Worse Than Blatant Racism: A Phenomenological Investigation of Microaggressions among Black Women

Tracy Robinson-Wood
Northeastern University

Oyenike Balogun-Mwangi
Northeastern University

Noreen Boadi
Northeastern University

Caroline Fernandes
Northeastern University

Atsushi Matsumoto
Northeastern University

Ami Popat-Jain
Northeastern University

Xiaolu Zhang
Northeastern University

Three ethnically diverse Black female researchers conducted phenomenological research using semi-structured interview questions that investigated the presence and nature of microaggressions in the lives of 17 highly educated women of African descent, ranging in age from mid-20s to late-50s. The minimum educational requirement for study participation was a completed Master's degree. Women could be enrolled in a doctoral program and pursuing any discipline or could have previously obtained a doctoral degree. The relevance of resistance theory as a framework for understanding Black women's experiences with and responses to microaggressions is investigated. Using thematic analysis within a social constructionist framework, five themes were detected: (a) Mighty Melanin Tax; (b) The Acrid Academy; (c) Underrating Race; (d) Coping as Optimal Resistance; and (e) Armored Coping. Limitations and implications for future research are included.

Tracy L. Robinson-Wood, Ed.D. is Professor of Applied Psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

Oyenike Balogun-Mwangi, M.S., is a Ph.D. Candidate in Counseling Psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

Noreen K. Boadi, M.Ed., is a Ph.D. Candidate in Counseling Psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

Caroline Fernandes, M.A., is a Ph.D. Candidate in Counseling Psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

Atsushi Matsumoto, M.S., is a Ph.D. Candidate in Counseling Psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

Ami Popat-Jain, M.A., is a Ph.D. Candidate in Counseling Psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

Xiaolu Zhang, M.A., is a CAGS Candidate in College Student Development and Counseling at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to tr.robinson@neu.edu.

Across the nation's universities, racial, gender, and sexuality diversity are touted as important to higher education and to the professional workforce. The number of Black women, however, in these settings remains disproportionately low. In 2010, Black women were 2.9% of university professors; 5.8% of university administrators; and 5.4% of people employed in management, professional, and related occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Previous studies with Black college students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) posit that many high achieving Black women, in higher education and other professional settings, experience a range of environmental and interpersonal challenges that contribute to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and a sense of not belonging (Robinson-Wood, 2009; Sue et al., 2007; Watkins, LaBrarrie, & Appio, 2010; Yosso, Ceja, Smith, & Solórzano, 2009). Microaggressions may explain such feelings among Black women and other groups with stigmatized identities. Defined as commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, microaggressions are hostile, whether intentional or unintentional, unconscious or conscious, and communicate insults and putdowns that have harmful psychological impact on targeted individuals or groups (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013; Pierce, 1985; Solórzano, Ceja, &Yosso, 2000). Within institutions of higher education, students, faculty, and administrative staff perpetuate microaggressions.

Microaggressions are insidious, chronic, and traumatizing. An accumulation of microaggression stressors has debilitating psychological impact, including reduced self-efficacy, heightened feelings of vulnerability, feelings of powerlessness, anger, hypervigilance, distancing, and isolation (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2011; Sue, 2010). Although universities aspire to increase racial diversity on campus, research highlights the disturbing occurrence of microaggressions against both students and faculty of color across race and gender (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; Pittman, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000).

The purpose of the current phenomenological study is twofold: (a) To understand how highly educated Black women talk about and make meaning of personal experiences with microaggressions; (b) To ascertain the relevance of resistance theory for interpreting highly educated Black women's responses to microaggressions. It is anticipated that this research will identify optimal resistance affect, behavior, and cognitions that could serve Black women psychologically and physiologically as they contend with microaggressions. It is also anticipated that this research will identify suboptimal resistance affect, behavior, and cognitions that may increase Black women's vulnerability to poor psychological and physiological outcomes.

Robinson and Ward (1991) developed resistance theory for Black adolescent girls. One of the primary goals of this theory was to identify strategies that Black girls and women could use to optimally push back against racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Albeit subtle at times, microaggressions are oppressive. The ability to identify and name oppression was critical to optimal resistance. Another goal of resistance theory was to help Black women avoid affect, behavior, and cognitions (strategies) associated with suboptimal resistance (see Table 1).

Grounded in an Africentric framework, Myers' theory of Optimal Psychology is central to resistance theory (Myers, 1991; Myers, 2013; Myers et al., 1991) and examines the ways Black people can function optimally while living in a society that has historically ascribed power to the segmentation of spirit and matter. In communicating the basic assumptions of her theory, Myers contrasts suboptimal and optimal worldviews. The suboptimal worldview is described as self-alienating and fragmented; existence is based on what the eyes can see. Additionally, self-worth depends on an external locus of control and is tied to materialism (e.g., feelings about personal beauty are driven by others' opinions or income defines personal value). Central to this world view, people search outside of themselves for meaning, yet seek out someone to be better than. Myers' suboptimal worldview is linked to suboptimal resistance.

In contrast, an optimal worldview is connected to optimal resistance and describes reality as both spiritual and material. Self-worth stems from intrinsic value and validation. People are worthy because they uniquely reflect spiritual energy with the highest value given to positive interpersonal relationships. Within the optimal conceptual system, the self is multidimensional, encompasses the ancestors, the

Table 1.

