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Experiencing Racial Battle Fatigue at the Top: Perspectives of Black Community College Presidents

Bryan K. Hotchkins
Texas Tech University

Jon McNaughtan
Texas Tech University

Jarett Lujan
Texas Tech University

Lola Banks
Oakland Community College

This qualitative study applied critical race theory to examine how six presidents of African descent respond to racial battle fatigue (RBF) in their leadership roles at predominantly White community colleges. Findings indicate participants responded to RBF by seeking off-campus peer support to avoid continual focus on their psychological and physiological experiences, which aided in their ability to continue in leadership roles. There were two primary emergent themes: (a) Less is More and (b) Response Matters. Less is More is defined as purposeful delayed processing of RBF ramifications to increase leadership capacity, focus on job roles, and avert emotional implosion. Response Matters is defined as responding to racism in a way that frames oneself as professionally nonthreatening and that enables oneself to perform leadership roles despite enduring RBF.

Keywords: racial battle fatigue; community college; president, leadership

Introduction

Much of the research on the leadership of college and university presidents can be divided into two significant areas including the practice of leadership (McNaughtan et al., 2021; Powers & Schloss, 2017) and the way experiences employing these presidential skills are associated with the president's identities (e.g., J. S. Davis & Greenlee, 2023; McNaughtan & Lujan, 2023; Munoz, 2009). For example, some studies shared the voices of Black presidents as they

consistently averted the racist legacy of American prejudice (Gasman, 2011; Ricard & Brown, 2008); understood the nuanced histories, missions, culture, and context within which universities are run (Gasman, 2006; Minor, 2004); and navigated inaccurate stereotypes that divide Black presidents into conservative, militant, and Uncle Tom caricatures (L. Davis, 1998; Warlick, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to provide insight into how presidents of African descent, who also self-identify being Black as a salient identity, respond to racial battle fatigue (RBF) at predominantly White community colleges (Smith, 2004, 2014). While work focused on RBF has been done in many higher education contexts, including community colleges, understanding how community college presidents, particularly those of African descent, navigate RBF on predominantly White campuses can provide support for presidents of color and insight for campus stakeholders. Therefore, two distinct research questions guided the study:

1. How do Black community college presidents experience RBF on predominantly White community college campuses?
2. How do Black community college presidents respond to the experience of RBF?

This analysis combined the descriptive approach of studying presidents with the practical insight of these leaders to seek to understand how the pathway to the presidency prepared the presidents to face racism and how their current context informed their practice.

Literature Review

The college presidency is a difficult job in general, with the average president remaining in the post for approximately the same amount of time as the average student (4 years for community college presidents and 6 for those at universities) and being given increasingly challenging responsibilities (McNaughtan, 2017). Additional challenges have been identified for members of historically marginalized populations who are hired to lead colleges (Alexander, 2014; Burmicky & Duran, 2022; Raines, 2017). Here we present a review of the literature on the challenges the role of college president comes with and then discuss how the intersection of identities further exacerbates this role. Presidents face fatigue from the growing challenges of their office, and for presidents or color, especially women, RBF presents additional challenges (Delgado & Allen, 2021; Munoz, 2009).

Leadership in Community Colleges

Community college presidents face incredibly complex environments and often obtain their role without formal leadership training (McNaughtan, 2018). While most college presidents have held some executive role (e.g., provost, vice-president for student affairs, etc.), most come into the presidency without previous or tangential presidential

training and are required to learn on the job (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Eddy (2005) found that community college presidents designed mental maps to guide their decision-making. These mental maps provided structure for presidents as they made new decisions where they might not have had all the information. Similarly, presidents framed their work within the context of their external environment. This cognitive work helped presidents to understand challenges within a set of boundaries that helped inform decision-making. Despite this complexity, presidents were expected to provide institutional stakeholders with accurate information and clear direction (Eddy, 2010; McNaughtan et al., 2019). Eddy (2010) described this responsibility in alignment with Weick's (1989) concept of sensemaking and sense-giving, wherein leaders seek to help campus stakeholders better understand decisions and the direction of the institution. Additional research has outlined specific skills presidents can employ to support their campus constituents, such as communication processes (McNaughtan & Pal, 2019), fundraising (Carter & Dungan, 2010), and financial management (Mullin et al., 2015).

