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Hired for Diversity and Onboarded for Assimilation: A Case Study of Racial Battle Fatigue Among Student Affairs Practitioners of Color

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HIRED FOR DIVERSITY AND ONBOARDED FOR ASSIMILATION: A CASE STUDY

OF RACIAL BATTLE FATIGUE AMONG STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS OF

COLOR

A Dissertation Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

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COLOR

August 2024

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This study addressed the need to understand the negative experiences of student

affairs practitioners of color (SAPOCs) related to racial battle fatigue (RBF) and the

accompanying need to explore how SAPOCs working at predominately white institutions

(PWIs) experience RBF. The author conducted a multiple-case study with 10 SAPOCs, who

served as individual cases, and used semi-structured interviews and document analyses of

institutional websites. The conceptual framework for this study was framed by racialized

organizations (Ray, 2019), campus racial climate (Hurtado et al., 1998), and RBF (Smith et

al., 2007). Findings indicated that while the 10 participants worked at different PWIs and had

distinct office and institutional climates, they shared similar experiences with RBF. Each

participant talked about the visceral impact of navigating their workplace as a staff member

of color, their fear of confirming stereotypes, and/or the mental toll of debating internally whether they had been microaggressed as they navigated their workplace. The study participants were persistently reminded that they were different in their predominately white workspaces, and they endured frequent disrespect about their appearance (e.g. hair). Participants revealed they could do the work that they were assigned but also articulated the negative impact RBF was having on them as they would complete their work tasks and manage their RBF. Ultimately, this led participants to have a mix of responses about whether they felt a sense of belonging at work and in which settings they felt the most sense of belonging. Participant experiences with RBF while working at PWIs included a lack of support at different levels (i.e. supervisor, department, or institution) of their professional journeys and a lack of racial representation in their white workplaces. Lastly, participants were evenly split on whether they would leave or remain in the field of student affairs and higher education. This study has outlined the importance of understanding the influence of the PWI environment on SAPOC and RBF. SAPOCs are inherently harmed when an institution focuses solely on increasing its compositional diversity without reflecting on the practices embedded in its culture and climate. The powerful stories shared by the participants led to suggestions for future research and several recommendations for institutions, departments, and SAPOCs to contribute to/improve to the wellbeing, working conditions and/or retention of SAPOCs.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family—the one I was born into and my chosen family.

To my grandmas, Simone and Vonnie: Without your choice to leave everything behind to

form a new life in the United States, I would not have been able to achieve this

accomplishment.

To my parents, Gerrie, Lancelot, and Nancy: Your unwavering belief in me propelled me

through the hard times.

To my brothers, Hunter and Spencer: I hope to make the world a better place for you both so

you don't have to deal with the struggles I experienced.

To my amazing friends whom I call family: It takes a village to live this one precious life we

have. I couldn't do this without y'all.

Lastly, to all the student affairs professionals of color struggling with racial battle fatigue,

you are seen and you have EVERY right to take up space.

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voice to tell my story and create spaces that can disrupt these toxic patterns in the workplace. For taking a challenging work experience and making it a scholarly pursuit to explain all the ways they had me messed up. And most importantly, for getting out of my own way. You did it! And I am so proud of you!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse at the student level;
however, that diversity is not reflected among staff. The *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s
Almanac 2021–2022 report stated that full-time staff working at 4-year higher education
institutions within libraries, student life, and admissions were overwhelmingly white[1]—
specifically, 67.5% at 4-year public institutions and 71.7% at 4-year private nonprofit
institutions. The report also noted that in the same roles at these 4-year institutions, Black
staff made up 11.2% (public) and 11.1% (private nonprofit), Hispanic/Latine staff constituted
9.1% (public) and 6.7% (private nonprofit), Asian staff made up 4.9% (public) and 4.5%
(private nonprofit), and American Indian/Native Alaska staff made up 0.09% (public) and
0.03% (private nonprofit) of all staff members. Conversely, the representation of students of
color enrolled in 4-year institutions rose to 45.2% by 2016 (American Council on Education
[ACE], 2019). While there is significant racial/ethnic diversity in the student body, the
majority of staff employed at higher education institutions remain white. This typically
means that most higher education institutions operate in a predominantly white-centered
framework, often creating challenging work environments for staff of color. While some

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[1] Similarly to Dumas (2016), I lowercase "white" since it does not describe a group with common kinship
outside of colonialism and terror.

higher education institutions work to recruit staff of color to help address the lack of diversity on their staff; these individuals are often onboarded to assimilate into the white-centered culture and policies. Therefore, it is critically important to examine the environment and collective experiences of staff of color and how they may lead to low hiring and retention rates among staff of color.

To better understand the experiences of staff of color, it is vital to understand the environment in which they work. Most higher education institutions in the United States are predominantly and historically white; thus, their organizational cultures and climates are created and re-created to support the white majority of their population, thereby leading to a hostile racial climate for staff members of color on campus (Arnold et al., 2016; Baez, 2000; Means et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2007). For instance, staff of color often feel out of place in their work environment and feel that their white peers do not believe they belong there when they speak up in meetings (Arnold et al., 2016). Staff of color, especially Black men, have reported that they are conscious of how they physically present themselves in workplace settings to avoid being perceived as intimidating (Arnold et al., 2016). Additionally, staff of color have often described the climate of their institution as "chilly" and less supportive of their research or work (Jayakumar et al., 2009; Marcus, 2000).

As shown in decades of higher education research (Briscoe, 2021; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hurtado et al., 1997; Hurtado et al., 1998, Jayakumar et al., 2009; Victorino et al., 2013; Yosso et al., 2009), campus culture and racial climate significantly shape staff experiences (Mayhew et al., 2006). For example, staff of color are more likely than their white peers to rate their experiences on campus as negative (Marcus, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2006; Steele, 2018), since most staff with marginalized racial identities interact with higher

education institutions that were not created for them (Steele, 2018; Wilder, 2013). Indeed, until 1970, most colleges and universities maintained admissions policies and practices that excluded students of color.

This hostile racial climate is exacerbated by the lack of representation of staff of color in senior-level professional positions at these historically and/or predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education (Gasman et al., 2015), which results detrimentally in staff not seeing themselves in higher positions and not seeing growth within the institution. Staff of color also often notice their white peers more easily navigating the institutional culture (Mayhew et al., 2016). In addition, staff of color are regularly overlooked for opportunities compared with their white peers and feel that there are higher expectations placed on them than on white peers (Steele, 2018). These examples illustrate the characteristics of the PWI environment, where staff of color experience isolation and hypervisibility in the workplace (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). Staff of color are often the only person of color in their department, which can either be an isolating experience, given the tokenism they experience, or create a space for hypervigilance, a heightened awareness of the staff of color present in meetings and involved in work projects (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). Corbin et al. (2018) found that hypervigilance also occurred for staff of color—who were avoiding associations with negative stereotypes around their racial/ethnic group—through a heightened awareness of their actions and words.

These negative experiences of staff of color interacting with the environment at colleges and universities can lead to symptoms of racial battle fatigue (RBF; Quaye et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2007). RBF refers to the influence of accumulated racial microaggressions and hostile campus climates on the physiological, psychological, and behavioral stress

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responses among people of color (Smith, 2004). William A. Smith (2007), who coined the term, argued that sustained differential exposure to race-related stressors at the societal, institutional, interpersonal, and individual levels and the interpretations and coping responses employed by people of color can lead to traumatic psychological and physiological stress conditions of RBF. Presently, only three published studies (Husband, 2016; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2020) have focused on the impact of RBF on staff of color within higher education. These studies have specifically focused on student affairs practitioners of color (SAPOCs) within staff-level positions at PWIs. Two of the studies (Husband, 2016; Quaye et al., 2020) centered on the overall professional experience of staff of color and how they dealt with RBF. The third study, by Okello and colleagues (2020), explored the possibility of healing from RBF and the ways staff of color attempt this healing. Undoubtedly, though the literature on staff of color is limited, these studies do highlight that RBF has an impact on staff of color, specifically student affairs practitioners, within the workplace and can impact their lives outside of work. My study explored the factors that lead to RBF among SAPOCs working in one of the most common settings of higher education, PWIs, to illustrate the importance of addressing the working conditions of SAPOCs.

Problem Statement

The need to examine staff experience is vital since staff members serve a crucial role in the ecosystem of higher education institutions, where they support faculty and students with their respective work. Institutions have a variety of staff roles that allow the daily operations of a university to occur, and staff of color occupy those roles. Student affairs practitioners comprise a subsection of staff at colleges and universities who typically provide services and resources to students outside the classroom. Originating in the mid-1800s, the

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field and positions within student affairs continued to grow as students' needs morphed and faculty were no longer able to accommodate these needs, such as overseeing student housing, advising student government, providing career counseling, keeping health records, and distributing scholarship monies (Hevel, 2016).

Research on SAPOCs is needed, especially considering the current negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hiring of staff, which has created a labor shortage in higher education and which has led to higher rates of employee burnout and demoralization (McClure, 2021). The combination of the negative environmental conditions in higher education for staff of color and their subsequent RBF with the current pandemic labor shortage has created a critical area of improvement for higher education. Moreover, the political climate on college campuses around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and critical race theory (CRT) has grown hostile as states have proposed legislation to curtail DEI efforts or eliminate DEI offices entirely (Mangan, 2023). As of 2024, according to CRT Forward Tracking Project, 807 anti-CRT efforts have been introduced at the local, state, and federal levels (Alexander et al., 2021). Hurtado et al. (1998) highlighted the importance of recruiting and retaining staff of color, which is essential to the success of higher education institutions as the student population becomes more racially and ethnically diverse. Moreover, retaining more staff of color can help create a more positive campus racial climate and can lead to the successful recruitment of more staff of color at an institution (Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], 2009). Thus, the current conditions of staff of color illustrates an urgent need to understand the nuances of the workplace for SAPOCs and how RBF impacts their professional experience.

The literature has demonstrated that organizational members experience the higher education environment differently based on their race (Arnold et al., 2016; Baez, 2000; Means et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2011). Specifically, research has shown that campus racial climate is more negative for faculty and staff of color than for white faculty and staff (Arnold et al., 2016; Marcus, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2006; Steele, 2018). Based on these similar othering experiences and the well-documented RBF symptoms of faculty of color (Arnold et al., 2016; Baez, 2000; Means et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2011), as well as the emerging literature on RBF experienced by student affairs professionals of color (Husband, 2016; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2020), it is likely that staff of color also widely experience physiological, psychological, and behavioral stress responses associated with RBF. However, despite the likely prevalence of racial battle fatigue among student affairs practitioners of color, their experiences have not been well documented in the literature. Therefore, the educational problem addressed by this study was the need to understand the negative experiences of SAPOCs related to RBF and the accompanying need to explore more deeply how SAPOCs working at historically and/or predominantly white institutions experience RBF. This problem illustrates an urgent need to understand the conditions of the workplace for practitioners of color working in student affairs and how RBF impacts their professional experience.

Research Questions

To address this problem, the following questions guided my research:

1. How do student affairs practitioners of color (SAPOCs[2]) experience racial battle fatigue (RBF) on their campuses?

    a. What is the role of RBF in their ability to execute their daily work responsibilities?

2. How do student affairs practitioners who experience RBF describe their sense of belonging?

    a. How do these experiences shape SAPOCs' perceptions of the office climate in their workplace? Of their institutional climate?

    b. How does RBF contribute to their desire to stay at their institution? Or in the field of higher education?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of student affairs professionals of color with racial battle fatigue, specifically for individuals working at historically and/or predominantly white institutions[3] of higher education. The factors leading to RBF include institutional and departmental contexts that impact SAPOC experiences. This multiple-case study explored these contexts and the lived experiences of SAPOCs within these environments.

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[2] For this study, SAPOC refers to Black, Latine, and biracial (Black and Latine) individuals. Given that the literature has primarily focused on Black and Latine, I wanted to continue that work specific to student affairs professionals

[3] Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *predominantly white institutions* (PWIs), which also includes historically white institutions (HWIs), or higher education institutions with structures and policies that are still white-centered despite the student population no longer being predominately white.

Although the literature on staff of color is scant and even fewer studies have explicitly focused on RBF (Briscoe, 2021; Quaye et al., 2020), some studies have documented RBF among faculty of color, which informs the understanding of RBF among staff of color since they work in the same institutions and must navigate the same racially hostile campus climates. Faculty of color often describe their symptoms of RBF in their experiences on campuses. Promotion and tenure processes, for example, are a large source of RBF. Faculty of color have been labeled as "difficult to get along with others" in their department or have been called "lazy" (Arnold et al., 2016), often making them feel out of place during the tenure and promotion process, isolated, feared, unheard, and outnumbered, and leading to a range of psychological RBF symptoms (Arnold et al., 2016). Arnold et al. (2016) established that RBF can create feelings of loss of control and can manifest physically in faculty of color, such as through weight loss and gain during the promotion and tenure process. Faculty of color regularly create coping mechanisms to deal with RBF through their agency and resilience. For instance, faculty of color often pursue race-based service to connect with other faculty of color and to reduce feelings of isolation (Baez, 2000). Additionally, the literature (Franklin, 2019; Husband, 2016; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2007) has indicated that Black and/or Latine[4] individuals are more likely to have negative experiences based on their race. Therefore, this study examined the experiences of Black and Latine student affairs practitioners.

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[4] For the purpose of this study, I will use Latine to describe the gender-inclusive term to describe anyone with a Latino/a/x background and honor Spanish speaking grammar.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study will benefit vice presidents/chancellors of student affairs and other individuals who lead a unit/department and/or supervise staff of color. Staff in human resources departments and leaders of national organizations dedicated to higher education will also find the study results useful. A deeper understanding of the racialized experiences of SAPOCs can create opportunities to better support and supervise practices for this population. Ultimately, when SAPOCs feel supported, an institution's overall campus racial climate improves, creating higher quality work experiences (Mayhew et al., 2006). Department, unit, and senior-level staff of student affairs divisions will benefit from this knowledge since they have the power to make changes that can foster positive change for the staff of color who work in their areas. Human resources personnel at higher education institutions will equally benefit from the study findings, given that the purpose of human resources professionals is to manage the human capital of their respective institutions and help manage the workplace dynamic for individual staff members. This study showcases how campus racial climate and organizational structures can negatively impact SAPOCs and thus create RBF for them.

Lastly, this information is critical for leaders of national organizations—such as the National Association of Student Affairs Personnel (NASPA), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the Association of College and Housing Officers–International (ACUHO-I), and the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR)—who would benefit from a greater understanding of the environments that SAPOCs navigate at PWIs and the impact of RBF on them. These organizations provide guidelines for the field of higher education, are often used as

resources, and set the standard for best practices within higher education. The voices and experiences of SAPOCs must be present in the research and in the information that these associations disseminate to the field of higher education. This study highlights the areas that are commonly known within higher education research but have not had an impact on the standards that guide the workplace. In other words, theory has not fully informed practice in this area for SAPOCs or the field of higher education.

Overview of the Study

In this dissertation, I first present the research questions that were used to explore the research problem. I then review the relevant literature to better understand how student affairs professionals of color experience racial battle fatigue at predominantly white institutions. Specifically, I examine the experience of SAPOCs at two levels: the institutional level and the individual staff member level. This multilevel analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how RBF manifests within the overall environment of higher education and how it influences individuals in their workplace. The holistic approach to analyzing RBF through the literature review illuminates the nuanced factors that influence an individual's level of RBF within the higher education workplace I then describe my methodology for exploring the research problem. The final section of the dissertation discusses the study findings and their implications.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The two areas of literature reviewed in this research provide a foundation for
examining the experiences of student affairs practitioners of color with racial battle fatigue
working at predominantly white institutions. The first half of the literature review explores
the racialized environment of higher education, the impact of the campus racial climate on
staff of color (including SAPOCs), and the subsequent experiences of staff of color within
higher education. This section focuses on the independent variables of the study, such as the
factors that lead to poor working conditions, racism in the workplace, and the resulting
presence of RBF. The second area of literature reviewed considers how RBF presents itself
among people of color in a university work setting. Although the literature does not
extensively examine RBF for practitioners of color working in student affairs, it does detail
the impact of RBF on faculty, which I drew upon to lay important groundwork for examining
the RBF experiences of SAPOCs in my study. However, I also include the limited literature
focusing specifically on SAPOCs and their experiences with RBF.

Racialized Environments and Staff of Color Experiences

While my review revealed a sparse body of literature on staff of color experiences
within PWIs published during the late 1990s and early 2000s, since 2015, new studies have
emerged. While there is more literature on the overall experiences of staff of color versus

staff of color experiencing RBF specifically, it is critical to understand the environmental nuances that influence staff of color experiences with RBF within PWIs. In considering how one's experiences with the climate and the overall environment contribute to symptoms of RBF for staff of color, I explore the literature by beginning with a discussion of the theories about racialized organizations and campus racial climate. I then examine the experiences of staff of color at PWIs in light of the tenets of the aforementioned theories. This discussion of the literature provides a larger overview of the environments in which staff of color must participate within higher education to perform their work and meet their job expectations. The analysis of the environmental conditions for staff of color illuminate the embedded factors that increase RBF within the structures of an institution and/or a person's department/unit. The analysis of the environmental conditions also highlights the interpersonal aspects of RBF when SAPOC interact with people in their daily work tasks.

Theories of Focus: Racialized Organizations and Campus Racial Climate

To aid in the analysis of the environmental conditions, two theories—racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) and campus racial climate (Hurtado et al., 1999)—are critical to deepening the understanding of this context within higher education. Ray's (2019) racialized organizations theory details how any organization is racialized, noting that organizations are not race-neutral but have racial structures. Ray discussed the benefit of combining racial and organizational theories to better understand the environment and create opportunities for change. Importantly, the theory of racialized organizations serves as an analytical tool, when paired with campus racial climate theory, for exploring the impact of the environment within a higher education institution on staff of color. Furthermore, the theory of racialized

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organizations underscores that PWIs also create racialized environments that play a direct role in the professional experiences of staff of color.

Although racialized organization theory is vital to understanding the role of race in organizations, other frameworks interrogate campus racial climate and the experiences of staff of color. In a foundational higher education report, Hurtado and colleagues (1999) noted that "research supports the notion that increasing an institution's structural diversity is considered the first important step in improving the climate for diversity" (p. 31), illuminating the importance of hiring and retaining staff and faculty who reflect the diversity of the student population to provide the best educational experience for students. The report outlined the four dimensions, history of exclusion, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate that comprise the campus racial climate framework, which has been used by higher education scholars since its inception to decipher the aspects of each institution's campus racial climate and its impact on people of color in their communities. When the report was first released, it allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of students of color at their institutions and how a negative racial climate could hinder their academic progress or how a positive climate helped them. This framework helps illuminate the climate that staff of color must navigate in their daily work experiences and provides a deeper understanding of the environments they navigate within their organizations.

Racialized Organizations Theory and Collegiate Environment

Ray's (2019) racialized organization theory provides a framework for analyzing organizations as racial structures that shape social norms and determine how material resources are accessed. The theory consists of three parts. The first part details the cognitive schema connecting ideas about race with material and psychological resources for staff. The

second part offers a set of tenets for how racialized organizations operate: (a) Racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups, such as the racial stratification in organizations where people of color often hold a large majority of the roles at the bottom of the organization's hierarchy (e.g., dining and housekeeping staff at colleges); (b) racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources, such as the endowment gap between historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and PWIs; (c) whiteness is a credential, such as the use of the "one-drop" rule formalized as state laws; and (d) decoupling is racialized, such as the separation of discrimination policy reporting versus enforcement systems (Ray, 2019). The third part of the theory discusses how organizations respond to and change societal racial issues. In the following sections, I describe the four tenets guiding Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations, linking each tenet to various contexts in higher education to illustrate how the different characteristics of racialized organizations are apparent in the environments of colleges and universities broadly. Since the literature on the experiences of staff of color has not engaged Ray's theory of racialized organizations, this section makes explicit connections between the theory and those experiences. My goal is to create a foundational understanding of the organizational factors that impact staff of color.

Diminished Agency

Ray (2019) described the process of racialized organizations diminishing members' agency as the interactions within the organization shape staff members' emotional responses to issues and negatively impact the overall earning potential for staff of color. The racial structures within organizations impact members' agency and influence how and where members spend their time. The myth of meritocracy in U.S. higher education provides a

helpful launching point for understanding higher education institutions as racialized organizations. Meritocracy is a dominant narrative arguing that if a person works hard enough, they will earn societal rewards and gain social mobility. In accordance with this myth, higher education is often seen as a vehicle for upward social mobility. Wilder (2013) began unraveling this myth by drawing attention to the formation of the colonial colleges and their ties to slavery. Critically, labor from enslaved people was used to erect and maintain many of the colonial-era higher education institutions; this exemplifies how higher education operates as a racialized organization by profiting from the free labor of enslaved people and their non-existent agency in building the physical infrastructures of institutions—and the continued tradition of not recognizing the value or role of Black people in the development of higher education. Furthermore, the endowments of the first colleges and universities, their trustees, and their students utilized profits from the slave trade to fund their scholarly endeavors. Indeed, these institutions were the primary beneficiaries of slave-trade wealth. Patton (2016) emphasized that Harvard University, the first PWI in the United States, has the largest endowment yet has not substantially acknowledged its wealth accumulation through the slave trade, thus cementing a tradition of diminished agency for people of color within the higher education organizational framework from the very beginning. The founding of higher education created the blueprint of the racial structure that staff of color operate within and creates a standard that is lower than that of their white peers.

Unequal Distribution of Resources

Ray (2019) detailed how racialized organizations re-create institution-level segregation by creating racial hierarchies within positions and thus undermining any diversity programs designed to increase staff of color in upper leadership positions. If staff of

color succeed in gaining a higher occupational position, they are expected to maintain the white norms of the organization, which create an environment rife with stereotype threats—that is, the constant threat that others' judgments of their actions will align the person with a negative stereotype that represents this person's marginalized identity—for staff of color (Ahmed, 2007; Quaye et al., 2020). One of the most evident ways that higher education perpetuates the unequal distribution of resources for staff of color is through the lack of effective recruitment and mentorship processes. Fyre and Fulton (2020) conducted a descriptive quantitative study using two datasets that contained demographic information on professional and managerial staff positions (i.e., non-faculty roles) at higher education institutions. While there had been dramatic growth in professional and managerial roles in the previous 25 years in higher education, the data showed that staff of color were more likely to work at 2-year colleges, which tend to have more diverse student bodies than 4-year institutions. Staff of color face persistent issues related to their representation in staff positions at 4-year nonprofit institutions, such as a lack of a pipeline to the profession, leadership programs, and mentoring opportunities. This lack of opportunities for professionals of color highlights the racial hierarchy within higher education that maintains a status quo of majority white staff at PWIs.

