment along with other tools and outlets they expressed were important to them has inevitably given them the

114

resources they need to navigate racism and foster a sense of empowerment and agency in predominantly White corporate environments.

Reflexive Thematic Map Demonstrating the Four Themes

As the participants' narratives unfolded an interweaving of their stories revealed the impact of various aspects of their lives to their awareness, preparedness, and navigation of racist encounters. While their pre-collegiate socializations may have differed, a shared congruency was found within their HBCU experiences and the influence these experiences had on their responses to racism.

This reflexive thematic map draws attention to the emergent patterns and connections within the data. Its purpose is to illustrate how Black graduates develop a sense of identity amidst racist experiences and explore how this understanding can foster inclusivity and equity in the workplace. The map in Figure 2 illustrates how the themes emerged along with the subthemes, codes and the relationship between them.

To address how Black students from HBCUs encounter racism, it was important to initially assess the extent of their exposure to racial discrimination within their upbringing. Additionally, understanding their pre-collegiate socializations that shaped their perspectives and preparation for racially challenging environments was important to name. At the top of the map are themes that shed light on the motivational influences, upbringing, and familial associations that impact the study participants' awareness of the enduring nature of racism. These themes serve as a foundation for understanding how the participants then recognize, interpret, and navigate their experiences with individuals from different cultures.

Figure 2. Reflexive Thematic Map
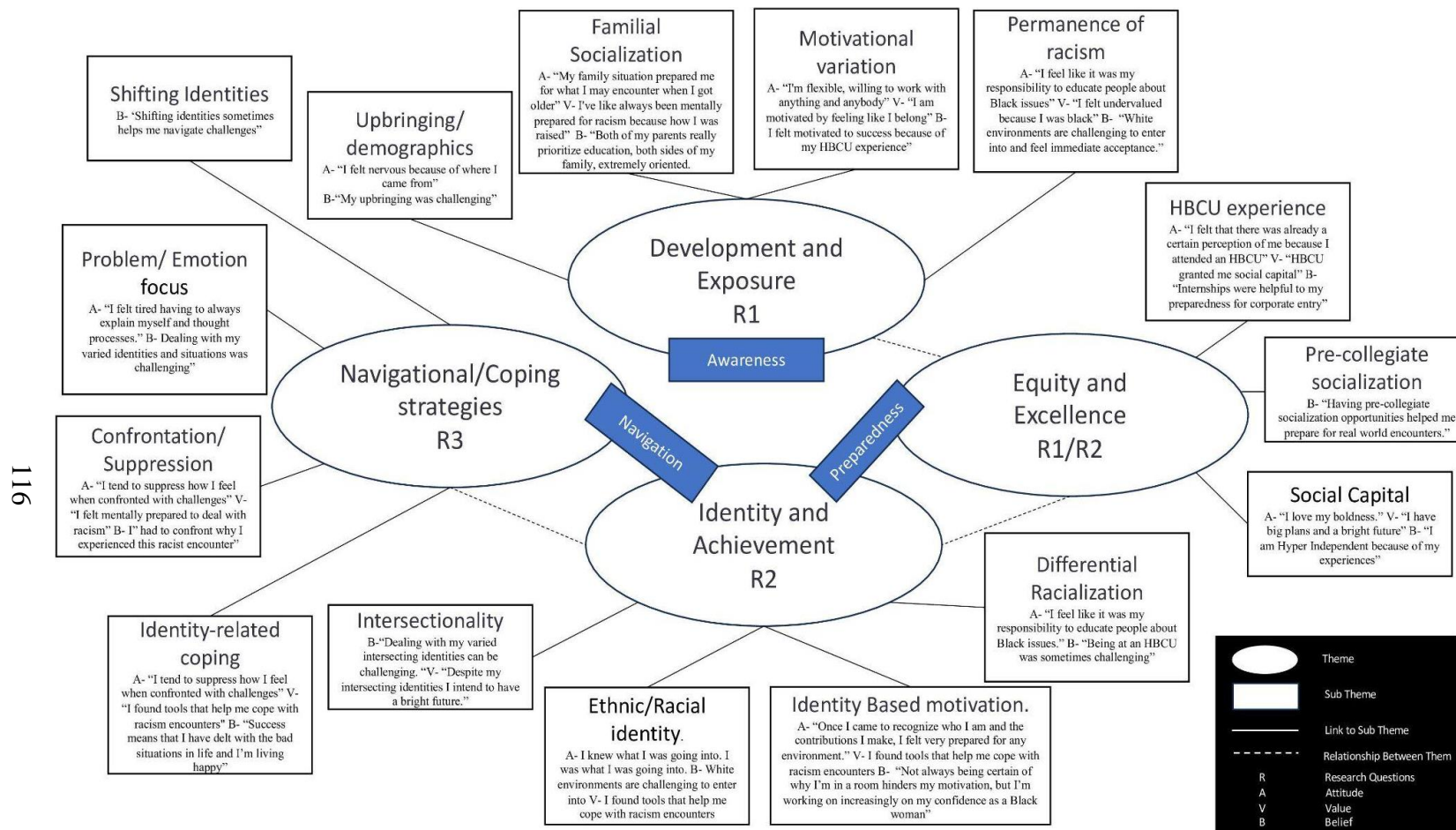
Note. R1: In what ways do Black HBCU graduates experience racism when they enter White corporations?

R2: To what extent do HBCUs prepare Black graduates for encountering racism in White corporations?

R3: What strategies for navigation do Black HBCU graduates initiate when they encounter racist experiences?

The interplay between equity and excellence was then unveiled which highlighted the impact of the HBCU experience and pre-collegiate socialization on students' ability to navigate through racial challenges in corporate spaces. This awareness allowed for the exploration into the intricate relationship between identity and achievement such that in cases where challenging experiences occur the question as to whether their identity would be salient enough to persevere would be tested. Emphasizing the influence of intersectionality, ethnic/racial identity, identity-based motivation, and the differential experiences of racialization was important to discover. Once preparedness for varying encounters was assessed, the navigational and coping strategies employed by the participants began to reveal the multifaceted nature of their approaches, including shifting identities, problem-solving, emotion-focused coping, confrontation, suppression, and other identity-related coping mechanisms. Being able to analyze these themes deepened my understanding of the challenges faced by Black graduates as they integrate into predominantly White corporate environments including what made them aware of racist encounters, their preparedness for entering these encounters, and their subsequent ability to navigate any challenges they may face.

Discoveries from Focus Group Conversations

The purpose of my focus groups was to assess interactions within the group, identify commonalities in experiences, and encourage open and free flowing discussions. Consequently, these sessions facilitated broader conversations pertaining to the emerging themes. As it related to the group's experience with racism, the following conversation related to whether racism was addressed in their home transpired:

Dewayne: Yes, I can recall my mother and grandmother having a conversation with me right before I started kindergarten. They told me I would start to be around more people

117

that don't look like my family and that I should always treat people with respect regardless of their skin color. They also told me that I would encounter people in life that would not like/accept me for the color of my skin as well.

Naomi: Honestly, I don't recall ever discussing race/racism in the home growing up. When I became an adult and started to experience racism in the workplace, I discussed it with my family.

The value of the HBCU experience related to their identity and achievement was another theme that emerged building into the role HBCUs play in shaping their experiences. Some participants felt that their HBCU experience was appreciated in certain working environments, while others felt undervalued in their organizations.

Naomi: Post-graduation I expected to have to work harder than others because I knew I'd be going into an environment where Black women were far and few between and hires from HBCUs were also not the norm. With that said, I expected to feel different and out of place, but I did not necessarily expect to be treated obviously different[ly]. This expectation was shaped by my experience in previous internships.

Bob: I feel that in my current job, they value my perspective when working on recruitment efforts for Black employees. They have started targeting HBCUs. They wanted to learn more about, you know, how can we hire, how can we hire Black students? What are the best ways?

Ciara: Right, it's nice when they do that. But if I can elaborate on my previous job, I can explain moments when I didn't feel my HBCU experience was valued. So, right after college, I landed my first job, the differences between how they treated us were crystal clear, like they didn't even care to hide it. In our group, there were only about five of us

who came from HBCUs, while the rest were from PWI in the same area where the

company was based. We were all pretty excited to start our new gigs, of course. It didn't

take long for us Black students, including me, to notice that we were always getting the

short end of the stick when it came to information. At first, they told us we'd start on a

certain day, but then, surprise, that date got moved. We thought, "Hmm, maybe

something came up?" But, as it turned out, the original date was what they'd planned all

along, and they just conveniently forgot to let us know. Once we all got there, it was like

night and day in how they treated us, depending on whether you were a "diversity hire"

or not. It was painfully obvious. The way some people talked to us and how they sort of

tip-toed around us—it was just uncomfortable.

Discussions about their encounters with racism during their entry into White corporate

environments revolved around the tension between companies' pursuit of diversity in the

workplace and the authenticity of their inclusion efforts.

Ariab I believe D & I initiatives varies depending on the specific company and its

culture. In some cases, it might seem like a quota-driven effort, while in others, it's

genuinely rooted in promoting diversity. The rest test is when you come into the

organization. Are they actively working to expand and maintain diverse representation

throughout the company as a whole? Speaking from my own experience with my

company, they primarily focus on recruiting from North Carolina, where the headquarters

are located, and where there are more HBCUs. However, I didn't notice that once the

new employee came in that they were presented with environments that made them

comfortable.

Nia: Aria, you make a good point. I've had limited experience with company recruiting, but I've noticed a significant shift in the aftermath of 2020, with events like the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. It feels, to me at least, that some corporations and companies are approaching diversity and inclusion efforts in a somewhat opportunistic or superficial way. As you mentioned, it can be a mix of genuine effort and trend-following. Right now, diversity and inclusion feels more performative like its the "in" thing to do. Many organizations feel compelled to show that they are addressing these issues, but whether it translates into real change within the workplace is another question.