Identity and Leadership in Community Colleges

Several scholars have identified that race and gender play pivotal roles in the leadership development, experiences, and career trajectories of Black administrators in higher education (D. R. Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). In a study of middle- and senior-level Black higher education administrators, Hinton (2012) found that Black women identified race as more salient to their leadership roles. In some cases, it is typical for a Black administrator to be seen as a Black person first and a woman second (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). However, for many Black women, race and gender in combination negatively affected their careers (Patitu & Hinton, 2003), with many women citing experiences of racial and gender discrimination and oppression (D. R. Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Distinguishing between racism and sexism can be difficult for Black women administrators as the two often exist simultaneously (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Since Black women experience discrimination based on the intersection of their identities (Crenshaw, 2019), it is important to distinguish their leadership experiences from those of Black men.

Theoretical Framework

This 4-month qualitative study, which applied critical race theory (CRT; Howard, 2008; Matsuda et al., 1993), examined how six presidents of African descent responded to RBF (Smith, 2008a, 2010) while enacting leadership at predominantly White community colleges. According to Smith et al. (2016), RBF is the result of "toxic and persistent racialized microaggressions and the subsequent negative health sequelae on marginalized and oppressed people. RBF is experienced at both individual and group levels simply by being a part

of a racially oppressed group" (p. 1192). Furthermore, Smith (2004, 2008b; Smith et al., 2020) situated RBF as the cumulative psychosocial-physiological impact experienced by racially marginalized targets who endure racial micro and macroaggressions. Subsequently, racial micro and macroaggressions were defined as "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Sue, 2010, p. 3). Therefore, it is important to note that since RBF and racial macroaggressions are experienced as threats (Arnold et al., 2016; Chancellor, 2019; Corbin et al., 2018; Hartlep & Ball, 2019; Okello et al., 2020; Rollock, 2021), these acts reinforce the notion that exposure to racism is harmful due to the gross nature of what Pierce (1974) situated as subtle "mini-assaults" that have a cumulative impact.

Since CRT is a methodological tool that allows us to examine the overarching impact of racism, the following tenets were applied to unpack how study participants experienced RBF in their presidential capacities: (a) CRT situates racism as endemic; (b) CRT opposes meritocracy, colorblindness, neutrality, and objectivity as legal notions; (c) CRT provides a historically contextual critique of ahistoricism; (d) CRT uses counterstory-telling to center the experiential knowledge of people of color when unpacking law and society; (e) CRT is interdisciplinary; and (f) CRT attempts to eradicate racial oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, 2019). These frameworks were applied in concert to analyze participant narratives.

Data and Methods

The study participants included six presidents of African descent who partook in three semistructured interviews that lasted no more than 75 minutes each, resulting in approximately 120 minutes of total conversation with each participant. Additionally, predominantly White community college institutional public information and archival documents were included in the data corpus to provide contextual nuance for each campus. To illustrate, student demographics, community urbanicity, and community college Carnegie classification (e.g., Minority Serving Institution, Hispanic-serving Institution) were considered when conducting data analysis. Snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) rendered three women and three men for this study. Table 1 includes some basic descriptive information for our sample. The average years in the presidency for our sample was 6, with the lowest tenure being 2 years and highest being over 10 years. The average student enrollment was 10,000 students with an average of 60% of those students identifying as White. We utilized Zoom to conduct, record, and transcribe the interviews (McClure & McNaughtan, 2021). We then applied cross-case analysis as we engaged with the data (Yin, 2018), with the consideration that "four

Table 1

Selected Descriptive Information for the Sample

Pseudonym	Years in Office	Est. Total Enrollment	Students Identifying as White (%)
Micah	2	10,000	75
Veronique	10	15,000	60
Aaron	8	5,000	70
Kristine	10	15,000	60
Jerome	4	5,000	52
Jaqueline	2	15,000	54

to six participants provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 160).

Study criteria were as follows: (a) president of a predominantly White community college and (b) self-identify as a person of African descent. Interviews focused on presidential roles and how presidents dealt with racial consternation, empowered the campus community to combat racism, and perceived the adverse impact of RBF on their ability to be leaders. Semistructured interviews were conducted (Yin, 2018). Trustworthiness was established by achieving triangulation, which included two participants' semistructured interviews from different institutional sites, which allowed for experiential corroborations of the phenomenon, thereby establishing thick descriptions from multiple data points. Participant member check audits, used as triangulation sources, confirmed perspectives and served as peer-research debrief. Pseudonyms were also given to each participant; some pseudonyms were selected in collaboration with the participant, although most declined to offer a preferred name.