The need for a clear path to leadership roles and a commitment to diversity have been identified as pressing needs for the future of higher education (Betts et al., 2009), which could address the institutional barriers blocking staff of color. One of the common responses to this issue is to recruit candidates of color to institutions to allow for greater representation. However, this may not be an effective option if recruitment processes for staff of color reproduce whiteness. Ahmed (2007) argued that recruitment processes create the "ego ideal

of an institution" and recruit prospective members to match the institution's existing image. Therefore, institutions are more effective in recruiting more white people to institutions, replicating a vicious cycle that provides little room for staff of color and continues to reinforce a racial hierarchy within higher education.

Jackson and O'Callaghan (2009) explored racial and ethnic diversity among administrative positions in a special issue of the *ASHE Reader*. Their report discusses the various barriers that staff of color face within the workforce. One of the organizational barriers they identified is the lack of access that staff of color have to mentors (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). The opportunity for mentorship is a viable option for increasing the diversity of staff; however, it is challenging when senior leaders at PWIs are predominantly white and do not provide quality mentorship or supervision to staff of color (Marcus, 2000). Using a critical race theory lens, Gasman and colleagues (2015) conducted a document analysis of the hiring of senior administrators at Ivy League institutions and found that those who served in leadership positions were white and male. Specifically, the study found that 87.5% of college presidents were white compared with 5.9% Black, 3.8% Hispanic, 1.5% Asian Americans, and 0.8% American Indian. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is challenging for staff of color to find mentorship opportunities (Marcus, 2000) when those who can serve as mentors may not understand their professional and lived experiences. Staff of color's limited access to mentorship is a prime example of the unequal distribution of resources that occurs in racialized organizations and can disadvantage their professional career and potential growth.

Whiteness as Credentialing

Ray (2019) highlighted how whiteness provides a credential for organizational resources and subsequently institutionalizes a property interest in whiteness (Harris, 1993) within a racialized organization structure, thus solidifying the racial hierarchy within the organization. White-centered institutions struggle to create environments that foster growth for their racially and ethnically diverse staff since these institutions are the structural and physical manifestations of whiteness as property in American society. Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) describes the process whereby the law codified the white race as a privilege and gave tangibility to the intangible nature of whiteness in the form of property. There are four rights associated with property that can be aligned with whiteness in society and within higher education: (a) the right of disposition, (b) the right to use and enjoyment, (c) reputation and status property, and (d) the absolute right to exclude (Harris, 1993). These four property rights influence the structures, organizational racial hierarchy, and environments that staff of color navigate in PWIs and are subsequently left to process its impact.

Higher education upholds the four rights of whiteness as property in several ways. The following examples illuminate the professional environment within which staff of color work. First, Harris (1993) described the right of disposition as the inability to sell or transfer whiteness, as well as its inalienability. Within higher education, this property right occurs, for example, in the practice of obtaining a college degree, which cannot be transferred. Second, the right to use and enjoyment illustrates how whiteness can have a dual use as a property interest and as an aspect of a person's identity that flows from passive to active in any given setting (Harris, 1993). For instance, higher education institutions deal with

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increasing market competition by curating a strong brand for their university. A university brand personality consists of human characteristics, such as prestige, sincerity, appeal, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). The cultivated university brand allows an institution to become an identity and a property interest that can vacillate given the current need of the competitive market of higher education. Third, the right of reputation and status property details how the legal system reinforces a racial hierarchy that places whiteness at the top, with an esteemed reputation. When whiteness is central to an institution's brand and is its ego ideal, the institution actively seeks staff of color who match that ego ideal (Ahmed, 2007). Therefore, it is more difficult for staff of color to be hired when they do not fit the institution's ego ideal. This right is also reflected in how higher education institutions are ranked by *U.S. World News* for the best and most elite colleges and universities for students to attend. This can also be seen in the promotion and tenure system for faculty when institution are examining where they have published and what type of service is valued (Arnold et al., 2016). Lastly, the absolute right to exclude is a core principle that defines who is white and what they can access (Harris, 1993). This concept is exemplified by the admission systems of elite higher education institutions and is especially reflected in the ways they determine who can gain acceptance, representing a white-majority student body both historically and currently (Patton, 2016). Moreover, staff of color are often identified in recruitment processes as not being a good institutional fit for open roles (Bensimon et al., 2016).

Another form of whiteness as credentialing is the design of curricula within PWIs, especially the process of determining what is deemed mandatory and what does not have importance in the classroom. Patton (2016) pointed out that the curriculum centers on white

experience and has a Eurocentric lens. Even when institutions attempt to create a diversity requirement for their curriculum, diversity courses rarely attempt to dismantle oppression but rather present diversity broadly. It is important to note that there is epistemological racism within the entire system of higher education (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Epistemology is the theory of knowledge production and thus the foundation of how curricula and courses are crafted. Scheurich and Young (1997) argued that epistemologies that are valued in higher education are based on the social history of whites and do not hold space for marginalized groups (e.g., Black, Native American, Asian, Latine, etc.). Higher education has used whiteness as credentialing in the courses and structures that uphold the current system, thereby creating a circumstance in which the curriculum reinforces racial subordination of people who do not identify as white and institutions of higher education protect the mission of their organization. Staff of color are employed by these racialized organizations and are meant to uphold their mission, which supports their racial subordination (Ray, 2019).

Racialized Decoupling

Ray (2019) described how racialized organizations traditionally decouple their efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion through practices that reinforce racial hierarchies. A diversity action plan, for example, is a document that outlines the strategies and goals white-centered organizations will enact to create a more inclusive environment or address known DEI issues on campus. Institutions produce these documents that claim to address racism; however, they do not yield effective results. As Gusa (2010) discussed, PWIs have an embedded culture of whiteness that creates and supports the marginalization of Black students and stifles racial equity. In fact, according to Gusa (2010), the Federal Bureau of Investigation found that secondary and postsecondary schools are the third most common

space where racial-bias crimes occur, which has remained largely unchanged in more recent

years. In 2020, 571 hate crimes were reported in postsecondary settings according to the

National Center of Education Statistics (2023), a statistic that highlights the hostile campus

environment present on today's college campuses. As of 2024, 807 anti-CRT actions at the

local, state, and federal levels have eliminated DEI efforts on campus; for instance, the State

of Florida has approved legislation that does not allow any state or federal funding for DEI

(Alexander et al., 2021; Mangan, 2023). PWIs create DEI positions and diversity action plans

to try to rectify the fact that they remain white spaces despite the growth of an ethnically and

racially diverse population (Arnold et al., 2016; Baez, 2000; Smith et al., 2007; Turner, 2002)

and to address racial issues on campus. Yet, Iverson's (2007) study, which comprised a

document analysis of 20 university diversity policies from land-grant universities between

1999 and 2004, found a critical flaw in these diversity plans or policies: They used whiteness

as the standard for measuring success. The policies and practices implemented by higher

education institutions use a white and male lens to measure success in relation to improving

the environmental conditions on their campus. Iverson (2007) illustrated that diversity action

plans create a discourse of access that paints people of color as outsiders who differ from the

white majority but also differ from other people of color and thus acquired insider status. The

process of decoupling race in implementing diversity action plans creates, ironically, an

environment that disqualifies people of color from participation, even though the plan was

created to include them as full participants within the racialized organization (Iverson, 2007).

Another core aspect of the racialized decoupling that occurs at PWIs is the language

used in documents about diversity and the common vernacular for discussions. Lang and

Yandell (2019) explored the language that PWIs use around race and diversity. They found

that the "diversity language" used in diversity action plans obscures the systematic racism on college campuses. The term "diversity" is often framed as a hope for everyone to understand each other better, but diversity discussions rarely engage in a critical analysis of campus history. As Ahmed (2007) conducted a series of interviews with diversity practitioners in Australian higher education, focusing on their use of the term "diversity." Ahmed (2007) noted,

> Some critics suggest that "diversity" enters higher education through marketization: the term is seen as coming from management, and from the imperative to "manage diversity," or to value diversity "as if" it was a human resource. Such a managerial focus on diversity works to individuate difference and to conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within universities. (p. 236)

Ahmed (2007) illuminated how higher education institutions use diversity as a buzzword rather than as a term that dictates the necessary actions to be taken within the institution. Again, this highlights how higher education operates as a racialized organization by creating diversity action plans that are intended to create more inclusive environments for people of color but that become decoupled from race by watering down "diversity" and never specifying how the institution will implement the plan within the organization.

Moreover, Tichavakunda (2021) explored how PWIs respond to racist acts or student activism on campus and used critical race theory to analyze the responses. Tichavakunda found that diversity action plans act as a "racial symbol" that does nothing to address the structural issues of white-centered institutions that promote racist behaviors and culture. Racial symbols can take many forms such as holidays, name changes, position titles, and the diversity action plan itself. A flaw of such plans is that they discuss diversity without

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examining a higher education institution's history or structure. This allows racism and whiteness to remain hidden and embedded in foundational structures such as policies and practices within the institution.

Clearly, higher education is not exempt from operating as a racialized organization, nor does it operate race neutrally. Understanding the various ways higher education reflects the tenets of a racialized organization allows for a better understanding of the experiences of staff of color operating in environments that uphold whiteness. Specifically, understanding the racial hierarchies present within the organization for staff of color highlights the agency and resources available to them to navigate their work. Additionally, higher education operating as a racialized organization means that staff of color interact with organizational structures that promote their racial subordination within the curriculum and within ineffective diversity action plans. Moreover, campus racial climate theory interrogates an institution's history as part of the first dimension of an institution's racial climate. Therefore, this serves as a helpful analytical tool for unpacking the work environment that staff of color endure daily. The following sections describe the theory of campus racial climate in the context of the experiences of staff of color.

Campus Racial Climate Framework and Staff of Color Experiences

Campus racial climate is often confused with organizational culture. Organizational culture is represented by norms, rules, and artifacts that reflect the deeply held values and assumptions of the organization (Bess & Dee, 2012). These values influence the normative behaviors of organizational members, and institutional culture is not easily changed. By contrast, campus racial climate is more vulnerable to change than culture and is socially constructed by the institution's members' perceptions of the overall institutional context and

their personal experience. It is imperative to understand that campus racial climate is built on the experiences and perceptions of the organizational members and cannot be observed by an outsider without data from those members. As people of color interact with systems within higher education institutions, they have different workplace experiences based on their racialized experience within their role and their daily lived experiences. Particularly for institutions with negative racial campus climates, there is an urgent need to address whether they want to retain people of color (students, faculty, staff, and administrators). However, improving the climate can be complicated if institutional leaders are not aware of the issues involved or solutions that would work best.

Hurtado et al. (1998) proposed a framework to better understand the nuances of the campus racial climate within higher education institutions. This framework consists of four dimensions that help illuminate the factors that create and contribute to the campus racial climate: history of inclusion, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate. In the following subsections, I discuss all four dimensions of Hurtado et al.'s campus racial climate framework and their connection to the staff of color experience and the impact on their well-being.

History of Exclusion

Higher education institutions have a long history of exclusion (Milem et al., 2005). As stated earlier, during the colonial period of higher education, when Harvard was founded in 1636, the field of higher education was created to educate future generations of white men, namely the white sons of wealthy families, who would enter the clergy. Additionally, many colonial-era institutions, such as Harvard, Dartmouth, and the College of William and Mary, were engaged in converting and "civilizing" Native Americans as part of their educational

mission and institutional charters (Wright, 1991). However, higher education evolved to meet the shifting needs of society and began serving a more diverse set of students. During the first passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, states were given access to land appropriated from Native tribes for the creation of institutions of higher learning (Thelin, 2011). However, the institutions that were founded through this federal initiative still catered to a predominantly, if not exclusively, white population. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were founded to remedy the access issue for Black students since they were not allowed admission into the existing PWIs. Not until 1890, when the second Morrill Act was passed, did federal funds became available for HBCUs to further educational opportunities for Black students (Patton, 2016).

Since its founding, higher education has excluded Blacks and other people of color from admission. Despite court orders and federal legislation, most universities remain white. Black student enrollment increased marginally as a result of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case and the 1964 Civil Right Act (Geiger, 2016). After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 and the subsequent protests that occurred after his murder, higher education institutions responded to the demands of students and the public by making a concerted effort to hire more Black administrators. Furthermore, colleges and universities did not fully open their doors to all students until the 1970s. While the increased representation of staff of color was helpful, it was later identified that the Black administrators felt that their positions did not have any formal power or authority within white-centered organizations (Smith, 1980). Since its inception, higher education has evolved, although reluctantly, to include more than its original audience of white male students entering the ministry, enrolling a greater diversity of students with underrepresented

identities based on race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender expression, and much more. Yet, PWIs still struggle to be inclusive of new students who have access to higher education, especially students, faculty, and staff of color. Currently, staff of color continue to be underrepresented in higher level administrative roles (ASHE, 2009)—a remnant of the history of exclusion within higher education.

Structural Diversity

Hurtado et al. (1998) defined structural diversity as the numerical representation of the various gender, ethnic, and racial groups on a campus. The American Council on Education's 2019 report *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education* stated that, since 1997, the U.S. college student population has grown more racially and ethnically diverse. In 1996, students of color comprised 29.6% of the undergraduate student population; by 2016, that number had increased 45.2%. At the graduate level, the representation of students of color increased from 20.8% to 32.0% during that same period (ACE, 2019). However, when one looks at the structural diversity of staff, it remains overwhelmingly white, at 71.4% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019). Focusing specifically on the structural diversity of staff members in higher education, Garcia (2016) conducted a qualitative study using the multi-contextual model for diverse learning environments and examined staff experiences with campus racial climate at Hispanic-serving institutions. The author found that staff of color who were the only persons of color (i.e., tokenized) in their department often had a negative perception of the racial climate and that being tokenized also placed an extra burden on them to serve students of color (Garcia, 2016).

Another area of consideration for structural diversity is the intentionality of the recruitment process in attracting staff of color at white-centered institutions. Jackson and

Flowers (2003) conducted a qualitative study that used the Delphi technique, a survey-based framework for estimating the likelihood and outcome of future events. The study uncovered strategies critical to retaining African American student affairs practitioners at PWIs. One of these strategies highlighted the importance of ensuring that institutions remain consistent with the diversity practices they market during the recruitment process and with the experience they provide to new staff of color when they arrive. The tone set during the recruitment process is vital to the retention of staff of color at PWIs. The recruitment process is critical to PWIs increasing their structural diversity with staff of color and should not be underestimated.

Psychological Climate

Hurtado et al. (1998) detailed that the psychological climate for diversity consists of the perceptions of racial conflict or discrimination, institutional responses to diversity, individuals' views of group relations, and the attitudes held toward different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Previous research (Gomez et al., 2015; Marcus, 2000; Mena & Vaccaro, 2017) has indicated a distinct professional experience based on racial identity and a distinct psychological impact for staff of color. One of the most consistent trends within the literature is that staff of color have different professional experiences than their white peers (Marcus, 2000; Mayhew, 2006). For example, in a qualitative study, Marcus (2000) interviewed 21 student affairs professionals and observed that staff of color tended to perceive that they were less successful in their roles compared with their white counterparts. Additionally, Mayhew and colleagues (2006) conducted a quantitative study that explored the staff experience with campus climate at PWIs in the Midwest. The results also highlighted that staff of color were less likely to perceive the climate as positive compared with their white peers. Marcus (2000)

further found that staff of color often engaged within an invisible political structure and were often unaware of the unwritten rules of the department or institution. In addition, Marcus (2000) found that when staff of color made an error with a campus stakeholder or went against an unwritten departmental norm, they felt it was difficult to overcome the mistake.

Moreover, Gomez et al. (2015) used a life-history methodology to conduct a qualitative study of two administrators at a PWI (a state university) in the Midwest. The staff of color felt that to succeed in the office environment, they needed to implore "niceness" tactics to avoid negative stereotypes associated with their racial and ethnic identity (Gomez et al., 2015). Specifically, staff of color worked hard to ensure that they made a positive first impression and worked to be amicable. Oftentimes in environments that are not friendly to staff of color, those staff members do not stay long in that workplace (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017).

The coping mechanisms that staff of color employ to navigate their work environments are contingent on their racialized experience. Briscoe (2021) applied a multi-contextual model for diverse learning environments and critical incident technique in their study of 12 student affairs practitioners, both individuals of color and white staff, and their experiences with campus racial climate at PWIs. The racial and ethnic identity of staff of color provided an additional lens for how they perceived and made meaning of their experiences on campus (Briscoe, 2021). Staff members who observed institutional obstacles, such as hesitation to adopt diversity policies, were less likely to perceive that the institution had achieved a positive climate for diversity. Another common occurrence for staff of color is that when national tragedies (i.e., the murder of Black men and women by police) and

campus racial incidents occur, staff of color must interact with their white colleagues who operate as if things are business as usual at the workplace (Briscoe, 2021).

Behavioral Climate

Hurtado et al. (1998) described behavioral climate as the nature of relations between and among different ethnic and racial backgrounds and the general social interactions between different racial/ethnic groups on campus. A major theme in staff of color experiences is their exposure to microaggressions and their subsequent processing of the impact. Mena and Vaccaro's (2017) critical ethnographic study examined the impact of environmental microaggressions and found that staff of color felt invisible on their campus, within their discipline and professional association, in their community, and interpersonally. Staff of color described the experience of not receiving acknowledgment for their accomplishments, being passed over for promotions, and lacking access to mentorship opportunities, which harmed their overall work experience (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). Staff of color must process the microaggressions that occur within their workplace through their interactions with others, either students or their colleagues. Briscoe (2021) described an experience in which a staff member of color was casually called a "slave" by a white colleague attempting to describe their strong work ethic, which was deeply hurtful to the staff member of color. Briscoe (2021) described another instance when a staff member of color recognized that they placed students' needs before their own when they processed racial incidents on campus, which contributed to their burnout and left them feeling drained and unable to help students at their fullest capacity. Both circumstances indicated the specific nuances that staff of color must navigate within their workplace—all of which are highly taxing, racially charged, and demoralizing.

The campus racial climate framework provides a tool for analyzing the environmental factors impacting staff of color. From its inception, higher education has been molded as a space intended to accommodate an exclusive, elite white population (Wilder, 2013). For hundreds of years, higher education excluded people of color from participating as students, faculty, or staff. However, when the admission and employment of people of color were permitted and then increased, the vestiges of exclusion remained, creating racial tension. Staff of color navigate a workplace rife with discrimination or racial conflict, resulting in a more negative experience that that of their white peers (Marcus, 2000; Mayhew, 2006). Staff of color must process the microaggressions and isolation they experience while attempting to complete their work (Mena & Vaccaro, 2016). The literature on staff of color within the psychological and behavioral dimensions of the campus racial climate helps to frame the ways that staff of color experience racial battle fatigue, particularly since RBF is an outcome of the behavioral and psychological dimensions of the campus racial climate. This is especially relevant when one considers how RBF symptoms manifest for staff of color within their work environment.

Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial battle fatigue refers to the accumulative physiological, psychological, and behavioral symptoms of people of color experiencing prolonged exposure to racism in the form of blatant and overt discrimination and microaggressions at historically white organizations, including PWIs in higher education (Franklin, 2019; Smith, 2004). The literature on RBF in higher education has primarily focused on the experiences of faculty and students. As I argued in the introduction, the similarities in the experiences of faculty and staff of color make the current knowledge base particularly helpful for laying a foundations

for examining RBF among staff of color within white-centered institutions of higher learning. Therefore, I begin by reviewing the literature on how people of color experience the symptoms of RBF. I then examine the experience of faculty and staff of color in the context of RBF within their workplace between interpersonal dynamics and interactions with institutional systems. Additionally, I explore the experience of stereotype threat for faculty and staff of color, since stereotype threat is a direct symptom of RBF. Lastly, I analyze the impact of role strain on faculty and staff of color.

RBF occurs when people of color must process the accumulation of ongoing subtle and overt racism that is common in everyday interactions. RBF manifests in people of color in three dimensions: psychological, physiological, and behavioral symptoms. The first dimension refers to psychological symptoms, which include, but are not limited to, denial, resentment, frustration, constant worrying or anxiety, emotional and social withdrawal, difficulty thinking coherently or articulating (confirming a stereotype), and loss of self-confidence (Smith et al., 2007). The second dimension focuses on physiological symptoms, including extreme fatigue, ulcers, tension headaches, elevated heart rate, and elevated blood pressure (Smith et al., 2007). The third dimension emphasizes behavioral symptoms, including stereotype threat, impatience, changes to eating habits, procrastination, or disturbances with sleep (Franklin, 2019). It is critical to understand how these symptoms manifest among people of color as they navigate their workplace and the overall environment.

Faculty and Staff Experiences with RBF

Given the limited research on staff of color experiences with RBF, the literature on faculty experiences with RBF is reviewed here for critical insights into the higher education

work environment. For faculty of color, RBF manifests mostly in the context of the different standards to which they are held in evaluation processes (Arnold et al., 2016), such as promotion and tenure. The promotion and tenure process is a review system for faculty that holds whiteness as the standard of success when analyzing a candidate's publications, teaching, and service as a faculty member. Faculty of color often maintain a delicate balance between working to meet expectations and trying to avoid the negative stereotypes attached to their race/ethnicity (Arnold et al., 2016; Corbin et al., 2018; Rollock, 2021). Recent studies have shown that RBF places strain on faculty and lessens their effectiveness in their academic work (Arnold et al., 2016; Baez, 2000; Means et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2007). These studies have illuminated the racialized experience of faculty of color within higher education and the realities of RBF, including the isolation or tokenism they feel within their department or how the focus of these studies are questioned with a white lens and often not seen as valid. Similarly, the literature on staff of color in higher education and their experiences with RBF has indicated that they navigate whiteness and are measured by standards based in whiteness. Three studies have dealt specifically with staff of color and RBF (Husband, 2016; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2020), illuminating connections between the professional experiences of staff of color and the RBF that results from navigating the workplace.

The literature on RBF has discussed two main aspects of the impact of RBF on faculty and staff of color. The first includes feelings of frustration, anxiety, and worry about how faculty and staff of color are perceived by others and their attempts to avoid association with racial stereotypes (Arnold et al., 2016; Corbin et al., 2018; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2020 Rollock, 2021). In addition, the second well-documented aspect of RBF among

faculty and staff of color relates to the mental energy that faculty and staff of color expend in processing the strain of their racialized experiences in their role, which interferes with their obligations (Arnold et al., 2016; Baez, 2000; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2020). Both experiences are connected to the symptoms of RBF and are described in more depth in the following sections.

Stereotype Threat

According to the American Psychological Association (2020), stereotypes are defined as a set of generalizations about the qualities and characteristics of a social group or category and are resistant to change. Steele (1997) examined the impact of stereotypes on women and African American people in academic domains and identified stereotype threat as a barrier faced by these marginalized groups. Stereotype threat is defined as the constant threat that others' judgment of a person's actions will align that person with a negative stereotype that represents this person's marginalized identity and thus has a negative impact on their performance (APA, 2020). Additionally, stereotype threat is one of the behavioral symptoms of RBF for people of color.

