Black Male Student Leaders in Predominantly White Universities: Stories of Power, Preservation, and Persistence

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Abstract

This qualitative ethnographic study uses narrative inquiry methodology to explore the life stories of Black male student leaders in predominantly white universities. More specifically, interviews with Black males experiencing racial battle fatigue while leading college student organizations are analyzed against participant journals and multiple observations across organizational situations. By utilizing a three-dimensional narrative inquiry approach, participant narratives make sense of life as an organizational leader experiencing racial microaggressions. Applying the qualitative method of narrative inquiry in this instance demonstrates how participants respond to the affects of cumulative racial stressors in ways that positively influence college persistence. Emergent themes were as follows: 1) reactive invisibility; and 2) responsive interest preservation. Participant stories identify the ways in which non-cognitive skill development is fundamentally racialized, requiring both personal negotiations and persistence strategies while also avoiding racist microaggressions.

The subject of Black male collegiate persistence has been broached by a variety of scholars and ranges from achieving belongingness while overcoming a dissimilar dominant culture (Dancy, 2012; Hurd, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012), to denial of welcoming academic environments (Fleming, 1984), adjusting to toxic campus climates (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007) and prevailing over 'onlyness' (Harper, 2013) experienced while attending predominantly white institutional (PWI) environments. Literature has loosely framed African American male persistence as the ability to successfully transition into a new collegiate environment and overcome a variety of academic, systemic and racial impediments (Cuyjet, 1997; Locks, Bowman,

Hurtado, & Oseguera, 2006; Tinto, 2003). In part, we submit that employing persistence strategies increases the likelihood of Black males not only overcoming systemic, racial and academic hindrances, but also contributes to these Black males completing college. To this end, the organizations Black males join, and choose to affiliate with play an increasingly major role in determining how they persist (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hotchkins, 2014) based on leadership choices they make. Further, these experiences become teachable moments in which non-cognitive skills (e.g., persistence strategies, communicative abilities) are developed but in racialized ways (Dancy, 2014).

The findings of this particular study frame the us-

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age of persistence strategies (e.g. tactical engagements with White peers dedicated to achieving positive Black student outcomes), as enacted by participants, as ways to respond to the affects of cumulative racialized stressors like racial battle fatigue (Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011) and racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). This narrative inquiry study uses personal experiences as a method of ethnographic research among Black male student leaders. Specifically, the collegiate life stories of four African American males experiencing racial battle fatigue, while leading in predominantly White organizations, and their persistence strategies are described and analyzed. By utilizing a three-dimensional narrative inquiry to re-story field texts, participant's narratives are presented to make sense of life as an organizational leader who experiences racial stressors, yet persists.

Life as a Leader in Progress

Oscar J. Martin celebrated his reelection to the position of President for the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), at Utopia University, during the gathering of data for this research in the fall of 2012. Oscar's "White colleagues," in his words, were "in need of cultural policing" despite being active in the marketing, promoting, and supporting of his second presidential bid for PRSSA. Oscar's leadership preparation, and racial socialization began at home years before arriving at Utopia University. He was the first person in his family to attend college. His aspirations of becoming a social media mogul were informed by the creation and success of business entities like Facebook, Twitter, and Vine. As a frequent user of various social media platforms for personal, social, and organizational leadership purposes, Oscar said he understands the value of being "easily connected to people with overlapping interests, concerns, and drive because accessibility is important for any leader who can be followed in both the real and virtual world." During Oscar's sophomore year he decided to become more involved on campus, because he felt isolated socially and culturally, and decided to join the historically Black Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. to find a sense of cultural congruency.

As a first-generation, junior communications major, Oscar often finds himself involved in both social and professional leadership positions. When asked how he defines leadership, he offered the following: "the act – leadership is the act of, uh, leading in a literal and positive manner and also sacrificing things to get better things accomplished." He gets his leadership values

from his parents, Paul and Edith, who have encouraged him at every turn to hold integrity and Black philanthropic efforts as central to being a leader. Growing up in a lower-middle class, urban, predominantly White neighborhood, Oscar learned what it means to be a leader from the numerous roles he played in athletics, and extracurricular activities. During his high school years Oscar was a member of three sports teams, and five youth leadership developmental organizations including Jack and Jill, Boy Scouts of America, and 100 Black Men of American, Inc. Prior to arriving at Utopia University, Oscar attended the racially diverse John Marshall High School where he was also active in the school newspaper and Black history club, which prepared him to interact with diverse people from varied cultural backgrounds.

Oscar's love for social media interaction led him to pursue a public relations and journalism focus, which allows for interactions with "different people." He utilized the inferential skills learned as a reporter in several of his organizational leadership positions, including the predominantly White Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), to hone his skills as a leader. He currently serves as president of PRSSA. "I joined PRSSA because the org is directly connected to my major, but also because it gives me access to campus resources my White peers use that I wouldn't know about otherwise" noted Oscar. His passion for being involved and engaged in leadership activities has increased since Oscar began his college education, but it is often complicated by the intersection of race and gender. Specifically, he is mindful that being a leader has increased his visibility as a Black male on campus, which influences his behavior as a leader because he never wants to reinforce negative stereotypes about Black men. This realization has causes him to vacillate between his racial and leadership identities thereby making leading "draining" at times.