The interview-coding data process applied Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step qualitative approach: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Confirmed triangulation was accomplished by extensive review of coded data (Patton, 2001) and through the match of a-priori labels to CRT tenets, which allowed for the triangulation of emergent themes among participant interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reconstructed data were created via axial coding. During multiple research-team meetings, final themes emerged based on repeated theme association (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

The findings of this study contribute to research about community college presidents of African descent and the way they respond to RBF (Smith, 2004, 2014; Smith et al., 2011). Furthermore, their strategies to avert racial microaggressive exposure and overt racism (Essed, 2002; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Sue et al., 2007) are also discussed. The examination of participants' RBF-responsive experiences explained the benefits of seeking community solutions when harmed and explained how the participants perceived the range of exposure within their educational contexts. Two themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) Less is More and (b) Response Matters. Participants indicated that strategies used to avert RBF included seeking off-campus peer support and avoiding continual focus on their psychological and physiological outcomes, and that these strategies aided their ability to effectively execute leadership roles. Furthermore, participants shared that they felt compelled to actively conceal their feelings from college employees, especially regarding how they experienced RBF, to avoid making it an "issue" with on-campus constituencies.

Less Is More

> You can't dwell on it, as you well know, because if you were to dwell on it, your physical being and mental well-being would probably not be manageable. And you would find yourself in a state of influx to the point where you can't be productive or continue to do your life. So you've got to figure out: "How can I learn from it? How can I make myself stronger? How can I make myself resilient? And when I can't do it, how do I retreat in a way that I'm still able to get up the next morning?" (Micah)

Micah's understanding of Less is More stems from a personal effort to be productive as a president by dedicating as little time as possible to thoughts about his RBF experiences, which contributed to the development of his "you can't bring that baggage to you" mentality. The *Less is More* theme is defined as purposeful delayed processing of RBF ramifications to increase leadership capacity, focus on job roles, and avert emotional implosion. Aaron shared that for him, RBF has made him a "hardened person," where "if someone hasn't proven to me that they're up to good as opposed to no good, for example, I can't trust them." Based on past experience, Aaron and the other participants felt compelled to respond with restraint to protect themselves and be able to conduct the needed business of the institution, both responsive coping mechanisms.

Micah also shared that context mattered. He discussed how his institution was in a "passive-aggressive state," where he realized that often people will seem to agree with someone else but then not actually follow through. For this reason, he reported spending less time with the campus as a whole and more

time with specific champions. Aaron similarly shared that after the George Floyd murder, he pushed back against "campus book groups" and advocated for a more "comprehensive action plan" that included how the campus would provide open discussions about the tragedy and support for those most impacted.

In the spirit of Less is More, participants did clarify that their approach did not mean tolerance of racism, but instead that sometimes as a president, swift, focused, and purposeful responses were critical. As Jerome said when reflecting on times he had seen others remain silent when something needed to be addressed, "Either way you look at it—by sitting there in silence, you're complicit to the acts of racism." He went on to say, after describing how we are okay watching Black men and women being murdered without purposeful discussion, that "people don't understand why there's a problem… Stop making everybody damn comfortable because education is going to change that. We have to stop making people comfortable." Jerome went as far as discussing how he once shared specific emails he received that were fraught with microaggressions and racist rhetoric. He said, "I'm sitting there looking at some of them thinking, 'Yeah, you [laughter] I bet.' They're trying to play a facade in front of their peers." He then discussed how bringing the comments of those individuals to light made him "feel better to not only expose them, but just to see that they're not the majority. They're in a minority, but they just feel so loud." There was power in bringing forward these issues, highlighting how Less is More is not about silence but about intentional engagement with these issues.

While addressing RBF in the moment is critical, we need to acknowledge that prolonged engagement with the topic could provide additional harm, as illustrated by returning to Micah's comment. "The first thing that pops up is anger. The second that pops up is frustration. And then the third what pops up is your reality," he stated. Study participants did not just describe their active contemplation of RBF as counterproductive; they understood that ignoring RBF could lead to employing maladaptive coping strategies. Ultimately, participants framed Less is More as a way to ensure that their careers would not end prematurely due to being overcome by RBF exposure but also asserted that purposeful dialogue was critical.