The stereotypes of faculty of color can have positive or negative connotations that are equally detrimental to their performance. Corbin et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study using a composite counterstory based on the experiences of 13 Black women. For instance, there is a common belief that Black women faculty are inhumanly strong and produce high-quality work (Corbin et al., 2018) despite all the obstacles in their way—hence the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype. For Black women faculty, this type of stereotype can lead to the John Henry-ism symptom of RBF (Smith et al., 2007), which describes how people of color can produce high standards of work despite their concurrently declining physical health (i.e.,

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ulcers, cancer, migraines, etc.). Elevated levels of productivity and declining physical health have been repeatedly noted in studies of faculty of color experiencing RBF (Arnold et al., 2016; Corbin et al., 2019). The emotional tensions of faculty of color are amplified by the lack of structural diversity within their workplace and by the pressure to perform well to represent their ethnic identity.

On the other hand, the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype can be quickly applied to Black women faculty who do not conform to the expectations placed on them or who have a reasonably angry reaction to a racialized situation (Arnold et al., 2016; Corbin et al., 2019). Arnold et al. (2016) used narrative inquiry to explore the promotion and tenure process experienced by 10 faculty of color, examining their microaggressions and subsequent RBF. The endless internal debate about whether one can react the way they feel or whether it could play into a stereotype can lead to several symptoms linked to RBF, such as fatigue, tension headaches, worrying, and hypervigilance (Arnold et al., 2016; Corbin et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). By contrast, white faculty are more apt at negotiating the expectations placed on them because they are encouraged to navigate the system that way (Arnold et al., 2016)—and those systems typically center whiteness (Iverson, 2007) and reflect the historical legacy that higher education was built for a white audience and continues to be steeped in whiteness. For faculty of color, there is a strong pattern of having to play "nice" to survive the system at hand (Arnold et al., 2016; Corbin et al., 2019; Rollock, 2021).

Similarly to what has been described in studies of faculty of color dealing with RBF, a major theme in the literature on staff of color who experience RBF is their persistent struggle to avoid negative stereotypes in the workplace based on their behavior or reactions. Okello et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study utilizing narrative inquiry that examined

how 35 Black student affairs educators healed from RBF. In this study, many of the participants detailed the impact and weight of being one of the only people of color in their work space and the pressure they felt to avoid being stereotyped as the Angry Black woman in their work interactions. One of the male participants in Okello et al.'s study shared that he was very thoughtful about how he presented his thoughts because he could be perceived as threatening due to his large physical build and his racial identity as a Black man. This was especially important since he worked in the fraternity and sorority functional area and had to be cognizant of the ways white women surveilled his Black body (Okello et al., 2020).

Quaye et al.'s (2020) study used narrative inquiry to explore the visceral effects of RBF on 35 Black student affairs practitioners. They highlighted that the Black women, in trying to avoid being associated with the Angry Black Woman stereotype, suppressed their rage and other emotions about the events they dealt with in their work setting. The reality of navigating stereotype threat in the workplace brought forth a shared experience among the participants, described as feeling that they could not bring their full selves to work and that they had to use measures to protect themselves in the workplace. A male participant described going to his mother's house, sitting on her couch, and taking the opportunity to just simply be present. He felt that he did not have to worry about any stereotypes or his race in this space, which represented an opportunity for him to decompress (Quaye et al., 2020).

The experiences noted in both Okello et al. (2020) and Quaye et al. (2020) have a direct connection to the RBF behavioral symptom of stereotype threat (Franklin, 2019) and the psychological symptoms of frustration, anxiety, and social/emotional withdrawal. The symptoms reveal the significant burdens that a practitioner of color must deal with while fulfilling the responsibilities of their regular work. Additionally, while the findings from both

studies yield important information about the experiences of staff of color, specifically Black

student affairs practitioners, they also highlight the urgent need for additional studies that

explore and provide greater deeper depth to the data around how RBF impacts staff of color

at PWIs.

Role Strain

Role strain is defined as stress that occurs when an individual cannot meet the

expectations of their professional role (Goode, 1960). The daily occurrences of racism in the

workplace and faculty of color's subsequent reactions do not often allow faculty of color to

meet the demands of their professional role, thus creating role strain. A mental and emotional

toll is extracted from interacting in these work settings and by simply showing up to meet

work expectations (Rollock, 2021). Rollock (2021) interviewed 20 Black women faculty in

the United Kingdom to understand their experiences and to ascertain why there are so few

Black female professors. Faculty of color are often in circumstances where they hold the

least power compared with their white peers and, therefore, must suppress their emotions

(namely anger) to avoid the fragile responses of their white colleagues and maintain decorum

(Rollock, 2021), leading to symptoms of RBF.

Role strain also commonly intensifies RBF symptoms among faculty and staff of

color who are committed to racial justice work. For example, Gorski (2019) conducted a

phenomenological study to examine 10 racial justice activist faculty and staff who

experienced burnout through racial justice activism at PWIs. The faculty and staff of color

found it difficult to disconnect from the work because it was deeply personal to them. The

study participants were already experiencing RBF symptoms of fatigue, hypervigilance,

frustration, anger, social withdrawal, and resentment, which were further exacerbated by

burnout and the multiple ways they experienced role strain. These harsh workplace

conditions can lead to high attrition among faculty of color (Rollock, 2021). In another

qualitative study, Quaye and colleagues (2020) used narrative inquiry to examine the visceral

effects of RBF on 35 Black student affairs practitioners as they struggle to cope with racism

in the workplace. The study described staff of color working in a distracted and hyperalert

manner, both symptoms of RBF, as they processed workplace racism. The staff of color in

this study revealed that they felt like they were constantly in fight mode and had their guard

up as they navigated predominantly white workspaces (Quaye et al., 2020). The ways the

participants processed their circumstances illustrated that they experienced psychological and

physiological RBF symptoms of exhaustion, hopelessness, and hospitalization for panic

attacks.

Role strain is present for staff of color as they experience RBF symptoms as part of

their daily professional experience while simultaneously attempting to accomplish their work

tasks. This also brings an emotional heaviness and bleakness to their day-to-day experiences

(Husband, 2016). Staff of color also experience role strain in their approach to supervision

dynamics. Wang et al. (2020) conducted a community autoethnography with three

counseling doctoral interns, focusing on their RBF in different supervisory experiences

within the internship. The study found that staff of color must actively engage in their

supervision dyad, requiring them to determine whether they will need to advocate for

themselves to their supervisor in addition to accomplishing the scope of their work. As a

result of this constant internal and external negotiation and deliberation process, the study

participants exhibited RBF symptoms of anxiety and fatigue. Additionally, they highlighted

the legacy of exclusion that has occurred in higher education, where the possibility of having a supervisor who shares the same racial identity as a staff member of color is lower.

Recognizing the stark reality of the workplace environment, one study considered the possibility of healing from RBF. Okello et al. (2020) argued that coping and survival are not enough to address the racist environments staff of color navigate daily and the damage from RBF in this setting. The authors offered that, by going through a self-definition process, staff of color can avoid using standards of whiteness as measures of their success. By contrast, when they use white standards, RBF can be exacerbated. Quaye et al. (2020) argued that self-care as a coping tool fails to examine the environment that perpetuates RBF and does not create space for change that would benefit staff of color and support them in avoiding RBF.

In summary, the past 2 years have seen an increase in publications centering on the experiences of staff of color within higher education and the connection of those experiences to RBF. However, these studies use data collected in 2017 (Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2020), highlighting the need for more current research. The literature has been more abundant and clearer regarding the connection between faculty of color and RBF. Importantly, there are similarities in the experiences of staff and faculty of color related to the role strain and stereotype threat they experience as they negotiate what they can withstand while fulfilling the demands of their roles. In addition, experiences with stereotype threat and role strain have been documented as giving rise to a range of RBF symptoms, including anxiety, frustration, fatigue, and social and emotional withdrawal, among other symptoms. The literature has shown that both faculty and staff of color experience these RBF symptoms, although the literature on faculty of color is much more expansive. My review of the literature demonstrated a critical need for more research on the staff of color population

to better understand how they experience RBF within a range of environmental conditions at PWIs.

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework helped guide this study by focusing on two levels of analysis: the individual perspective and organizational influence. Since the purpose of this study was to explore the factors leading to racial battle fatigue for student affairs practitioners of color working at predominantly white institutions, the research required a conceptual framework that illuminated the nuances of individual experience while navigating the white-centered nature of higher education as an organization.

The conceptual framework for the study is a combination of frameworks (Hurtado et al., 1999; Ray, 2019; Smith et al., 2007) that offered deeper insights into the experience of SAPOC on an individual level and the organizational contexts a practitioner of color working in student affairs must navigate in their professional role. The framework represents a funnel of different factors that create the context for SAPOC, and the outcomes of these contexts comprise their experiences , namely with RBF. The first contextual element in the funnel framework represents the institutional level of a PWI and the setting a SAPOC navigates to complete their work. The institutional context of a white-centered institution is important to name because of how it shapes and influences the culture and policies of a department/unit and creates the holistic environment a SAPOC must navigate in their professional role. This layer comprises four factors: structural diversity, a history of exclusion by the institution, whiteness as credentialing, and racialized decoupling The history of exclusion speaks to the tradition of PWIs not allowing various racial and ethnic groups to enroll or work at the respective institution (Hurtado et al., 1999). Recognizing this factor helps illuminate the

many nuances of PWIs' climate. Structural diversity refers to the numerical representation of gender, ethnic, and racial groups in an institution. Given this study's focus, PWIs will always have a majority of white community members; this is the fabric of the landscape with which a practitioner of color in student affairs must interact. Whiteness as credentialing and racialized decoupling at PWIs further impact the experiences of SAPOC at the institutional level. Whiteness as credentialing is the underlying process that provides access to organizational resources, centers white agency, and legitimizes work hierarchies (Ray, 2019) within an organization. Higher education serves both as a credentialing agency and reinforces the property interest of whiteness within its structure. Racialized decoupling is the practice of implementing policies meant to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion separate from the practices and policies that should reinforce them, such as making efforts to recruit SAPOC without planning for their needs and identities to be integrated into the culture of an institution. These factors help illuminate how SAPOC find a sense of belonging in their unit/department and in the climate of the institution.

The second contextual element in the conceptual framework represents the department/unit context, highlighting four factors that shape the organizational environment that a SAPOC must navigate within their department/unit: the behavioral climate and psychological climate of the workplace, diminishing agency, and unequal distribution of resources. Behavioral climate consists of the social interaction of different racial/ethnic groups within the same racial/ethnic group (Hurtado et al., 1999). Psychological climate refers to the individual's view on institutional response to diversity, perceptions of discrimination or racial conflict, group relations, and the attitudes held by others from different racial and ethnic groups. These climate factors can influence SAPOC's feelings of

diminished agency and illuminate the unequal distribution of resources. Diminished agency

occurs when a SAPOC interacts with the racial structures within the organization they work

for and is based on their positionality within the department/unit, which impacts their ability

to use their agency in this setting (Ray, 2019). This impact can be seen in how they control

their time and how they influence the larger organization, such as a SAPOC's commute time

to their workplace in a predominantly white area (Ray, 2019). A SAPOC also faces unequal

distribution of resources when their department/unit within higher education re-create

institutional segregation by solidifying the racial structures within positions. For example,

SAPOCs are clustered more around entry-level roles versus senior-level roles. This speaks to

the abundance of white and male people in senior leadership roles within higher education

and to the few SAPOCs who are tokenized in their high-level roles. These factors offer

insights into how SAPOCs execute their daily work tasks and into their desire to stay within

their role/field.

   Lastly, regarding the outcomes of these experiences within these contexts, this study

focused on the lived experiences of SAPOCs in predominantly white spaces and the

accumulated symptoms they exhibit based on their professional and personal experiences

with RBF. There are three categories of RBF symptoms: physiological, psychological, and

behavioral. The first set of symptoms is physiological, including high blood pressure, tension

headaches, ulcers, and extreme fatigue. The second category of symptoms is psychological,

including frustration, anxiety, a loss of self-confidence, and social withdrawal. The third type

of symptom is behavioral, manifesting as stereotype threat, procrastination, and sleep

disturbances. The symptoms and the experiences of practitioners of color who work in

student affairs were the dependent variables this study explored. Figure 1 depicts the study's

conceptual framework.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework
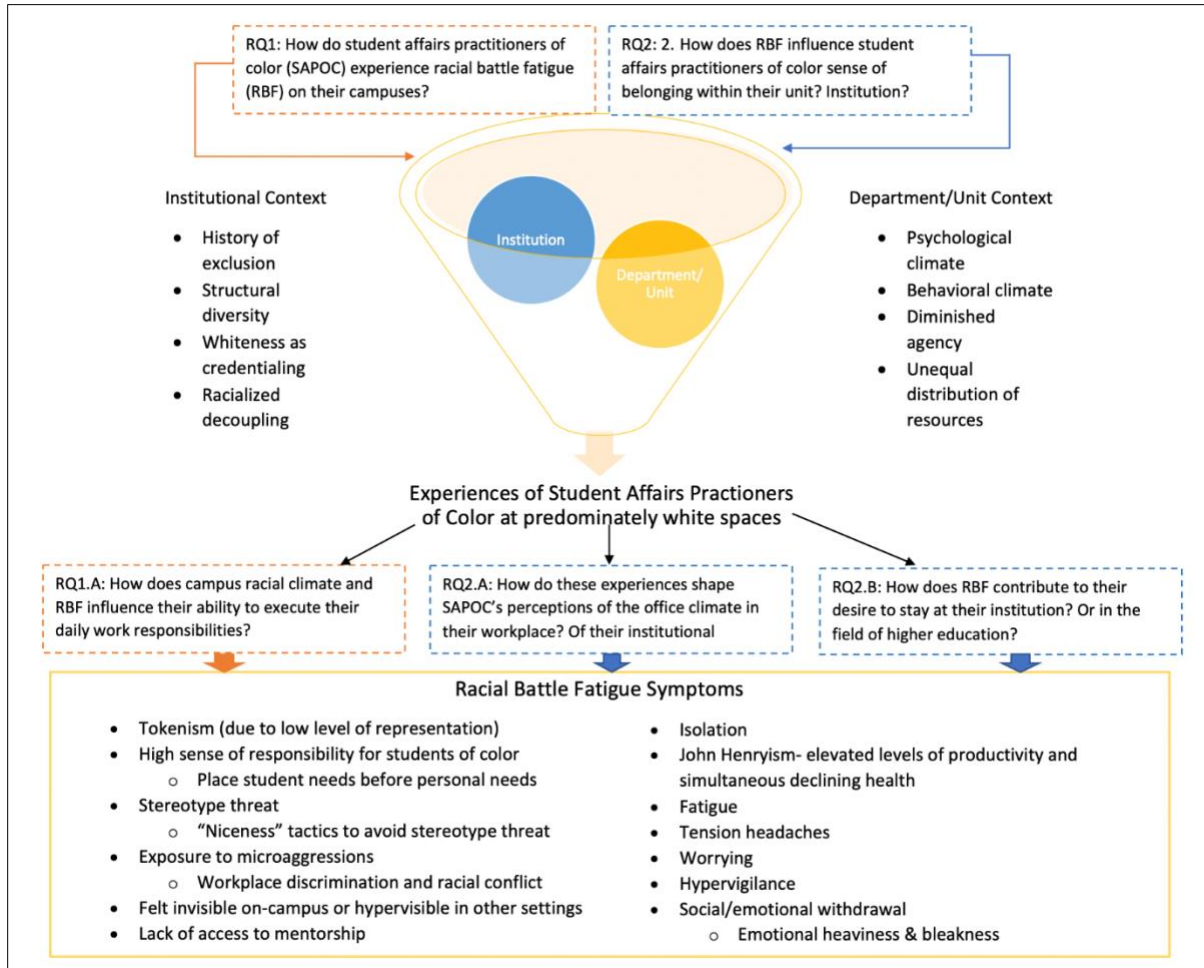
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena that go beyond what numbers can illustrate in quantitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) defined qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world and whereby the researcher studies phenomena in their natural settings to make sense of those phenomena. The five most common qualitative research methods are case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnographic study, and narrative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The qualitative researcher must select the method best suited to addressing the research questions they create. This chapter outlines the methodology I selected, describes my positionality in the study, and details the study's research design.

I used a case study to address my research questions. Case studies are used in a variety of fields, such as education, psychology, business, political science, and social work, to contribute to the knowledge of an individual, group, social, political, or organizational phenomenon (Yin, 2018). A critical component of a case study is the clarification and construction of what the "case" will be and how to create a bounded system around it (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A case can be an event, process, activity, program, or several individuals that represent the site of the investigation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Furthermore, various case-study research designs are used based on their function,

characteristics, and disciplinary perspectives (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Given the importance of institutional context to my study, this method allowed me, as the researcher, to examine staff of color experiences with racial battle fatigue in their real-life context (Guest et al., 2013). As described earlier, RBF refers to the continued and accumulated racial microaggressions and hostile campus climates influencing the physiological, psychological, and behavioral stress responses of people of color (Smith et al., 2007). Predominantly white institutions represent the most common type of higher education institution and comprise a large population of white staff members, therefore, increasing the likelihood that SAPOCs navigate environments that contribute to their RBF. A holistic approach to my case study allowed me to focus on the unit of analysis, RBF, and a descriptive case study allowed for rich description of the phenomenon of interest. Lastly, using a multi-case approach allowed me to gain a stronger sense of the experiences of student affairs practitioners across different predominantly white spaces. Therefore, using a descriptive, holistic, multiple-case study was the methodology best suited to addressing my research questions.

Positionality Statement

The qualitative research process begins with the researcher and how they view the world. The elements of a researcher's worldview, or paradigm, include axiology, epistemology, and ontology, which help illustrate how they are positioned within their research process. Axiology describes the way researchers are led by their values and how these values model their ethical considerations. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, focusing on the ways of knowing and how one attains new knowledge. Ontology is the philosophical study of being, and epistemology and ontology show how a researcher interacts with a research process (Mertens, 2020). Before outlining my research process, I describe my

worldview and how my experiences informed my cultural intuition about the research problem. Additionally, I highlight the opportunities I had to use my cultural intuition within my research process. Delgado Bernal (1998) described cultural intuition as the researcher's ability to understand the subtle meanings of data and the phenomenon being researched. There are four sources of cultural intuition: personal experience, existing literature (both technical and non-technical), professional experience, and the analytical research process.

As a Black Caribbean-American, temporarily able-bodied, cisgender woman working in middle management within the student affairs division of a public 4-year institution, I believe that the creation of knowledge is based on the social construction of realities, and my ontology honors that knowledge is socially constructed and historically situated. I have had varied professional experiences in which the espoused values of the institution of being antiracist or dedicated to social justice did not align with my lived experience within the institutions. I believed I would be working at institutions that valued social justice and that would intentionally foster a holistic sense of belonging for all people who work and matriculate at that institution. Yet, I have regularly experienced PWIs that are not able, and at times unwilling, to accommodate the needs of staff of color or create a sense of belonging for them. I have had to combat a departmental culture that was not ready to have diverse perspectives when I was first hired as an entry-level professional, and I have dealt with an institutional culture that is protective of maintaining the status quo—which is anything that will uphold whiteness and maintain the white racial balance of the institution. These experiences have fostered a transformative paradigm through which I hope to reveal and dismantle systems of oppression.

I was motivated to conduct this study based on my experiences in the workplace. I have often been the only Black woman in my role in my department. I have experienced moments of RBF (in the form of anxiety, extreme fatigue, and high stress) as a result of having to address colleagues, typically those who occupy a higher ranked position, for a variety of race-related issues. For instance, I had to vocalize the importance of acknowledging the back-to-back murders of Black men in the summer of 2015 in the office, challenging the generic greetings I received that did not allude to the tragedies that occurred earlier that day. Or when I have had to argue about the importance of having a practitioner of color on a student–staff committee responsible for recruiting over 230 employee positions for undergraduate and graduate students. Or when I was asked if I would return to the professional staff recruitment team since the person in charge was "trying to be mindful of diversity," thereby blatantly tokenizing me. Or when I helped lead a group of professionals in creating affinity spaces for 192 resident assistant staff during the summer of 2020, after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. The following academic year, I tried to apply an antiracist lens to the work I did and experienced significant stress or triggers from my work environment. This ultimately led to my supervisor stating that "the things [I] have issues with are the things that will never change" and then trying to coach me out of my role. My own RBF began to intertwine with high levels of burnout with my work (including psychosomatic pain in my left hip) and led me to leave my first institution and professional role.

Given the cultural intuition I have around RBF, I was cautious of the potential triggers for the participants in this study as we discussed topics that can often bring up negative and/or traumatic experiences. I posed my interview questions with care and

sensitivity, aware that I was asking questions about difficult moments in a participant's professional and personal life. As a researcher, my ethics are guided by the value I place on cultural norms and social justice within my research practice. Therefore, I believe looking into how RBF can impact practitioners of color working in student affairs at PWIs is critical for current and future generations of professionals in higher education.

<div align="center">**Research Design**</div>

A research design outlines the plan, structure, and strategy for addressing the research questions of a study (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). In this section, I describe the methods I used for data collection, data analysis, and establishing trustworthiness, and discuss the limitations of the study. Yin (2018) stated that there are five components of a case-study design: (a) the research questions; (b) propositions, if any; (c) the case itself; (d) the logic linking the data to the proposition(s); and (e) the criteria for interpreting the findings. The following section outlines my approach to the research design of this study.

The research questions I outlined were the focus of this study and its design. The design centered on the proposition that student affairs practitioners of color experience racial battle fatigue working at white-centered 4-year institutions, impacting their work and their retention at their respective institution. The cases were individuals who identified as SAPOCs and who worked at PWIs in the New England area. I used cross-case analysis in my multi-case design when I collected the data. I identified two plausible rival explanations for my case: (1) SAPOCs do not experience RBF based on their workplace experience, and (2) RBF does not negatively impact a SAPOC's experience in their workplace or negatively impact their retention. The rival explanations allowed me to determine if one of the cases

presented as a negative case and took a different direction and allowed me to change my

original propositions (Yin, 2018).

Table 1

Components of the Research Design

Component	Study Design

Case Study Questions	1. How do student affairs practitioners of color (SAPOCs) experience racial battle fatigue (RBF) on their campuses?
	   a. What is the role of RBF in their ability to execute their daily work responsibilities?
	2. How do student affairs practitioners who experience RBF describe their sense of belonging?
	   a. How do these experiences shape SAPOCs' perceptions of the office climate in their workplace? Of their institutional climate?
	   b. How does RBF contribute to their desire to stay at their institution? Or in the field of higher education?