The negotiation of his racial and leadership identities has led Oscar to understand that overcoming organizational impediments, like not achieving complete buy-in, is a characteristic of a leader he hoped to avoid. Furthermore, as a leader for a variety of constituencies Oscar learned to prioritize the importance of knowing when to lead and when to follow so he "takes charge" and "falls back" in order to allow opportunities for peers to enhance their leadership ability. Admittedly, Oscar realizes that leadership is a continual process that takes time and is never perfect because as circumstances change he needs to adjust, and be fluid within organizations. This insight about the patience involved

in leading has served him well and was a primary reason Oscar occupied leadership positions throughout his first two years of college. Oscar wants to get the best out of his college experience and believes being involved in as many ways as possible will contribute to becoming a global citizen upon graduating. In part, he desires to be as equipped as he can because "that real world is waiting for a brother and it is as cold as a Chicago winter minus a bomber!" His preparation to enter the "real world" is contingent upon being fully prepared through his leadership experiences; in fact, his preparedness is the lynchpin to his future.

Martin and Me

I met Oscar at Utopia University two years after his arrival in 2010. The president of his undergraduate Zeta Zeta fraternity chapter recommended we meet to discuss mentoring practices of Black faculty with African American males as fulfillment of a class assignment. Although he had no difficulty engaging about his mentoring experiences with Black faculty in-class, as the conversation transitioned into extracurricular activities like leadership, his lament was clear. We discussed Oscar's difficulty leading in predominantly White organizations, specifically PRSSA where he served as president. As the conversation continued he seemed perturbed with issues like having his authority usurped by White peers, continually having to explain issues pertaining to race, and defending his rationale for wanting to make the organization more inclusive. The cumulative effect of dealing with race manifested in his hesitancy to attend group meetings and frequent avoidance of collaborative activities. He also mentioned the weight of having to endure "race attacks that question my intellect. Hell, I'm a national merit scholar. They [Whites] demand explanations about my ability to afford school. I hate that shit! I earned my ticket too, but not because I'm Black. I'm smart!" Oscar seemed frustrated about his circumstance so I interjected, "Let's change the subject. Tell me about how you experience leadership as a follower." My intention was to distract him from focusing on being a leader, but instead he grew angrier: "Sure, let me tell you about my following in the organization I lead." I did not realize the import of his comment within the context of our discussion, but I noted it to see if his narrative would later parallel those of other participants with whom I was conducting college life history research.

Once our conversation ended, I asked if Oscar wanted to participate in my study about Black male student leadership experiences. Upon receiving written consent we met six times for approximately 60-90 minutes. I was intrigued by the overlap of our experiences as undergraduate leaders related to what we both perceived to be follower resistance based on our African American male identities. Additionally, Oscar wrote weekly journals detailing his leadership experiences in a predominantly White organization, the frequency with which he had interactions with organizational members that pertained to race, and how those incidents affected him as a Black male. Oscar's story, which was told out of chronological sequence, was informative concerning the benefit and angst of leading in a predominantly White organization. However, his sense of who he was as a leader was convoluted because the definition was inherently confounded by his inability to simultaneously "enjoy being Black, male and a leader because some of my White peers see the first, first. That keeps them from seeing me as a leader first. It's complicated."

Unlike most of the participants in the larger study Oscar often spoke in a figurative rather than literal narrative using similes, metaphors, hyperbole, and personification. He might say "I'm like a pied piper with us [Blacks], but it's like roaches scattering when the lights come on with Whites," instead of saying "Black students follow me easily, while Whites are reluctant to follow my leadership." Figurative descriptions like the aforementioned represented Oscar's "small thing to a giant" hyperbolic description of his life as a leader, but were increasingly literal when he discussed how he was affected by his racial reality as a Black male leader. For example:

> It's difficult leading White people. They don't understand my drive to belong, to give back to communities of color, to be casual in meetings so they misjudge my seriousness, and resist my agenda, but keep me around to show they are accepting of difference. Some days I hate it, don't want to get out of the bed, but stay involved because the adversity sharpens my leadership blade.

Narratives like these were general in description, and did not identify specific peers, instances, or situations except when Oscar discussed "the meeting room." In fact, he seemed to have complete recall of his experiences, interactions, and occurrences at this particular organizational location including attendees, topics of discussion, and dissenting perspectives of members. In fact, in describing his reaction and responses to meeting situations he frequently mentioned

his oppositional relationship to the organization's vice president, a "White girl" named Persephone. Indeed, they rarely "vibed" or agreed on the organizational trajectory to the point where Oscar's described their governing as "conflictual." When I asked him what happens in organization meetings, he looked at me directly responded "my repeated being a follower as an elected leader!" I inferred that he perceived Persephone as undermining his authority, and I felt certain that this was the source of his trepidation. Although Oscar believed the meeting place was literally where organization business was conducted, he figuratively perceived it as the place where his development as a leader, though often eroded, experienced growth like "a rose emerging from concrete." Oscar was eager to share his story, and responded without hesitation to the questions posed about his experiences as a leader in a predominantly White organization. However, he deliberately took his time describing how the process of leading in meetings affected him and made him feel.