Preparation for racism emerged as a theme as study participants discussed how they felt well-prepared to handle instances of racism due to prior life experiences, while others felt unprepared and cited internships as instrumental in their preparation.

Nia: I mean, when I first entered the workforce, I didn't have any illusions about what I might encounter. To give you a bit of context, I come from a really urban background. But here's the twist—the school system in my area was so bad that my parents scraped together every last penny they had to send me to private schools for a better education. And you know what? That experience exposed me to racism at such a young age that I basically became mentally prepared for whatever might come my way.

Aria: I can totally relate to what you're saying. We both come from the northern part of the U.S., and my experience really ties into when my family moved to North Carolina when I was eight. Initially, I started in the public school system for third and fourth grade, but they soon transferred me to a private Christian school because it had a better curriculum. That's when I started getting used to being the only Black person in the

classroom. I spent eight years there, and then I went on to an HBCU where it was all people of color. So, I got really comfortable in that environment, surrounded by people who looked like me.

We discussed ways that their HBCU impacted their understanding of potential encounters they may have with racism.

Dewayne: Two of my professors gave two speeches that stuck with me. One of my professors told us that she was preparing us to be the best leaders we could be in the global market and that she wanted us to do our best because we would likely encounter discrimination once we enter into the workforce, especially being Black and in IT. Another one of my professors who taught economics who was Indian even got emotional in class one day telling us that we should still hold our education from an HBCU to high standards because it was just as good if not better than those that attend a Duke or any other PWI. That stuck with me so much because of his compassion and tears he shared while pouring into the 30 plus students in the class.

Naomi: I did not feel very prepared. I don't recall there being much intentional focus on what to expect, things we might come across and how to respond in these environments. I felt lucky to just get an internship. Racism preparedness wasn't really on my radar.

The focus group participants referenced the varying coping mechanism used to respond to and navigate through the encounters they experienced. They referenced finding peace in seeking support from affinity groups, and engaging in conversations with like-minded individuals to strategize responses to racial incidents.

Ciara: It's really helpful to have people who understand where you're coming from. We have a group text where we can talk. My whole team is Black, except for my supervisor,

Tom. He's an ally and a cool White dude. Every time something happens at my organization, we have a comfortable place to talk, eat lunch and have drinks, we'd dish on everything. I'm very happy that I have a team where we can be open, we can be honest.

Nia: It sounds therapeutic, doesn't it?

Ciara: Absolutely, it really is.

Aria: I agree with you, Ciara. There's nothing better than spilling work tea over a lemon drop. We had a happy hour last week, and another's coming up on June 14th. It's fantastic to dish while having a drink.

Ciara: Indeed, Aria. So, in my experience, I started a group called "CAPture Color" for my corporate program. It provided a safe space to discuss our experiences. It was discreet, set up Webex meetings, and it was therapeutic. Some have left the company, but we still check on each other.

Nia: That's amazing. I want to do that with my group.

Aria: It's discreet, and honestly, if they find out, who cares? We're just talking.

Ciara: Exactly. We're not doing anything.

Aria: I scheduled Webex meetings on people's calendars, and we met once a month. It helped a lot.

Ciara: Facts. It really does.

Aria: I did it for a while, and it created connections and networks. Some didn't want to join, fearing they'd be labeled.

Ciara: Yeah, we have a few like that. Some folks just don't want to be associated with us.

Aria: It's okay; to each their own.

Ciara: Definitely. We wish we could do something like that at my agency, but some people are just cutthroat.

Nia: Yeah, we have a few like that too.

Ciara: That's why my team is good; we don't need anyone causing trouble.

To conclude our discussion, I introduced one final question to the group. I inquired about their thoughts on how their HBCU experience could have better prepared them for navigating these situations and circumstances, and I invited them to share any specific preparations or strategies they believe would have been beneficial.

Nia: Making sure students are involved in internships would be very helpful.

Aria: Just to reiterate what I mentioned earlier, hackathons, competitions, and similar events that expose students to corporations and peers can be really beneficial. Providing incentives can also encourage participation. Exposure and travel are key.

Nia: Absolutely, exposure and travel are crucial. Another idea is integrating these experiences into the curriculum. For example, in the School of Business, there's a professional development course that could serve as a model.

Summary

A follow-up conversation with each of the study's participants provided the necessary validation that the findings reflected in this chapter were appropriately captured and attributed to their respective experiences. I allowed them to provide any additional detail to their insight. While there were no substantial additions to their feedback, they all valued the conversations. They felt that further discussion on ways they could take a more active role in providing perspective and assistance to undergraduates' HBCU experience and preparing for racist

encounters would be something they would be interested in pursuing. This chapter featured findings from conversations with eight graduates from HBCU institutions regarding their entry into predominantly White corporate environments. The study revealed that all the participants experienced some kind of mistreatment or racially charged situation within their careers. While some were more willing to name the racism in their incidents than others, they all agreed that cultural sensitivity in the workplace is important to cultivating a safe and inclusive environment.

The study participants referenced the importance of the inclusion of conversation surrounding racial encounters in certain curricular opportunities at their HBCUs, they felt that those elements would better equip them and those who will be entering the marketplace in the coming years with the skills and knowledge they need to navigate these encounters. They also suggested that their experiential opportunities like internships and conferences, and opportunities to network with people that do not look like them were also helpful to how they could navigate in and out of those situations. These experiences also help to build self-confidence, self-awareness, and identity and offer guidance on how to overcome complexities that exist in varying social dynamics. The critical role that HBCUs play in supporting their graduates extends far beyond their campus experiences. This study emphasized the importance of ongoing efforts to foster a supportive and empowering environment for Black students so that they will continue to thrive academically and professionally while navigating the complexities of racial integration in corporate environments.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As I prepare to discuss the implications of my study in this chapter, I am reminded of a quote by James Baldwin (1998) in the book *Baldwin, Collected Essays*, in an essay titled "The White Man's Guilt":

> The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, and are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. (p. 723)

This quote resonates with me because, as demonstrated through research, Black people in this country still face the enduring repercussions of historical movements that have dictated their treatment for decades (Bobo, 2004; Regmi, 2022; Solórzano et al., 2000). From enslavement to the struggle for Civil Rights, from the era of Jim Crow to the persisting presence of systemic racism and microaggressions, we must continue to reconcile the evolving forms from which racism exists (Smith et al., 2016). Like a persistent and pungent cancer, the lasting impact of racism is undeniable and will persist unless we actively confront and dismantle these deeply rooted issues (Subbaraman, 2020). The only way to address these issues in hopes of moving forward is to call them out, so incorporating CRT as an analytical tool to enable unmasking these issues is incredibly important. Once they are called out, there must be corresponding action that helps dismantle oppressive systems and elevate marginalized voices. In this chapter, we will investigate how the study's findings align with the research questions posed throughout the study, establish connections between this research and other pertinent scholarship within the

field, and identify implications and recommendations that can provide valuable insights for research and practical applications.

<div align="center">**Discussions from Research Questions**</div>

The research questions for this study were formulated to achieve multiple objectives: to understand how Black graduates experience racism by unearthing socialization experiences that influence how these graduates navigate instances of racism, to dissect the role of HBCUs in preparing Black students for racist encounters, and to examine coping strategies that are employed to sustain their mental health and well-being. This section intends to highlight the multifaceted dimensions of these inquiries, explore the interplay between HBCU experiences and workplace realities, and identify coping strategies employed by Black HBCU graduates.

How Black Students from HBCUs Encounter Racism

Throughout my study, the participants identified how they experience racist encounters, whether through tokenism, stereotyping, or microaggressions. This discovery is not dissimilar to other research findings that suggest Black people experience racism when entering predominantly White spaces (Mills, 2020; Pitcan et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2020). However, those studies do not centralize Black HBCU graduates in their exploration. There was also the acknowledgment of limited networking opportunities, unequal advancement, coded language, unclear directives, and unfair double standards amid the participants' responses. These findings align with those of scholars like Dr. Nancy DiTomaso (2013) in the book *The American Non-Dilemma: Racial Inequality Without Racism*, wherein she explored networking and unequal advancement issues, particularly in the context of racial disparities in the workplace. Also consistent with current research is the role pre-collegiate socialization experiences play in

<div align="center">126</div>

developing Black graduates' racial identity development, awareness of racism, and emotional responses to racist encounters (Aral et al., 2022).

The study participants overall indicated having positive socialization experiences proved to have a stronger foundation for resilience and effective coping, while those who were less socialized or had more negative encounters demonstrated increased vulnerability to the effects of racism. This recognition is important because it demonstrates how HBCUs can offer targeted support that fosters advocacy. HBCUs can also prioritize building collaborative partnerships with corporations to create more inclusive environments. Collaborations like internship and experiential learning programs, mentorship initiatives, scholarships, and case study opportunities will support cultivating inclusive environments. These partnerships would benefit the HBCU and the corporation because they would establish an exchange of knowledge and experiences to provide a more sustainable and inclusive environment.

The Role of HBCUs in Preparing Black Students for Racist Encounters

The research findings suggest that Black graduates from HBCUs feel that, in some way, their cultural identity was shaped or reinforced through their HBCU experience. They acknowledged the impact co-curricular activities had on their exposure and preparedness for racist encounters. Internships played a significant role in establishing engagement with real-world environments, thus fostering familiarity and sensitivity to encounters with racial microaggressions and/or discriminatory behaviors. While similar studies like Terrell Strayhorn's (2020a) study on internship participation among Black business majors at HBCUs did not find a strong statistical connection between their experiences with internships and their immediate

academic performance, it did reveal that there is some relationship between those who participated in internships with their long-term academic success. Strayhorn's findings and findings from this research study have practical importance for business educators and others at HBCUs related to the importance of internships as part of academic and career preparedness expectations.