PROPOSITIONS	1. Student affairs practitioners of color experience racial battle fatigue at white-centered institutions that affect their work and retention at their institutions. 2. These white-centered institutions of higher education can have institutional and departmental racial climates that do not allow student affairs practitioners of color to feel included or have not made any changes to be more inclusive of their diverse employees; they expect the employee to assimilate to their standards.
CASE	The case was individuals who are student affairs practitioners of color and had experienced RBF. Individuals had to have the following qualifications:

Component	Study Design
	• Black, Latine, or biracial • Student affairs professional with at least 2 years of full-time experience after graduating with their master's degree
	The boundary of this case was focusing on SAPOCs who worked at predominantly white institutions of higher education in the New England area.
Logic Linking Data to Propositions	Based on the propositions, I used cross-case synthesis analysis methods.
Criteria for Interpreting Findings	During the design stage, it was important to identify potential plausible rival explanations for the case. The following were created: 1. SAPOCs do not experience RBF based on their workplace experience. 2. RBF does not negatively impact a SAPOC's experience in their workplace or negatively impact their retention.

Data Collection

Creswell and Poth (2016) described seven interrelated activities for data collection in qualitative studies that aim to gather information essential to addressing the research questions: (a) locating a site and the individual cases, (b) gaining access and building rapport, (c.) sampling purposely, (d) collecting data, (e) recording information, (f) minimizing field issues, and (g) storing data securely. The following section details this study's data collection process .

Locating Site, Participants, and Sampling

The unit of analysis for this case study was student affairs practitioners of color working at predominantly white 4-year colleges or universities. This study focused on PWIs, where white students represent the majority of the overall student enrollment. The study was

bounded in the U.S. Northeast, given the high number of 4-year nonprofit public and private

higher education institutions in the region. The region also enriched the study by providing a

diverse selection of institutions, providing access to numerous public and private 4-year

colleges and universities that can be found nationwide. Additionally, I am most familiar with

4-year institutions from my own educational and professional experiences, which allowed me

to gain deeper insights into my participants' experiences. To take part in the study,

participants needed to be student affairs practitioners of color who self-identified as Black

and/or Latine and to have worked in the field for at least 2 years, but I looked for a variety of

professional experiences starting from entry-level to senior-level practitioners. I defined

"student affairs" as any department, division, or unit dedicated to students' learning and

growth outside the academic classroom (i.e., student housing, student activities, civic

engagement, service-learning, orientation, conduct, etc.). I identified 10 participants who met

the requirement that each represent a case, and I continued to add more cases until I had

reached saturation. I used cross-analysis to construct the common themes that emerged from

the shared experiences of the practitioners of color who worked in student affairs in white-

centered institutions.

I used a variety of sampling strategies in the study. Given the intent of the study, I

used multiple levels of sampling, including criterion, purposive, homogenous, and snowball

sampling, to identify the SAPOCs who could participate in the study. Purposeful sampling—

which requires a researcher to select individuals who can inform an understanding of the

research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2016)—was integral to recruiting the ideal number of

participants. Criterion sampling involves looking for study participants who fit the criterion

of a study (Creswell & Poth, 2016), in this case SAPOCs working at PWIs. In homogenous

sampling, the researcher focuses, reduces, and simplifies the study participants into one group (Creswell & Poth, 2016); in this study, that group was student affairs practitioners of color.

Gaining Access and Rapport Building

With the approved version of the study proposal, I embarked on the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Boston's Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. Given the human nature of the unit of analysis I explored, IRB approval was necessary. Generally, the IRB process was created to uphold three primary ethical principles for human research: (1) respect for persons—voluntary participation and informed consent; (2) beneficence—minimize risks to participants; and (3) justice—fair and equitable selection of participants.

When the IRB approval was granted, I began recruiting research participants for the study by marketing the opportunity through various channels. I created marketing materials to promote via social media groups and forums, like Instagram, Facebook, GroupMe, and LinkedIn. I am part of groups on these social media platforms that are geared toward student affairs practitioners. I have personal connections with regional groups dedicated to the professional development of student affairs practitioners that aided in the recruitment process. I also marketed the study opportunity through networks within the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and the Association of College and Housing Officers–International (ACUHO-I)—organizations for student affairs practitioners. I also have personal connections with regional and national subgroups within these organizations dedicated to the professional development of student affairs practitioners that helped with the recruitment process. After 2 weeks of recruiting study participants through social media and professional organizations, I

had reached my target sample. I accessed my professional network within the Northeast region to recruit SAPOCs. The recruitment material directed individuals interested in participating in the study to a questionnaire that asked for basic demographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity, length of time in the field, institutional type, functional area of work, etc.). As study participants agreed to the study, I coordinated the logistical details of the interviews and provided written information about informed consent.

Collecting, Recording, and Storing Data

Case study data can be collected through interviews, direct observations, participant observation, documentation, archival records, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2018). For this study, I used a combination of interviews and documentation. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each case (approximately 60 minutes long) either in person or via Zoom to explore their lived experiences with RBF at their respective PWI. I used an interview protocol (Appendix A) to organize the interview and understand the study participants' professional experiences. The interview protocol helped gather data about their experience navigating their workplace as a practitioner of color and their direct experience with RBF. I also used the semi-structured interview to explore what they were told during their recruitment to their institution versus their lived experience within the role for which they were hired.

For each interview, I wrote a reflective memo with a set of reflective questions before and after the interview to examine my own learning from each case. Using cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal,1998), my memo process helped me process the ways the study participants' stories were similar to mine and what I learned from their interviews. The memo prior to the interview described what I hoped to learn from the interview; the memo

after examined what the study participant said and how it connected with the conceptual framework and research questions. The memo process helped clarify both the participants' experiences and my own.

For each interview, I used Otter.ai to record and transcribe the conversation. I uploaded the transcription and audio to my OneDrive cloud folder dedicated to the study. Additionally, I stored my fieldnotes from the document analysis in the respective OneDrive folders for each case and had a dedicated folder for my reflective memos for each step of the study. This folder was password-protected and aided in protecting the confidentiality of each interview participant.

Lastly, I collected relevant, publicly available institutional documents for my study. For each case, I collected documents that showcased the institution's commitment to DEI for the overall institution and for their employees. Specifically, I searched the institution's website for published information related to the PWI's commitment to diversity. I also used a data collection memo for my document analysis (Appendix B) (1) to organize the information I found on the webpages and (2) to examine how they connected to the conceptual framework and research questions.

Data Analysis

The process of analyzing data is not linear and cannot be completed in a straightforward manner. Creswell and Poth (2016) described the process of data analysis as a spiral that is interrelated and occurs simultaneously. The spiral adheres to the following process: (a) managing and organizing data, (b) reading and memoing emergent ideas, (c.) describing and classifying codes into themes, (d) developing and accessing interpretations, (e) representing and visualizing the data, and (f) account for the findings. Furthermore,

following the standards of case study methodology, I organized my data analysis process in three phases: (1) within-case analysis, (2) cross-case analysis, and (3) final product (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Research Design
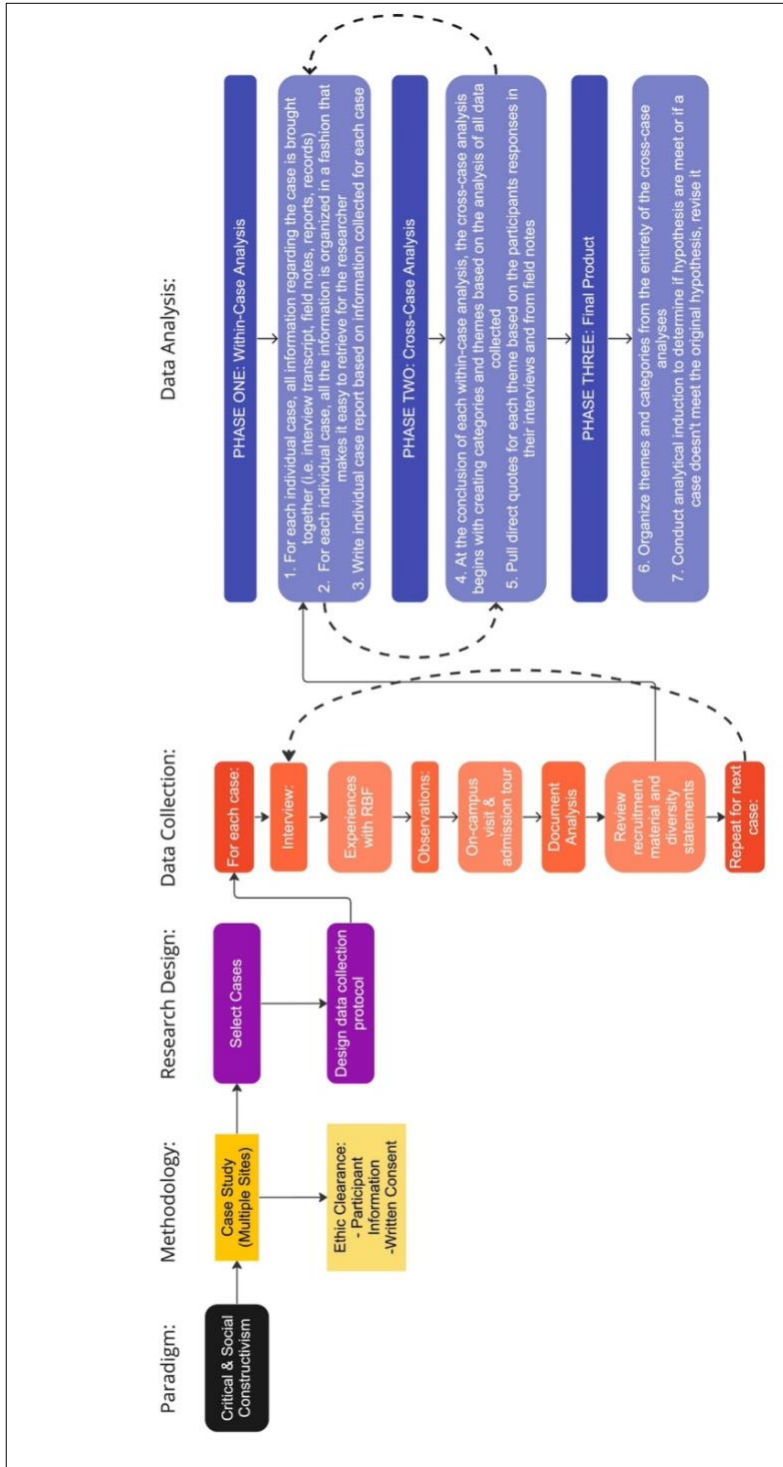
Adapted source: (Yin, 2018)

The first phase focused on the analysis of each case on its own and consisted of three steps. The first step of this phase involved collecting all the data from the interview and the fieldnotes from the document analysis and other case material. During this step, I began immersing myself in the data by reviewing the interview transcript and protocols and becoming familiar with the information presented by each case (Merriam, 2009). In the second step, I created an organizational system to capture all the data collected and to begin creating the chain of evidence that would allow readers to examine the data without the researcher's interpretation threaded throughout (Yin, 2018). The third step involved reviewing each data point to create the case study report, which detailed what was learned from each case from the interview and document analysis. With each case study report, I began the preliminary coding process for the individual case, based on the initial synthesis of what I learned from each case interview and document analysis, to begin the process of identifying themes. During this step, I deepened my understanding of the phenomenon of interest (student affairs practitioners of color and their experiences with RBF) within this case and started identifying codes or patterns that were connected to the other cases.

The second phase of the analysis focused on cross-analysis of the data from the cases to determine emergent themes. This stage comprised two steps. In the first step, I conducted a cross-case analysis once I had collected two or more cases. I began creating categories and themes for the data collected between the cases (Merriam, 2009) by inputting the codes into NVivo data analysis software. I referenced my conceptual framework to identify where the data reflected the contextual factors and lived experiences outlined within the framework for each case. For the second step in Phase 2, I pulled quotes from each of the identified themes that emerged from the interviews and the fieldnotes of the documents. During this step, I

began the process of thematic analysis to form categories and themes from the data collected from all the sources (Merriam, 2009).

The theme identification process brought the data analysis process to the final phase, which focused on creating the study's final product through two steps. The first step of this final phase involved organizing the final themes from the completion of all the cross-case analyses. Through the comparative analysis of the 10 cases, I identified themes that highlighted similarities between the experiences of the cases after a thorough understanding of each case (introduced in Chapter 4). When I completed all the individual cases, I used NVivo to narrow the first round of 135 codes to 34 codes in the second round of coding. Then, from the second round of codes, I created the themes for the findings I present later. During this step, I analyzed how the identified themes interact with the literature I had reviewed and my conceptual framework. In the last step, I conducted analytic induction to determine if my original hypothesis fit the cases (Merriam, 2009), which it did.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described trustworthiness as the core objective of a study and a way to judge the study during and after its completion. Trustworthiness refers to the authenticity, quality, and truthfulness of a study's findings (Cyprus, 2017). Trustworthiness is determined through four criteria: transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used a thick description of the research findings to allow transferability to readers' own experiences. By adhering to my interview protocol (refer to Appendix A), I provided dependability by ensuring that all participants were asked the same questions during their interviews; I also achieved dependability by following the protocols I set for the document analysis. To ensure confirmability in the study, I kept an audit trail of all

data collection and analysis steps I outlined and continued to ground the findings with direct quotes from the participants. Lastly, to enhance the credibility of the study, I conducted member checking with the participants by asking clarifying questions about their interview responses.

Yin (2018) offered four measures of validity in a case study research design: (a) construct validity, (b) internal validity, (c) external validity, and (d) reliability. To achieve construct validity, it is necessary to have multiple sources of evidence, which I built into my design by using interviews and documentation. This multi-source approach also helped with data triangulation, allowing for the establishment of a chain of evidence so that the reader can trace back the findings to the specific source(s) in the study (Yin, 2018). For internal validity, it is critical to have adequate time during data collection to actively seek data that could support alternative explanations (Merriam, 2009). Another strategy that helps maintain internal validity is reflexivity, whereby the researcher names their biases and dispositions (Merriam, 2009), which I did at the beginning of this chapter. External validity focuses on the transferability of the study and using maximum variation in the study sample (Merriam, 2009). Lastly, reliability is achieved through case study protocols (Appendices A, B, and C) for the sources of evidence and by creating a case study database (Yin, 2018). Merriam (2009) also recommended utilizing an audit trail in the form of a journal for gathering the researcher's memos and thoughts as they work through the cases.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this multi-case study design was the system I created to organize my data. I was mindful of this possibility and was steadfast in following the protocols I established and committed to keeping memos throughout the process to help

strengthen my audit trail. Since interviews were another source of evidence for the case study design, I encountered very few logistical issues with scheduling interviews with my participants within the intended timeline I set for data collection. The study did not include the perspectives of Asian and Native American student affairs practitioners and therefore does not provide a full understanding of how RBF impacts all practitioners of color. Additionally, I focused exclusively on practitioners who work at 4-year institutions; therefore, the findings do not offer any perspective on the community college experience.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter outlined the steps I followed to explore the factors that lead to RBF for SAPOCs at PWIs by describing my choice of methodology for data collection and analysis. I began this chapter with a discussion of my rationale for utilizing a descriptive holistic multi-case study and a reiteration of my research questions. I then reviewed my positionality in the study and how I viewed my role as a researcher. I detailed my research design by outlining my process for data collection and my data analysis steps, and closing with the trustworthiness and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 4

CASE OVERVIEW AND PARTICIPANT CONTEXT

This study explored the experiences of student affairs professionals of color (SAPOCs) with racial battle fatigue (RBF) working at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education. This chapter focuses on participants as the single case and provides a brief overview of the context and the RBF symptoms uncovered in their interviews. I begin by presenting a table summarizing demographic information about the study participants. This demographic information is critical to understanding the experiences of the participants and their professional roles. I use a pseudonym for each study participant to protect their identity. This chapter introduces the participants to give the reader an opportunity to understand their higher education. I present a brief profile of each participant and describe their experiences with RBF. I conclude with a summary of the information outlined in the chapter.

During the data collection phase of the study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 SAPOCs, all of whom worked within a division of student affairs at their respective PWIs. Every participant had worked at least 3 years as a full-time student affairs professional. All participants worked at PWIs in the Northeast region of the United States. The participants represented a variety of nonprofit 4-year institutions, including private and public colleges and universities. Additionally, I conducted a document analysis of each

participant's institution to analyze their publicly stated commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and to determine how they executed their vision. Most of the institutions did not publish staff and faculty demographic information on their websites; however, the study participants indicated that their professional colleagues were predominantly white. Table 2 provides a summary of study participants' demographic information.

Table 2

Study Participant Demographic Data

Participant ID	Race	Gender	Years of Experience	Department	Institution ID	Institution Size & Type	RBF Symptoms
Emilia	Afro-Latina	Female	4	Housing & Residential Life	Granite University	Medium, Private	Tokenism, stereotype threat, fatigue, sleep disturbance, emotional withdrawal, anger, frustration
Faith	African American/ Black	Female	6	Housing & Residential Life	Valley State University– East Campus	Small, Public	Tokenism, stereotype threat, sleep disturbance, fatigue, anxiety, isolation
Kerry	African American/ Black	Female	15	Assistant Dean of Student Activities	River College	Large, Public	Sleep disturbance, tokenism, stereotype threat, high blood pressure, fatigue, tension in jaw & shoulders
Mario	Latino	Male	5	Housing & Residential Life	Birchwood University	Small, Private	Stereotype threat, increased impatience, frustration, fatigue, tokenism

Participant ID	Race	Gender	Years of Experience	Department	Institution ID	Institution Size & Type	RBF Symptoms
Randall	African American/ Black	Male	8	Student Conduct	Coal College	Medium, Private	Anxiety, stereotype threat, lower self-confidence, appetite changes, hypersensitive
Roberto	Latino[5]	Male	5	Housing & Residential Life	Skyline College	Medium, Private	Frustration, irritation, stereotype threat, numb to racial incidents, impatience, fatigue
Jaimie	Latino	Male	9	Student Activities	Skyline College	Medium, Private	Tokenism, stereotype threat, fatigue, anger, fear, hypervisibility, sleep disturbance, frustration
Tahj	African American/ Black	Male	11	Housing & Residential Life	Sage College	Large, Private	Frustration, tokensim, stereotype threat, tension in jaw, anger
Lauryn	Biracial	Female	5	Fraternity & Sorority Life	Slate University	Small, Private	Anger, stereotype threat, fatigue, social withdrawal, appetite changes, hypervisibility
Danielle	African American/ Black	Female	7	Gender Center	Utopia University	Large, Private	Fatigue, sleep disturbance, appetite changes, tokenism, stereotype threat, increased stress, frustration

Note. According to the Carnegie classification, small institutions have a population of 1,000–2,999 students, medium institutions have a population of 3,000–9,999 students, and large institutions have a population of at least 10,000 students.

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[5] Roberto is Latino; however, he also self-identified as Hispanic.

At the time of this study, Emilia and Roberto had just entered mid-level professional roles at their institutions, while the other eight participants had been in mid-level roles for at least 3 years. The participants worked in a variety of functional areas in student affairs: Five participants worked in housing and residential life, three participants worked in student activities, one participant worked in student conduct, and one participant worked in a gender center. The racial distribution of the participants was almost equal: 40% identified as Latine, 50% as Black/African American, and 10% as biracial. One of the participants, Emilia, identified as Afro-Latina. The gender distribution was equal, with 50% of participants identifying as cisgender female and 50% identifying as cisgender male; none identified as transgender or nonbinary.

Introducing the Participants

Emilia

Emilia was an Afro-Latina woman who had worked in a mid-level role at Granite University for 4 years in the housing functional area. Like many, Emilia was driven to the field of student affairs through her experience obtaining her bachelor's degree at a small, predominantly white, Catholic, liberal arts college where many of the students came from highly affluent families. During that time, Emilia participated in a mentoring program geared toward supporting first-generation students and was introduced to many mentors who helped create a community for her. When Emilia began her professional career, she had originally pursued the student affairs field to help students of color with a similar background as hers to acclimate to their collegiate experience. In her current position as an assistant director, to which she was promoted in 2023, Emilia had the same purpose. She spoke about her high level of emotional investment in increasing representation for students of color. As one of the

few staff of color in her office, Emilia indicated that she had a high level of responsibility for the students of color at her institution and worked to avoid any racist stereotypes associated with her racial identities.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Emilia worked at Granite University, a medium-sized 4-year private university located in the suburbs of a state in the Northeast. At the time of this study, Granite University had an enrollment of approximately 3,500 students. Granite University released its staff demographic report in spring 2020, indicating that 3% of its staff identified as Hispanic/Latine and 2% as Black, underscoring the limited racial diversity among its personnel. Granite University was founded in the late 19th century by two white men and began admitting women 2 years after opening. Women remained an underrepresented student population for decades. While the population continues to grow and change, there remains a history of exclusion. During my document analysis, I observed on the institution's website that Granite University espoused a commitment to creating an inclusive and welcoming environment; however, many of the institution's efforts were geared toward students and did not indicate how they support their employees of color.

Emilia stated that her professional experience within her department reflected the lack of effort to support staff of color at Granite University. Specifically, Emilia stated she did not feel supported by the university as a staff member of color and found it challenging. Emilia discussed the additional projects she participated in beyond the normal tasks of her current assistant director role in housing: She taught a course, she had volunteered to help with an inclusive syllabus project, she was on the bias-motivated incident response committee, and she was asked to help Spanish-speaking parents or guardians who called seeking assistance.

Emilia was not compensated for any of these additional tasks. Also, she described her office as a space that was not prepared to talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and she often felt the burden of being one of the only staff members of color in that space. She commented on the negative impact of tokenism on her as she worked to bring a racial equity lens to her work. Moreover, she did not feel a high level of support from her supervisor, who reinforced the pattern of Emilia feeling unsupported and excluded in her workplace environment.

Emilia stated that she had a low sense of belonging in her office, especially when she was criticized for how she dressed and for her tone when she addressed DEI issues. Emilia was passionate about these issues but felt like she was the only professional willing to speak about them in her department. Emilia stated that she was experiencing emotional withdrawal from her coworkers due to her inability to rely on their support. Emilia began her career passionate about supporting students of color but ultimately had to interact with institutional systems that did not place this student group in the center of the institutional efforts or that used this student population as a marketing tool that fed a false narrative of inclusion. This created tension within Emilia's work life, leading to fatigue and disturbed sleep in her personal life. Emilia describing using code-switching as a method to avoid stereotype threat, while also questioning why she needed to do that in the first place. She shared that when she encountered racially distressing moments in her role, she often invalidated herself, questioned whether the offense had actually occurred, and then began a process of overthinking her reaction to the moment. Lastly, Emilia revealed that her fear of failure played into her avoiding being associated with negative stereotypes; she felt that she needed to be "on point" (i.e., perfect) to not let down her community, lest she play into the stereotypes associated with being Afro-Latina.

Emilia's experience highlights how institutions recruit staff of color but do not develop new strategies to increase their level of inclusion and retention of their racially and ethnically diverse student staff. This cycle of ineffective retention practices for staff of color was reflected in the patterns Emilia experienced at her workplace. Ultimately, her professional experiences within higher education drove her to begin considering whether she would remain in the field given the negative impact it had had on her professional career and personal life. She was in the process of determining if there was a professional opportunity that would not invalidate her racial identities and her personal well-being.