The Meeting Room

Although I had observed other participants from the larger study during their organization meetings, I had yet to witness Oscar engaging organizational members so I agreed to attend up to six meetings to learn more about how he navigated the space. We met at the southeast end of campus and walked at least 17 minutes to the student union, fourth floor, Room 435. Oscar was visibly nervous. It was a humid, April Oklahoma day and the sky was clear as a "freshly washed Cutlass window." I engaged him about the meeting by asking "What is the agenda for today's meeting?" He responded, "Our marketing program, Utopia Speaks, which is an offer to do a public relations campaign for a member of the Black Chamber of Commerce. Already did one for the YWCA. I'm expecting everyone onboard." His confidence abounded, and I continued, "this meeting should run smoothly, right?" He retorted, "Possibly, but you never know because they [members] be flaky like fish scales." If this was supposedly an easy meeting, why was he seemingly becoming more agitated the closer we came to the building where the meeting was scheduled? It occurred to me, as he hesitantly entered the elevator, that the meeting location was an object of contention. We were the first to arrive, Oscar sat at the head of the elongated table which was surrounded by 36 chairs, repeatedly reviewing the agenda on his IPad Air while loudly playing Kendrick Lamar's "good kid, m.A.A.d

city (Deluxe)" album.

The meeting room, which carried the namesake of David Duke, was painted bright white with crimson trim, and was situated in the southwestern corner of the building. It was well-lit, had two blue-tooth monitors, and only one door for entry and exit. Oscar seemed comfortable with the arrival of each member, but turned down his music, and was less animated when Persephone entered the room. The meeting began three minutes early. Appearing to be experiencing trepidation, he said with angst, "I call this meeting to order. Roll call. Old business, then we'll discuss our next PR campaign." Thirty-two people were present. Six were students of color, and Oscar was the only African American male in attendance. The entire executive committee consisted of White undergraduates. In order to avoid influencing the behavior of members and officers, I was not introduced to the group. As the agenda unfolded members held side discussions about a variety of topics from the cost of dues to rationales for supporting upcoming fundraising events. Each committee reported relevant organization issues, voted about long-term investments like developing a PR internship data-base, and determined the t-shirt design for the upcoming year. Forty-one minutes into the meeting the new PR campaign recommendation was brought to the membership by Oscar. "As you all know, last semester we conducted a successful PR campaign for the YWCA, so this semester I would like do the same for a business in the Black Chamber of Commerce." Persephone interjected, "Is that a charitable organization?"

Tension mounted in the room as participants seemed unsure whether the exchange would escalate. Oscar's forehead began sweating, and his voice cracked when he responded, "Just because it's Black doesn't mean it's charitable or needing a hand out." "Why are you always so defensive? It's like you have a gangbang mentality or something. Plus, do we really have time for that now?" responded Persephone. Oscar's voice raised, "We have time for everything else you want to do, just not the Black things, huh?" Before she could respond, the Sergeant of Arms, Mortimer intervened, "Oscar, calm down; her question was legitimate. Plus, you do get emotional at times." The treasurer, Janet concurred, "Plus, Oscar, maybe we need to do a campaign that is more universal, you know, global, not just for deprived groups." The room fell deathly silent. Oscar scanned the room with a scowl, looking at each person in attendance almost as if he were searching for an ally to speak on his behalf or waiting for the next person to speak and give him a final reason to scream. The exchange left Oscar

looking exasperated and defeated to the point where he shut down, and called for a vote on the campaign. The recommendation was defeated, and instead the group voted to identify a "community" organization partnership dedicated to assisting with developing programs about healthy eating habits. Oscar characterized the meting room as "a cage," and his mood communicated his visible apprehension.

After the meeting concluded we talked for three hours standing directly outside of the room. It appeared Oscar had reached both a breaking point and epiphany simultaneously when he stated, "I'm learning to overcome their [White peer] resistance, but it comes with a cost because my anger is engulfing me. The cost is great, but I'll deal with White folks the rest of my life so now is the best time regardless the pain." This statement was the most revealing he had made so I asked Oscar to elaborate. He invoked a water analogy:

> It is the difference between learning to swim and drowning. Both cause you to expend energy, require you to move in uncertain directions, and decide whether you'll make it or succumb. Regardless, you get wet, lose breath, but ultimately it's the learning that matters most, it's what keeps me living on the beach awaiting the next high tide. Eventually, I'll need to teach someone else to swim, and my prime lesson to them will be; don't adjust to the water, make it adjust to you.

Oscar's descriptions about his experiences as a leader quickly switched to how each meeting affected his being, altered his peace. It was as if he, by agreeing to become president, resigned himself to a place devoid of cultural understanding, and congruence where although he realized acceptance was not an option, leadership development was the preferred achievable outcome.