I was surprised to discover that two of the study participants indicated some adverse experiences at their HBCU, specifically about efforts made by Black faculty and staff to address attire concerns and certain behaviors. This intervention from the Black faculty and staff was seen as an attempt to insult or discredit their intellectualism for the sake of what they felt to be superficial observations. Those experiences with Black faculty and staff made them uncomfortable and confused about presenting their authentic selves during professional encounters. This discovery notes the complexity of preparing Black students for the inevitability of facing discrimination based on first impressions and doing it so that it does not insult the student or perpetrate a Eurocentric normativity that requires Black people to assume a certain level of assimilation. Research supports that first impressions can significantly affect how an individual is treated, including their chances for advancement (Green, 2003). Some may view these requirements as compromising to White supremacy, while others see it as navigating their career advancement by playing the corporate long game to get what they want (Frye et al., 2020; McCluney et al., 2021). The findings from my study did not present a conclusive way for approaching this issue, as every organization is different, and every graduating Black student is unique in their motivations, attributes, and capabilities. This is why authentic communication

and exploration between the student, the HBCU, and the corporation is important to devise the most succinct and successful integration into these environments. It must also be recognized that some compromise may have to occur to gain acceptance into the system so sustainable systemic reform, or in some cases, deconstruction, can occur.

How Black Students from HBCUs Cope with Racist Encounters

Lastly, the study participants shared the various coping mechanisms they used to navigate their encounters. Acknowledging these methods is important so they can be further examined and incorporated into instruction should professional development curriculums evolve to cover racism preparedness. Some ways they chose to navigate these encounters included addressing the issues as they came, suppressing their feelings in hopes that the encounters would disappear, or electing to find allies or join affinity groups. Some study participants indicated they pray or exercise to decompress from these encounters.

There is a growing recognition of the importance of equipping individuals with interpersonal skills and tools to navigate such encounters effectively. Jacob et al. (2023) study found that for institutional racism, their respondents used strategies like active coping and problem-solving. When facing interpersonal racism, spirituality-based strategies were common. When facing cultural racism, collective coping, social support, and problem-solving were popular.

Based on these findings, instruction that includes interpersonal skill-building, like education on active listening techniques, empathic reasoning, and effective communication skills, could be effective. Conflict resolution and awareness related to cultural competence and

emotional intelligence would also be appropriate to include in curricula. These skills could help

the students better understand and respond to different perspectives and emotions while

promoting respect and understanding in the workplace.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study uncovered compelling insights that underscore the

transformative potential of inclusive curriculum design. It becomes evident that the

acknowledgment and addressing of systemic injustice and racism within curricula can not only

empower Black students but also provide them with a robust toolkit to navigate the complexities

of the corporate world. Additionally, implications for the dimensions of partnerships between

HBCUs and corporations are uncovered through the research findings. In this collaborative

effort, we discover the significance of these partnerships in providing invaluable support systems

for Black graduates. Lastly, the research implications to policy and practice affect the long-term

impact of the HBCU experiences on Black graduates' career trajectories and overall job

satisfaction when networks are built and relationships are formed.

Racial Awareness Through Curricular Design

Educational institutions or curriculum developers responsible for designing and

implementing educational programs would benefit from these findings, as they suggest that

creating a curriculum that acknowledges and addresses systemic injustice and racism can benefit

Black students by helping them understand and navigate potential racist encounters in the

corporate world. Additionally, it allows Black students to frame impending corporate encounters

appropriately and provides a safe space to conceptualize their own racist encounters. Existing

research has consistently shown the benefits of including cultural awareness in the curriculum

for Black students in academia. Aronson and Laughter's (2016) study on Culturally Relevant Education (CRE) for Black student-athletes found a positive impact on their academic performance when exposed to CRE in their curriculum. Other studies have also demonstrated a positive correlation between cultural awareness in curriculum and various outcomes, such as increased student motivation (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Civil & Khan, 2001; Dimick, 2012; Hill, 2012), enhanced ability to engage in discourse (Civil & Khan, 2001; Gutstein, 2003; Martell, 2013), and improved perception of themselves as capable students (Robbins, 2001; Souryasack & Lee, 2007). The study's findings, which center on post-graduation success for Black students from HBCUs, serve as an appropriate extension to previous research primarily concentrated on Black students during their academic years.

HBCU/Corporate Partnership Prioritization

The findings also highlight the need for prioritizing partnerships, which carry significant implications for both HBCUs and corporations. The participants' emphasis on seeking networks and support systems as strategies to navigate challenging racial environments underscores the importance of both HBCUs and corporations strengthening their partnerships and networks. For HBCUs, these partnerships can serve as bridges, connecting the richness of experiences and resources within these institutions to the opportunities and challenges awaiting graduates in the corporate world. Within these alliances, the accumulation of wisdom and cultural empowerment fostered at HBCUs can continue to guide and empower Black graduates through their entry into predominantly White corporate environments. For corporations, these partnerships represent an opportunity to tap into a diverse talent pool enriched by the unique experiences and perspectives

131

cultivated in HBCU environments. By strengthening their collaborative efforts with HBCUs, corporations can create more inclusive and equitable spaces for Black graduates to thrive.

Cultivating Culture Empowerment Through Relationship Building

The implications from the findings underscore a significant relationship between the HBCU experience and the graduates' sense of achievement and self-esteem. Acknowledging this correlation, it becomes evident that establishing policies that encourage robust relationships between HBCUs and corporations will serve as a catalyst for fostering cultural empowerment and a profound sense of belonging among Black graduates as they transition into predominantly White corporate environments. This policy-driven approach aims to ensure that the racial identity development nurtured within the HBCU environment remains an enduring and influential aspect of graduates' experiences in the corporate world. As noted in various studies (Biscoe & Safford, 2010; Douglas, 2008; Kossek et al., 2006), affinity groups and networks can provide a sense of belonging, empowerment, and guidance to Black students and employees encountering challenging experiences.

<center>**Implications for Future Research**</center>

This study holds a unique position within the exploration of Black students navigating predominantly White corporate environments by centralizing the role of HBCUs in shaping their experiences with racism. While scholars have explored the role HBCUs play in academic performance and self-confidence (Crewe, 2017; Esters & Strayhorn, 2013; Franklin et al., 2023; Strayhorn, 2020b), none place HBCUs at the forefront of an investigation of racist encounters. The study sheds light on the formative impact of these educational institutions on the racial consciousness, preparation, and resilience of Black students. Implications of the study should prompt deeper explorations into how HBCUs influence the skills, mindset, and networks that

Black students bring to predominantly White corporate environments. It also suggests the need for research exploring how corporations can leverage the strengths cultivated at HBCUs to foster diversity and inclusion within their own organizations, potentially leading to more tailored and effective strategies for recruiting and retaining Black talent. Implications of this study underscores the critical role of HBCUs in shaping the experiences of Black students as they navigate the complexities of corporate environments, offering additional opportunities for further inquiry and practical applications.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Recommendations from the study's findings include culturally responsive curricular development, partnership cultivation, and empowerment through inclusion. These recommendations underscore the need for strategies that allow Black professionals to assert their identities confidently while effectively addressing racism in corporate settings. By embracing these recommendations, stakeholders can work collectively to create a future where the potential of Black graduates is celebrated, diversity is valued, and inclusion is a lived reality, ultimately fostering a more promising and equitable world.

Racial Awareness Through Curricular Design

Considering research findings highlighting challenges faced by Black graduates from HBCUs, including instances where Black faculty and staff attempted to intervene by offering suggestions on how the students dressed or spoke, it became evident that a more nuanced approach is needed. One recommendation from these findings is incorporating curricular themes that offer approaches for navigating racist encounters without resorting to encouraging code-switching or compromising authentic behavior. This recommendation aligns with the need to equip Black students with strategies that allow them to assert their identities confidently while

effectively addressing racism when encountered. Future research in this area should explore the development and implementation of such curricular themes. It should explore how these themes can empower Black students to respond to racial challenges in a manner that preserves their authenticity and self-expression. Additionally, research should assess the impact of these curricular approaches on graduates as they enter corporate settings, aiming to understand whether graduates feel better equipped to navigate racism without compromising their identity. Implementing these recommendations will create a framework for HBCUs that supports a productive pipeline to employment, empowering Black graduates as they become professionals when navigating racist experiences. Overall, it will secure a better chance of success and promote diversity, inclusion, and social justice in professional settings.

HBCU/Corporate Partnership Prioritization

Regarding recommendations derived from the findings, HBCUs and their relationships with corporations would be best established through a collaborative employment pipeline, and effectively utilizing the resources present at HBCUs in conjunction with the strengths of corporations can facilitate the success and smooth integration of graduates into their new corporate environments. Previous studies indicate that learning effective relationship-building and communication skills is vital for conveying ideas, instructions, and feedback successfully (Conrad & Newberry, 2012; Klein et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2016). Considering programs like internships and corporate advisory boards can help facilitate this relationship and offer students exposure to the corporate environment, allowing for a smoother transition. The forging of these partnerships will enable HBCUs to prepare their students for corporate entry and provide

valuable opportunities for professional growth. It is important to ensure that these partnerships

and experiential opportunities are authentic and meaningful, not just symbolic gestures.

Cultivating Cultural Empowerment Through Relationship Building

The findings in this study suggest that Black graduates expressed greater satisfaction with

organizations that actively promoted inclusivity, encouraged cultural exchange, and integrated

diverse perspectives into their practices. While my research centered on the role HBCUs play in

preparing students for racial encounters, it is important to recognize the importance of

organizations to cultivate inclusive and empathic environments that prioritize psychological

safety for all employees, including Black individuals. I recommend that HBCUs encourage

corporations in their pipeline to proactively address issues of racism and create spaces where

Black employees can share their experiences and challenges and support one another. This aligns

with other studies that point to cultural consideration as a factor in Black employee satisfaction

and advancement (Belias & Koustelios, 2014; Brown, 2002; Moyes et al., 2000; Sledge et al.,

2008).