Faith

Faith was a Black woman who worked at Valley State University–East Campus for the two years since 2021 in an entry-level role in the housing area. However, Faith had worked in student affairs for 6 years. When Faith decided to begin a career in student affairs, she defined her purpose as trying to help students who looked like her. The inspiration for her student affairs career was her undergraduate experience and her participation in a residential mentorship program geared toward students of color. During her 6-year career, Faith's purpose had evolved to serve all students, but she gave intentional focus to students with any underrepresented identities such as queer students and first-generation students. She shared that she experienced two strands of isolation: (1) institutional disconnect from the main campus and (2) the passive aggressive intrapersonal dynamics in her office.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Valley State University–East Campus is a small 4-year public regional university located in a midsize city in the Northeast. At the time of this study, the total student population was approximately 3,000. Valley State University–East was founded in the mid-

20th century as part of an expansion of the main West Campus. During my document

analysis, I observed a sparse website offering very little information about diversity and

inclusion resources or diversity initiatives for this regional campus. Additionally, there was

very little information on the main campus page about any overarching goals for diversity,

equity, and inclusion for staff of color or the overall campus community. The only diversity

training found on the institution's website—a presentation on implicit bias in hiring—was

designed for the medical branch.

Faith worked in the university's small housing office of three professionals and

described the climate as chilly and passive aggressive. She was the only Black woman in her

office and felt isolated there. She described feeling different from her supervisor and co-hall

director since the two of them seemed to bond over their many similarities. Furthermore,

Faith had received challenging constructive criticism of her performance a few weeks before

the interview. She was called the weakest member of the team by her supervisor, and this

took a toll on her self-esteem and increased her anxiety. She also stated that she has not been

able to connect with other staff of color or Black professionals on her campus, which she

found challenging and isolating. Particularly, based on the location of her office on campus,

which is a satellite, the opportunities for networking with other Black staff and resources

were fewer than on the main campus.

Faith said she did not believe she had experience any racially distressing moments at

Valley State but still described a negative racialized professional experience that impacted

her ability to sleep and increased her overall fatigue. Faith shared that she avoided being

associated with negative stereotypes that centered on her fear of failing and not wanting to be

known as the Black woman who failed at everything. This anxiety was more pronounced for

Faith than for the other study participants, given the troubling feedback she received from her supervisor at the beginning of the semester. As with Emilia, this overall professional experience had forced Faith to question whether she wanted to remain in the student affairs field or if she would transition to a mid-level role in the field.

Kerry

Kerry was a Black woman who had worked at River University for the past 3 academic years in the student activities and orientation functional area. Kerry was a senior-level student affairs practitioner who had worked in student affairs for the past 15 years. Upon graduating from her undergraduate program, Kerry thought she wanted to be a licensed family and marriage counselor, but when looking at programs and their curricula, she realized how much she enjoyed working with college students. At the beginning of her career within student affairs, she described deriving significant purpose from working with students of color on campus. Kerry stated that, more recently, her purpose had evolved from helping students of color to include working with staff of color since she was usually one of the highest ranked Black woman administrators on campus. She was emotionally invested in helping staff and students of color through her work, but it placed a lot of pressure on her to be a positive role model for other students and staff.

Institutional and Departmental Context

River University is a large 4-year public university located in a large city in the Northeast and is part of a university system. The total student population at the time of the study was approximately 15,000. For the fall 2023 semester, River University published a dashboard that included staff demographic information; at that time, the staff was 6% Hispanic/Latine and 13% Black. River University was founded in the mid-20th century to

meet the growing needs of higher education for the city in which it is situated. During document analysis, it was clear from the institution's website that they celebrated diversity in a superficial manner by publicly stating values and aspirations without indicating how the institution would execute their goals for creating an inclusive community beyond the high compositional diversity numbers of the student body, which was further emphasized during the interview with Kerry. She noted that the institution did not have a clear plan for improving the experience for students of color.

At the time of her interview, Kerry had a low sense of belonging in her office and indicated that it was a "toxic workplace" due to racism and sexism. Kerry could not determine if was her position as the unit leader or her identity as the only Black woman that prevented her from connecting with her all-white colleagues in her office suite. Specifically, she felt as if one colleague had waged a campaign to tear her down and turn others against her because her colleagues never invited her to lunch in their office suite, or they stopped talking when she entered the space. While Kerry described the overall climate at the institution as toxic, she did not describe the division of student affairs that way. When she talked about the division, Kerry focused more on the work, which was often overwhelming, and she felt that she and her colleagues were overworked.

Kerry stated that she was constantly working to avoid matching negative stereotypes placed on Black women by being very conscientious of how she presented herself in meetings or deciding which hairstyles she would wear to those meetings. Kerry noted that when she recognized she had become disengaged from the work and environment, that was a strong indication that it was time for a new job, and she could no longer serve in her current role. Ultimately, Kerry was committed to continuing her career within the broad field of

higher education but hoped to explore work at a different institution in the next academic year or two.

Mario

Mario was a Latino man who had worked at Birchwood University for the past 3 academic years in the housing functional area and had worked in the field for over 5 years. Mario worked in a small office that had seen many staffing changes in the 3 academic years he had worked there. Like the other participants, Mario was inspired to join the field of student affairs based on his undergraduate experience and involvement in various student leadership opportunities, such as a resident assistant position and student government. He wanted a career that allowed him to impact communities in a positive way and ultimately found that opportunity in higher education. Mario said that his purpose within the field of student affairs had evolved from being about the individual student to impacting the system with which students interact. Mario had found better work–life integration at Birchwood since it had moved him closer to family and important people in his life.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Birchwood University is a small 4-year private liberal arts college located in a suburb near a large city in the Northeast. At the time of the study, the total student population was approximately 1,600. Birchwood University was founded in the early years of the 20th century and began as a single-gender institution. The institution went co-ed 40 years after it was founded but continues to lean heavily toward female-identifying or non-binary individuals. During my document analysis of the institution's webpages, I found no information geared explicitly toward staff of color. There was one subcommittee comprising students and staff committed to helping students with diversity programming, but nothing

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explicit for staff of color. There was language on the webpages about the typical standard definition of inclusion and the legal description of race as part of a protected class of identities.

Mario commented that Birchwood did things differently from the three other institutions he had interacted with prior to working there. Mario shared that many of the aspects of Birchwood University were race-evasive, that is, the racialized experiences of staff or students did not come up frequently or were not explicitly named in the department or institutional setting. Mario observed that Birchwood seemed to be an institution that experiences considerable turnover, with staff members typically leaving after one or 2 years. Mario stated that he had experienced a positive office climate and cited that there had been a lot of reorganization among the division of student affairs. Mario worked in an office where approximately 50% of his coworkers identified as staff of color, which helped limit opportunities for tokenization.

Mario's experiences with tokenization and frustration had fluctuated with the various roles he had occupied and institutions he had worked at in higher education. When Mario experienced racially distressing situations, he had a moment of freeze when he questioned whether the incident had occurred and how to respond. Moreover, a core aspect of Mario's racialized experiences was his personal philosophy to let go of the things that upset him in his work setting because if he allowed himself to become upset, he believed he was giving that issue permission to take up space in his mind. He described using this personal approach frequently in his reflections on dealing with his frustration. However, Mario noted that, despite his personal approach, there were moments when he got home and experienced fatigue and impatience based on what he had dealt with at work. Overall, Mario envisioned

staying within his role for the duration of his doctoral degree program for the next 3 years and did see himself staying in higher education for his career.

Randall

Randall was a Black man who had worked at Green Bay College for the past few months in the conduct and student accountability functional area. Before Green Bay College, he had worked at Coal College for 3 academic years and had worked in the field for 8 years. Like Mario, Randall had worked as a resident assistant and student leader during his undergraduate career, which inspired his decision to work in student affairs. Randall shared that he was drawn to higher education because he wanted to be a change agent for students and have an opportunity to shape students' experiences. His purpose for his work had evolved over time to think about ways to holistically support them and include the many identities they bring to campus.

Randall shared a striking story about an internship experience he had during graduate school that had left a deep impression on him throughout his professional career. Randall was released from his internship experience after a disagreement with his supervisor about doing homework during the work shift, and his direct supervisor, whom he identified as a white woman, lied to her supervisor that Randall was aggressive and threatening during this conversation about doing homework at his internship. Randall stated he was not aggressive during that incident and simply went home after the conversation. Since then, he had been hyperaware of how he physically presented himself in any space (such as trying to take up less physical space or shrinking himself) and questioned whether he should push back on a task a supervisor had given him, for fear of being seen as difficult.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Since Randall began at Green Bay College a few months prior to the interview, the majority of the experiences he shared during the interview were at Coal College, and therefore the focus of his departmental and institutional experiences centered on Coal College. Coal College is a large 4-year private university located in a large city in the Northeast. The total student population at the time of the study was approximately 37,000. Coal College was founded in the late years of the 19th century and did not start admitting women until a decade after its founding. During my document analysis, I observed that Coal College did not provide any details about how it supported staff of color. The college's webpages included standard legal language on being an equal-opportunity workplace and celebratory language about how the institution values diversity on campus. In the spring 2020 semester, the institution began its first identity-based affinity groups for faculty and staff. However, the bulk of its efforts around inclusion seemed to focus exclusively on faculty of color, not staff of color.

Randall stated that he was the first Black man in his role at Coal College in the 30 years the office existed. He described the office environment as tough because he was the only person of color in the office, and since he was the youngest person in a five-person office, he felt like he needed to prove himself worthy of his employment there. Randall described how isolating his former role at Coal College was and how remote-work days had been extremely helpful because they removed him from the chilly climate in which he worked. However, the affinity spaces at the institution helped him connect with other faculty and staff of color. He took the opportunity to chair the affinity group and was able to connect with others outside his department and within the broader campus community, which

provided counterpoint to the cold climate in his office. Ultimately, Randall planned on staying at Green Bay College for the entirety of his doctoral program and expressed wanting to eventually become a college president in the future.

Roberto

Roberto was a Latino man who had worked at Skyline University for the past 3 academic years in the housing functional area but had recently been promoted to a mid-level role in housing in 2023. Roberto had worked in the field for over 5 years. He saw his purpose in student affairs as centering on student advocacy. He wanted to address inconsistencies he saw within the institution's commitment to serving underrepresented student populations and creating an inclusive experience for students. However, as he had transitioned to his new role, his purpose had evolved to creating accountability measures for students and expanding his advocacy skills to the full-time staff who reported to him.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Skyline University is a midsize 4-year private university with a business orientation located in the suburbs near a large city in the Northeast. At the time of the study, the total student population was approximately 4,000. Skyline University was founded in the early 20th century as a business school. During the document analysis of the institution's website, I observed that Skyline University's webpages, like Coal College's, highlighted the standard language of the aspiration of having an inclusive and welcoming culture for the campus. There were some resources that had been specifically created for staff of color employee resource groups (ERGs); however, I found no evidence of an overarching plan of execution or of a DEI strategic plan available for the whole university community or geared toward improving the staff of color experience.

Roberto started at Skyline at the height of the pandemic, when the office was operating in a remote capacity and then shifted to a more hybrid setup. Roberto shared that, during the fully remote operation at the height of COVID-19, though there were two people of color in his department, this was not as obvious since they did not have to go to meetings in person. However, as the office came back to a more in-person modality, he recognized how few staff of color worked in his department. Roberto described his office climate as warm and welcoming, but his experience within the overall institution has been fraught with microaggressions or moments of classism due to the high affluence of the student population. Additionally, Roberto felt like the institution's efforts were performative and that the larger institution did not invoke a sense of belonging for him despite claims that it was trying to be more inclusive. Specifically, Roberto discussed how the institution did not really do anything intentional with their staff of color and seemed more fixated on reporting out student demographic information to support their claims of diversity.

As one of the few staff members of color at the institution, Roberto felt tired, and he felt like there was an expectation for him to be a role model for students of color. He also tried to name the areas of improvement he identified in his role but felt numb from the racial incidents that occurred at his institution. Roberto talked about having a lack of patience with others from dealing with the work environment and felt like he was not taken seriously within his supervision role because of his racial identities. This experience made it difficult for him to concentrate on his work tasks, or he found himself overthinking issues. Roberto talked about being intentional about bringing his laptop home to try to avoid bringing work concerns home beyond the workday, but that was unavoidable on the days he was serving on the emergency response rotation. Overall, Roberto saw himself staying in his current role for

another year and was deciding whether he would like to continue working at an institution of higher education or pivot to policy work.

Jaimie

Jaimie, a Latino man, had worked at Skyline University for 2 years in the student activities area and had worked in the field for 9 years. Like the other participants, Jaimie was introduced to the field during his undergraduate experience as a first-generation, low-socioeconomic status student. He identified his love for programming during this time and pursued a career with that at its core. He stated that the purpose of his work in the field was to provide opportunities for students to develop their skills for a postgraduate experience through their involvement in student organizations. He wanted to help students become civically engaged individuals in their postgraduate worlds. While Jaimie's advising skills had grown throughout his years in the field, his purpose had remained focused on the holistic growth of students through the programming opportunities offered.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Like Roberto, Jaimie worked at Skyline University. He worked in an office with other BIPOC individuals and felt like he could communicate how he felt in this space. Jaimie had an Asian-identifying supervisor who was attuned to his racialized experiences and provided the necessary support he needed to succeed in his job by allowing him to vent, or his supervisor advocated for creating a more equitable office. However, at previous institutions he has worked in, he felt that, as the only person of color in the office, when he needed to vent about a work issue, he also had to educate others on how to support him. Additionally, at his previous institution, colleagues turned to him constantly when DEI issues arose, even though he had no formal training beyond his lived experiences. At Skyline, Jaimie was

constantly negotiating how to navigate advising his programming board and also dealing with outcomes of students not heeding his suggestions for how to make their programs more inclusive.

Similarly to Roberto, Emilia, Faith, and Mario, Jaimie did not feel supported by his institution as a SAPOC. He believed that institutional leaders only published statements when issues occurred, which felt very performative. Additionally, since Skyline is a business school, it saw DEI as a value-added item that the institutional leadership could commodify, referred frequently to its students of color as a "niche population," and did not make any attempts to increase inclusivity on campus. Therefore, the climate of the institution and its surface-level commitment to DEI made Jaimie cautious when he was dealing with other campus partners. He was not sure what level of competency they had or if they would be harmful in their approach.

Jaimie described his work as an obstacle to his health and well-being. He shared that he often came home from stressful days and would immediately go to sleep. He stated that it was hard to create a healthy eating and exercise routine when he was mentally and emotionally taxed. He struggled regularly with brain fog when he could not get enough sleep and therefore could not think clearly about the tasks he needed to accomplish within his role. Jaimie wanted to eventually hold a directorship in his next role, and at the time of the interview, he was still deciding whether to stay in higher education for the rest of his career.

Tahj

Tahj was a Black man who had worked at Sage College for 3 years in the housing area and had worked in the field for over 10 years. Tahj described his start in the field of higher education as untraditional. He did not go directly into a master's degree program for

higher education or student affairs, but for business. He worked in educational technology after his collegiate experience and had two degrees in business. He formally began his career in student affairs through a networking opportunity from his educational technology days. He learned much about the field from his first role in student affairs but had remained passionate about working with young adult students. Tahj defined his purpose in student affairs as providing spaces of inclusion for students with underrepresented racial identities, which was a core component of his current role.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Sage College is a large urban 4-year private, ivy league university located in the Northeast. The total student population at the time of the study was approximately 11,000. On its website, Sage College published that 19% of its staff identified as a historically underrepresented group, including Black and Latine individuals. Sage College was founded in the late 18th century. The institution did not start admitting women students or graduate its first Black student until 100 years after its founding. During my review of the institution's website, I observed the most detailed diversity and inclusion plan that aligned with the institution's strategic plan. However, what made Sage College the strongest institution I observed was that it published data about its staff of color based on its website and outlined a 6-year period in which growth occurred, as reflected in the published diversity strategic plan. Additionally, Sage College created a program that sought to nurture talented and diverse staff members who were committed to enhancing their leadership skills and promoted more inclusive and equitable communities within higher education settings. While the positive results were tentative—and could regress if there were a leadership change or a shift

in the institution's commitment to creating inclusive environments for staff of color—they were notably different from the other institutions I analyzed.

Tahj described the departmental and institutional climate as positive and inclusive. He stated clearly that things were not perfect; however, he worked in an office with many staff of color and had a supportive Black woman supervisor. Part of what created a positive atmosphere for Tahj at Sage College was the recognition that occurred regularly showcasing the staff's hard work and the additional paid time off provided as "appreciation days" within the department and institution. Tahj stated that the current structure of his housing department was overhauled right before he started, and he was asked to model what his position could be in the future. Therefore, there had been some positive changes for the underrepresented student population related to specific housing for their identities and needs, such as a specific house for Black-identifying students, Native American students, and historically Black Greek-lettered organizations. Additionally, Tahj described the recruitment and hiring process as very intentional and mindful of the cultural needs of prospective employees. For instance, he described creating an interview schedule that accommodated the fasting needs of a Muslim woman candidate. The college recruited this woman, and she stated that the Sage College housing department was the only prospective employer to take those needs into consideration, which was why she chose to work there.

At a former institution, Tahj talked about being confused for another Black male colleague. He stated that the dean of students always confused the two of them, despite their looking very different in appearance, and he believed the dean did this because he perceived Tahj as forgettable. Additionally, in another role at a different institution, Tahj was looked over for a promotion but was expected to train the new hire and was not recognized for

keeping the department afloat by himself. Tahj felt this was due to his race and ultimately left this role for a new professional opportunity. Overall, Tahj shared that he was likely to stay at Sage College for a couple more years and was not actively job searching. Tahj saw himself staying in the field of higher education and hoped to rise to a senior-level role.

Lauryn

Lauryn was a biracial woman who had worked at Slate University since 2022 in the fraternity and sorority area and had worked in the field of higher education for the past 5 years. Like most of the participants in this study, Lauryn was introduced to the field of student affairs through her undergraduate experience (specifically through her sorority) and was told by a mentor that she could pursue this as a career. Lauryn enjoyed working in fraternity and sorority life because it can be a significant developmental opportunity for students to learn skills that translate well into their life post-graduation. Lauryn viewed her purpose as working with students throughout their entire collegiate career while they were involved in a fraternity or sorority organization. She particularly enjoyed how their involvement in these organizations provides many transferable skills they can use in many other aspects of their life.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Slate University is a small 4-year private liberal arts university located in the Northeast. The total student population at the time of the study was approximately 2,000. Like many of the other institutions in this study, Slate University had a long history of exclusion and did not start admitting students of color and women until 1968, approximately a century after its founding. During my document analysis of the institution's website, I observed that Slate has the traditional structure of 4-year institutions with similar

populations. The institution had a racial climate plan that articulated more plans to make the campus more inclusive at the student, staff, and faculty levels. Though there had been some progress reported on the status of these efforts on the website, I am certain that, based on Lauryn's descriptions of the campus climate and bias-related incidents involving students, there was racialized decoupling present with these improvements and that Slate still did not address some of the inequities present.

Lauryn depicted an institutional and departmental culture and climate that was entrenched in whiteness. Most significantly, Slate University enrolled a large population of legacy students, that is, students whose parents or immediate family members attended the institution. Lauryn said that many of these students had many generations of their family who had attended Slate and often came from boarding schools where the culture and climate were similar. Therefore, for most of these students, their enrollment at Slate was the first time they interacted with people with different racial and cultural identities. Particularly, Lauryn shared that she addressed student behavior that was centered on racial and gender-based violence slurs within her role. She was not sure she was taken seriously about this behavior, given the racism and sexism she experienced at work as a woman of color. Lauryn talked about navigating a largely white student population at Slate University and frequently experienced microaggressions about her age and gender from the white students in fraternities or sororities. For instance, Lauryn communicated how annoyed she was explaining to white students, who could not understand the metaphor, why one of the Black fraternities would speak about breaking the chains of slavery in their organizational preamble.

Furthermore, Lauryn did not feel supported by her institution as a staff member of color. For instance, when a bias-motivated incident—which involved improper signage

supporting the 45ᵗʰ president on campus and which was picked up major news outlets—had

impacted her identities, she was not provided any resources or support and was expected to

continue in her role. Within this role, Lauryn must serve on "party patrol" on Friday and

Saturday nights, providing water, snacks, and support to students while they host parties in

their houses. During this time, Lauryn was subjected slurs when the students were

intoxicated. When she raised the issue to her supervisor, whom she identified as a Black man,

he responded by saying he could not believe that would happen and that it had never

happened to him. Thus, he was invalidating and therefore ineffective in supporting Lauryn

during these distressing racial moments in her role.

Lauryn talked about how she felt like she was withdrawing from the students and not

giving her role any of her extra time. She felt hypervisible to the students and had overheard

students saying, "She's the Black one over there." Despite having on-campus housing and

meal money, she did not want to eat in the dining hall or even order takeout to avoid

interacting with the students when she was not actively working. Overall, Lauryn was

looking to leave her current role as soon as possible and was willing to leave the field of

higher education.

Danielle

Danielle was a Black woman who had worked at Utopia University for 5 years, since

2019, in the women's center functional area. In her role, she worked with sexual assault

reports as a confidential source for students. Danielle had worked in the field for over 7

years. She was a licensed social worker by trade and had sought to work with traditionally

aged college students, given that many mental health issues begin at this age. In addition, she

wanted to offer greater representation factor for Black students since "diversity gets slimmer

above the Mason Dixon line." Danielle defined her purpose as helping to guide students through their college career and provide Black students a mentor who looks like them. Throughout her career, her purpose had evolved with her understanding of how higher education works.

Institutional and Departmental Context

Utopia University is a large 4-year private Catholic university in a suburb of a large city in the Northeast. At the time of the study, the total student population was approximately 15,000. Utopia University was founded in the late 19th century and did not start admitting women students until 101 years after its founding. During the document analysis, I observed that Utopia's website presented a mission-focused institution centered on cultivating a holistic experience for all community members, such as faculty, staff, and students. However, there was no concrete plan or evident success regarding initiatives focused on the staff of color experience. The institution did detail identity-based affinity groups on campus, but there were no additional resources published on the website.

Danielle described the institutional climate and culture as a toxic workplace. She explained that Utopia did a good job of hiring staff of color but did not do much to retain them. The main contributor to the toxicity, according to Danielle, was the president of the institution, whom she described as very damaging and not a good model for leadership. For instance, she believed that if he could bring the institution back to the days when it only accepted white male students who identified as Catholic, he would. The president refused to use inclusive language in the convocation speech each year. Additionally, Danielle described the Christmas party, where she was expected to stand in the receiving line to greet the president before mingling at the party—which she equated with being asked to "kiss the

ring." Danielle did not like being in spaces with the top university leaders, who happened to all be white cisgender males, given that they did not try to make the space inclusive for staff of color. However, as a chair of the Black affinity group on campus, she was often in the same space as the top university leadership, which contributed to her low sense of belonging within the institution.