I asked again, "explain how you experience pain in this room?" Oscar seemed reluctant to share, but explained: "In here I'm anxious, fearful, confident, but hesitant to exert my authority. You saw the resistance. I dream about this place. Sometimes, I can't even enter the room. I'm slowly driving myself crazy to be a leader." He continued with several random encapsulated stories about leadership. It bears mentioning that PRSSA executive meetings, which are rather different from general organizational gatherings, are lengthy, filled with heavy debate, and could be interpreted as combative at times. As a result, participants raise voices, are visibly upset, and walk out when opposing viewpoints are presented, none of which I witnessed

Oscar do. After Oscar shared further insight about the cumulative effects of leading PRSSA, mostly in the pejorative, we walked back to our cars. The conversation was sparse. I came to realize after we departed that Oscar associated the worth of leadership outcomes and the unnecessary impediments therein as part of the process of achieving his ultimate goal; becoming an exemplary leader. This meant overcoming obstacles, be they racial or otherwise.

Meaning of the Meeting Room

I now had a complete understanding. The meeting room—to members of PRSSA the image of a leadership destination, the revered place where ideas were exchanged—was for Oscar J. Martin a transformative symbol of necessary danger. Like a flame to a moth. Like Icarus to the sun. For Oscar, the reaping was worth the process of sowing especially if it meant he was seen as a leader, one who could vacillate between two identities; Black and leadership. However, although he was willing to, as he stated "take a loss to win it all," his desire to endure the process of leading was strategic. Like many of the other participants I interviewed who held leadership positions in predominantly White organizations, Oscar wanted to feel empowered, craved trust in his vision, and sought to be followed by a racially diverse range of organizational members. In understanding his perspectives about the leadership process, I recognized that at the center of his experiences was his developing ability to cope with microaggressive interactions. Furthermore, he was aware that if he committed completely to focusing on being a leader he would be further damaged by the leadership process. Eventually, I came to understand that being a leader, a Black leader, was in fact the fruition of a childhood dream that served as a source of pride and gave meaning to Oscar's life.

I learned that when sharing his narrative about the being a leader, the meeting room simultaneously represented Oscar's struggle and achievement. He communicated the former by describing numerous times when he felt PRSSA members only viewed him in racial terms through comments like Persephone's, "Congratulations on the scholarship, you're the only Black person; that system is working for you." However, such comments embodied Oscar's ability to "overcome like Martin Luther King, Jr.," which encompassed his self-image, and even measured his resiliency. My other study participants' narratives led me to conclude that being a Black male and leader were interwoven and together

represented an unwavering stability that enabled them to survive throughout their life challenges. Oscar's survival practices evolved from his thinking that in order to engage, while keeping a safe distance from the process of leading, he must utilize two main tactics: 1) *reactive invisibility*; and 2) *responsive interest preservation*. Additionally, he communicated with family, reached out to other Black peer leaders and engaged in extracurricular activities like swimming to help him deal with the racialized stress.

In using *reactive invisibility*, Oscar discussed coping with the challenges to his leadership as highly situational, and accomplished by relinquishing organizational power in various forms, and embracing Black male stereotypes. Surprisingly, Oscar exhibited stereotypical behaviors that he believed Whites would perceive as threatening to avoid interacting with him. He explained:

> Sometimes I want no part of them [Whites] so I may cut a mean mug, or talk about growing up in the hood to set the stage that I may act a fool if pushed. The goal is to get them to leave me alone; that is, if they already see me as a menace subconsciously. Basically, either I can retreat or make them think they need to.

By applying the above tactics Oscar acknowledged that although perceptions of his leadership ability might be damaged, if it positively influenced the validation of his peers, and reduced his race-related stress then the outcomes were best for not only himself, but his organization. To enumerate, Oscar lamented about times when he purposefully avoided leadership situations:

> There have been times when I just didn't want to talk about what all Black people think, why my hair is braided, whether I think I'll lose my scholarship, or how much better PRSSA could be if there were more students of color involved. When I feel avoiding them [Whites], I reschedule meetings last minute, don't attend the socials, and even tell my second vice, it's yours tonight, I can't make it. If I'm not there I don't have to deal with BS.

Acting to make himself invisible served to preserve who Oscar perceived himself to be, an enduring Black leader who knew when to take a step back, while aspiring to press forward. Furthermore, he acknowledged that when doing so his behavioral responses typically happened "in the moment, without premeditation. You know, just the now flight, when I'm tired of fighting." Since his earlier high school leadership experiences

were "practically colorblind, and all about being popular" Oscar was familiar with "playing the game to win," so making himself "invisible like Ellison" was what he believed to be the most logical choice.

Although reacting to racial interactions by rendering himself unavailable limited his exposure to racial microaggressions, responding to leadership opportunities by engaging White peers who understood his plight as a Black leader acted as a counterbalance to the racial stress Oscar experienced. Doing so allowed Oscar to be his holistic self; Black and a leader while being able to exercise *responsive interest preservation*. Oscar revisited his intentional engagement of White peers who were introduced to him as advocates of Black students, frequent attendees of cultural campus events or with whom he had previous positive discussions. Although these criteria were prerequisites for White peer engagement, what sustained these interactions was what he perceived as their commitment to aiding him in achieving positive outcomes for Black student and the preservation of Blackness. Along with the other participants I interviewed, Oscar operationalized the preservation of Blackness in cultural and numeric terms because "helping us create avenues to express ourselves culturally don't mean nothing if it ain't any of us here!"