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Recommendation for Research Future Studies

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In future studies, it is important to allocate sufficient time and resources to measure the

long-term impact of recommended interventions and strategies comprehensively. Further

exploration into Black HBCU graduates' experience post-graduation should involve conducting

comparative analyses, contrasting the experiences of Black students in HBCUs with those in

PWIs or other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). Such comparisons will yield valuable

insights into the unique challenges and advantages of attending HBCUs versus PWIs or MSIs,

especially as these students enter predominantly White corporate environments. Future research

<div align="center">135</div>

should dive deeper into intersectional considerations, examining how the diverse identities of participants may influence their navigation through racist encounters. Lastly, exploring alternative theoretical frameworks to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences is important.

Long-Term Assessment and Comparative Analysis

Future research should include enough time and resources to measure the long-term impact of the recommendations and proposed interventions. Longitudinal studies will provide a deeper understanding of how the experiences of Black students in HBCUs evolve, allowing future researchers to explore the long-term impacts of racism and potential changes in attitudes and behaviors. Future studies should compare the experiences of Black students in HBCUs with those in PWIs or other minority-serving institutions (MSI). Their varied experiences entering predominately White corporate environments will offer valuable insights into the unique challenges and benefits of attending HBCUs versus a PSI or MSI.

Inclusion of Intersectional Considerations

Incorporating a more prominent intersectional lens into the research should also be considered. This incorporation can help determine how factors such as gender, class, sexual orientation, and other identities intersect with race to shape the experiences of Black students in HBCUs. This approach would provide the researchers with the necessary data to explore the unique challenges individuals with multiple marginalized identities face. Exploration into these factors provides a more conclusive understanding of the experiences of Black students in HBCUs, which can lead to more effective and inclusive support and coping strategies in the future. Additional investigation into the role of institutions with their policies, practices, and

136

support systems regarding mitigating experiences of racism is another important part of the research to consider. As was done in this study, qualitative research methods like focus groups and in-depth interviews should continue to be included in future research, as they provide a richer and more detailed understanding of Black students' experiences by capturing the complexities and subtleties of racism.

Exploring Other Theoretical Lenses

Future studies should examine racism and the experiences of Black students from HBCUs through other theoretical lenses that can offer a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Theories like Culturally Responsive Education (Hood et al., 2015), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), Acculturation Theory (Schumann, 1986), Social Capital Theory (Lin, 2017), Cultural Intelligence Theory (Earley & Ang, 2003), and Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Richard, 1977) could provide additional resources to help support ways to intervene most effectively. Culturally Responsive Education highlights the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that recognize and honor diverse cultural backgrounds (Hood et al., 2015). Applying this theory to integrating Black graduates from HBCUs into White corporate environments can help determine the best ways organizations can create spaces that welcome, support, and value Black employees.

Social Identity Theory emphasizes how individuals categorize themselves and others based on social group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). For Black graduates, understanding how their social identity intersects with the identity of the predominantly White workplace can help identify the potential for challenges, biases, and opportunities for a healthy and sustainable

work environment. Acculturation Theory focuses on the process of adapting to a new cultural environment (Schumann, 1986). Considering this theory can help determine the factors that facilitate or hinder the successful integration of Black HBCU graduates into predominantly White workplaces, such as language, communication styles, and workplace culture. Social Capital Theory emphasizes the importance of social networks and relationships for accessing resources and opportunities (Lin, 2017). Exploring this theory will help identify strategies to help Black graduates build connections, establish mentorship relationships, and navigate the social dynamics of their new work environments. Cultural Intelligence Theory relates to the ability to work effectively in culturally diverse settings (Earley & Ang, 2003). This theory can inform interventions best suited for Black graduates to enhance their cultural awareness, understanding, and adaptability to different environments. Social Learning Theory highlights factors influencing how individuals form new behaviors through observations and modeling (Bandura & Richard, 1977). Applying this theory can help develop intervention tools that can help leverage the effects of positive role modeling and mentorship.

By exploring this issue through the lens of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, organizations and HBCUs can work together to create more inclusive environments that help B lack graduates overcome racial challenges they may experience. All these theories will provide insight into how the experiences of Black graduates are shaped.

Conclusion

This Narrative Inquiry, grounded in CRT, sought to discover how Black graduates from HBCUs encounter racism when integrating into a predominantly White working environment. This study aimed to identify factors that contributed to how aware and prepared they were for

these encounters and how they navigated them. Findings from this study provided valuable insights for fostering inclusive and equitable opportunities and holding corporations accountable for developing inclusive and productive work environments for Black employees.

The study's most prominent finding revealed that most participants felt unprepared to navigate encounters with racism upon graduation from their HBCU. This discovery suggests that topics related to encounters with racism in corporate environments are not adequately addressed in the curriculum, leading to challenges in Black graduates' integration process. There is a critical need for HBCUs to incorporate diverse and culturally responsive education that equips students with the necessary tools to navigate racist encounters in corporate environments successfully. By acknowledging and addressing this gap, HBCUs can better prepare their graduates to face the realities of predominantly White workplaces, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for Black professionals. Implications from this research call for a renewed commitment to empowering Black students with the skills, resilience, and cultural competence needed to navigate racial challenges effectively in their future endeavors.

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APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Name (please do not use real name, select alias)

What ethnicity do you identify?

African American or Black

Asian

European American or White

Native American

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Multiple Ethnicities

What gender do you identify?

Female

Male

Non-Binary

Prefer Not to Say

Other

Age

21-25

26-29

30-35

35+

Where are you from? (City, State)

Racial demographics of hometown (of more than +50% of a particular ethnicity)

African American or Black

Asian

European American or White

Native American

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Multiple Ethnicities

Collegiate Major (Undergrad)

Graduation Date (Undergrad)

Current Employment Status

Unemployed

Employed

Self-Employed

Years Employed

0-5 years

6-10 years

11-15 years

16+ years

Education level of parents

	Mother	Father
Highschool		
College		

Graduate

Associate's Degree

Certification

Military

Other

Please identify your availability for a follow-up interview by clicking this link. Please select a date/time between February 20, 2023- March 12, 2023.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me a little about yourself. How would you describe where you are from?

2. Tell me a little about your co-curricular or extra-curricular experiences before college. (i.e., clubs, organizations, community activities)

3. Tell me about your co-curricular or extra-curricular experiences while attending your HBCU. (i.e., clubs, organizations, fraternities/sororities)

4. Think back to what you would consider the most significant experience at your HBCU, then talk to me about what made that experience so impactful.

5. How would you define what it means to feel like you belong?

6. How important is feeling like you belong to your overall motivation and drive?

7. What was it like when you graduated from your HBCU and transitioned into a predominantly White corporate environment?

8. Can you tell me about a time when you encountered racism in your work environment, overt or covert?

9. What kind of preparation do you feel like you had prior to graduation to help you navigate racialized encounters you may experience?

10. How long have you been employed? Have you found that how you deal with racialized aggressions and microaggression shifts the longer you have been employed?

11. In your opinion, what is the most challenging aspect of working in a predominantly White corporate environment?

12. How have your feelings about integration and belonging changed within the past few years

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

You were invited to contribute to this focus group because you participated in a Racial Readiness for Career Preparedness Interview. In our previous conversations, you reflected that you graduated from an HBCU, identified as Black, and transitioned to a predominantly White space post-graduation. This demographic recognition qualified you to be a participant in this study.

You were invited to contribute to this focus group because you participated in a Racial Readiness for Career Preparedness Interview. In our previous conversations, you reflected that you graduated from an HBCU, identified as Black, and transitioned to a predominantly White space post-graduation. This demographic recognition qualified you to be a participant in this study. Throughout the course of 60 minutes, I will be presenting you with some probing questions, however, I encourage you to speak freely and offer up any additional questions or insight that come from the discussion:

1) Did you every discuss racism in your household when you were growing up?

2) What were some specific instances or examples where you felt your experiences as a Black student from an HBCU were valued or appreciated in the all-White working environment?

3) Did your HBCU education adequately prepare you for the cultural differences you experienced in the all-White working environment? If not, what additional support or preparation do you think would have been helpful?

4) Why do you think companies participate in recruitment efforts to secure diverse candidates?

5) What were some specific instances or examples where you felt your experiences as a Black student from an HBCU were valued or appreciated in the all-White working environment?

6) Conversely, can you recall any situations where you felt your experiences or perspectives were overlooked or dismissed in the all-White working environment? How did you handle those situations?

7) In terms of racism, what did you expect to experience post-graduation? How were these experiences shaped?

8) Have you ever conversed with other Black people in your corporate environment regarding their experiences and encounters with racism?

9) What strategies or coping mechanisms did you develop to navigate potential bias, discrimination, or microaggressions in the all-White working environment?