Suboptimal and Optimal Resistance

Suboptimal Resistance	Optimal Resistance
Isolation from others or inability to be alone.	*Umoja*—Unity with others across race, gender, class, and age.
Unhealthy reliance on others for validation.	*Kujichagalia*—Incorporation of a healthy identity.
Excessive care giving and responsibility to "fix" things and please people.	*Ujima*—Healthy reliance on self and others.
Inability to ask for help; inability to say no to others' requests.	*Ujaama*—Sharing fiscal and human resources.
Feeling like one is always under a cloud; aimlessness. Chronic fatigue and "being tired."	*Nia*—Having a sense of agency and purpose.
Passive coping; lack of insight into problem solving; a passive belief that God will take care of everything.	*Kuumba*—Actively creating new and empowering ways of being in the world.
Pessimism about one's life and future; a pervading sense that things are not going to change.	*Imani*—Trusting that life gets better and the universe is benevolent, responsive.
Suboptimal Resistance Affect Inferiority, insecurity, chronic pain and sadness, hopelessness, bitterness.	**Optimal Resistance Affect** Strength, confidence, inner peace, entitlement, hope, normal sadness.
Suboptimal Resistance Behaviors Addictive behaviors (drugs, alcohol), disordered eating; high risk sexual behaviors; externalizing power.	**Optimal Resistance Behaviors** Asking for and giving help to others; recognizing harmful practices; setting and pursuing goals; knowing how to wait.
Suboptimal Cognitions A belief that one is unworthy, unattractive, unloved, and that life would be better if you were someone else.	**Optimal Cognitions** A belief in self-agency, self-worthy, one's dreams, and an understanding that failure and crises are necessary aspects of life.

unborn, nature, and community (Myers et al., 1991).

Similar to Optimal Psychology, resistance theory includes two modalities of resistance: suboptimal resistance and optimal resistance. Further development of this model identified affect, behaviors, and cognitions (ABCs of Resistance) associated with suboptimal and optimal resistance (Robinson, 2005; see Table 1). Suboptimal resistance is survival-oriented and refers to short-term cognitive and behavioral adaptations to chronic stress that do not serve people well in the long run, but rather, tend to have immediate, numbing, soothing, and/or pleasure inducing effects (Martin, Boadi, Fernandes, Watt, & Robinson-Wood, 2013; Robinson & Ward, 1991; Robinson-Wood, 2014). Suboptimal resistance strategies include emotional eating that corresponds to weight gain, dependence upon others for validation, and unprotected sex, which increases risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Within this resistance modality, women are more vulnerable to poor social, physical, and psychological outcomes.

Conversely, optimal resistance is linked to the Nguzo Saba, a Swahili term for first fruit (Pack-Brown, Whittington-Clark, & Parker, 1998) and best known through Kwanzaa. Seven values are reflected and include unity with others, self-determination, healthy interdependence, creativity, purpose, and faith. The woman characterized by optimal resistance is able to name discrimination and identify its effects on her feelings, while purposefully managing her thoughts and behavior in support of health and healing. Seeking counseling for depression or anxiety and participating in regular exercise are consistent with optimal resistance strategies (Martin et al., 2013; Robinson & Ward, 1991).

Race, gender, and class discrimination help to explain the psychological, physiological, and economic conditions that many Black women endure (Thomas, 2004). Their lives must be understood within multiple jeopardy, which refers to the racism, sexism, and classism that Black women face as well as to the intersecting relationships among these sources of oppression (King, 2007). Although Civil Rights and Feminist movements sought to bring attention to race, gender, and class disparities, racial meanings and stereotypes appear to be a permanent feature of United States culture (Omni

& Winant, 2006). Social, epistemological, and historical influences impact the positions that Black women hold inside and outside of the academy, and need to be recognized without essentializing Black women's experiences and overlooking considerable within racial group diversity (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

An accumulation of racial discrimination contributes to a decline in mental health and negative physiological reactions (Gibbons et al., 2014), lower feelings of belonging (Clark, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, & Dufrene, 2012), substance use, breast cancer, obesity (Pascoe & Richman, 2009), and hypertension (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Even perceived racial discrimination is associated with increases in internalizing and externalizing reactions among Black women. Increases in internalizing anxiety and depression are associated with a decline in physical health and place constraints on functioning, whereas increases in externalizing, such as hostility, are related to substance use problems. These relationships affect both mental and physical health and may contribute to the disparity in health that Black people experience across class status (Gibbons et al., 2014).

According to the National Survey of Life (Williams et al., 2007), the largest psychiatric epidemiologic study of Black people in the United States, the prevalence of depression is higher for African Americans (56.5%) and Caribbean Blacks (56%) than it is for white people (39%). Despite this data, only 7% of Black women will receive some type of mental health treatment (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Cultural and religious reasons fuel a belief held among many Black women that they must resolve problems, including microaggressions, on their own. With rates of depression among Black people higher, and the likelihood of receiving mental health treatment lower, the implications of microaggressions are apparent. Nearly 60% of Black women are obese and are disproportionately represented among people with stress-related mortality and racial health disparities, such as diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension, and HIV disease (Dingfelder, 2013; Robinson-Wood, 2013).