To further explain, Oscar gleefully described a meaningful relationship he has maintained with Thaddeus, a White male peer, over the past year:

> Thad gets it! I had to vet him first, but he don't front or put on airs to impress; he's really about social justice, and since I live it, we mesh well. Sadly, he's one of 1,000. Most White folks don't want to discuss privilege, sharing resources or what they need to do to stop perpetuating racism. One thing he told me early was if White males ain't willing to acknowledge their power, handle them with a long-handle spoon. It's become my mantra. If you're White and not trying to help put my people on then I don't have time to invest in you or your agenda. I have to get something out of relationships with my White peers because it takes so much to interact with them in general. Plus, it's less stressful to talk to Whites who I don't have to educate about the taboos, really less stressful!

Oscar's motivation for interacting with White peers was directly connected to what he perceived as a benefit to Black students, and organizations. He frequently mentioned learning about internships, scholarship, and job opportunities from engaging Whites he had vetted and viewed as "friendlies." By leading in a pre-

dominantly White organization his "safe" connections often yielded associations and information that were beneficial to Black students like himself who wanted to get the most of out of their college experiences. As a result, Oscar felt that locating resources, be they persons or financial, fulfilled his purpose as a Black male, and as a leader who should and "does empower followers."

Despite the numerous ways Oscar attempted to avoid racial stress, what he said in our final interview made it clear that he viewed racial stress as permanent in his life due to the endemic nature of racism, which would always cause him discomfort. "Long as they are insensitive to the hurt they cause we will have to deal with it, and hopefully respond in non-threatening, healthy ways. The burden of race hurts regardless of whether I'm here or out in the world." Prior to that statement, I assumed that Oscar, like some of the other participants in my study, viewed racial construction as merely bound by a college context. I knew Oscar understood the gravity of being seen as a Black male who happens to be a leader despite the location.

Methods and Data Sources

Four African American student leaders participated in this study. A purposeful sampling criteria (Patton, 1990) required the following: 1) self-identifying African Americans; 2) held elected positions in predominantly White student organizations; and 3) attended a PWI. Researcher field notes, six 60-90 minute in-depth interviews with each participant, weekly descriptive journals detailing leadership experiences and the frequency of perceived race-related interactions, six observations of participants during organizational meetings, and stories about family racial socialization were utilized for data gathering purposes. In this study, a three-dimensional narrative inquiry process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) focused on participants' interactions (e.g. personal and social); past, present and future (e.g. continuity); and place (e.g. situation) to restory their narratives in a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw & Crenshaw, 2002). Narratives were deconstructed by applying analytical strategies as interrogating dichotomies (Czarniawaska, 2004) thereby aiding in detailing emergent themes that provided meaning to the stories (Huber & Whelan, 1999). This counterstory narrative is presented to make sense of life as a Black male organizational leader who experiences racial microaggressions. Applying the qualitative method of narrative inquiry in this instance demonstrates how participants respond to the effects of cumulative racial stressors by enacting purposeful coping strategies like aligning with White peers who were committed to positive Black student outcomes.

Study Context

The study data are based on the experiences of four African American undergraduate students who led in predominantly White organizations at separate private and public PWIs. Although varying in student demographic make-up, none of the four institutions are comprised of more than 8% African American students. Each institution situated in the Western or Midwestern Region of the U.S.. University of Midwest, is comprised of 21,011 students, and only 7% are African American. Midwestern Private University, a highly-selective institution, is comprised of 15,140 students of whom nearly 4% are African American. Western University, a large state institution, that has approximately 33,253 students, and only 1% African American students are in attendance. Finally, Utopia University, which has 8% African American student enrollment, is comprised of 27,693 students.

Participants

In order to aid the reader in distinguishing participants' demographic data, Table 1 is presented below. Specifically, there were four African American male participants who held various leadership positions at their PWIs. Participants were members in 12 predominantly White organizations. In total, participants held 17 positions; six were elected, and 11 were appointed. Two participants were presidents. None of the organizations in which participants served were connected to race (e.g. White Student Union); in fact, each organization was either directly related to participants' declared majors (e.g. Public Relations Student Society of America) or extracurricular activities (e.g. Fellowship of Christian Athletes).

Table 1.