APPENDIX D: CODING WITH CORRESPONDING TEXT

Alias	Category	Tag	Text
Aria	Attitudes	Bold	I love my boldness. I do like my big heart (room for all my friends) I love my style that I am growing into. I used to wear a lot of black, but I graduated Covid hit then all the colors of the rainbow started to find
Ashley	Attitudes	Hyper Independent	You mentioned that your, your parents were divorced. What, what was that like growing up in your home? Or we have to get into being super personal, but just, you know, how did it kind of affect the way you, you moved in your life? Yeah, So as a result of that experience, I.
Ciara	Attitudes	Hyper Independent	I think also just me being a very independent, I'm also just, you know, like focused on like making sure I have what I need but also what others need as well Kind of just sums me up. Like I m really like
Aria	Attitudes	Hyper Independent	Her father. When her parents separated. The siblings took sides, and the father were very strained. He would tried to be there for me, but I didn't trust him, and didn't try to understand. There was barely a service level relationship. Hyperindependent... she is a mother's girl.
Neon	Attitudes	Dewayne I feel like it was my responsibility to educate people about Black issues	I feel like over time you, you're able to discern more and see things for what it is and see things like things that are not normal or to see
Pat	Attitudes	Dewayne I feel like it was my responsibility to educate people about Black issues	Ms. Williams, but I know like my last year at Redwoods and this was after the George Floyd situation and like companies really starting to become more diverse. Redwoods was like taking a real strong stand cuz they're big corporation. They were starting to take a real strong stand on diver diversifying their workforce and also in increasing salaries for a lot of the positions that based off of what others like those bottom, I ain't gonna say bottom leve , but those lower level positions were. So I thought that was really interesting after we had that political, that that race, that political racism kind of changed
Ashley	Attitudes	Dewayne I feel like it was my responsibility to educate people about Black issues	Being called the wrong name is definitely a huge experience. But also realizing that we also can't respond slash react emotionally. And so in this case it was just a simple name as Amber, I'm not Carla versus.
Nia	Attitudes	Dewayne I feel like it was my responsibility to educate people about Black issues	I do try to educate people sometimes, like especially in 2020 when after the George Floyd incidents happened and off after Ahmaud Aubrey, like how black people felt. Especially like when people say I
Dewayne	Attitudes	Dewayne I feel like it was my responsibility to educate people about Black issues	So we tried to do for black History Month, we tried to do a story talking about the Tulsa massacre and they told us it was, it was too, too much, showed too much violence. But this was February, 2020. So we were told we couldn't do that. Fast forward to George Floyd killing, they came back and said, okay, maybe it's something else we could do to kinda highlight these things. And so what we did was call our walk in my truth panel. So we had five of us to get up there to talk about the situation where we we been discriminated against or
Dewayne	Attitudes	Dewayne I feel like it was my responsibility to educate people about Black issues	I think the most predominantly thing I've had to deal with is having to teach my coworkers about some diversity and cultural difference. So
Nia	Attitudes	feel tired	do not rely on your black students or black employees because it's exhausting to, for them to be that black voice. And I thought that was
Nia	Attitudes	feel tired	it gets draining having to explain yourself and your thought processes
Pat	Attitudes	felt intimidated	But where I ended up, and especially coming from my community is like at first I was like, do I really belong here? I don't know anybody that s in corporate America with this good job fresh outta school who, who, who has had it for about a year and is living like this at 21 years old, 22 years old, no, 21 years old. So I, I did question myself a lot,
Nia	Attitudes	felt intimidated	that kind of intimidated me I think in my career where I really didn't feel comfortable asking for help and it made me feel like I have to
Pat	Attitudes	felt prepared	So it has me prepping on what type of older person, the type of father I want to be to my kids, their friends and just like type of servant
Ashley	Attitudes	felt prepared	I knew what I was going into. I was what I was going into. I knew I was going to be the only black woman or you and I was, I was the only black woman in my office and on my team. And prior to graduating school, I had already started making connections with black professionals in, in accounting one and then black professionals who
Dewayne	Attitudes	felt prepared	One, an ethics class I took at community college where we, even though it was about a lot of philosophy stuff, but we talked about the dynamics of the workforce as well. And the second thing was first class with Dr. Grant. You know, we went through the class and we took, introduced ourselves. And so, you know, she did hers and we asked, you know, why are you, you know, here as a teacher? And she told us her story of being in corporate America and being a leader
Ashley	Attitudes	felt unprepared	For me, being a H B C U student, of course it was a culture shock, but
Ciara	Attitudes	felt unprepared	Like I'm not having real interactions like I expected with my colleagues and coworkers. This is like the learning curve of learning the financial industry as well and then how tech ties into it. And then
Bob	Attitudes	felt unprepared	I've always been a pretty smart kid, but I never really applied myself, which is, which, you know, it, that habit followed me into college.
Nia	Attitudes	felt unprepared	That transition was tough because I was like, and while I get at, you re always gonna learn something new in your role. I didn't feel
Dewayne	Attitudes	lacked confidence	I wasn't given, you know, the confidence in store to myself to say, hey, this is something you can do. But it's something that I worked so hard for even even working on that, like with dep oyments I had to
Nia	Attitudes	tend to suppress how I fee when confronted with challenges	I try not to take things too personal because life life's for all of us.
Nia	Attitudes	tend to suppress how I fee when confronted with challenges	And unfortunately I think it's caused me not to speak up too in certain situations because I m like, ugh, it's just the norm. And I hear myself even when I talk to my stepdaughter, imposing those same viewpoints on her. like, look, you're black and you're a woman. I. I

Alias	Category	Tag	Text
Nia	Attitudes	I tend to suppress how I feel when confronted with challenges	don't react to it though. I don't just because it's just not my nature. I think I'm not one of the people who are just gonna, oh, you know,
Nia	Attitudes	I'm flexible, willing to work with anything and	I consider myself like really agile. Like I'm flexible, I'm willing to work
Naomi	Attitudes	Nervous	I honestly never thought much about college either. I knew I, I knew I was a strong student and I knew college was the next step, but I just
Bob	Attitudes	Nervous	And, and it was, whether it's Dean Nelson, because I was, you know, Dean, he, Dean Nelson probably didn't know me at the time because I was so introverted and I was just able, and I was scared. Like I was so scared it was like, like a hundred people in the room. But I went up there, delivered the capstone, told them what I learned about professionalism and how it differs from different workspaces and how
Nia	Attitudes	Nervous	Then I would be like really sad and homesick sometimes. And I would, my mom would literally have to find people to come, like get me, like she had friends who had students who, they were older here, but they
Nia	Attitudes	Nervous	it was an exciting time, but I was extremely nervous.
Naomi	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	One time I was working at a client site and the office manager, she, you know, she was chatted up with me and for some reason she's talking about like N UNC and Duke basketball and I don't even watch
Naomi	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	So I felt very offended. I don't know, like, I don't think she would've done to one of my coworkers. I don't know if she thought she was
Naomi	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	Oh, another one I was interning, I think it was my June, no, my sophomore year at Central. I was interning at like a financial firm in Atlanta and there were, we had two people on the project. It was me and another girl that went to the University of Virginia. And we were working on like a marketing project and basically the director of marketing, we turned in our project and he's praising the other girl for all of these things that are done so well in the project. But he didn't do what I did and he didn't think, he didn't even think to think
Ashley	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	I was in accounting and at this time being a young person, I did have blonde hair, I did have colorful hair and it was just to students versus to maybe asking me that, not knowing that I have a license to do my hair and that I worked as a cosmetologist. So it wasn't until, okay, I give this explanation that becomes okay that my hair is like this, but what if I wasn't a cosmetologist? Right. What if I didn't have a license? Does that still mean you talk to someone in that capacity? Does that mean still mean you treat someone that way? Or if they
Ciara	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	transition from a predominantly white to like an H B C U. It wasn't really like a culture shock, but it felt like I was kind of home in a sense. And then also I learned, you know, the whole colorism aspect too, like, you know, light-skinned versus dark-skinned thing, which I really didn't even know really existed. But there was one particular friend that everybody, cuz I'm really like, I don't really judge people at all. I'm like, I'm really open, open-minded, you know, whatever. And there was one particular friend that I had, she, everybody questioned
Ciara	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	And also since I went natural and a couple weeks ago that was the first time I got like a silk press just to you know, make sure I get a haircut or whatever and it's like oh my gosh I really like your hair. And like before I wasn't getting that except by like a slight few. And I remember when I was one year in and I did a virtual, they were like telling me about yourself or something interesting you wanna share. I shared with my team who I was on the current rotation with and I'm on the team now just like my journey and everything and they really
Ciara	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	And like some of the, I haven't had any microaggressions, although I do feel kind of strange like cause I dress in a more modern business attire than, you know, you know how people dress at the bank and then we're not even client facing either. It's just like the same dress
Nia	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	And I realized then like, oh my gosh, she thinks like all black people are the same or we like, not even notating the many countries in
Nia	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	So when I was around people who were white treating me differently, it was still a cultural shock for me. I had this older white woman call
Nia	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	when I first got to house Audrey, they would expect me to be the black voice of everything. So if they needed me, if we had like a campaign or we knew a certain product skewed highly with black people, the expectation was that I could create, well yes, I'm not, it's fine cuz I do live the black experience or I can relate from the
Dewayne	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	It like, deep down it's like, okay, I, it, I already had some reservations and doubts. I was like, okay, you know, I felt like I was prepared but I was like, you know, you, I'm still scared cuz this is still a territory I haven't been into in a work environment. So I head that deep down, but I also just knowing me is like, okay, they just fuel my fire to show
Dewayne	Attitudes	Perceptions of me because I'm Black	They was like, cuz you're not like the rest of them. So the rest of them meaning Wow, I'm not a black person with my pants down causing trouble or being somewhere where I shouldn't be. That was the, the
Ashley	Attitudes	Self-assured	Now being back as a non-traditional student, my mind was a lot more
Ashley	Attitudes	Self-assured	My mindset is on, I know that I want to go here, so what do I have to prepare to do to get there? And so I mentored a lot of people in, in my time being a student, a non-traditional student, I helped to build the
Dewayne	Attitudes	Self-assured	I've always had to count on myself. So it, and it made things kind of bad for me. And in growing beyond that because I I, I, and it's truthfully honest, I still go through that same thing today. I won't ask for any help. I, I do whatever I need to do, whatever sacrifice I need to make
Nia	Attitudes	Unsure	And so I had to prepare for this transition to leave my comfort zone. I was having so much fun and my fear, I really had a fear of moving to North Carolina because at the time I struggled with understanding people's accents. It was like, it was a big deal for me. I was really