The racism from microaggressions that students of color are exposed to is subtle yet mirrors the racism that exists in the 21st century. As institutions of higher education become more diverse, there are more possibilities for subtle

and often unconscious racial microaggressions to occur (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012). Compared to white students, students of color are vulnerable to experiencing college campuses more negatively. While research has addressed the cumulative health impact of racism on people of color, Torres, Driscoll, and Burrow (2010) highlighted the resulting stressors and health effects of racial microaggressions given frequent behavioral and environmental encounters with inferiority. This longitudinal mixed-method study of 107 Black doctoral students and recent graduates found that assumptions were made about criminality and second-class citizenship within the academy. An underestimation of abilities was particularly salient for graduate students and impacted mental health. Cultural and racial isolation and alienation in predominantly white academic settings exacerbated other stress. Racial microaggressions can increase the perception of greater life stress, which may explain the enduring nature of racial disparities in mental health (Torres et al., 2010).

Gomez, Khurshid, Freitag, and Lachuk (2011) conducted research with 40 graduate teaching assistants who identified as Black and/or international students of color. Instructors experienced avoidance and slighting from students. Although instructors, they were assumed to be subordinate to their white students and endured constant questioning of their instructional decisions. Teaching assistants suffered a reduction in self-confidence and attrition from the program. To cope, faculty did the following: (a) Sought social support from friends, family, and colleagues; (b) Chose their battles carefully; (c) Prayed or sought other spiritual means of coping; (d) Withdrew interpersonally or emotionally from offending faculty members; and (e) Resigned to the reality that racial microaggressions would exist to some degree in academia (Sue et al., 2011).

Through focus groups, Solórzano et al. (2000) studied the experiences of 34 Black students (47% male and 53% female) in three elite universities. Responses were gathered across several areas and included (a) Racial discrimination; (b) Responses to racial discrimination; and (c) The effects of racial discrimination on academic performance. Racial microaggressions, which were sources of stress, contributed to isolation, frustration, and self-doubt.

Students reported feeling invisible within the classroom, with their contributions diminished or ignored. Students also reported blatant racism at campus social events.

Microaggressions are not only experienced by students of color but also describe experiences of faculty of color. Pittman (2012) examined the experiences of 14 Black faculty (7 women and 7 men) members at a PWI. All were tenure-track except for one. Faculty provided narratives of their experiences with racial microaggressions. A majority of the faculty members experienced some form of microaggressions from white individuals. During individual interviews, each participant was asked the following question: "What role do you think race plays in your life at your institution?" Among participants, 86% indicated that race played a major role in their experiences and interactions on campus. Seventy-one percent viewed campus race relations as negative. Researchers concluded that faculty members described a negative racial climate on campus, that microaggressions were common, and that a norm of whiteness was pervasive, which contributed to Black faculty feeling disregarded.

A qualitative study that focused on 12 faculty members of color in a counseling psychology program concluded that academia could be a laborious environment. Faculty members expressed alternating feelings of invisibility, marginalization, and hypervisibility. Participants endured constant questioning by other faculty, staff, and students regarding their qualifications and credentials. Secondly, respondents reported inadequate mentoring in the workplace, which was not culturally sensitive or focused on professional growth. Generally, the respondents reported that they were expected to participate in roles of lower value and were not offered roles congruent with their expertise. Women faculty had difficulty determining if discrimination was race- or gender-based and some were self-conscious with respect to choice of clothing, hairstyle, or manner of speech (Constantine et al., 2008).

Griffin, Pifer, Humphrey, and, Hazelwood (2011) used an interpretive multi-case study method to explore the experiences of Black professors. Interviews were conducted with 28 Black professors (57% male, 43% female) at two public research universities. The aim of the study was to explore two important questions:

(a) How do Black professors describe their perceptions of and experiences with race and racism on their respective campuses? and (b) How do these individuals respond to the more challenging climates they may encounter, and from where or whom do they draw support to persist despite hostile climates? Using a systematic coding process, participants stated that race significantly influenced their campus experiences. Professors revealed that personal and institutional racism occurred. Some participants reported their race was viewed as their primary identity and their title as professor was secondary. Black women, in response to marginalization, may seek a "home place," which refers to essential spaces where personal and professional validation can occur by providing women with emotional support and opportunities, such as at research centers, where their work is welcome.

Faculty of color face unique challenges while negotiating racial-cultural discussions in their courses (Sue et al., 2011). This was especially relevant when white students were unaware of their white privilege and would invalidate the experiences of students of color in the classroom. In the same way, faculty of color found that they were victims of microaggressions as racial minorities (e.g., students challenged their authority in the classroom as well as questioned the accuracy of class content). Managing personal feelings and classroom discussions took their toll, particularly when faculty of color felt isolated, invalidated by white faculty peers, yet experienced institutional pressure to attain tenure and receive positive student evaluations.