African American Student Leadership Demographics

Name	# of Organizations	# of Positions Held	Highest Ranking Title
Marc	4	7	President
John	3	2	Vice President *
Mike	2	3	President
Bernard	3	5	Social Media Chair

* Served as Vice President in two predominantly White Organizations

Data Collection and Analysis

Students participated in six open-ended interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, all of which were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The ethnographic process suggested by Agar (1980) was employed to immerse myself in the details of the data by reading transcripts in entirety several times before coding. Using a data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2007) that consisted of reviewing interview data, observations, journal entrees, and field notes, I reduced data into categories and looked for evidence to support each category (Stake, 1995). This analysis process consists of "moving from the reading and memoing loop into the spiral to describing, classifying, and interpreting loop. In this loop, code or category formation represents the heart of qualitative data analysis," (Creswell, 2007, p. 151). The process allows for employing descriptive interpretation, which yields an *in situ*, or within context explanation of the setting of participants, events and places. Subsequently, an open, line-by-line coding, constant comparative method (Merriman, 1998), using first and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009), allowed for the detailed splitting of codes, which encouraged "careful scrutiny of social action represented in the data," (Saldaña, 2009, p. 20). Data were cross-case analyzed (Yin, 2009) to identify salient themes and patterns, which substantiated meanings of participants' leadership experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Richards, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

Oscar J. Martin's narrative inquiry, and this story

of our interactions, is part of an eight month research project whose methodology, composite counterstory and critical race theory (CRT) theoretical framework have been raised in previous research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawaska, 2004; Harper, 2009; Huber & Whelan, 1999; Matsuda et al., 1993; Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2006; Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). Numerous scholars have written significantly about the use of CRT to dismantle deficit notions that position students of color as "other," inferior or disinterested in higher education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Specifically, the following CRT tenets were applied to this study due to the summative framing utilized by Matsuda et al. (1993): 1) racism is endemic within an American context; 2) CRT opposes legal notions of objectivity, colorblindness, meritocracy, and neutrality; 3) CRT challenges the dominant perspective of ahistoricism, and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law; 4) CRT recognizes experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society; 5) CRT originated from interdisciplinary perspectives; and 6) CRT seeks to eliminate racial oppression, consequently ending all oppression.

Upon selecting a narrative inquiry and CRT to gather and frame the data, this research was intended to elucidate three points: that the intersection of racial and leadership identity needs to be discussed due the dearth of studies in the field (Arminio, et al., 2000; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998); cumulative effects of race-related stress, as sourced by micro-aggressions and racial battle fatigue, influence the ways Black males engage on predominantly White

campuses (Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue, et al., 2007) particularly in leadership roles; and how the application of persistence coping practices can lead to praxis points of cultural resistance designed to reduce or limit exposure to race-related stress.

Discussion and Implications

Study Generalities

For the purpose of this study, the definition of racial battle fatigue, as used by Smith (2004) when examining how Black faculty experience interacting with White students who have been racially primed to view Black culture as inferior, is applied: "racial battle fatigue is a response to the distressing mental/emotional conditions that result from facing racism daily" (p. 180). Furthermore, racial microaggressions as defined by Sue et al. (2007) is utilized: "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p. 271). Although racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) are subtle precursors to racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004), the cumulative impact of frequent racial microaggressive exposure can result in adverse health outcomes for recipients.

Study findings revealed that each participant experienced the effects of enduring racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), which culminated in psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses emblematic of racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004), albeit some more frequently. As leaders in predominantly White organizations, participants experienced microaggressions more frequently during organizational meetings than in any other campus setting, which they viewed as a necessary exposure to better themselves as leaders who are resilient despite the circumstances. Participants also viewed the setting as a space to practice non-cognitive skills (e.g., interpersonal interactions, leadership, communicative ability) and learn the ways in which racist contexts complicate these endeavors. Leading White constituents shaped participants' perceptions of not only the value of employing persistence strategies as leaders, but also the necessity of aligning themselves with those who championed Black student interest, and like themselves, sought positive outcomes for Black

student populations on campus and abroad.

Overall, participants strove to decrease their exposure to microaggressions by employing premeditated persistence avoidance strategies that limited their interactions with persons who represented a potential racial threat. When coupled with seeking out White advocates, who participants viewed as "safe persons," participants felt these tactics benefitted not only themselves. In fact, study participants attributed microaggressions not only to their race, but recognized their leadership positionality as coupled with race, which served as a central aspect of their racial battle fatigue. In other words, due to having key leadership roles (e.g. President or Vice President), which required frequent interaction with organization members, they experienced microaggressions more frequently than in organizations in which their roles were less demanding. Ultimately, participants determined how to navigate their leadership spaces by choosing whom to disengage and with whom to align, which determined the level of microaggressive exposure, and racial battle fatigue.

Microaggression Effects

This section anchors the findings of the study within relevant studies that discuss, among other topics, the influence of racial microaggressions on African American student leadership experiences. Connections are made between perpetrator microaggressive acts, organizational contexts, and the effects on participants' ways of leading. The composite counterstory narrative of four African American males, which is presented here as the lived experience of Oscar illustrates participants' individual leadership experiences with racial microaggressions (Sue, et al, 2007), and highlights their psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses, which were symptomatic of Black male students and faculty who have racial battle fatigue (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007; Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011; Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Although each participant discussed repeated exposure to racial microaggressions in general terms, which was useful in applying CRT to highlight connections between White peer behaviors and predominantly White organizations, their individual experiences were nuanced, and specific to a particular space—the meeting room. To enumerate, participant's identification of the meeting room as a physical space of racial angst, based on their treatment by White peers, confirms Sue et al's. (2007) claim that environmental microaggressions are connected to places. However,

although participants viewed the room's namesake as problematic, it was their perceived racial interactions in that space that influenced their negative associations with it. Therefore, participant's microaggressions were spatial and directly proximal (Hurtado, 2000; Jessor, 1981) based on perceptions and confirmed actions of White peers. To illustrate, participants were asked to keep a journal, notating how often they had racialized experiences, where those experiences occurred, and how the experiences made them feel. Additionally, participants were asked to note how they responded to these racialized interactions. Participants experienced greater frequencies racial microaggressions during their organizational exchanges with White peers where they perceived their authority being usurped during meetings and organizational social events. In order to aid the reader in gauging the level of racial microaggressions experienced, Table 2 is presented below.