189

Alias	Category	Tag	Text
Nia	Attitudes	Unsure	don't think she meant it harmfully, but my parents were immediately offended because she, they felt it should have been like, she should have the cultural awareness of the, even my coworkers who were
Nia	Attitudes	Unsure	it was tough. I was very, so my lifestyle like was really interesting because I went to these private schools, like I was saying, it was the
Dewayne	Attitudes	Unsure	So it just fueled my, my passion to learn more, passion to progress more. So I didn't let it take it all to heart, but it still, it still impacted me. So I'm like, you know, do you actually see the value that I would bring? And it was, it was, it wasn't until I, I left the company and came back. It was cause I had to be c i o who was my mentor asking
Ashley	Beliefs	Being at an HBCU was sometimes challenging	And these are based off of fears also from H B C U faculty and staff about their understanding of life. Right. And I understand that there, there's a lot of fear moning mongering for H B C U students that I've
Ashley	Beliefs	Being at an HBCU was sometimes challenging	biggest things because there's a lot of assumptions around black girls who are on campus exploring life. Right. They, there's a lot of assumptions of holes in and grown and being fast and all of this instead of realizing like we are young people who are exploring life and the freedoms and, and, and I think just putting everybody in the
Ashley	Beliefs	Being at an HBCU was sometimes challenging	So while I was in school I was working full-time as well. And I think that's another thing that people don't take in into account is that a
Bob	Beliefs	Being at an HBCU was sometimes challenging	I was in like a deep, deep, deep depression. I was feeling a lot of my classes, actually, all of my classes except one. And like, I just wasn't
Pat	Beliefs	Dealing with my varied intersections can be challenging	Okay, so I have sickle cell disease. Sickle cells is a, it's a blood infection, a hereditary blood infection that causes severe pain crises because of how the shell, how the cells are shaped in my body, which caused them not to hold as much oxygen as a normal human. So entering my senior year of college as Mr. North Carolina Central, it's the first week of classes. I've done all these great traveling and stuff across the United States with a fellowship that I had the year before, meaning the summer before, which is summer 2016. I've traveled to different states for the mystery role. And that first week of class I'm
Pat	Beliefs	Dealing with my varied intersections can be challenging	It was the worst one. I, I've been dealing with this all my life, but it was the worst one that I have had. And like years like since I had been a child, and mind you, I was, I was 20 going on 21 at that point in time. So that was probably the worst one I had had since I was like 14, 15 years old. So I had kind of forgot what that pain had felt like and then I hadn't, I didn't have as much going on at 1415 as I did at 2021 in the senior in college with like, with one of the biggest roles on campus. So with it putting me on my back for about a week, it was just a real low moment cuz I had had such a good summer and I was trying to take that energy into the semester and it's, it's kind of like getting up, going to work on Mondays. Like yes, it's Mondays, no one really likes Mondays, but Mondays help you set your week off, right.
Ashley	Beliefs	Dealing with my varied intersections can be challenging	I had a car accident in my, my junior year, my sophomore, junior year where I had to medically withdraw from school. So I had a co, you know, I lost not, you know, but I did lose all of my cognitive skills and abilities and I had to relearn them over again. Oh wow. And I also had a speech impediment, which I stutter. So sometimes I still
Naomi	Beliefs	Having familial support was helpful to me	There's the era where I lived with my grandma, and then there was the era when I lived with my mom. So when I lived with my grandma, it was a house full of family, you know, aunts and uncles, cousins. We all lived with my grandma. So it was a fun time, you know how it is,
Ashley	Beliefs	Having familial support was helpful to me	My mother was an educator, a math educator in Newark, New Jersey. And my father was a computer network engineer. So I went to predominantly black schools, elementary schools, which happened to
Nia	Beliefs	Having familial support was helpful to me	I'd say like both of my homes extremely loving, both of my parents really prioritize education, both sides of my family, extremely
Nia	Beliefs	Having familial support was helpful to me	So I definitely say my parents played a role and then of course my, my schooling experience because I mean, seventh grade I can remember being in a classroom and there was a situation where I had a friend who was white Nicole. She didn't do well on the test and maybe I
Nia	Beliefs	Having familial support was helpful to me	So people poured a lot into me and really, you know, wanted me to succeed. And when, so as far as like home life, I think everything was like really focused on like, I was just poured into a lot, like in terms of
Aria	Beliefs	Having familial support was helpful to me	Which is why I wanted to go to an HBCU, but only really got once I went to church or a family picnic. She wanted to go somewhere where she didn't have to be the minority. However, I still had a bougge black girl image at the hbcu because of my background with majority white spaces...and doing things that AA girls didn't always
Aria	Beliefs	Having familial support was helpful to me	Loud, fun, vibrant people. Very conducive to the creative side of me, anything that I wanted to do it was supported up to a certain point. Which my parents separated everything went downhill, middle school and high school. 7 th and the summer from my junior year, it wasn't
Pat	Beliefs	Having pre-collegiate socialization opportunities helped me	And it started my, it, it really jumpstarted my leadership goals as far as like me knowing I wanted to lead and e it even tailored to some of
Pat	Beliefs	Having pre-collegiate socialization opportunities helped me	Yes, I was in Air Force J R T C for all eight semesters of my high school. My high school, my, yeah, my high school career. I did that internship. I was a part of the, I had a marketing trade and those

190

Alias	Category	Tag	Text
Pat	Beliefs	Having pre-collegiate socialization opportunities helped me	was chosen amongst 27 interns out of like 350 applications across the state of North Carolina to attend this paid internship program at the rising senior and high school, where we focus on community economic development for our community. So me being from Warrenton Warrenton, I worked for the Warren Family Institute for approximately eight weeks. And we did leadership sessions back in
Ashley	Beliefs	Having pre-collegiate socialization opportunities helped me	I did a lot of volunteering at schools, like doing math tutoring. I was on the debate team in high school and that's pretty much it.
Ciara	Beliefs	Having pre-collegiate socialization opportunities helped me	Sports pretty much and outside of school I was in sports as well, like four H Club for tennis or like the summer like some small summer programs for the the four H club and then we had like a computer science club slash elective but it was pretty much you kind of got to explore and do what you wanted to do cuz their, their extracurricular
Nia	Beliefs	Having pre-collegiate socialization opportunities helped me	group called Anytown, which was like a diversity diversity club in high school. So I was the president of that. I was a part of yearbook club. And then outside of that I did things like in the local community, like
Aria	Beliefs	Having pre-collegiate socialization opportunities helped me	Junior Cividens, Church youth choir, Foreign Language program, competitive choir, debutant
Dewayne	Beliefs	Having pre-collegiate socialization opportunities helped me	So September I took the ASBA test for the military injuries. And once my guidance counselor then saw my ASBA scores, he was like year she in for the military. He didn't help me with anything else as far as
Naomi	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	And Central felt familiar cause I had been with my mom to her law classes when I was younger. So it, you know, it sounded like a good idea. I'm familiar with the school and nobody else in my family had
Naomi	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	the thing that's one of the like events that stood out to me is when we would visit the NABA Conference. And that was a really good experience because I was able to come together with, you know,
Naomi	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	NABA fall day at school business. And one of the recruiters from one of the recruiters from KPMG was there speaking. And at the end of the, at, at the end of his presentation or whatever, I just, I handed him my resume and that's basically what kicked off, like my interests, my interviews, and ultimately like my internships and jobs with kpm G. So
Pat	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	And then my senior year of college I became Mr. North Carolina Central University, where I pretty much did the, did that ambassador role, community economic development role on campus, off campus and in other states on H B C U campuses for like community
Pat	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	I'm gonna say MR was the most significant, I was in the Centennial Scholars program and I was part of the, I was part of the MAC Men's Achievement Center. But I would have to say being Mr. North Carolina Central was the most valuable experience for me and, and my peers. I came in contact with a lot of people that I think inspired and that are still inspired to this day. I had my scholarship, the PAT scholarship for
Pat	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	And I was thinking about not taking his call, but something was like, take the call. And after I talked to Kent Kent about it and he influenced me to do it and I was like, okay, you know what, I'm gonna do it because I just, I was just sitting here thinking like, this isn't what I'm used to. Like I've made a, a 360 from freshman sophomore year as far as my, like, who I hang out with, what I'm doing on campus, what I'm doing off campus. So this may be what I'm looking forward to get my mind and my stuff back together. Even though, and even though I was doing well in classes, it was kind of affecting me on a social, on a social aspect of things. And I took his call, we had a good conversation. I came to his office like her, him and Tasha's
Ashley	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	a lot of H B C U students come from these harsh, many of them depending on the school, come from these very harsh backgrounds where they are forced to be where they are parentified and adultified and they are forced to grow up and have certain responsibilities that when they do come to college and they experience a certain freedom,
Ashley	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	The biggest thing is where do I fit in this world? And being in a place where everybody's there, they're like, oh, I fit in here. I'm welcomed
Ashley	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	My mindset was I need this business degree so I can open a business. So I think that was the most pivotal part was having that conversation
Ciara	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	and then he went to n UNC Chapel Hill for his PhD and he is a pediatrician so I was like why not? And intentionally it wasn't like I wasn't going to be there for more than two years. I wanted to go to somewhere where they had like a really robust computer science program but like in that time and then comparing it to how all my
Ciara	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	I guess my range of being president, majority of the leaderboard were, were women on the like, you know, vice president and like secretary treasurer and like getting involved not only like within the majors but also in the club and then like outside of the club. And then also kind
Ciara	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	It was like a Google community program where we went out into like the daycare centers and we taught parents how to use a computer from basics, you know that and then like Battle the Brains and probably some others as well. And then girls Who Code, I think that's
Bob	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	But Ebony, N C C U alum, she told her boss, who is my mentor Lan, who has recruited me to my new role at, at this new agency. Like they weren't going to take a shot on me until Ebony said, let me hold me personally accountable for Nigel's performance. Wow. Because I