Response Matters

> I don't exhibit pushback to people who I perceive as being racist publicly. I'll do it offline. And I don't know if that's good for the institution or not because I don't think they learn from me sucking it up and not doing much about it publicly. I withdraw. I make jokes, I still play with people, I ask them about their children and things like that. So I don't think that there's this perception that Veronique is any different in these circumstances. Except when they see me explode like I did in a recent incident. (Veronique)

Veronique's explanation of *Response Matters* is derived from her understanding of the value of not being perceived as a person who lashes out, even when racist moments are experienced, especially when interacting with other college employees. Micah lamented a similar feeling, stating, "It can rarely be the true self that comes out every day when you're in this role and this environment." This intersection of being the president and having institutional power but feeling more pressure to restrain feelings and responses was experienced almost across the board.

This feeling of constraint was even more evident for the women serving as presidents in our study. As one president said, "We're taught as women to be nice, okay, from a very young age. And so I've been socialized that way." She went on to say that she would suppress her emotions and say to herself, "Don't let them see you sweat." This perception of concealing emotions highlights just how important presidents felt their response was. But not all presidents felt the same need to conceal their response.

Some presidents shared that the longer they were in the role, the more empowered they felt to be bold in their expression related to RBF. Even for presidents who felt more emboldened, there was an acknowledgment of limits to their response. Aaron shared that he didn't "remember making a decision to be more bold" but that he felt he needed to share what he experienced and not "put up with racism." Jerome similarly shared that for him, it was about time. He said:

> I think that consciously for me, after I'm going into my sixth year as being the president.… there was a piece of me for—and I will tell people. I'm like, 'You're first year, you're second—you're not really those people's friends. You're really not. And every year you'll chip away at being a higher percent of—You're their president.' And I felt like going into—When I took that moment and spoke in front of the faculty in that professional development day about my experiences, and some of them were sitting in that room and not giving a shit, that was it. That was, like, the aha moment. (Jerome)

The frustration with not receiving the needed response led Jerome to be bolder in subsequent discussions. Almost every president in the sample shared at least one moment where they decided to be bolder but did include some level of consideration and restraint in their statements, which illustrated the balance between hiding true feelings and advocating against racism.

The Response Matters theme also refers to participants determining the best practices for responding to racism publicly in ways that frame themselves as nonthreatening, still professional, and able to perform leadership roles despite the level of they RBF experienced. For instance, participants referred to numerous times when operating in leadership roles and meeting alumni, students, or administrators exposed them to racism and confirmed

their RBF. Jaqueline discussed why her responses needed to be instantaneous: "Should it be happening? No, but when it does, we have a responsibility to say something, do something, and educate. Create teachable moments… I need to let you know—you're not going to do that again." These examples do not only speak to participants' awareness of a need to address racism and RBF exposure as an act of responsive coping. They also confirm a desire to do so in a way that would have a lasting impact.

Participant narratives unpacked racism and RBF exposure to confirm that community college presidents of African descent used outside peer-community support to strategize on ways to deal with their individual circumstances and establish holistic healing. It is also important to note that recognizing that RBF was an unavoidable outcome of racism informed how participants led constituents, performed self-care, and engaged in problem-solving. For example, participants discussed how they dealt with unexpected weight gain, frequent headaches, and instances of increased hypertension. In doing so, they acknowledged that racism was a part of the job, but they also knew that continued, long-term RBF exposure was unsustainable. As Jerome stated, "There's just a certain acceptance that it's just a variable that's going to be there. You know what I mean?" This speaks to the belief that although navigating racism was important, in attempting to avert it (itself an act of responsive coping), there was a clear understanding that racism would exist throughout their careers.