Danielle's experience within her division was more positive, and she felt a sense of belonging. Her experience within her department was nuanced and negative. She enjoyed the work she did supporting students through some challenging life experiences, particularly those who had survived sexual assault. Danielle described feeling uncertain about her dynamic with her supervisor, whether it was supportive or potentially harmful depending on which version of her supervisor she was dealing with. Danielle stated that her close relationship with the vice president of student affairs, who was a Black woman, had strained her relationship with her supervisor. Additionally, Danielle talked about an experience with her supervisor where she felt she needed to have a broken spirit to feel like they could connect. From that point, Danielle did not trust her boss and built a wall to protect herself.

Danielle's experiences as a Black woman in the predominately white space of her institution and the heavy conversations she had with students about their sexual assault experiences were impactful since she had experienced assaults on her own Black womanhood at her PWI. Consequently, she was constantly exhausted through this vicious cycle of assaults. Danielle described taking an extra yoga mat, putting a "do not disturb" sign outside her office, and laying in a yoga pose to ground herself for 5 minutes to process the stress and emotional burden of her work. Ultimately, Danielle stated that she would stay within her role until she completed her doctoral program and wanted to continue to work in

higher education within predominantly white institutions, where she felt she could have the

greatest impact.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from my study. The chapter centers the voices of the study participants and their lived professional experiences with higher education. The themes were either pulled directly from the participants' quotes, informed by my conceptual framework, or formed from my own cultural intuition having experienced RBF working at PWIs. Five themes emerged from the cross-case analysis process: (1) *The Struggle Is Real*, (2) *Working Is What Makes Me Sick*, (3) *Do I Even Belong Here?*, (4) *Must Be Something in the Air*, and (5) *Why Stay?* Additionally, some of the subthemes addressed in this chapter focus on more positive or neutral experiences highlighting that SAPOCs can do excellent work when given the opportunity. These subthemes serve to combat the idea of SAPOCs being victims of racism and perpetually downtrodden.

The Struggle Is Real

The theme *The Struggle is Real* centers on the varied interactions that the SAPOCs in this study discussed having with their predominately white work colleagues. While the participants worked at different institutions with distinct office and institutional climates, they shared similar experiences with racial battle fatigue. The RBF experiences of the SAPOCs in this study in white-centered workplaces impacted each staff member of color holistically.

The participants talked about the visceral impact of navigating their workplace as a staff member of color, their fear of confirming stereotypes, or the mental toll of debated internally whether they had been microaggressed as they navigated their workplace. In many instances, their presence in the workplace was invalidated by peers who often failed to recall their name correctly or pronounce it properly. Since the primary responsibility of student affairs practitioners is to support the students on their campus, the study participants described how they had to deal with emotionally taxing information while also helping students understand their impact on others when discussing often polarizing topics such as diversity or politics. Four subthemes help articulate the findings within this theme: (1) *navigating double standards*, (2) *denial of human dignity*, (3) *mental health taxation*, and (4) *resilience strategies*.

Navigating Double Standards

This subtheme highlights the ways that the study participants felt obligated to present the best image of the race and ethnicity they represented. They discussed having an internal debate about how they were perceived by their white colleagues or feeling like they were not heard when making contributions at work; navigating double standards posed a threat for SAPOCs as an additional layer of stress within their role. Study participants frequently cited being guarded, hyperaware, hypersensitive, and hypervigilant about how they presented themselves or in how they processed what they had experienced. As one of the few people of color in their respective department, they constantly balanced their role as practitioners with avoiding negative stereotypes associated with their marginalized identity, which harmed their performance. For instance, Emilia, an Afro-Latina woman who served as a mid-level housing professional, discussed her experience as one of the few SAPOCs and the only Afro-Latina

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person serving at the mid-level in her office. She described how she navigated the double standards and how that impacted her behavior at work and increased the pressure she placed on herself. She said,

> Even though I don't know a lot of the stereotypes that are associated with my ethnicity, I feel like I have to stay on point … especially because … I'm a woman of color ... and it's like I can't let the community down, I can't be a statistic, I can't be *that one person* that, you know, [does] xyz type [of] thing. I do worry.

Though Emilia stated that she was unable to name the stereotypes associated with Afro-Latinas, her fear of being associated with them was omnipresent in her work experience. Emilia consistently felt the pressure having to represent all Afro-Latinas in her workplace and making sure she was not representing them in a negative light. Additionally, during her interview, she named other moments when the fear of confirming a stereotype was present in her professional experience, such as feeling very conscious of how she spoke in her office or the pressure of conforming to specific clothing attire in the office. Emilia also felt she could not be the one to fail at her work for fear of being connected with statistics that highlighted lower rates of accomplishment for people of color. Emilia's experiences indicated several symptoms of RBF, such as lower self-confidence, stereotype threat, and tokenism as she processed the double standards of her work environment.

Unfortunately, navigating double standards persisted beyond the experiences of mid-level roles such as Emilia's; it was also very present for Kerry, a Black woman and senior mid-level professional who oversaw student activities and multicultural student services. Kerry stated that how she wore her hair had implications for how she was perceived, and she

discussed the negative effects of navigating double standards while trying to be an authentic role model for students of color. She shared,

> I have to be very cautious of how I present myself and how I can maneuver around campus even from that internal struggle of, like, how do I present myself, even with hair. Like, can I wear these braids to this meeting with blah blah blah? Or do I need to do something different, or can I wear my braids down or do they need to be up? And even the struggle of trying to figure out if I want to go natural and within these spaces because I need to feel like I'm presenting myself in a way in which students can respect me, but also staff and other members around campus. But that students will see the authentic me and be able to relate to who that is. And so, they see a Black woman with braids [attending] some of these meetings with these top people around campus, but [students] realize that they can be that same way and be their authentic self when they go into these spaces as well.

Kerry was faced with thinking about how she presented herself every day and how she modeled an authentic form of leadership in her position to the students of color who saw her on campus. She tried to negotiate her physical appearance with the white-centered standards of professionalism that manifest frequently for Black women (e.g., how they wear their hair) and avoided the negative stereotypes of Black women with her intentional choices. Kerry was often the most senior Black woman practitioner on campus, and her experiences indicated the RBF symptoms of tokenism and stereotype threat. Kerry constantly had to navigate her workplace as one of the few Black women and was hypervigilant about how she spoke and about her facial expressions. Generally, the study participants' quality of work was

greatly harmed by their constant concerns with their perception or the way people perceived them within the workplace.

Mario noted that navigating double standards played a factor in how he navigated his work. For him, the double standard was specifically connected to how he communicated his suggestions for work tasks. Mario, a Latino man who worked as a mid-level housing operations professional, felt like double standards hindered the effectiveness of his suggestions:

> [For example] trying to suggest a policy recommendation or suggest we take a certain approach to addressing an issue … people will often not take that as seriously.… I'm not sure if it's positional, that I'm not a director or whatever the case may be? I'm not sure if it's that [or they] don't really listen, unless it's coming from certain people that they do *usually listen to* [who] tend to be white people here. So that's always something that is in my head. You know, that's my own thoughts or paranoia, some could say.

Mario felt diminished in his ability to communicate key ideas to improve processes in his role. He felt that, as a Latino, he was not taken as seriously as his white peers and that his suggestions were not received like those of his white peers. Therefore, this double standard was top of mind—to the point of paranoia—when he had to communicate ideas. Like Emilia, Mario did not want to play into stereotypes of Latino men and was hyperaware of the possibility of being associated with negative stereotypes in his professional experience. This created an additional level of stress for Mario as he tried to focus on his daily work tasks.

Faith, a Black woman, was primarily responsible for serving in the emergency response structure as an entry-level housing professional. She shared that navigating double

standards had affected her position as she addressed a community-standards violation with on-campus residential students. She recalled,

>So, I can think back to one time where a group of students who were mainly white, from what I remember, were caught smoking cannabis in their residence hall. But I feel like the way public safety reacted to it was like, "Oh, you should know." Like, we should know what they were smoking…. And I was like, I'm not going to know about this. I don't engage it. And myself and other RAs who responded were all Black; it was myself, as the hall director, and the RAs were both Black women. And the RAs were like, "We were not involved in this, like, at all outside of school, or being RAs or anything like that." So, I just remember in that instance feeling like, "Why do I feel like I'm being like, called in and called out" at the same time.

This situation was a prime example of the RBF symptom of stereotype threat. Faith could not execute a core part of the emergency response portion of her role because public safety made a racist assumption that Faith and the student staff knew what the smell of cannabis was because they were Black. This illustrated one of the microaggressions she had to deal with while ensuring the safety of the on-campus community in her professional capacity and the stereotype threat she experienced. Faith identified as Black, but it was clear that she did not engage in the behavior of consuming cannabis.

Say My Name

Another unfortunate occurrence for the study participants was their frequent experiences with microaggressions in their workplace by white staff who did not say their name correctly or called them another person's name. The study participants described these

experiences as typically centering on them being confused for other people of color at work. Roberto, a male mid-level housing professional, spoke frequently about these occurrences:

> I get called another person in our office; his name is Jaimie. He's the associate director for student engagement … and I get called *his* name and he gets called my name *all the time.*

Similarly, Tahj, a Black man who was a mid-level housing professional, shared his experience being called another Black man's name at a previous workplace by the dean of students:

> He always used to call me my colleague's name, and he would call my colleague my name. I need to make sure you understand … *we don't look alike*. Terry is also Black. He is like my brother. That was my rock when I was in the Middle East, but this is Terry [points to a picture]; the only thing we had in common was we are Black, our bodies are even different. We are Black, and we both had locs. He had a full head. I only, like I still do, just have the top … he will constantly, whenever [he] sees me, like, "Oh, hey, Terry how's it going?" And so one time I'm like, "*It's Tahj. You call me his name all the time and it's starting to drive me crazy*."

For Tahj and Roberto, when they were called another person of color's name, it was always a moment of harm. They expressed feeling frustrated and angry when this occurred. From their perspective, they looked nothing like the other person beyond having the same race or ethnicity. These examples are associated with the RBF symptoms of frustration, anger, and another type of stereotype threat whereby their colleagues assumed people of one race or ethnicity looked the same. Kerry described a situation in which she was confused for another Black woman on her campus in an incredulous tone. Kerry detailed,

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I've also been on predominantly white institutions that there'll be one or two Black women, and I distinctly remember a time when I was walking across campus … I am a short, chubby, you know, light-skin girl, and the other lady who worked on campus is a tall, dark-skin skinny woman. And the person said, "Hey Felicia," and I looked around for Felicia and, like, "Where is she?" And [then] I realized they were talking to me and like we are complete polar opposites. Um, so there's no way you can get us mistaken, you know?

Like Roberto and Tahj, Kerry dealt with the consistent microaggression of being mistaken for another Black woman at her PWI. This persistent pattern of disrespect caused strain for Kerry as she focused on her daily work tasks—a layer of tension that her white peers did not have to constantly worry about.

Even the basic human dignity of having one's name pronounced correctly in the workplace often eluded the SAPOCs in this study, especially if they had a name that was common in their culture or heritage but differed from the white American standard. For instance, Jaimie, a Latino who was a mid-level professional working in student activities, said, "People will, will try to call me James throughout the space, but wherever I'm on campus, that's its own little battle. Like, 'My name is Jaimie, nice to meet you.'" Jaimie spoke of these interactions in a resigned tone, making it clear he was tired of having to correct people about his name, but made efforts to ensure that his white colleagues said his name correctly as a way to ensure he was seen in his workplace. The frustration Jaimie demonstrated in his continued efforts to correct people is an example of RBF. Jaimie discussed the intricacies of his position in student activities as he worked closely with students to plan events or advise their student organization, then added how he had to

navigate the stereotype threat of either being called the wrong name or having his name mispronounced.

Mental Health Taxation

Given the way the participants navigated double standards or the ways their names were erased in their workplace, it is not surprising that many of them also talked about their mental health taxation. The study participants shared how they were persistently reminded that they were different in their predominately white workspaces and how they endured frequent disrespect about their hair. Tahj talked about his personal experience of simply changing whether his locs were worn up or down, prompting tone-deaf comments from white colleagues. Tahj spoke animatedly about how aggravated he would become when his white colleagues asked ignorant questions about his hair:

> Some of the white women in the department, if I got a retwist or if I just put my hair in a ponytail, would say, "Oh, did you get a haircut?," "I love your new haircut." It's happened a few times here [at Sage College]. I like to wear my hair up, but then I'll put it down. No really! Like we know the roots are rooting right now [points to his roots of his hair]. And they will ask, "Wait. Did you get your hair done?' I'm like, "No! *Do you see how I look?* No! I didn't get my hair done!"

While noting someone's appearance can be seen as showing care and a level of attention to detail, in this racialized interaction and environment, it was another reminder of how Tahj was othered. Though the study participants needed to be continually aware of their own culture and the dominant white culture, they straddled two worlds for their own survival and to become agile around issues in white-centered institutions of higher education. Shifting

between both worlds is an example of the mental health taxation Tahj had to endure by correcting his white colleagues about his hairstyles.

Similarly, Kerry also expressed feeling taxed by a white colleague who was fascinated by her chemically straightened and long hair. Kerry recounted the story in an animated and livid fashion:

I have definitely been in situations where I've had to answer questions about my hair all the time. When I was working at [another institution] and my hair was relaxed [and] pretty long. So, I was standing at the elevator and I happen to, like, just go over and my hair fell down in my face. And a white counterpart had been talking about my hair all day and how [my hair] look so shiny and so perfect. And when my hair fell down into my face when I was looking down at the elevator, she went and touched it. But prior to that, I had told her, because she was trying to touch it, I was like, "Don't touch my hair, because to you my hair is going to feel greasy because I had just put oil on it and that's why it is shining." … And so when my hair fell out [my ponytail], she touched it. And then she said, "Oh!" and I had on a white shirt, and she went like this to me [wiped her hand on her shirt]. I said, and it took all of me not to react to her the way that I would have … in a different setting. But I had to hold that in and she could tell that the tension was there … I literally had to curse at her and I said, "*What the fuck did you just do? I told you not to touch my hair!* Then you touched it, and then you wiped all my white shirt! Like, why did you touch it? I did not give you permission to touch me or my hair, and you violated me by wiping on it! I told you my head was going feel greasy. *My hair is different from yours!* We already have

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established that way back in our previous conversations when I told you that our hair

is different!"

Even when Kerry iterated a boundary and asked her white colleague not to touch her hair,

she was ignored and treated like a novelty. Kerry's choice of words showed that she was

angry and exasperated by the boundary violation. Kerry's mental health was further taxed by

having to determine how to navigate the physical space of her campus and how to avoid

getting her hair touched without permission—all while she tried to fulfill the core

responsibilities of her job.

For other study participants, there were more traditional mental health challenges

within their work that were compounded by how their racial identities interacted with certain

situations. For instance, Danielle, a Black woman workings as a mid-level professional in a

gender center, shared how being a confidential source for sexual assault reports impacted her.

Danielle talked to students who shared her identities, who reminded her of herself, and who

shared their traumatic experiences of sexual assault. She said,

> I don't think I ever mentioned this, but I do a lot of direct service work with survivors
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> of sexual assault, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, in addition to doing a
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> lot of student-facing work with supporting the programming that comes out of our
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> center. And so, I am working with students who have dealt with that type of trauma,
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> and that's also difficult. And it's even more difficult when I have students who hold
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> identities that are similar to mine, who are either BIPOC or Black women. That gets
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> especially harder to hold because we know countertransference is a thing. So that can
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> certainly be challenging, and that just makes for an additionally long day. And
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> because I do hold the identity that I hold and, again, I have that rapport with students.

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I will get students who are not survivors, but we'll have some other stressor that's

happening in their lives, and they'll come in and talk with me. And so, again, I'm

grateful to be able to do that. I'm very glad that I have the training that I have to be

able to do it and do it well. But it still doesn't mean that it's done.

Dealing with sexual assault disclosure could negatively impact anyone's mental health, but

for Danielle, there was an additional taxation of speaking to students of color who resonated

with their shared racialized experience at an PWI and students who just came in to speak

about their problems with a staff member who looked like them. This occurred as Danielle

also navigated constant attacks on her Black presence in a white-centered institution. This

had an even greater negative impact on her as the only Black woman working with students

of color who were reporting to her in her office and was a byproduct of the adverse impact of

tokenism on Danielle.

When asked, "Have there been any bias-motivated incidents on campus that have

attacked racial identities before?," Roberto, a Latino who worked in housing, discussed how

he had become numb to the racial incidents that occurred on campus, and he prioritized

supporting students over his own needs. He stated,

I don't think it has affected *me* as much because if I'm taking it from the perspective

of, like, a staff member, no. But as somebody that lived [on campus] I feel like it

would affect other people [who never lived on campus] more. I feel like it should

have impacted me more, but it didn't. I feel like I dealt with enough of the incidents

that you become numb to certain situations. Which is not ideal, it's just the reality.

My mentality shifts. I'm like, "Okay, what do I need to support now?" Like is [it the]

student [or] myself? And sometimes I do need to focus on myself, but in the instance

that were [a bias incident] happened and [it] doesn't necessarily impact me directly; it

impacts a student. So, I am able to separate the two when it's not directly impacting

me. Do I have feelings about it? Yes. But I need to focus my mentality into what

needs to be done, which is support the student.

Roberto was not able to communicate the personal impact of racially biased incidents, even

though he stated he recognized he should focus on himself when he was impacted. He

communicated that his first reaction was to think about what the students needed in those

moments. Roberto believed that his housing experience influenced his students-first

approach. However, it did not allow Roberto to process the impact of those incidents for

himself or name the taxation it had on his mental health when asked. This created an

opportunity for Roberto to continue showing high levels of productivity while having

declining health issues, which is a RBF symptom known as John Henryism.

Another factor of the SAPOCs' experience was when they were expected to support

students during polarizing election seasons and deal with the volatile discourse on campus.

Jaimie, who identified as Mexican, spoke about what he went through during the 2016

presidential election and the tenure of the 45th president of the United States. He recalled,

I remember the early parts of the Trump presidency, something I really struggled with

is, like, I have to support students who support this guy. And statistically, in my head,

I know it's like 40-plus students. And he's, like … called Mexicans rapists, criminals.

And whenever I push back on [that] and they give that same tired argument, like,

"That's not what he said, he said the *bad ones*. And I'm like 'No! I know a dog

whistle when I hear it.' Not even a dog whistle, *a blow horn*." Yeah. And my patience

there would started running really, really thin. And so, I would, for the sake of talking

with students who had different, I don't want to say different opinions, but who had those problematic opinions. I was like, "You need to cut it right now. Because I'm not going to engage further in this." And that will get exhausting, and they will push back. Obviously, there's "Oh, you can't have a conversation." … No, because you're arguing in bad faith and the thing, I get to … feeling like my identity matters less and less, as you debated as, like, it is a game. That was a very exhausting period.

Jaimie's role centered on having discussions with students to determine what programming the institution should plan for the entire campus. Therefore, when he talked to students about national events, he experienced a level of exhaustion from having to defend his identity against the racist ideologies being spread by the former president. That type of exchange with students had a negative impact on Jaimie's mental health and placed an additional tax on him when he attempted to do his job. Jaimie described feeling invalidated by racial incidents in his workplace and angry about these ongoing interactions, which are symptoms of RBF due to the accumulation of these experiences.

Moreover, in fighting to be seen in the white-centered workplaces of higher education, the SAPOCs in this study found themselves at a tipping point, where they questioned whether the taxation was worth the fight. Emilia described her own debate about hitting her limit and how she dealt with the guilt from this line of thinking. Emilia stated,

Part of it is that I feel that I don't want to do it anymore. I want to give up. *I even feel guilty* because I want to give up, and it's like I need to be stronger. I need to, I'm not the one and only, the first and only person that experiences XYZ. So, if other people are able to endure these types of situations, *why am I being a little b about it* and not wanting to quit, right? Like wanting to jump ship just because this happened to me

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right now. That, that is one of the things that really makes me upset, too. So, overall, I

just be upset about everything, but that's one of the things that really gets me upset

with myself just because I'm not necessarily accepting that these things are normal,

but it's the world that we live in type thing.

Emilia shared openly the exasperation of the accumulation of tokenism and feeling less-than

in her work setting based on her racialized experiences. She had moments when she

acknowledged that she could quit and walk away from this negative experience but felt like

that she would be letting down her community and students of color if she did leave. Emilia

was one of the few staff of color working in the housing office, she felt like she advocated

for inclusion any opportunity she had, and she felt that if she left, that advocacy would end.

Emilia's experiences indicated several symptoms of RBF, such as anger, frustration,

worrying, and tokenism, in this situation.

Resilience Strategies

Ultimately, quitting is not always a feasible option for SAPOCs, and the study

participants discussed the various resilience strategies they employed to deal with the harder

times in their roles. For some participants, it was a mentality or mantra they held to deal with

the unpleasant moments in the role. For instance, Mario talked about how he tried to not have

professional issues impact his personal life. He shared,

I mean, there is an accumulation at some point. And I feel like, in life, that's a little bit

of my philosophy in terms of just like letting things go and trying to just like keep

moving and trying to, like, compartmentalize things so that, like, no one topic or day

at work or experience is going to ruin your day. That's a big part of me. I try to leave

work at work and come home and just, like, be doing my personal stuff.

In his interview, Mario referenced his "let things go" mentality and his ability to compartmentalize, which worked for him overall. However, there were moments in the interview when I asked him to reflect more deeply on these racially distressing moments in his workplace, which did take a toll on his patience at work and was something he brought home with him occasionally. He talked about needing to set aside time to decompress from work when he got home and being more irritable with his partner after a challenging workday.

Other participants took a more strategic approach to dealing with their RBF and negative experiences in the workplace. Kerry, a senior mid-level professional, talked about an approach she used at the institutions where she had worked. She said,

And at my previous institution, I decided to bring all the Black women together. And that was Black women students, Black faculty, staff, and administrators, because we needed to figure out how to support each other. If we're fighting for the same things and in different pockets, that makes us weak in our pockets because there's only one, maybe two of us, fighting in that pocket. But if we all come together … as Black women and fight, then undeniably you can't X out our voice because now we're a number other than one. And so that bringing us together as a form of a sister circle to kind of talk about the issues was definitely very helpful for us to have a collective voice on campus because we were all in different committees. So, we would come back, and we would talk about what was happening in our committee, and we would give each other advice and feedback and our thoughts. And then had me go to that committee with our voice was still being heard in those spaces. And we oftentimes

tackled it as a team effort. And with making sure we boost up and support each other;

to be one of the few walking around campus is hard.

Kerry created the sister circles—a space designated specifically for Black women to share

their experiences and build their self-esteem—as a way for her to take back her power from a

situation that had been invalidating. She expressed that it was a successful endeavor that gave

all the Black women who participated a space to be heard and to act on ways to improve the

space for each other. This practice helped limit the frustration she felt through her RBF

symptoms of tokenism, isolation, and fatigue.