Table 2.

*Racial Microaggression Frequency**

Name	Organization(s)	Weekly Avg.	Total*
Marc	Public Relations Student Society of America	(7)	224
	College Republicans	(12)	4,608
	Career Council	(4)	128
	Pi Kappa Chi Honors Fraternity	(9)	288
John	Fellowship of Christian Athletes	(3)	96
	Young Democrats	(8)	256
	Chemistry Affiliates	(2)	64
Mike	Engineers without Boarders	(2)	64
	Environmental and Sustainability Group	(3)	96
Bernard	American Meteorological Society	(3)	96
	Logics Club	(7)	224
	Food Recovery Students Network	(5)	160

* Data covers a 32-week period and highlights only experiences found within organizational meetings.

Furthermore, participants in this study not only experienced racial microaggressions, but interpreted them as "'put downs' of Blacks by offenders," (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzales & Willis, 1978, p. 66) used to "constitute a verification of Black inferiority" (Davis, 1989, p. 1576) while reinforcing attitudes of White superiority. To illustrate, Oscar discussed experiencing both subtle (e.g. Persephone questioning whether the Black Chamber was a charitable organization) and overt (e.g. Persephone associated receiving his scholar- ship with being Black) comments that he interpreted as racist. Minikel-Lacocque (2012) contended that overt comments are classified as racialized aggressions due to the intentional racism used within common places to illustrate the "cumulative burden" (Pierce, 1995) of the act of racism. In this study, the common place is rep- resented by organizational meetings and social events where participants perceived themselves as belonging, because they were leaders, and expected to be holisti- cally accepted by their White peers.

This expectation of acceptance, based on leadership positionality, when coupled with their responses to racial microaggressions, advances Minikel-Lacocque's (2012) theory about *contested microaggressions*, which is "the process by which the target of a microaggression names and contests the perceived racist act" (p. 27). Participants in this study used the persistence strategy of contesting racial microaggressions in two specific ways: 1) directly asking perpetrators to clarify the meaning of their comments like "really, you're a National Merit Scholar?"; and 2) locating vetted White advocates, who were aware of the situational instances, to inquire on behalf of targets about perpetrators' rationales behind their racially offensive comments. Similar to participants in Minikel-Lacocque's (2012) study, my participants viewed their organizations as places of potential personal and leadership growth, that was truncated at times by racial microaggression experiences, which left them feeling not only unsafe, but hesitant to engage in leadership activities.

Lastly, in utilizing the evidence offered by Smith (2004) and Smith, Allen and Danley (2007) about realization of the adverse cumulative affects of racial battle fatigue on Black faculty and Black male students, I applied the postulation offered by Smith, Yosso and Solorzano (2006) as a culmination of participant experiences: "the stress associated with racial microaggressions causes African Americans to experience various forms of mental, emotional, and physical strain" (p. 2). Utilizing this application allowed for a better understanding of how participants experienced the impact of racial microaggressions, which contributed to their racial battle fatigue.

Racism-related Stress Experiences

Although perpetrators of racism were not the focus of this study, participants' proactive responses to the racism was intended to decrease their exposure to racial microaggressions, which influenced their behavioral responses. These responses were manifested in two specific ways: 1) *reactive invisibility*; and 2) *responsive interest preservation*. Both were utilized as coping persistence strategies. In order to aid the reader in understanding the affects of microaggressions experienced Table 3 is presented below.

Table 3.

Racial Battle Fatigue Stress Reactions*

Name	Psychological	Behavioral	Physiological
Marc	Anger	Emotional detachment	Memory loss
John	Feelings of Revenge	Growing hatred	Sudden Depression
Mike	Nervousness	Questioning self-worth	Crying
Bernard	Discouragement	Employing escapism	Sleeplessness

* Categories represent primary examples of symptoms as reactions to racial microaggressions

In response to racial battle fatigue, participants used the persistence strategy of *reactive invisibility* to attempt to create personal praxis points by avoiding proximal adverse racial interactions. To illustrate, Oscar purposefully missed organizational meeting to avoid racial microaggressions, and in doing so placed proximal distance between himself and the perpetrators. This confirms previous research by Hurtado (2000), Smith (2008) and Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000).