Racial and cultural microaggressions can trigger traumatic memories at an individual or racial/ethnic group level (Helms et al., 2010). Although not everyone who is exposed to microaggressions will develop a stress-related reaction, impacted individuals may experience anger, sadness, hopelessness, fear, or PTSD. The number, duration, and intensity of microaggressions may affect subsequent symptoms such as insomnia, body pains, and headaches (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Additionally, people may experience shame, confusion, guilt, and self-blame for traumatic occurrences (Carlson, 1997). Clearly, the psychological and physiological toll of microaggressions on students and faculty has been documented. However,

there are gaps, namely a theoretical framework, for identifying strategies that may promote or hinder health among Black women in their responses to microaggressions.

Method

This phenomenological study was conducted in an effort to describe and understand highly educated Black women's experiences with microaggressions. Qualitative research allows the researcher to enter the personal and subjective world of others by using thick descriptions and interviews (Jordan, 2006). The three interviewers are highly educated women of African descent. One researcher is American-born and a university professor of counseling psychology with family ties to the American south. A second researcher is American-born and a Ph.D. counseling psychology student of Ghanaian ancestry. A third researcher is Nigerian-born and a Ph.D. counseling psychology student. By virtue of being "native" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), we are insiders and have personal experiences with microaggressions. We co-exist as listeners to and observers of Black women's stories about microaggressions yet function as co-resisters, as tellers of our own microaggression stories, as subjects, targets, and witness bearers. We encountered stories that resonated with our own stories. Because of our experiences with microaggressions, we were aware of the possibility for subjective interpretations and bias.

Although this work is not autoethnographic, our experiences were "bracketed" as part of this phenomenological investigation. Moustakas (1994) used the term bracketing to describe the process by which investigators set aside their own experiences, as much as possible, and take a fresh, transcendental perspective on the experience being examined. During interviews and following the receipt of electronic responses to interview questions, we mined our personal stories and how they located us within the context of our interviewees' stories. By practicing reflexivity, we looked at ourselves while engaging in the research. Our intention was to avoid the projection of our ideas and values onto the participants, their experiences, and their interpretations of their experiences. Throughout data collection, we spoke with one another about the interview process and its personal impact on us. We were attentive

to internal conflicts that arose (e.g., hearing a participant blame herself for microaggressions). As informed readers, we sought to make sense of and interpret participants' words and statements and asked participants if our meaning making about and interpretations of their experiences as Black women encountering microaggressions was consistent with their understanding. Given the importance of a researcher's focus on a participant's interpretations of her own experiences, we invited women to make sense of our understanding of their experiences or interpretations (Maxwell, 1992). We also understood through the recursive process of being interviewed and responding to interview questions that meaning and experience were being produced and reproduced between the women and ourselves (Braun & Clark, 2006). This relational integrity served the research project well given that rapport-building was required for a woman to invite another woman to hear her story of injustice and struggle without judgment or minimization. By knowing our participants, trust was more likely to be present and was pivotal to this work due to the intimate nature of the shared material (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007).

Between 2012 and 2014, 17 Black women participated in semi-structured interviews or answered semi-structured interview questions. The type of sampling used to identify the sample was purposive. We identified our sample through professional contexts (school, community, and work). In purposive sampling, researchers select a sample based on their experiences with and knowledge of the group to be sampled. Selection criteria required research participants to be Black and included women from the African continent, the Caribbean, and North America. Prospective participants could be born anywhere in the world as long as they resided in the United States at the time of the interviews. Participants needed to be female, of any age, with a completed Master's degree and/or enrolled in or had previously acquired a doctoral degree in any discipline. A desire to understand how highly educated Black women made meaning of their microaggressions helped us to establish clear sampling criteria, which allowed us to select and describe our sample (Creswell, 1994).

The women ranged in age from mid-20s to late-50s. At the time of the interviews, they lived in the mid-west, west coast, and east coast. Among the 17 women, 8 women held doctoral degrees; 2 women had Master's degrees; and 7 women were doctoral students. Seventeen women allowed us to honor a diversity of Black women across age, occupational, and educational levels. The women occupied various professional and managerial positions. Consistent with national data on high rates of non-marriage among Black women across income and education, 2 of the 17 were married at the time of the interviews; 7 were mothers. Each woman was given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality and preserve anonymity (see Table 2).

Prior to the research being conducted, all 17 women were given an informed consent that they retained along with a list of toll free numbers to call in the event of experiencing distress following the recall of microaggressions. The Office of Human Research Protection offered this suggestion. We defined microaggressions in the informed consent form and were careful to avoid inviting into the research women who we personally knew were in the psychological throes of an ongoing microaggression. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Face-to-face and phone interviews were the primary method of data collection. We were sensitive and flexible concerning how we went about collecting data and therefore offered women the option of an interview, electronic submission of their responses with a follow-up phone call, or in-person interview. Several recorded phone interviews were conducted with women who lived on the west coast, mid-west, or outside of the northeast, or whose schedules were more amenable to a phone interview than to a face-to-face interview. Each of the five women who chose to write responses to interview questions had previously spoken with her researcher about personal microaggressions. Following the receipt of electronically returned responses, the researcher contacted the participant to debrief; debriefing sessions were not recorded.

In this phenomenological investigation, we were interested in knowing about the prevalence of microaggressions in highly educated Black women's lives and how women constructed meaning about these microaggressions. Each participant was asked the following questions: (a) Have you ever experienced microaggressions in class or at work? (b) Have you ever experienced microaggressions outside of class or

Table 2.