Danielle took a more personal and physical approach to dealing with the stress of

being a SAPOC at a PWI. She handled many challenging student reports and described how

she handled the increased stress of her workplace by grounding herself:

I definitely have times where I've had to pause when I've been working with students.

Because they're emoting so much that we have to externally contain a lot of that and

it's exhausting for me. And so, I've had times where I've actually had to say, "Okay,

let's pause for a moment. Let's both take time to breathe and kind of do some

grounding because I'm starting to feel like I have to do a lot of containment." I know

that they're way more escalated than what I'm seeing. And then there definitely are

times where after I meet with a student, I've had to [get] a yoga mat, and I put it on

the floor in my office, I shut my door, and I turned off my lights and fortunately I

have a little, like, roundy thingy outside my door status that I'll leave on Do Not

Disturb. And my staff is trained at this point that they don't disturb me. And I, like,

lay savasana on my floor on my yoga mat in the dark for 5 minutes to physically

ground myself because the stress of what I've heard are just trying to figure out like.

Danielle talked about the pressure and impact of her work on her mental health. To deal with this increased stress, she took a moment and created space for her to process her work and reconnected to her body by doing a yoga pose in her office. Otherwise, Danielle would have succumbed to the stress and negativity in a way that might have impacted her well-being beyond her work setting.

<div align="center">**Working Is What Makes Me Sick**</div>

The second theme from the data collected—*Working Is What Makes Me Sick*—centers on how the study participants' RBF and overall experiences in their workplace impacted their ability to perform their role. This theme also illuminates the moments when the participants felt that their racial identity did not influence their performance. Two subthemes emerged from this second theme: (1) *obstacles to wellness* and (2) *normal work experience*.

Obstacles to Wellness

The intriguing aspect of this subtheme is that the participants revealed that they were able to do the work they were assigned but could also articulate the negative impact it was having on them holistically. When asked, "What symptoms of RBF have you experienced?," Lauryn, a biracial woman and a mid-level professional working as a live-on fraternity and sorority life staff member, talked about the intricacies of her position and its effect on her. She recalled,

> I definitely think psychological is the biggest one. And again, forcing to withdraw socially, both in my personal life and no longer being able to give the students, like, my extra time, the energy outside of what absolutely has to be done. Also definitely changes my eating habits because I just, I don't want to be perceived by students

when I don't have to be. So particularly now that I'm the only one in my department, I think it's very easy for students to identify me, and I hear it that "She's the Black one over there. That's the person that you'll want to ask your question and go see." We do have some money to eat on campus, and typically I would take lunch on campus, and now I'm avoiding the dining halls. And I have the lovely gift of living in [on-campus] housing, and even doing takeout, I just don't want to, like, step out to get food and then have to encounter all the students who live here on this road. I feel like a lot of it definitely resonates with me.

Lauryn reflected on her professional experience and the impact it had on her daily life. She talked about socially withdrawing in both her professional and personal life, which is a symptom of RBF. Lauryn was so taxed and exhausted by the racism in her workplace that she did not want to interact with students outside her work hours, despite living on campus. Similarly, Jaimie, who worked in student activities, named it plainly when he thought about how RBF impacted his life beyond work. When I asked him about RBF symptoms he had experienced at work and how work had affected his health and well-being, he said,

I feel like it is an obstacle to me being healthy because I'll get back from, like, a stressful day, stressful event, or like dealing with [an] upsetting situation with my students, where I've had to be the support, and all I want to do is sleep. So, I'm getting better at that. But I would be lying to say if that hasn't happened and especially during the hard quarantine part of the pandemic that got amplified. but it's hard to be healthy when you're emotionally tax[ed]; you need to get rest, and have … healthy eating habits, and [an] exercise regime.

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A student activities job can be demanding, but in Jaimie's case, these demands were heightened and exacerbated by the racism he dealt with in his position. For example, Jaimie often had to advise student organizations about their events, and his suggestions focused on inclusion would be met with resistance. The RBF he dealt with in his work created a larger barrier to creating healthier habits based on the consistent nature of dealing with racism in his workplace. When asked about his RBF symptoms, Jaimie described a high level of fatigue, sleep disturbance, frustration, fear, and tokenism in his daily work experiences.

For some of the study participants, obstacles surfaced even before they got to work. Danielle, a Black woman who worked in a gender center, talked about recognizing that stress was killing Black women in college president roles and how she worked to be fully prepared to help students with issues on campus or in the broader society. She detailed,

When you're, you know, a person of color in general, I will say a Black woman in particular, we kind of get used to being in crisis mode, we get used to living in the trope of the "strong Black woman" and holding everybody else's stress. And we do it so quickly and without thinking because, culturally, that's what it's always been. Right? But it's, I think, it's only recently that we're realizing it's killing us. *No, very seriously!* Like what was in the last, I think in the last week, there have been two Black women college presidents who have dropped dead or the last 2 weeks. There's been two who have dropped dead, and one of them was interim. She was an interim president; *she didn't even want the role*. And it's like, what does that say? Stress is killing us quite literally! And so, when there are, when there are moments of [the murders of] George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, [the mass shooting] in Jacksonville, and these college presidents. When there are instances like that, affirmative action

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being reversed, Roe v. Wade being overturned. Those are particularly stressful days, because I know, I kind of mentally prepare myself for coming onto campus on those days because I have to make sure that I've read what's going on. I know what's going on. I have at least likely a preliminary understanding of what the ramifications are, what the outcome is going to be, like, how it could look, because I know I'm going to come on campus and students are going to look to me to not only commiserate with them and validate them and answer questions … And it's exhausting. *It's really exhausting*.

Danielle observed current events in higher education and how the stress on Black women college presidents was killing them. Then she related this stress to her role and how she prepared mentally for what she would encounter at work. She had a drive to be prepared for the questions her students would ask her throughout the workday about racially distressing events and legislative changes in society. However, this process had created a high level of fatigue and increased stress for her, which are symptoms of RBF.

Other participants discussed how difficult it was to focus on their job while navigating the challenges of a predominately white space. Mario, a Latino who worked as mid-level housing professional, noted that his white supervisor received a promotion for a role she was not qualified for, and he could not focus while he was processing this. He shared,

For example, my director came to the role outside of higher ed; no [residential life/university housing] experience. And because the interim [vice president of student affairs] was her professor in undergrad, she got promoted to, like, an interim [associate vice president] and dean of wellbeing role and *I'm just like WHAT*? Both

being white, it also just feels nepotistic and racially, like, you're just looking for your people.… But if you were to put a job description out for that role, they would not meet the qualifications. That's to me, it's bullshit … I'd say on the worst days maybe. And that just from [a] not being able to focus perspective. Maybe you want to focus on the task at hand, but in the back of your head, you're like, "How did they get that promotion?" *Like how did that make sense*?!

As Mario processed dealing with RBF symptoms of denial and frustration, he stated that he knew that SAPOCs do not get as many chances to get hired for a job due to the lack of professional connections, but his white colleague, with little direct experience, still got the job. In many cases, SAPOCs can juggle the demands of their role while working in spaces that do not meet their needs or offer an inclusive environment. Yet, this comes at the expense of their own personal health or negatively influences their life at home. Mario stated that he would come home frustrated and needed time to decompress from the events that had occurred at work.

Normal Work Experience

Participants identified moments when they felt their work experience was normal despite the RBF they dealt with at work. When I asked, "What areas of your work do you feel your identities are least present?," four of the participants stated explicitly that administrative tasks, such as sending and receiving emails, were professional moments not shaped by their racial identity. Lauryn, a biracial woman who worked in fraternity and sorority life, reflected, "Ironically enough, when … I email with campus partners … I definitely don't have a name that lends itself to my identity." Another participant, Mario, a Latino who worked in housing operations, shared,

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A good amount of my role is also … technical and … the IT computer world. So, in

my first year, we implemented the Housing Director, which is the housing software,

and … when I'm just going through codes and room configurations, making sure

student IDs [match] … I'm not thinking about my identity that time. I'm just kind of,

like, zoning out with the numbers and maybe some music. So that piece of my role

where it's just, like, very task-oriented, not present at all. Because I'm not thinking

about much else than the numbers and letters that are in front of me.

Another participant shared that they felt their racial identities the least when they were

working with students. Kerry, a Black woman and senior mid-level practitioner who had

worked at several PWIs, felt that working with students had been a moment when she was

not hyperaware of her racial identities. As she described,

When I'm working with students. I honestly don't know if the students, and I don't

want them to come off sounding colorblind, but I think a lot of our students

understand what it is [like] to work with a woman of color. Not necessarily what

experience it is.… They look around and they see very few of us, and they see that I

am here, and I am in this role where I can help effect change. I don't know how. I

don't have to feel like I'm thinking about the fact that I am a Black woman.

Whether it was working directly with students or doing administrative tasks, there were

moments when the study participants felt they could do their work without fixating on their

racial identities. I chose to highlight these moments to serve as a reminder that these

SAPOCs were very capable at their job and took a student-centered approach to their work. I

highlight these positive and neutral participant experiences to showcase that it is possible for

SAPOCs to do their work without experiencing harm from the structures and individuals in

their white-centered workplaces—and the resulting symptoms of RBF. These experiences are

equally important to SAPOCs and show their strength in navigating these white spaces.

<p align="center">**Do I Even Belong Here?**</p>

Within the third theme—*Do I Even Belong Here?*—the participants considered their

sense of belonging within the institution and their department. The participants had a mix of

responses about whether they felt a sense of belonging and in what setting they felt the most

sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is critical to determining a SAPOC's length of

tenure within their role. There were two subthemes present in this theme: (1) *found my*

people, and (2) *Get Out (student affairs edition)*.

Found My People

Tahj had worked at three other PWIs prior to Sage College and had experienced

significant RBF. However, at Sage College, he derived a sense of community from the work

he accomplished within his role. Tahj, a Black man who worked in housing, talked about

what he did within his role and how he felt seen and valued within his work:

> I have 16 Greek organizations, but 11 of them have houses. I have 14 program
>
> houses, and I have seven themed communities. And themed communities are a
>
> partnership with another department. So, my role is really intermingled, my Greek
>
> organizations. We have local [National Panhellenic Council] and [National Pan-
>
> Hellenic Council] and I feel seen, if you want to be honest, because of some of the
>
> work I have been doing to highlight that … I was recently in an [Association of
>
> College and University Housing Officers–International] article about the interfaith
>
> thing community, [the division of student affairs] blasted that out. Won an award for
>
> [American College Personnel Association] and they blasted that out. When I went to

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the [American College Personnel Association] conference, at our campus life

divisional lunch we had, I was one of the people that they asked to talk about my

experience.

Tahj worked at a university focused on creating moments of recognition for their staff and

was a large source of how he interpreted his positive experience at his workplace. Tahj felt

seen and valued for the work he did and was given opportunities to engage in professional

development. Through these moments, he found community among his department and

division. Tahj was the only study participant who described an affirming and welcoming

department and institution, illuminating that it is possible to create an environment in which

SAPOCs feel valued and seen.

For Jaimie, a Latino who worked within student activities, felt that he had a greater

sense of belonging in his office because there were other SAPOCs working in the same

space. He recalled,

In my department, I feel I've just gotten my place; that's because I think I'm integral

to functions. I do feel I can be more authentic in my current department. Just because,

like I said previously, there's more Latine individuals in the space, and there's more

[Black, Indigenous, and people of color]. So, when someone says something out of

pocket, like at an all-department meeting, or something like that, I can, like, pull

someone aside and be like, "Really?" So that has been helpful. What I will say

though, it does still feel like a community created, how do I put this, for enduring or

to help with surviving. I wouldn't say surviving the place but lasting in the place.

Jaime discussed the impact of having representation in his office, which was helpful in

building community and finding people; yet, he considered the community as a way to

endure the working conditions of Skyline University. In other settings outside his department, Jaimie described the institution as performative about its DEI efforts. Therefore, his department, which included many other SAPOCs, created a space for debriefing the impact of institutional efforts, RBF, and regularly occurring racially distressing moments.

For Randall, Danielle, Jaimie, Kerry, and Roberto, involvement in race-based affinity groups at their workplace helped strengthen their sense of belonging within their institution or office. Randall, a Black man and a mid-level professional who worked in student conduct, talked about chairing a Black affinity group at one of his previous institutions:

I would say, being a professional, I felt I was able to navigate the space, even though it was a predominantly white institution, because I tried to get more involved … instead of just maybe complaining or just taking the burden of "this is the way things are." I got involved with the affinity group on campus they had; it was the faculty & staff of color community network. They held programs and after-work get-togethers, educational programs, as well as celebrations and all of these different things. And I decided to run for chair of that group, and that really opened a lot of doors for me on campus as a person of color, so I wasn't just judicial affairs. I was a person that people felt comfortable coming to when they were facing different challenges, and I was able to help out there.

Randall was the only SAPOC in his office and the first Black man to hold his position at Coal College; therefore, he had to deal with considerable RBF from the tokenism he experienced in this space as the only Black professional. Randall described his office as "cold and impersonal." He felt like he was there to simply hear student accountability cases, and no one spoke to each other in the office. Randall's ability to connect with other Black

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staff helped broaden his workplace community beyond his office and be in a space where he did not need to be the token Black person.

Roberto, a Latino male who worked in housing, talked about his participation in a divisional BIPOC caucus, an intentional space for staff of color to discuss current issues they dealt with, and Skyline University had a white caucus geared toward building allyship. He said,

We get the choice to participate. I choose to do so. It's very different how the white caucuses run versus the BIPOC one. We do have a little bit of a less structure thing, and we have talked about this; sometimes it feels like we're talking about trauma and experience that we've had with. Sometimes we try to do at least a reading [an article] or to have articles or things that have come up [to discuss] whether we agree on a point of view that was shared … while the white caucus is very structured.

Randall and Roberto found community through their race-based groups, which allowed them to branch out of their department and get more involved with the institution. In these spaces, they socializes with other staff of color or discussed topics that impacted their racial identity.

Faith found community within the physical surroundings outside campus, where she could build a life beyond work. A Black woman and entry-level housing professional who worked at a regional campus, Faith talked about being able to travel easily to a large city in the Northeast when she was not at work, which enhanced her sense of belonging in a broader off-campus community. She said,

I'm an introvert, so when I was in college, I did not want to do anything with anybody. I just want to, like, stay in my room by [myself]. I'm trying to get over that and, like, actually do a lot of stuff … since I'm so close to [a large city]. I go to the

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city, like, all the time by connecting through Reddit and a meetup. So, this Friday,

[I'm going to] karaoke and spending some time in Korea Town. In doing so, I'm

definitely getting out of my comfort zone a lot. And I think I it could partially be

because I don't have anybody else here who I'm, like, connecting with.… Not that I'd

want to connect with my supervisor outside of work, but she has a fiancée, she's

going be getting married in a month. And then my co-[hall director], he's in a

relationship.… I think because we do spend so much time together in the office, I

don't think we all want to spend time together outside office anyway. And then West

Campus people will mention, "Oh, I should come down to East Campus and see you

all," but no one ever really … does.

Faith felt much isolation since her office was in a more remote location on her campus.

Additionally, Faith worked at a regional institution (East Campus) and did not get to interact

frequently with the flagship institution (West Campus). She did not see a lot of Black people

or people of color regularly on campus, and she worked in a small office of three full-time

staff members (including herself) where she did not connect with her coworkers. Faith was

the only Black person in her office; therefore, her ability to find community off campus had

been helpful in combating the RBF symptoms of tokenism and isolation for herself.

Conversely, Danielle, a Black woman who worked in a gender center, had been

intentional about finding community from her first day at Utopia University and found

another Black woman social worker at her orientation. Later, when a senior-level Black

woman joined the division of student affairs, Danielle added her to her Black woman

community and dubbed the group the "Three Musketeers." Danielle talked about her

involvement with a historically Black sorority and meeting sorority members who also

worked at her institution and who bolstered her sense of community on campus:

> I didn't mention that being part of the Divine Nine is something else that is, that has
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> really been amazingly helpful and supportive to me. One of, one of the women that I
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> mentioned to you that's in the Three Musketeers was a sorority sister. My mentor that
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> I got through the leadership program is also one of my sorority sisters. Being able to
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> move about campus and find other Black professionals, faculty, and staff, and interact
>
> with them and then finding out that … have this other additional connection as
>
> another layer of support.

Danielle's previous involvement with an off-campus organization had helped her experience

on-campus. Her sorority affiliation had eased the challenge of creating pockets of community

outside her office and finding support during the more challenging times of her role.

Danielle was the only full-time SAPOC in her office and had to deal with tokenism daily.

Get Out (Student Affairs Edition)

The ability to find and form a community was not guaranteed for all participants.

Notably, some participants who found pockets of community at their institution still felt

isolated in other spaces on their campuses. When I asked Danielle, for instance, to "describe

her sense of belonging at her department and institution," she said she had fostered

community on a personal level with her "Three Musketeers" group and other sorority sisters

who had mentored her, but the community feeling dissipated when she had to interact with

the overall institution. She said,

> But with the university as a whole, I would say, no. And that's because, again, when I
>
> have to go into other spaces where the powers that be [are]—we're talking the top five

people running the university—anytime I have to be in a space that's like that, it's not

comfortable. It's a little infuriating that the expectation from those who are running

the room or in power is that other folks are going to cower—like, it's insane.

Danielle led one of the race-based affinity groups and attended diversity council meetings

with some of the institution's top leadership. This was one of many settings where she felt

like she had to "bow" to the powers that be at her institution. Danielle described the all-white

male leadership group as performative when they held diversity council meetings for the

affinity group leaders to name their groups' concerns. Danielle did not feel like they did

anything with the information but instead used those meetings as an example of how they

were improving the institution's diversity climate. Danielle's experience spoke to a hierarchy

at her institution that did not include or value Black women.

Kerry, a Black woman and senior mid-level administrator, was very transparent about

her experience in her department. When I asked her to describe her sense of belonging within

her department and institution, she explained that she did not feel a sense of belonging in her

department due to the chilly climate created by one white colleague who did not like Kerry.

She shared,

I don't have any, and again I go through that questioning if I don't have that because

of … my higher ranking title or if that is because there's no real connection with those

that I work with. I don't really know, but there is no real belonging. I have found my

sense of belonging in other places [on campus] with other people who I feel are like-

minded as me. And I use that now, and I think that may be something that I'm going

to continue to have to work through as I move up in the field.... You know, people say

leadership is lonely, and I'm starting to understand what that means.... But when it

comes to my suite, I think that there's been a large campaign, and I say this because,

but sometimes I feel like when women of color start to talk about their experience, it

could come off as if "Are you making this up? Or do you know that this is real," but

when I can't necessarily give you the examples and so, I know that there's a huge

campaign against me in my suite, like, folks do not [like me]. And I say that because,

like, there's times where I walked down the hall and I hear people talking, and then I

hear, "Oh there's Kerry," and then boom! Everybody stops talking. And so, to me,

that makes it seem as if, "Okay, you got a problem with me," and I am not a person

who is afraid to address it. So, situations like that. I going to be like, "You were

talking about me, what were you talking about?' So, I'm okay with doing that kind of

stuff, but it just seems like one [person] has taken and ran with the toxicity of trying

to tear me down and has created a hostile environment for me. Which is why I also

don't try to engage with folks, either, and situations.

Like Randall and Danielle, Kerry found a community in a space outside her department

through chairing a race-based affinity group. However, she described a very chilly

environment in her office where she felt like people were either always talking about her or

were consistently not inviting her to lunch when her all-white colleagues would eat in their

office suite. She could not determine if it was because she was the department head or if it

was because she was a Black woman. In this instance, Kerry was processing the RBF

symptoms of isolation, tokenism, and stereotype threat.

Jaimie, a Mexican man who worked in student activities, reflected on an experience

he had at a previous institution regarding a campus speaker at the public state institution. He

struggled and felt a lower sense of belonging when the off-campus white supremacist group

Patriot Front came to campus and expressed that Mexicans did not belong in this country. He recalled,

> I was the one person of color in my office full of white women. And I remember … a clear example of, there are people coming to this campus who don't think *I* should be allowed in this country and would probably love to see harm.… I have no way of truly venting or addressing the situation. And then I'm expected to go out to my students and be their support.… I'll do that because part of my job is to make sure that my students are taken care of, and I will always support my students, especially, especially my students who are BIPOC who are facing that type of hatred.… But you're pouring out of an empty cup, for lack of a better term, and I just remember there I got so exhausted because I had started there—it was really a bad time. It was February 2020, and I had been there 2 years. My whole 2 years there, it was incident after incident, and then, all right, here I will be the person in our office to dictate our messaging, say what's up. I was also the advisor for all the identity-based clubs and orgs, around race, ethnicity, and religion. While all the other people in the office that advise all the other orgs.

Jaimie had experienced significant tokenism in his previous role as the only person of color in his office. Furthermore, like many SAPOCs, he was responsible for all the identity-based student organizations and became the default diversity, equity, and inclusion communications person in the office during a time of high racial turmoil in the country. Jaimie shared that after dealing with racially distressing incidents, he would feel anxiety, his adrenaline would kick in, and he would get headaches from the increase in his blood pressure after each

incident. These symptoms of high blood pressure, anxiety, extreme fatigue, and isolation in his department were all consequences of RBF.

Must Be Something in the Air

The fourth theme from the data collected—*Must Be Something in the Air*—related to the ways the study participants interacted with their department and institution. They mostly cited feeling a lack of support at different levels in their professional journey or highlighted differences in racial representation in their white workplace. Four subthemes emerged from this main theme: (1) *lack of support—institutional level*, (2) *lack of support—supervision level*, (3) *racist incidents*, and (4) *racial representation*.

Lack of Support—Institutional Level

When asked whether they felt supported by their senior-level administration, all the participants cite instances when they did not. Danielle, a Black woman who worked for a gender center, spoke about the impact of poor senior-level leadership she had witnessed at her private liberal arts institution, Utopia. She discussed the negative influence the president had on the climate of the institution and how that interacted with her personal identities. She stated,

> The climate of the institution, I will say, and this is just in my opinion, it is not great, and that comes from the top down. And I say [it] comes from the top down because presidents are very important, and they set the tone for their institution.… They still can and do have the ability to influence their university. And unfortunately, I will say that I'm currently at a university where the president does not set a good tone. He sets the tone that is divisive. He sets a tone that is archaic, he sets a tone that is really openly misogynistic and sexist. I very much feel like if he had his way, he would turn

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back the hands of time and turn our university back to when it was only accepting

students who were all white, all man, seemingly all hetero.… The school in his

current iteration would not exist. And I don't say that to be facetious. I say that in all

seriousness.… An example I can give you is the motto. Originally, or as it stands

now, it's "men and women for others." How hard is it to say, "people for others"?

And there's a refusal to do that. [At] convocation, talking about "we welcome your

sons and daughters," [instead of] being able to say, "we welcome your students."