Employing the coping persistence strategy of *responsive interest preservation*, by seeking and actively working directly with White peers advocates who were committed to the achievement of African American equality on campus, not only identifies a positive response, but also adds to both the CRT and leadership literature. Specifically, *responsive interest preservation* is the direct racial converse of Bell's (1979) interest convergence principle: "the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of

whites" (p. 523). When participants used *responsive interest preservation* they purposefully aligned themselves with White peers whose interests were to not only to achieve outcomes that facilitated racial equality for Black students on campus, also whose actions helped to preserve the unadulterated expression of Blackness (e.g. slang, wearing of natural hair, Greek step shows, etc.). In contrast, using *reactive invisibility*, which typically involved instantaneous reactions to microaggressions, rendered participants less effective as leaders because it resulted in being absent from proceedings, events and discussions about advancing their organizations in an attempt to further avoid racial stressors.

Although these proactive coping persistence strategies served as useful applications toward thwarting the effects of race-related stressors, and aided participants in decreasing the frequency of racial battle fatigue experienced, in various ways these responses suppressed participants' leadership ability. In essence, by purposefully withdrawing from certain racially contextualized leadership situations, in response to racial microaggressions in predominantly White organizations, participants were unable to fully engage not only organizational members, but also their positional responsibilities. For example, Oscar allowed the vice president to conduct meetings. Although adamant about their desires to be a good leaders and good Black leaders, participants refused to be paralyzed by racial battle fatigue because they wanted to make their "kin folks proud." Participants viewed their leadership and Black male identities as coupled, inseparable, and intersecting for the purpose of creating a positive future for not only themselves, and Blacks, but also for humanity. Therefore, the meaning of their leader identities/lives emerged out of recognizing organizational/racial impediments, and developing strategies for achievement. For this reason, it is important to differentiate between reactive ripostes and contemplative responses to racial microaggressions by noting that these coping strategies were useful tactics whether premeditated or immediate.

Implications for Research

For a critical higher educational ethnographer, this research is representative of the value of comprehensive narrative inquiry resulting in panoramic counterstory data that not only amplifies the voices and field texts (Clandinin & Connnelly, 2000) of participants, but also chronologically restories the effects of race on leadership identity and persistence outcomes for African

American males. Furthermore, Oscar Martin's story describes the power of peer influences and context on a leader's situational awareness, avoidance, and engagement based on an ability determine who is harmful versus helpful. As Hurtado (2000), Hurtado, et al. (2008) and Gurin, et al. (2002) confirmed, the conflicts resulting from peer interactions can adversely affect students' perceptions of organizational types, thereby influencing the ways leadership plays out with organizational members. Moreover, as evidenced by Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011), racial battle fatigue is the result of gendered, racial, and predominantly White environmental sources of stress for Black men that are compounded by the frequency of interactions with White institutional presence in higher environments (Gusa, 2010). The African American leaders in this study could not avoid such interactions when leading in predominantly White organizations despite employing coping persistence strategies. Specifically, Smith et al., (2011) postulated that their findings "support the paradox that African American men face every day when they walk into the classroom or boardroom and experience racial climates that are replete with gendered racism, blocked opportunities, and mundane, extreme, environmental stress" (p. 77). Indeed, these types of occurrences also exist in predominantly White college student organizations where Black males must vacillate between protecting their Blackness, while determining how to lead for the advancement of their organizations (Arminio, et al., 2000; Harper & Quaye, 2007). According to Oscar, being in perpetual "transition between Black and leadership identities" often silenced their voice as a leader and African American male, which was at times "overwhelming."

Methodologically speaking, using CRT, allowed for recognizing the ontological, epistemological and axiological value of participants' lived experiences, to challenge both peer and organizational forms of racial microaggressions and confirms the endemic existence of racism within a predominantly White institutional context. Furthermore, CRT as applied in this study recognizes participants' attempt to eliminate not only personal racial oppression, but also to assure racial oppression is removed from the collegiate environment writ large. Using CRT by highlighting narrative inquiry serves to foster applicable, proactive ways for Black males to lead in hostile environments where their race and gender are under assault. Clearly, interacting with racial and gendered stressors can not only have adverse affects on the psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses of African American males,

but these stressors also alter their leadership involvement and disengagement. Therefore, how these leaders are supported when leading in predominantly White organizations is essential to consider, as well as the responsibility of institutions, faculty, organization advisors and administrators in ensuring Black male student leader persistence.

Conclusion

Our interactions with participants illuminated a leadership conundrum that represented an internal struggle that seemingly had no ending, and an inescapable realization that as long as participants were Black and serving as active leaders in predominantly White organizations, they would be in danger of experiencing racial battle fatigue. Participants' preoccupation with the meeting room was both literal and figurative relating to their construction of it as a place where they were forced to go as a leader to confirm their worth as Black males who were competent to lead White peers and students of color. Once we begin to think about the intersection of racial and leadership identities as coupled with organizational context, it becomes easier to understand the difficulty of existing in a space seen as detrimental race-wise, yet beneficial toward leadership development. If anything, participants' understanding of their multiple identities is clearly confounding in that despite the numerous challenges presented, they never chose to succumb or completely resign from their predominantly White organizations. Participants' resilience, which was indicated by their purposeful application of coping persistence strategies, as leaders is evidence that racial battle fatigue can be mitigated, but it also serves as a template and departure point for beginning to understand what motivates Black male leaders to continue within environments that are not necessarily conducive to their leadership orientations and other non-cognitive skill developments.

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