 Sample

Pseudonym	Degree	Profession	Age	Marital Status	Mom	Microaggression Type
Allie	Doctorate	Faculty	40s	Single	No	AA, OR, MT, UR
Trina	Doctorate	Faculty	50s	Single	Yes	AA, MT, AC, OR
Lana	Doctorate	Faculty	40s	Single	Yes	AA, UR, MT,AC
Jill	Master's	Ph.D. Student	30s	Married	Yes	AA, MT, UR,AC
Toni	Master's	School Counselor	50s	Divorced	Yes	AA, UR, MT, AC, OR
Viola	Doctorate	Consultant	40s	Divorced	Yes	AA, UR, MT, OR
Heather	Doctorate	Psychologist	50s	Single	Yes	AC, MT
Nancy	Master's	Ed. Specialist	50s	Single	No	AA, MT
Nora	J.D.	Law Profession	50s	Single	No	AA, UR, MT, OR
Sara	Master's	Higher Ed. Staff	30s	Single	Yes	AA, UR, MT, OR AC
Julie	Master's	Ph.D. Student	30s	Single	No	AA, MT, AC
Kate	J.D.	Lawyer	30s	Married	No	UR, MT, OR
Meva	Master's	Ph.D. Student	20s	Single	No	UR, MT, AC, OR
Diane	Master's	Ph.D. Student	20s	Single	No	AA, MT, UR, AC
Kiera	Master's	Ph.D. Student	20s	Single	No	AA, MT, AC, OR
Cindy	Master's	Ph.D. Student	20s	Single	No	MT, UR, OR
Jan	Master's	Child Therapist	20s	Single	No	MT, AC

Legend: AA—Acrid Academy   MT—Mighty Melanin Tax   UR—Underrating Race

AC—Armored Coping   OR—Optimal Resistance Coping

work? (c) Could you describe what happened? (d) How did the situation make you feel? (e) How did you respond to the situation and how have you coped? (f) Has the situation changed your interactions with those involved? (g) What would you like to see happen at school/work to remedy this situation? and (h) How did this interview make you feel? Semi-structured interview questions were created within a social constructionist framework, which looks at how

a certain reality is created by the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Our goals were to listen to Black women's experiences with microaggressions, understand how they made meaning out of and coped with race and gender-based microaggressions, and capture the context in which microaggressions were experienced. We wanted to acknowledge and affirm the reality of microaggressions among women who had "made it" educationally and occupationally.

Interpretations were examined with an understanding of the research literature, which highlights the existence, manifestation, and prevalence of microaggressions among highly educated racial minorities. Black women live in a society that esteems whiteness and maleness (e.g., multiple jeopardy), and despite the attainment of a graduate degree, questions are raised about qualifications and abilities are underestimated (Constantine et al., 2008). To navigate this unjust terrain, women are required to contend with racism and sexism. We sought to tell a story that accurately presented the microaggressions experienced by a subgroup of highly educated Black women. Turning words, pauses, emotion, and hesitations into categories or themes was the goal. Toward that end, we wove an analysis of narratives with data extracts while contextualizing our work within the existing research literature.

Themes were flagged and interpreted using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, reporting, and analyzing patterns (themes) within data and minimally organizes and describes the data in rich detail (Braun & Clark, 2006). It assists the researcher in answering questions being addressed and is theoretically flexible. Patterns are identified through a rigorous process of data familiarization, data coding, theme development, and revision (Braun & Clark, 2006). Transcriptions, responses to questions, and debriefing sessions were reviewed. Observations that piled up into a pattern and resonated between subjects were identified, clustered, and defined as thematic. For instance, data extracts or coded chunks of data taken from a data set (a woman's interview), across age cohorts revealed that K-12 education, university, and work environments were often experienced as precarious, albeit educationally, professionally, and financially beneficial. Women discussed having to prove their intellectual metal in a climate where assumptions of difference, inferiority, and/or incompetence existed. Such talk pointed us towards looking at a pattern of responses, which were identified as a theme. As counseling researchers, we were attuned to the emotions reflected in women's words, such as sadness, anger, and frustration, as they spoke or wrote about school or work. Institutional and personal racism was frequent enough that women were required to make choices regarding which discriminatory practices would be attended to and which ones could wait or be dismissed.

Qualitative data analysis occurred simultaneously with the activity of data collection. As we spoke with women, we mined current interviews as well as previously collected interviews for meaning making, pattern development, and thematic emergence. Participating in these activities simultaneously, which Creswell (1994) maintained is a clear difference between qualitative and quantitative research, caught and sustained our attention through the research process. Our research process was multidimensional, layered, and a fluid, non-linear process that involved gathering information from the field, sorting and arranging the information into categories, placing and formatting the information into a vivid story, and writing, revising, and rewriting the qualitative text (Creswell, 1994). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and there were several checks for validity that allowed us to factually describe the data. Our phenomenological study, with its emphasis on the human experience examined from the rich and detailed descriptions of the women being studied, compelled us to tell women's experiences correctly and truthfully. We needed to accurately attribute meaning according to women's perspectives; thus, interpretive validity was critical. Interpretive validity refers to the meanings, beliefs, intentions, feelings, and thoughts (Maxwell, 1992) that women gave to the microaggressions they experienced at school, work, and in retail settings. Interpretive validity was applied to our understanding of the five women, who although electronically returned written responses to questions, wanted to support this research and consented to participate in the study. We observed that participating in this way allowed women the space to reflect upon and respond to questions at their own pace.