Alias	Category	Tag	Text
Bob	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	I, you know, I've always read and I took advice from individuals older than me that I knew my HBCU building a relationship with your professor was important, be best friends with your professor. And at that point I saw Ms. Brame and, you know, she challenged me. Like,
Bob	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	I want to challenge my, I want to cha I love, that's when I love started love to love challenging myself. So I, I tried to do like the, the, I didn't really enjoy sga a I, I don't, I, I tried to do sga, but I didn't really like sga. So we did the school of School of Business Dean Advisory Council. I started two organizations, Eagle Opportunities and the Entrepreneurship Club. And I worked with the Entrepreneurship Think
Nia	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	I attempted to get involved with S G A, but really wasn't a fit for me. I think it was just too demanding and I spent most of my time working, which I totally regret, but I spent most of my time like working mall jobs outside of school. And then with the school of business, I became more involved probably in my junior year in college. And so that was like transitioning into Miss School of Business, entrepreneur club. I
Aria	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	Cancer awareness org, SGA, worked for residential life, patient winner for org on campus, collegiate version of 100 black women, mentoring program, org sought to develop women in college so that they can be, business advisory group, another group brought job opps
Dewayne	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	Oh, when I got into college, this, this was my thing. I was like, I want the college experience. I, you showed, yeah, I wanted different, I wanted a different world show experience. I was like, I'm I'm gonna do everything. I was like, I know it's a lot, but I got into to Of course
Dewayne	Beliefs	HBCU granted me social capital	So I had chair roles and it Eagles and Tile Sigma. So I just try to make sure I get as plugged in as much as possible. But then also with that, I
Ciara	Beliefs	Internships were helpful to my prepardness	my internship, another and also just being able to be part of like those competition teams and meeting other people from other places as well And, and a couple of the conferences that I went to for like graduate school within the SSS program, they kind of helped just really just in a matter of just exposure to other places and other
Bob	Beliefs	Internships were helpful to my prepardness	So as I was volunteering with EPA as a student intern, we had to deliberate capstone presentation in which Dean Nelson and Ms. Bra was invited. And I, I, I wanna say that was my biggest, like, that was that moment because I was able to capture everything I learned
Nia	Beliefs	Internships were helpful to my prepardness	Like being sent to Adweek and having the opportunity to even like work with you or work with just students on campus. I, it really gave me an opportunity and a leg up in terms of like networking and
Pat	Beliefs	My upbringing was challenging	I'm gonna have to say my stepdad, I still struggle with this today. Me and him got into a physical altercation when I was 15 going on 16. It was in 2011. So I was 15 going on 16. It was in August. And we just had a physical conversation because of, from something I thought out that was petty like dealing with chores. And it's kind of like when I look at him, no, you're not my favorite person but I still respect you as like my mom's husband, my stepdad, the man in the house. I still give you that type of respect. I don't like being disrespected and I don't think my grandma always raised me to respect your peers and I, I do my best and will always do my best at that. But I think that day he just kind of touch the different nerve and then like him beginning the
Pat	Beliefs	My upbringing was challenging	My, I was raised by a single mom. I didn't meet my dad, my biological dad till I was 21. I was raised by my stepdad on and off. He's the bi, he's the biological father, my younger brother, me and him, him and I, my younger brother and I are like two, two and a half years apart. My father was incarcerated in federal penitentiary for about 18, 19 years.
Pat	Beliefs	My upbringing was challenging	And then we had a, what was it, a social worker come to the house maybe like three days to a week later after the altercation. And she ordered us both to man anger management classes. And I, I trip out about this because I'm like anger management. Like I just didn't feel like I deserve anger management classes. I'm not a, I didn't think I was an angry person and I still don't. So I just, that's two the things
Ciara	Beliefs	My upbringing was challenging	So I feel like overall I have like a diverse experience between living amongst a bunch of other cultures versus living amongst only like one or two, especially in a really rural area and everything is like so far away and there's not much like of things that you can experience that are outside of the box but coming from like having that background but then also being raised around mostly women in my family
Ciara	Beliefs	My upbringing was challenging	Slightly chaotic but not really too much cuz it really is like when we were in Henderson, North Carolina, it's only like my mom, my grandmother, my cousins and their mom and then my grandmother's sister. But before we had two houses and then eventually like we combined into one so it was just a mixture of like different
Bob	Beliefs	My upbringing was challenging	So it's very small, not a lot of opportunities. So the, the, so when you graduate high school, if you don't go to college, you're projected to either work at like Purdue, which is, you know, the chicken catching
Pat	Beliefs	Not having familial support was hard	she didn't try to stop me from going to school. It was more of like, I think like why are you, why are you going to school? Like, and cuz she, she's seen people around her not have to go to school and still end up making things outta itself. I didn't see that per se. We was

Alias	Category	Tag	Text
Pat	Beliefs	Not having familial support was hard	My grandma was terrified in a way. And I think my freshman year, that was a part of the reason why I moved off campus. It, it allowed me to save a little bit more money, but she was 30 minutes up the road to eased her mind. So I stayed with her my sophomore and junior year of college. And then my mom, she really started to act out on a negative way cuz she felt like I was, cuz that was about an hour and a half
Bob	Beliefs	Not having familial support was hard	Like I wouldn't say I had the best relationship with my mom growing up. So I grew up with my grandma and growing up with my grandma,
Dewayne	Beliefs	Not having familial support was hard	I think that one was another, a period where I didn't feel confident and I didn't have support because I wasn't getting pushed by my family to go to college. And I didn't, I didn't feel like I had financial support from them either. So I viewed college as, as debt right. Instead of being an investment. So it, it was that dynamic and then
Dewayne	Beliefs	Not having familial support was hard	One of the biggest turning points in life was I was, I, I think I was thinking about this the other day, so I can remember like kindergarten up until like my parents split. I used to be on the honor roll or whatever, but my parents split. I was, I was going through a lot. I even got put in special counseling because I almost failed my grades for fifth and sixth grade. I eased, but my teachers was like, at least I
Ashley	Beliefs	Participating in Co-Curricular opportunities in college was helpful	I was the president of the accounting club NABA my freshman and sophomore year. I did, I studied abroad in Ghana. Oh wow. I, I was a part of a lot of like business leadership. So I was part of the Honor society in college. So that's been, that did a lot. I participated in a lot
Nia	Beliefs	Shifting identities helps me navigate challenges	The code switching is definitely a challenge because it's, it's like speaking two languages almost. Like you have some things I have to convert, but like the jokes of my friends is like, I'm like girl, hold on. I
Ashley	Beliefs	Teaching classes that prepare students for navigating interpersonally with people of different cultures would be helpful	H B C U students? I would definitely say a mindset class and an emotional intelligence class.
Naomi	Beliefs	White environments are challenging to enter into	Like the one that I'm in right now is easier than when I was in before, but I'd say in the toughest environment, environment I've been in, which was my previous job, it was just feeling like I could not be myself. I couldn't talk like myself. And that just makes it harder to do your job and you have to come in and be somebody that you're not.
Pat	Beliefs	White environments are challenging to enter into	It was a culture shock going in my C E o Kevin, he made me feel really comfortable though. However, I was still only about 10% of minority African American, well yeah, of African minority African American in the company. The, I'll say the other 85% was majority white, 5% other. And it was, like I said, it was just a really big culture shock. I had the fellowship the summer before I graduated in 2016. I graduated in, I mean the year before I graduated, which was summer 2016. I graduated in May 27th, May, 2017, where I went back as a full-time employee. So I knew a lot of the people because of my internship. And they were different people. Like, they were like
Ciara	Beliefs	White environments are challenging to enter into	I feel like just the relatability and just your everyday life. And then for my situation, everybody is like 35 and up and not really like, only thing they mostly talk about is kids and then vacationing overseas. So, but I mean like, Or like working out or whatever. But I mean there's other stuff to that. Like everybody has like, I wanna say a quirk, but like I'm interested in video games and anime or like,
Nia	Beliefs	White environments are challenging to enter into	I know that I'm not the only one who goes through it. And so luckily that's where my support system comes in. So if something happens or
Nia	Beliefs	White environments are challenging to enter into	When I gave birth to my son after I gave birth to Legend, the board, one of the board members, the owner of House Autry, Susan sent me
Aria	Beliefs	White environments are challenging to enter into	felt a little prepared for entering into my work environment. I got hired through a diversity program through the place I worked. St the beginning it was very obvious we were being treated as diversity hired. It caused rifts and uncomfortableness...when met with counterparts not from HBCUs all of their stuff was not the same and it was noticeable it was not the same. They were treated the same.
Dewayne	Beliefs	White environments are challenging to enter into	I think when I was on program it was another, it was another member on program area and he, he was from the Cincinnati area and I, I, I'm usually able to get along with everybody but of course when I started this program, I'm in my thirties and this is a, a 2020 year old. If we
Naomi	Beliefs	Why I experienced this racist encounter	The one thing that comes to mind is like, nobody's probably ever called them out or held them accountable for the things they say. I
Ashley	Beliefs	Why I experienced this racist encounter	The privilege of being ignorant, the privilege of not feeling obligated or interested in learning about things outside of self. So you feel privileged and comfortable enough to say that to someone, even if it's sheer interest. Right. I just wanna know how do you wash your hair?
Bob	Beliefs	Why I experienced this racist encounter	So he, I sent it to him, he sent it to the associate director at the time and they was like, Hey Mike, we not supposed to send anything to this guy, but I'm not, you know, you know, it's a white guy. I'm not sure if he was racist or anything. I honestly, I don't, I didn't even know him. But, you know, it everybody what it felt like he was, because the way,
Nia	Beliefs	Why I experienced this racist encounter	like we're taught that the confederate flag is racist, right? There's no cultural anything behind it. There's no southern pride. It's scary. Yeah. To us where to them they look at it as a positive thing and we
Nia	Beliefs	Why I experienced this racist encounter	Because I'm black. I think there's, there's so much culture and sensitivity. I think from a corporate perspective, people don't know