Discussion and Implications

By using CRT to unpack the RBF experiences (Howard, 2008; Matsuda et al., 1993), participants' responses were analyzed; as a result, we found evidence of adverse psychological and physiological effects of RBF exposure aligning with past work. A key finding in this study was the use of acts of responsive coping, which were illustrated by Aaron and the other participants who responded to racism with restraint to protect themselves in the Less is More theme. This type of self-preservation action explains how "wearing the mask and 'hiding it' are emblematic of the ways participants strove to cope in the midst of racism" (Okello et al., 2020, p. 428). Furthermore, doing so created proximal distance between the people and situations that were a point of racist trepidation, thereby allowing participants to better conduct presidential business for the institution. Similarly, in the Response Matters theme, Jerome and other participants accepted the permeance of racism (Howard, 2008; Matsuda et al., 1993) as an impediment to their ability to accomplish their jobs, which informed a need to better navigate the geographies of racism on campus by purposefully averting it. This realization was the catalyst for purposeful behavioral responses (Smith, 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Smith et al., 2016, 2020), such as the sharing of racism stories, which also served as an act of responsive coping since "sharing stories of what racism feels like can foster connections and validation among Black people" (Quaye

et al., 2020, p. 621). Furthermore, since participants understood racism to exist in perpetuity, being informed through communal dialogue was seen as a valuable asset to engage in throughout their careers.

However, for the participants in this study, their role as president led to a strong desire to avoid allowing RBF to dictate how they engaged with others. While all participants discussed their desire to be activists against racism generally, they had trepidation regarding engaging RBF exposure directly. Instead, they took a softer tone with a focus on choosing specific moments to engage in these conversations; this aligned with past literature as well (Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2019). In fact, participants' pursuit of RBF solutions not only informed their need to safely traverse campus racism hostilities (Gusa, 2010; Harper, 2012; Hurtado et al., 2015) but also determined the extent to which they prioritized creating spaces for acknowledging interest convergence (Bell, 1980), amplifying campus counterstory narratives of persons of color and challenging meritocracy within their educational context (Bell, 1991).

Implications for Practice

While the themes discussed in this study are essentially implications for practice, here we also provide two additional practices that can be adopted by leaders experiencing RBF that are more specific, and then two implications for structures that are connected to the presidency. First, Micah shared that while they must "keep the mask on," sometimes as a leader they sought to teach and encourage understanding focused on outcomes. Aligned with the Less is More and Response Matters themes, even when RBF occurs, presidents need to be active participants in campus dialogues to reduce RBF among campus stakeholders. Past research (Eddy, 2010; McNaughtan et al., 2021) has provided guidance on how presidents can harness some of the challenges they face to strengthen themselves and their campus community.

Second, presidents need to know and identify campus champions (Hotchkins et al., 2022) and be reminded that they are not alone in their equity work. Jerome shared how in a meeting he brought forward some of the emails he received in which he was attacked with claims that he was "promoting a liberal agenda" and "making you feel guilty for being White." These emails frustrated him, but as he shared them his colleagues rallied around him, providing support and positive reinforcement for all the work he had done. This strategy helped the presidents to refocus and recognize the positive outcomes of their challenging role. Experiencing RBF as a president does not need to be an insular experience, and several of the presidents in this study received strength by realizing they were not alone.

While there are implications for presidents, this study also provides an impetus for change when considering organizations and structures that support college presidents. First, governing boards should be cognizant of the

climate, culture, and experiences of their college leaders, especially their president. Morgan and colleagues (2022) have called for governing boards to be more proactive in their work around diversity, equity, and inclusion. A key part of this work is collaborative effort between the boards and their institutional leadership. By being proactive in understanding the climate and culture of their institution and the experiences of the college president, boards can provide needed support to the president and avoid premature departure of college leaders who serve as change agents. In this vein, past research has discussed the concept of fit between college presidents and their institutions (McNaughtan, 2018), which should not be understood to mean that there will be no conflict or that difference is problematic. Instead, colleges should consistently seek to be dynamic and increase inclusivity and support for all students, staff, and faculty. This change requires diverse leadership, and this leadership should be supported and strengthened by college boards (Morgan et al., 2022).

In addition to institutional governing boards, state and national organizations could utilize the findings from this study as evidence for needed support for college presidents. Specifically, presidents, especially presidents of color, should have opportunities to develop networks and receive guidance on how to navigate the increasingly polarizing climates that higher education is being placed within. Too often, national organizations are not active participants in providing support to college leaders, especially those leaders who may be marginalized on their campus. Increased focus and support would be a welcome opportunity.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Jon McNaughtan, Assistant Professor- Educational Psychology and Leadership Department Texas Tech University, 8813 16th Street, Lubbock TX, 79416. Email: Jon.Mcnaughtan@ttu.edu / (435) 671-1126

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