In ascertaining the relevance of resistance theory to approach, frame, and explain Black

women's experiences and behaviors with microaggressions, theoretical validity was central. Although it is revealed in the future research section that suboptimal resistance was not identified as a theme, we are mindful that different researchers might have coded it as such (Maxwell, 1992), given that suboptimal affect, behavior, and cognitions were observed (Robinson, 2005). In an attempt to neutralize bias inherent across interviewers and different contexts of data collection (face-to-face interview, phone, electronic transmission of responses), as well as to enhance the integrity of the research, investigator triangulation was critical. Triangulation was realized by involving multiple investigators and research team members' review and critique of all aspects of the research process (Golafshani, 2003). Investigator triangulation allowed the three authors involved in the data collection to construct explanations for Black women's experiences with and responses to microaggressions (Mathison, 1988). Themes were discussed, reviewed, and revised. We participated in an audit trail and evaluated different aspects of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Due to our commitment to maintaining reliability and validity, triangulation provided us with opportunities to address contradictions and inconsistencies (Creswell, 1994; Mathison, 1988). For example, during initial data analysis, the theme "natural hair as unnatural" was included but eventually dropped. Although observed in some of the young women's narratives, established thematic criteria were not met among half of each researcher's sample.

Results

Women were gracious and passionate in recounting their experiences with and stories of microaggressions. Five central themes were detected: (a) Mighty Melanin Tax; (b) The Acrid Academy; (c) Underrating Race; (d) Coping as Optimal Resistance; and (e) Armored Coping. We present these themes in the following subsections.

Mighty Melanin Tax

Regardless of the sizeable age range among research participants and researchers, all women reported the presence of microaggressions in their lives, and this demonstrates agreement and convergence of data (Mathison, 1988; see Table 2). Microaggressions were talked about in a variety of ways and experienced as ridiculous, offensive, frustrating, unbelievable, and sad. The mighty melanin tax theme refers to the massive physiological and psychological toll that chronic microaggressions levied upon visible Black women, including those who occupy elite and niche positions, or have earned tenure.

The non-experimental nature of this study does not allow statements of causality—only relationship. While we are unable to definitively state that microaggressions caused health conditions, as forms of racial discrimination, microaggressions are stressful, linked to chronic discrimination (Torres et al., 2010), and have an adverse impact on mental and physical health (Gibbons et al., 2014; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Williams et al., 2003). The following physiological and psychological conditions were present among our sample: (a) High blood pressure; (b) Recurring cancers; (c) Overweight/obesity; (d) Nosebleeds; (e) Diabetes; (f) Heart palpitations; (g) Thyroid disorder; (h) Headaches; (i) Sleep disturbance; (j) Anxiety/panic attacks; (k) Fatigue/exhaustion; (l) Forced compliance; (m) Reduction in the amount of diversity work; (n) Excessive alcohol use; and (o) Feelings of sadness, anger, resentment, and frustration.

The Acrid Academy

The research literature indicates that school and work can be alienating and harsh places for most highly educated Black people to negotiate, due largely to racial discrimination expressed through microaggressions (Gomez et al., 2011; Griffin et al., 2011; Harwood et al., 2012). Our participants included Ph.D. students, faculty, and professionals who spoke of other people's knowledge being legitimized over their own, and their capabilities being questioned and underestimated by peers, students, and faculty (Constantine et al., 2008; Torres et al., 2010). Allie shared an example of the academy as acrid in subjecting faculty of color to scrutiny and questions about competence. She discussed a fairly common practice of undergraduates privileging information acquired previously from other faculty, although they were presently enrolled in her class. In response to the content in her lecture, some of Allie's students would question

her: "But Dr. so-and-so said this. Are you sure you're right?" Allie was confident in her knowledge and would give students a look that was meant to convey the message: "I can't believe you just asked me that." While maintaining her authority without verbally addressing a student's comments was effective, she frequently engaged in this exhausting strategy. The acrid academy communicated to women, who were employees and Ph.D. students, that they did not fully belong (Sue et al., 2011), which contributed to fatigue, thoughts of departure (looking for work elsewhere), feelings of second-class citizenship, and self-doubt.

Underrating Race

Throughout society, race has grandmaster status (Robinson-Wood, 2013), tends to eclipse other identities, and existed at the center of most microaggressions that women described. Across school and work settings, race significantly informed Black women's experiences (Griffin et al., 2011) yet emerged as a fragile and fugitive topic to engage. At the same time, race had enormous power to create discomfort and inflame tension, particularly when Black women named racism to white people who seemed reluctant to recognize racism as real, were not mindful of their white privilege, and/or denied individual racism (Sue et al., 2007; 2011). The relevance of race in the explanation of Black women's differential treatment or negative experiences was met with disbelief and invalidation, primarily by white classmates and coworkers. Jill believed that whites dismissed the reality of her racial experiences: "I was told that if racism happens, it's because you have a racist mindset and you're thinking of racism.... It's because you're segregating yourself and you're racist. This stuff always, always comes from white men." Jill, a Ph.D. student, was accused of playing the race card by exploiting race and invoking its name in situations where race was perceived by others to be irrelevant or unfounded. Sue et al. (2007) referred to this phenomenon of nullifying people's racial experiences as a microinvalidation.