Alias	Category	Tag	Text
Nia	Beliefs	Why I experienced this racist encounter	And so I think there's that whole curiosity thing. I'm shm sure there's like a superiority thing. I'm, I even at house Audrey, there were challenges because I was the youngest person and I would move quickly. I was promoted really quickly. There was also the issue of the
Pat	Values	Bright Future	future looks like, my future's really looking good right now. Ms. Williams, I know I got, I know I told you project car, I got a lot of
Ashley	Values	Bright Future	Futuristically. I don't foresee myself, like I already, I have my own company, I have my own small businesses, so I'm an entrepreneur and a entrepreneur. So ultimately my future looks like me working for
Ashley	Values	Bright Future	My future is great. I'm a multimillionaire in my future.
Nia	Values	Bright Future	I had like big plans, like from a future perspective,
Aria	Values	Bright Future	I have no idea what the future look likes. Married to a tall black man. Still debating about kids, have multiple property. Work in the HR space. I really feel like working in an agency and working that does
Pat	Values	I am motivated by belonging	Cause if I don't see how I'm contributing to the mission, I'm questioning the value of, I'm questioning my value as an employee, my value and like the things I've been through and just, it, it attacks my confidence in a way. Whereas I'm thinking like, okay, if this, if I'm
Ciara	Values	I am motivated by belonging	interaction piece, I mean not only like with my actual team but like in the sense of there's onsite activities like you know stuff like in D N I
Nia	Values	I am motivated by belonging	I think it, it's very important in my opinion. Like I can't really put it on a scale, but even when I, like if I'm interviewing with a company, my question is always around from a culture perspective, you know, what
Aria	Values	I am motivated by belonging	I think it depends on the space...at work, it was a very different space it wasn't anything that I studied. I didn't know anything I felt like this was a time I don't speak my mind because I don't know what is going on. In spaces were I feel like I understand what is going on I tend to
Ashley	Values	I am not motivated by a sense to belong	Not very, it's not important.
Ashley	Values	I am not motivated by a sense to belong	I was saying that at this present moment and what I've grown to and matured to again and being accepted isn't important to me as it was
Bob	Values	I am not motivated by a sense to belong	I wouldn't say the feeling of belonging. Like, I never really thought about belonging anywhere until that experience. But I think my drive and my motivation just comes from me wanting to, to learn. Like, not,
Pat	Values	I felt like I belonged	I need to put myself in that position where either no one or only one or two other people can do what I can do. I don't want to be easily replaceable. So feeling needed and confident in my job is in my job or
Ciara	Values	I felt like I belonged	But like overall what motivates me is like if it's a, if it's a challenge and it's an obtainable challenge, I think it's definitely something that
Ciara	Values	I felt like I belonged	Probably my internship at Red Hat to me, And I'm not saying this in general but like overall their inclusivity and just about every single thing that, like whether you're gay, like the L G B, lgbtq, you're black, wherever culture you're from, they always made sure that everybody like had a voice at the table, piece of the pie was very inclusive, had events celebrating like, oh this is Caribbean culture, like even food and things like that too. And just overall just the company in general. You can dress how you want. Like my manager was definitely very integrated with his team. Like everybody had different backgrounds,
Nia	Values	I felt like I belonged	House Audrey was definitely a sense of belonging. They were, I I would say most of the time along the way they were definitely like rooting for me and wanted me to work with and grow there. It and it kind of honestly, that sense of belonging kind of triggered why I
Nia	Values	I felt like I belonged	I loved how much my opinion was valued and so I'd say I really, really
Dewayne	Values	I felt like I belonged	It is because I, for me it makes me feel like, okay, I understand and know what I'm doing. It, it was, I've had some res reservations about that as far as my career. I get to a place and it's like, okay, I, I really don't know this, you know, do I belong here? Am I supposed to be here doing this? And Ive been appointed there. So that means
Naomi	Values	I felt mentally prepared to deal with racism	I like that I'm dedicated to my physical health these days. I really admire that about myself. The days when it's hard to go, I still get up
Pat	Values	I felt mentally prepared to deal with racism	My mom kind of really kept things general. Like if you're disrespected then you, you stand up for yourself because regardless, I don't know what you got going on when you leave this house, but whatever it
Nia	Values	I felt mentally prepared to deal with racism	I've like always been mentally prepared for it.
Nia	Values	I felt mentally prepared to deal with racism	I've been mentally prepared, you know, my mom always, or my dad too, they always said, look, you know, you're a black woman, you're gonna have to work twice as hard and this, it's a harsh conversation,
Nia	Values	I felt mentally prepared to deal with racism	Your grades have to be better because they're gonna look at you and treat you differently and you, what are you gonna do? Cry about it or
Aria	Values	I felt mentally prepared to deal with racism	I am not shocked by racism, so I wasn't shocked by how this went down. I had experiences with white people from growing up...in 4 th grade she played chess, and she beat her English teacher in chess, she waited until she did a paper then called her out in class and said
Dewayne	Values	I felt mentally prepared to deal with racism	I think I handled it better now because before, you know, I, I still had that military kind of combativeness in me. So like if you disrespect me, I was gonna disrespect you. So now I, I let them paint themselves as a fool. I'm not going, you know how those thing is, don't don't
Naomi	Values	I felt undervalued	I felt very, you know, like just, I just felt he was treating me very differently. And I can only assume was because, you know, my school
Ashley	Values	I felt undervalued	I did a presentation on microaggressions and at, at the end of the call I was the leader who happens to be a white male, said thank you to someone in the organization who was not on call thinking that was

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Nia	Values	I felt undervalued	And she like turned on me like, she was like, well that's the job, that's what you were hired to do in the first place and she's really upset about it. And like the next week she ended up firing me as an intern and it like, and the situation just continued to escalate and there was a black woman who worked there in totally different department. When she heard about it, she just brought me over to her
Nia	Values	I felt undervalued	an internship at this company called Net Assertive and the vice president of marketing was a white woman named Lauren. And so they hired me to be an intern. When I expressed to Lauren that I was struggling in my role, it was like a social media marketing intern and social media was like still kind of fresh. Like they didn't even have
Naomi	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	I like to exercise and kind of like a preventative measure. So like, I mean, I probably, I'll probably still get stressed out at work a little bit, but the impact isn't as strong if I know I've had a workout that morning, I'm gonna work out the next day or something like that. So I really use exercise to keep me kind of in balance. And also just
Pat	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	so that was my first time trying therapy. I was going through a lot at that point in time and I was somebody like tried therapy and I was like, I didn't wanna do it, but I was like, all right, I'll try. And it, it ended up helping. After I finished with those sessions I just, I was like, I'm not gonna do this no more. I don't know what made me say
Ashley	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism	Finding black leaders and black women who were where I desired to
Ashley	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	Definitely reading, mentorship. I was a proponent for self-development, so I was always working on myself and seeing how
Ashley	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	And so finding leaders and people who looked like me who were in big four, who could mentor me and share their experiences to me.
Ciara	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	But trying to find somebody that's relatable to like how I feel has been difficult a little bit besides like I, from my, since we were virtual from my program, I started a like cap, the program was called CAP Program, which is corporate audit analyst program. So I started like a virtual meeting once a month where I invited people of color to just
Ciara	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	I will say some of the content that I like to view is more like on the social media pages or podcasts or YouTube or what have you, other people of color in tech or like the POC sites to just kind of like, you know, how are they handling it or like how, how their experience is going. Especially like, you know, the software engineers and stuff like that too. I mean in, in general too or just a matter of just talking to a peer who actually is understanding and non-judgmental or like, you
Bob	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	For me personally, I, I, I really, I, I can't, I can't, my philosophy is I can't let anybody ever get me out of character. If they do that mean
Nia	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	And even if it's, I get like it's very serious sometimes or certain things need to be addressed. Like it, my coping mechanism is to just talk
Dewayne	Values	I found tools that help me cope with racism encounters	I, I just, I always had to tell myself, you know, regardless what anyone else think, I'm gonna always give myself, give my my best and that I, I am capable of doing this. So regardless of what they say or how they feel, I have earned or I believe I should have this seat at the table. Some other things, I'm, I'm a very spiritual person. I prayed a lot and you know, just talking to mentors as well. So that has been very
Naomi	Values	Success means to me	To live a good life is, for me, for me to live a good life would be to have a good balance in spending my time doing the things that
Pat	Values	Success means to me	love the fact that I'm a family guy. My, even though we have rock, everybody's family does is you have a rocky start and, well, we had a rocky beginning and things get rocky in between. I still like the fact that I keep them close and I, I'm in Oklahoma right now on the leadership conference and they call me like, how's it going? What's it
Ashley	Values	Success means to me	I like that I am a resilient person. I like that I am a goal oriented person or solution oriented person. And I like that I went on my
Ashley	Values	Success means to me	Self-love as a young person, not living in someone else's expectation and really going after my own dreams and then learning about wealth.
Ciara	Values	Success means to me	I say in short is to just feel like well love yourself and be unique overall. Just being able to put like your, your mental first and what drives you also just like to, to be, or to feel fulfilled I guess, or satisfied is like what it needs to be successful. Cause everybody's like
Bob	Values	Success means to me	To live a good life, it just means you are happy. The people around you are happy and you don't have to stress about the future of the
Nia	Values	Success means to me	success is determined a hundred percent by happiness and comfort,
Nia	Values	Success means to me	being healthy is successful, being happy is successful, being financially stable is successful no matter what the, the, and just reaching those defined goals, like having family and good relationships determine success. I I, I don't consider it like career
Nia	Values	Success means to me	Financial freedom I would walk into, I would wake up tomorrow and
Nia	Values	Success means to me	I need flexibility. I need to tell, define the when, where, and how I work. And I will just tell me the problem and I will give you the
Aria	Values	Success means to me	Success is trying new things, whether you get them or not, being able to say, yes I tried this and it is for me, or I tried this and it isn't for me. People who are really successful tried different things. Someone who tries different things no matter the end result. A good life, means you have a lot in your life that doesn't have a price...abundance of love, friendship, opportunity. Those are things you can't replicate or
Dewayne	Values	Success means to me	And then I want to be able to take my, my personal small company, my foundation and work more in that. So that's something that's

195