Coping as Optimal Resistance

Resistance theory was applied to the analysis of the interviews. More specifically, optimal resistance affect, behaviors, and cognitions

were detected among study participants, reflected the construct of optimal resistance (see Table 1), met study criteria for definition as a theme, and manifested as strategies of optimal resistance in the following ways: (a) Participation in supportive communities that were available for dialogue, support, and refueling; (b) Recognition that systemic racism fuels microaggressions and that a woman is not the cause of discriminatory treatment, yet is responsible for dealing with the microaggressions; (c) Implementation of strategies for contending with microaggressions. For example, Nora, Nancy, and Allie wrote to corporate retail headquarters to complain about discriminatory treatment while shopping, which included being ignored at a high-end store, being followed while shopping, and being asked if there was an intention to pay for items in one's basket; all of these instances reflect ascriptions of criminality, low-income, or governmental assistance status. Women refused to spend money at a store until an apology was extended; (d) Sought therapy to heal from traumatic memories associated with chronic racial microaggressions, ostracism, and objectification as an angry Black woman; (e) Exercised; (f) Felt the normal sadness and resentment associated with experiencing microaggressions; and (g) Made decisions to take action against some but not all microaggressions experienced (see the list below).

Core to optimal resistance is existing within empowering and healthy relationships. Sara, an educational professional in higher education, described the therapeutic nature of talking about one's microaggresssions, sharing with others, and reaching out to targets of microaggressions: "I have a colleague at my university who is [Black]. She doesn't work in my department, but she experiences blatant racism and discrimination. So I reached out to her: 'You're never going to believe what happened to me today.'" Sara's consciousness of the deleterious impact that microaggressions have on Black women's lives, as well as knowledge and use of her sense of agency, supported unity with her colleague, and lessened racial isolation.

Armored Coping

Our analysis of interviews uncovered coping responses that were akin to being in battle. This type of coping was themed as armored due

Table 3.

Optimal Resistance Strategies to Microaggressions

- Sought therapy

- Journaled

- Went for a walk/exercised

- Prayed

- Improved diet

- Humor--Laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation

- Affirmed personal authority

- Called a friend/family

- Participated in this research

- Wrote to a store to complain of discrimination

- Persevered (e.g., stayed in school)

- Confronted people when inappropriate comments were made

- Picked battles

- Consulted with an institutional grievance officer

- Walked away from an untenable situation

- Ascribed inappropriate behavior to the nature of all humans to make judgments

- Discussed occurrences on social media websites

- Engaged in arts and crafts

- Mentored and educated newly admitted students of color

to the protective psychological gear that women seemed to adorn at school and/or at work in their efforts to confront doubts from others, as well as from within oneself, about their worth, capabilities, and legitimacy. Armored coping included: (a) Informing colleagues before the start of a project that a woman was capable and highly trained; (b) Being on the lookout for slights

and digs; and (c) Engaging in constant preparation to intercept friendly fire (e.g., unintentional putdowns) from colleagues, classmates, faculty, and students. Word rehearsal, practice of retorts, over-preparation, and distancing from perceived adversaries exemplify constant watchfulness and appears to be an anxiety-related symptom of racial microaggression stress (Torres et al., 2010). Our interviews revealed a daunting, dual, and dueling process of women deciding which environmental indignities not to respond to while functioning in a state of heightened attention in order to anticipate the inevitable microaggression. "I've learned how to pick my battles. On the one hand, I think that people should be called out for making crazy, racist comments but on the other hand, it takes away from my own experience in the classroom as a student to constantly be on guard, to have this sort of stance of vigilance, constantly just waiting for someone to make a crazy remark that I have to respond to." Julie, a Ph.D. student, echoed the importance of picking her battles and being battle-ready to confront microaggressions, while engaging in self-care (e.g., preserve energy) so that she could address microaggressions that should not be ignored.

Discussion

Our research findings corroborate other research on microaggressions among graduate students, faculty, and professionals of color, namely that microaggressions target people on the basis of their phenotype, are stressful, sometimes traumatic, pervasive, and associated with psychological and physiological health conditions (Constantine et al., 2008; Gomez et al., 2011; Harwood et al., 2012; Pittman, 2012; Sue et al., 2007; 2011). Microaggressions occurred within student development, counseling, and psychology graduate programs that have a history of advocating social justice and promoting the mental health of people from stigmatized groups. While professional organizations have provided ample multicultural training and educational resources (American Psychological Association, 2003; 2012), the full benefit of these resources is diminished when educators are unaware of and/or reticent to look at their attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate microaggressions.

As intensely relational human beings, microaggressions are particularly injurious to women when they occur within workspaces and classroom environments. Within these contexts, people co-exist together as colleagues, classmates, students, program faculty, and cohort members. Lana surmised, with palpable sadness, that microaggressions were worse than blatant racism, fueled largely by her belief that program faculty were more than colleagues but friends. Because microaggressions can be subtle and ambiguous in higher education (Harwood et al., 2012), as well as in other settings, multicultural competency training, particularly for professionals who already perceive themselves to be multiculturally competent, may enhance the quality of work and school environments, and reduce their acridity.

Women worked and studied in environments where societal discourses, or cloaked uses of language that represent potent meanings (Robinson-Wood, 2013), lurked around the edges, were rarely named, yet structured attitudes and influenced behaviors. Examples of discourses include Black women as less intellectually capable than white people, angry, and prone to ascribing race indiscriminately across situations. Most study participants had an understanding of these racial dynamics, which contributed to a guarded navigation of their laborious racial terrains, often as the only Black person, or one of very few Black people, or other people of color.

In our study, affect, behaviors, and cognitions consistent with optimal resistance were evident, and empowered women with clarity about the systemic nature of microaggressions, supported women's goal attainment, and provided flexibility and complexity in thinking and behavior. Affect associated with optimal resistance included hope, confidence, and entitlement to one's place at work or in the academy. Optimal resistance behaviors were observed when women sought help when needed, gave help to others, set goals, and overcame obstacles. A belief in self-worth, personal agency, and the authenticity of one's dreams describe optimal resistance cognitions. The pursuit of advanced degrees or professional positions occurred within settings that valued educational attainment, supported career success, and encouraged the enrollment and hiring of racial minorities, but were also spaces where microaggressions, as contemporary forms of subtle racism, were routine.

Armored coping featured prominently in this research and embodied optimal resistance, evident through unity with others, faith, purpose, and determination to succeed despite obstacles. At the same time, armored coping typified the chronic fatigue, unrelenting self-doubt, and insecurity of suboptimal resistance. There was insufficient theoretical support to cast armored coping as either suboptimal or optimal; it appears to be both. Power dynamics were at play in that women often worked with, were supervised by, or received instruction from people they perceived to be unsupportive of them or untrustworthy.

Limitations and Future Research

According to resistance theory, suboptimal affect, behaviors, and cognitions include feelings of inferiority, addictive behavior, disordered eating, externalizing power, and the belief that one is unworthy and unattractive (Robinson, 2005). We did not code suboptimal resistance as a theme since established criteria for defining themes (observation across half of each researcher's sample) were not met; they were more likely to be present within single participants and were perceptible when a woman (a) Blamed herself for race-based hostility directed toward her; (b) Suppressed feelings; (c) Avoided thoughts or conversations about microaggressions; (d) Isolated herself from systems of supports; (e) Externalized power by physically altering oneself in an effort to please others (e.g., put a chemical in natural hair due to an internalized belief that straight hair was more attractive than natural hair); (f) Had persistent and consuming anger; (g) Was chronically overweight or obese; and (h) Consumed copious amounts of alcohol.

Suboptimal resistance is associated with short-term solutions (e.g., comfort eating and drinking) that offer immediate gratification and are soothing, but do not serve women well in the long run; vulnerability is increased to poor health outcomes, such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and alcohol addiction. Despite a convergence of data across researchers regarding the existence of microaggressions among highly educated Black women in their 20s through their 50s, there were sites of vulnerability that are developmental in nature. Isolation from communities of support and chemically altering natural hair to appease others, are

characteristic of suboptimal strategies that were primarily observed among women in their 20s. Such strategies are contrasted to healthy solitude, consciousness of the politics of hair, and reliance on an internal center that informs personal beauty decisions. Future research on microaggressions among Black women should include larger numbers of highly educated Black women in their 20s to more fully investigate the role of hair as a specific location for racial and gender microaggressions. Overweight was more common among women in their 40s and 50s, as were chronic medical conditions such as diabetes and cancers. Research is needed to investigate relationships among suboptimal resistance, armored coping, traumatic symptoms, and the cumulative and negative effect of microaggressions on mental and physical health over time. As part of the aging process, reports of racial discrimination may become more differentiated as the ability for people to compartmentalize negative experiences increases (Torres et al., 2010).

Given the barrage of microaggressions to which Black women are subjected, resistance theory, as a lens for interpreting Black women's responses to and experiences with microaggressions, is a strength of this study and may encourage the use of strategies that support optimal resistance; nonetheless, limitations exist. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and we knew the interviewees. Weaknesses associated with purposive sampling and knowing interviewees include the potential for inaccuracy in the researcher's criteria and the possibility of bias. Familiarity can support research of a sensitive nature to the extent that triangulation plays a crucial role in addressing bias. Although interviews are a primary mode of data collection in qualitative research, they did not occur in a natural field setting and may have yielded different responses to questions than those submitted electronically by a subset of participants. Debriefing sessions, following the electronic receipt of responses, were not recorded between participants and interviewers. While focus groups provide vertical and horizontal interactions among researchers and group participants, our study did not include this important form of qualitative data collection. The theme "natural hair as unnatural" was not retained as it did not meet established thematic criteria. This study did not

analyze the different ethnicities represented. A larger sample of ethnically diverse Black women across immigrant status would allow further exploration of unique cultural experiences, and investigate regional, developmental, and linguistic differences, while examining any relationships with microaggressions. Finally, more research is needed to investigate microaggressions within the context of intersectionality among Black women who are sexual minorities and/or among women with disabilities.

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