Danielle worked at an institution where the president was out of touch with the needs of

current college students and viewed the institution through an outdated lens. She described

him as a staunch supporter of binary language that only speaks to men and women and did

not want to use more inclusive language to welcome all identities on the campus. She stated

that this leadership behavior affected the institution at all levels but starts at the top with the

president. Given her work in a gender center and the office's focus on providing an inclusive

space on campus, it is clear why Danielle felt that her role and her racial and gendered

identities were not supported on this campus.

Additionally, it is a stark reality that there is little racial diversity in the upper levels

of leadership within higher education institutions. Randall, a Black man who worked in

student conduct, talked about what he had seen in the 3 months since starting his new role at

Green Bay College:

It's really unfortunate that the higher you go in your roles, the more you're not going

to see people that look like you, unfortunately. And it's unfortunate that I felt like I'd

gotten used to it. So, I am at Green Bay College, and I think that's one thing that is

somewhat lacking. I've [been] working here since July, so a few months now, and I

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think I've only seen no more than two Black men that work there. And I think I've

seen maybe, maybe one or two, maybe two Black women since I've been [here], and

they are probably scattered. You just don't run into them like that. But when I first

started working here, they sent me a "who's who on campus" from just about all

departments, and I didn't see it there on campus, either.

The senior-level leadership positions at institutions are typically white and lack

representation from other marginalized racial identities. Therefore, as Randall acclimated to

his new institution, he did not find opportunities to build community with other Black staff

while navigating the tokenism at his new workplace. This exemplifies the lack of support for

staff of color from the onboarding stage of a SAPOC's career and the negative impact on the

SAPOC. The lack of diversity creates an additional obstacle in this critical stage of starting a

new position that is present for staff of color versus their white peers.

Study participants often described actions their institution took that were

performative. Jaimie, a Latino who worked with student activities, illustrated what he saw at

his institution, Skyline, and how the institution interpreted serving students of color there. He

shared,

I would say the climate for the campus, this is Skyline. It's a business school, it's

almost capitalistic, down to the micro level, and I find it so fascinating when I

observe it. It leads into these weird interactions; I just learned at a community forum

the other week that apparently, like, 50% of our community is BIPOC, which is a

huge number. And there's, like, 50% of our incoming class, not the whole

community. This is the first time we've hit that number. That being said, I've worked

at more predominantly white institutions, I hear less and less about issues around

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diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility *here* than I've ever had any other

institution. And when I brought up, like, "Hey, how are we, do we make sure our

programming is more inclusive, how we have more variety of programs, so different

walks of life and experiences can see themselves in, like, the events that are

happening on campus?" I won't forget, I got told by a group of students, "Jaimie, we

really don't do that because that would really only serve, like, a niche population of

our students." And … I was flabbergasted. I was like, "*Are you joking? … why did*

you say that to me with a straight face?"

Part of Jaimie's role is to help expand students' understanding of the audience they program

for, but based on his experience at Skyline, the students interpreted their peers of color as a

small group that did not justify the effort. Jaimie had to process this racist comment while

brainstorming options for the new, diverse first-year class coming into the institution. This

student perspective reflected the institutional perspective on and effort on behalf of their

students of color.

      When I asked, "How do you feel that the university leadership is doing at supporting

staff of color on your campus?" Randall talked about another example of performative

actions that did not really demonstrate a thorough system of support for the campus

community members of color at Coal College. Randall, a Black man who worked in student

conduct, described the actions of the institutional leadership:

      I feel like … they would put out these different initiatives and programs, but at the

time, I felt like they were band-aids to the, to the problem. And I don't feel like there's

really any systems or policies that actually change to better support or attract more

diverse faculty and staff members or just our faculty and staff of color across campus.

Yeah, I've never felt, "Oh, wow, they really see us" or "they were really trying to

make great strides to understand our experience and make it better for us here." I

think you just kind of have to adapt.

Randall detailed how the institutional leadership did not take the time to understand the

issues experienced by staff of color. The efforts he witnessed from them did not offer

sustainable longstanding relief but were temporary "band-aid" solutions to the issues and

forced him to adapt to the environment. These performative actions did not improve the

working experience for SAPOCs or make them feel seen.

Roberto, a Latino who worked in housing, felt supported by his department due to the

racial diversity of the space. However, when he reflected on his time at the institution, he had

a different experience and pinpointed the discrepancies he had seen in supporting students of

color on an institutional level. He shared,

I know [the institution has] been trying to be more inclusive or encourage [a] sense of

belonging, but it's very hard when not a lot of people want to participate in, or it just

feels forced. Or feels like they're not really trying. And I always make certain

comments [throughout] the year, whether they want to take [the] suggestion, that's

how I feel, take it or leave it. I can give you an example. So there's a welcome

reception for the Multicultural Student [office]… so we had the lavender graduation,

multicultural sendoff, and a Black student sendoff. It's clear that some clubs,

organizations, and students are being supported more than others. And it's apparent

when you go to these events, and that same department that oversees these events that

has the money to sponsor them with no … limitations … providing more for one or

the other.

Roberto highlighted some of the performative actions of the institutional leadership and the unequal support for different underrepresented student groups. As a SAPOC who was passionate about helping this student population, Roberto described feeling frustrated and irritated based on the lack of support at the institutional level. Witnessing the disconnect in the institution's support for this student population contributed to Roberto's RBF.

Lack of Support—Supervision Level

Other participants shared experiences of not feeling supported by their department's supervisor. I asked the participants about the ways their supervisors supported or drove their racial battle fatigue. Emilia, an Afro-Latina who worked in housing, talked about her experience with her direct supervisor, who was a white man and who did not seem to have strong cross-racial supervision skills. She shared,

He doesn't know how to interact with people of color, period. Like, I've seen him interact with students, I've seen him interact with staff [of color] and he gets … nervous, and I was talking to someone recently because it was so evident recently, where he just wants to be extra cool with [people of color], especially, like, the darker they are, the more cool he wants to be. Yes, it's bizarre, and it's slowly uncomfortable. And he wants to cover it up with like "this is the most diverse environment" that he's been in. And I'm at a predominantly white institution. Like, that's the type of thing, but again [he is] always talking about how he wants to do better. But then when trainings come around, [he is] nowhere to be found because he has other things to do.

Emilia had to work with a supervisor who was clearly uncomfortable with interacting with people who were not white; he invoked a "cool" version of himself to try to connect with students of color. Furthermore, her supervisor did not seem willing to deepen his skills

around diversity, equity, and inclusion since, as Emilia stated, he did not make time to be present at trainings nor was he held accountable by his direct supervisor to be present at these sessions. Her supervisor's behavior perpetuated Emilia's RBF symptoms of tokenism and fatigue, since she was the only Afro-Latina in the office, and she found her supervisor's behaviors exhausting.

Jaimie, a Latino who worked in student activities, described a previous institution he had worked at and its lack of diversity. As the only person of color in the office, he felt like he needed to censor himself, avoid becoming the "angry Latino man," and coddle his supervisor's white fragility. He recalled,

Going backwards at [my former institution]; the whole office was very white. It was all white women, and the frustration I have there comes from me being a Latino man and dealing with the intersect of this white woman. It's like your whiteness is frustrating me, and, but there's this perception that I can't be angry or upset. Or having to make sure I don't upset the white women in my office. So, there is that piece. It started exhausting [me] because, alright, I'm holding back what I'm truly feeling right now to protect [her] feelings around [her] fragility.

Jaimie shared previously that, in this office, he was the person designated to handle all the DEI-related updates to the students. However, it became clearer that his white female supervisor was not equipped to support him as a Latino and would often make the emotional labor about her, as revealed through her unwillingness to examine her whiteness and how it impacted her supervision relationship with a SAPOC.

In other instances, study participants felt unsupported by the lack of follow-up from anyone (including their supervisor) about difficult student issues. SAPOCs are often frontline

staff members who assisted students during crisis moments. Faith, a Black woman who worked in housing, talked about a crisis to which she responded to at her regional campus, Valley State University, East Campus. She recalled,

> The students are in there performing CPR, someone's on the phone with 911. And I was just like, there is a Black man [who] is unconscious. Everybody in the room is students of color. From that experience, West Campus had reached out to me and they're like, "Hey, if you need to talk to someone, we're here for you. There's also the employee assistant line" [and] gave me that phone number. But I was like, "No, I think I'm fine. I'm okay." *I don't think I was fine*. During this past opening, one of the [resident assistants passed] out Saturday night, and from the feedback I took that was like, "Oh my gosh! because I messed up with staffing [was the reason] that she passed out." That was another reason why my whole week was just off because I was like, "What if I attributed to this?" I remember I called my doctor's office and I called the 988 number [the national suicide prevention line]. No, I didn't feel suicidal, but I just wanted to talk to somebody. So, it was helpful to talk to people who are not at all involved in it, but I still need to work through some things to, like, get over a little bit. But I would say support is kind of there and kind of not there. And then I think, for my supervisor, with her being a white woman, I know she's open to talking about race and things like that. But I also feel like her plate is pretty full with a lot of stuff.

Faith dealt with a complicated crisis response situation that involved students of color and that had a deep impact on her, which is common in her type of role. Moreover, Faith received little support from the institution or her supervisor to unpack this common student emergency response situation to see how she processed the situation or how it interacted with her

identities. Additionally, Faith's confidence in her role was shaken by constructive feedback given at the beginning of the year about her performance opening the residence halls, which made her wonder whether she had endangered her resident assistant staff member due to her poor performance. Though Faith said she could talk to her white female supervisor about her racial identities, she sought assistance from her doctor's office and the national suicide line to reach out to someone who would be willing to speak. Faith stated that she was not suicidal, yet this incident speaks volumes to the fact that she did not feel like she could speak to her supervisor, whose primary responsibility was to provide support to anyone she supervised, regardless of what was on her plate at the time.

Even when supervisors provided constructive criticism, the racial identities of the study participants were present and, combined with RBF, shaped how they heard the feedback. For example, Danielle, a Black woman who worked in a gender center, recounted a situation in which she was responsible for a student retreat for Black women that had low attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Her supervisor told her that the retreat had been a failure, and Danielle was impacted very negatively given that the retreat was geared toward people who shared her identities. She said,

So, in that, in that moment, when she said the whole "do you still want to be here?"— anybody who gets asked that question, what are they thinking? Right. So, that was a moment where I immediately was feeling very gaslit; I was feeling like I was going to get fired. I very much felt like I was not supported, and I also immediately knew that I had to tread very carefully moving forward with this particular relationship and with this particular person [her supervisor] because I've always felt like, and still feel like, she holds me at an arm's length. And she has relationships with other women in the

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workplace who have been around longer than me and [has] good relationships with them. But I also don't see her putting in the time to build that relationship with me, you know, and that's okay. I don't begrudge [it], like, we click with who we click with. And I don't have any problem with that. But what I do have a problem with is, if I'm asking you questions about life and trying to get to know you better, and you're giving me, like, one-word answers or you're not really trying to talk to me, then that doesn't bode well. So, given that was my sentiment when we first started working together, and I was kind of realizing that she was kind of holding me at a distance a little bit. And then for her to say that, after a program that I was completely tasked with 100% failed ... we're 0 [for] 2 at this point.… It took me a good month after [that] conversation to process what my supervisor said, to set up the appointments with the other two [Black] women to have lunch with them [to get advice on the feedback], and to kind of amalgam all that into a cohesive response so that I could go back to my boss. When I went back to my boss, and I said, "I'm hoping that we can have a conversation because, there was something that you said to me about a month ago and really kind of struck a chord with me." I said, and when you asked me "if I wanted to be here," I [heard] you say that and, as a Black woman, when that comes from a white woman, I hear "I don't want you here."… At this point, there's tears, *on my end*, not her.… And one of the things that she said to me was she appreciated me being able to have this conversation with her, and she did not realize that that was how it came across.… But then she also said, she's like, "I feel like I have learned more about you and know more about you than I've been able to learn in, the 2 years at that point, roughly, that I've been there."… And I remember thinking after the fact

it took me to be broken down, one foot out the door in tears in her office for her to feel like she could connect with me. So, what does that say? Right. At this point, we're 3 years past that and our relationship has gotten better. But I didn't have a wall up before. I definitely have a wall up now. Because she's shown me that I can't trust her.

Danielle had watched her white female supervisor build strong and open relationships with other women in the institution but did not feel like she could connect with her supervisor when she tried. She already worked in a small office where her and her supervisor were the only two full-time staff members, so that had created an isolating experience for her, the only Black woman. Therefore, when Danielle received critical feedback about a student retreat for Black women, it was layered with her racialized experiences of otherness and isolation. For Danielle, the feedback confirmed her impression that her supervisor did not want her in this position, and Danielle had a visceral reaction and began job searching because she believed her role was in jeopardy. When she had the opportunity to speak to her supervisor about this moment of feedback, it was the first moment her supervisor felt like they had connected on a deeper level. However, it also destroyed any foundation of trust that could occur between her and her supervisor since Danielle felt that she needed to show a great level of weakness to get a connection from her white female supervisor.

Racist Incidents

Four participants detailed a variety of racist incidents that occurred in their predominately white workplace. Lauryn, a biracial woman who worked in fraternity and sorority life, described Slate University's general racial climate and the culture of the undergraduate students:

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It's definitely a place where legacies exist, and I have not ... met many students who will really act like they're going to school in 1984 and ... these are okay things to say.... This is the first time that they're ever hearing that these are not appropriate things to say because they've been at institutions prior to this, and they've grown up in families where no one has ever told them that that's not appropriate.

Lauryn navigated an institutional culture in which students arriving at Slate University had an underdeveloped understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion. When Lauryn talked about her RBF symptoms, she described anger, hypervisibility, and stereotype threat. Working with students who used racially derogatory language had an immense negative impact on her professional career. For Lauryn, as a biracial woman working with predominately white fraternity and sorority organizations at a PWI, she interacted daily with students who spoke poorly of people who looked like her.

Danielle, a Black woman who worked at a gender center, stated that a racist incident had occurred on the Utopia University campus every year during her professional tenure there. She also noted that the institution struggled to retain their community members of color:

They [the university] put in all the work to recruit the students. They don't do the work to retain them. They don't do the work to graduate them. They don't do the work to support them. When we have multicultural floors within the dorms, and there are all kinds of racial incidents that happen because people are ...vandalizing the hallways, and I think that they happen every single year, *every single year*. There's some sort of incident where a multicultural floor is vandalized. And then you wonder why BIPOC students don't want to stay here.... *Make it make sense* …when there are

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things that are happening culturally that aren't catering to them. It makes sense. You

know, it was Spring Fling, and you're bringing in all these white artists—that's not

going to speak to them.

Danielle commented that her institution was doing a commendable job of recruiting students

and staff of color. Yet, she also said that the environment that community members of color

had to navigate was hostile and invalidating. Yearly racist incidents and a lack of inclusive

programming took a toll on Danielle, who felt othered and tokenized on campus.

Jaimie referenced his experience as a professional staff member going through

diversity training at Skyline with a mostly white professional staff. He said,

I remember they were doing a diversity training. And I was having this moment

where ... I was losing it because you're doing the diversity training ... and all I saw

were the white people in the room, all raising their hands to talk and they're repeating

... "It's so important that we're having these conversations. I'm glad we're finally

having this discussion ... I just feel like we don't have these discussions enough ... Me

as a white person, this is how I feel." And there was no centering around, like, the few

... BIPOC people in the room, the Latinx people in the room. And so that's ... where I

felt like, "Oh, my identity is not showing here" because [white] people feel like, "Oh,

let me make this about me."

This training centered the white majority and, ironically, excluded the staff of color in the

room by emphasizing the emotions and fragility of white staff. Jaime vocalized his

frustration about this incident and illuminated how this type of training setup is a triggering

and negative experience for SAPOCs.

Representation Matters

Som study participants highlighted the representation of racial and ethnic diversity at their institution. Tahj, a Black man who worked in housing, had the most positive experience at his institution compared with the other study participants. When asked about his experience within his department, he shared,

Friend, my department is Black. Is run by a Black woman. Dean Johnson is a Black woman who has been in the game for 28 years now. We call her Auntie D. So being in my department when I first started, there was a plethora of color … on the [residence education] side; between our [area coordinators] and then leadership, there was a plethora of it.

Tahj was very enthusiastic about his positive experience at his institution. His enthusiasm centered on the racial representation in his department and the division of student affairs. He felt like his institution was committed to creating an inclusive environment for SAPOCs and altered their practices to reflect the needs of the SAPOCs they hired.

In rarer instances, people of color held high-level leadership roles at the study participants' institutions. For Kerry, a Black woman who was a senior mid-level administrator, this racial representation in leadership allowed for opportunities for mentorship and guidance in a predominately white workplace. She said,

At my current institution, because we have a woman of color as the vice chancellor [of student affairs] … she can't be as boots on the ground as she wants to be, to do more to support women of color within the division. But I do know it is her priority that we get some more of us present in the division, and I have found her to be a real great mentor for me because when I do have issues, I feel like I can always go to her

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and talk with her about the issues that I'm having on campus and figure out how to

navigate those, and she's always a great support.

The kind of access that Kerry had to a woman of color mentor who could guide her through

some challenging professional moment is a rarity. Kerry felt isolated in many other instances

of her professional experience, but this was a highlight for her and a space for her to be seen

and affirmed.

Mario, a Latino who worked in housing, talked about how the high level of

representation had been helpful in his office but had not fully created a space where his racial

identities were embraced, despite efforts to diversify the staff. Mario worked for an

institution that had a more race-evasive approach that never intentionally created spaces for

staff of color. He shared,

I'd say that's more diverse, like a 40% to 50% person of color population in our

department. I don't feel left out at all in the same way, and I don't feel, like, tokenized,

too. So, I'm not the only one who [can help if] there's someone who's speaking

Spanish on the phone. Maybe my first year that might have been something, but now

it's kind of, like, in some way, shape, or form someone to be able to represent.… I

don't feel isolated. I don't feel tokenized, but in the same regard, it's not, like,

embraced.

For Mario, having greater representation of racially and ethnically diverse staff helped reduce

or eliminate harmful microaggressions. He compared his current experience with other

institutions where he was the only Latino; in settings with less diversity, he was tokenized

more and experienced more microaggressions.

Why Stay?

The fifth and final theme from the data collected was W*hy Stay?* Ultimately, it is critical to understand how the overarching experiences of the study participants impacted their aspiration to stay in the field of higher education and student affairs. The participants were evenly divided about whether they would stay in or leave the field.

Randall, Mario, and Danielle had enrolled in a doctoral program, either on their own campus or in an external program (for which they received financial support). While they completed their degree, they were willing to stay in their role for the financial support and the stability of knowing their role. For example, Randall, a Black man who worked in student conduct, reflected,

> Well, I'm going to be starting a doctoral program next week. So, I'm probably going to stay the extent of the program because they're going to pay for it. Yeah, I'll probably see what other opportunities that come my way. So, I would, I would say the least is 3 years and the most is probably 4 to 5 years.

The institutions the participants worked at provided at least short-term employment of the SAPOCs, who rationalized dealing with their RBF and negative experiences at their PWI for a greater good. Additionally, it was a great professional development opportunity for the SAPOCs enrolled in doctoral programs that enriched their work in their positions.

Moreover, three of the participants were enrolled in doctoral programs while working in their role, and this played a significant role in their staying in their positions right now. Yet, once they completed their degree, they had visions of moving on to a new role and institution. For instance, Danielle, a Black woman who worked in a gender center, shared,

I'm not long, you know, it's 2023 now.... I'm set to finish my degree in May [20]26.

At that point ... any time I spend after that, it's going to be ... borrowed time. I see

myself needing and wanting to be in a space where ... I'm a director, probably of a

multicultural center or an identity-based center. That's not going to happen here.

Unless my boss leaves. She just got her PhD. She is still here. There's no place for her

to go. So. .. unless she leaves, there's no place for me to go unless I leave the

university.... Maybe I could go into being, like, a multicultural dean somewhere....

My particular university does not have that role. So, in order for me to do that, I'm

going to have to leave, and I'm okay with that... I'm completely fine with leaving

because ... the university has shown that they want to get all the people here, but they

don't want to keep the people, they don't want to do the things to stay…so May '26 is

the definite and then anything after May '26, gloves are off.

Danielle indicated that there was not much room for growth left at the institution, based on

her career goals and her supervisor seemingly not going anywhere. Considering her

racialized experience at her institution, Danielle wanted to work where she could serve

students of color and experience less harm as she did her work. Danielle did envision

remaining in the field but wanted to work at an institution that values investing in students

and staff of color—an institutional environment that would not increase her RBF.

Tahj, a Black man who worked in housing, felt that his life's calling was working in

higher education, and despite offers to leave the field, he had chosen to stay. Tahj said,

I want to be a ... vice provost of the division.… I want to retire, and I don't necessarily

see myself doing anything else. No matter how much I think of the other things I've

had an opportunity to leave out of higher ed. I think as much as we may hate the way

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higher ed treats us and how much they take advantage of us ... corporate is worse....

My goal is to retire from working in the world of education, and what capacity that

might look like, I don't know. But I enjoy it.

Again, of all the study participants, Tahj had the most positive experience, so it was not

surprising to hear him state that he wanted to stay long term in the field. Tahj's positive

experience at his current institution contributed to his dedication to the field and showed that

efforts to create an inclusive environment did yield positive results in his experience.

On the other hand, many participants talked about how the negative impact of poor

leadership, combined with their racial battle fatigue, was a factor in driving them out of their

roles and institutions. For instance, Lauryn, a Black woman who worked with fraternity and

sorority life, reflected on the accumulation of dealing with racially distressing encounters in

her role and how it influenced her willingness to leave her current role. She stated,

I think it's really draining. I think the biggest impact is that it makes me no longer

[want to] work in this field.... I mean ... I know there are a lot of spaces where people

feel fraternities or sororities are more inclined to bad behavior than other students.

And I ... don't feel that way. I feel obviously ... any student group, whether it's the

football team or the chess club, it's easy to get your whole group highlighted for one

person's actions. I do think that fraternity/sorority reflects ... the rest of the student

body on the campus, and it definitely makes me not want to be at this institution any

longer even if I could work with a different group of students. And it makes

something that I felt really passionate about, which is working in higher education ...

it makes me really not want to do it anymore.

Lauryn stated that her RBF was half the reason she was considering leaving the field. Ultimately, her negative racialized experiences at several PWIs had completely disillusioned her about having a career in student affairs.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of my study was to understand the experiences of student affairs

professionals of color (SAPOCs) with racial battle fatigue (RBF) working at predominantly

white institutions (PWIs) of higher education. By understanding these experiences, I sought

to determine and address the factors contributing to the SAPOC RBF experience and

elucidate ways to mitigate the negative impact of RBF for SAPOCs working at PWIs. My

research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do SAPOCs experience RBF on their campuses?

    a. What is the role of RBF in their ability to execute their daily work

       responsibilities?

2. How do SAPOCs who experience RBF describe their sense of belonging?

    a. How do these experiences shape SAPOCs' perceptions of the office

       climate in their workplace? Of their institutional climate?

    b. How does RBF contribute to their desire to stay at their institution? Or in

       the field of higher education?

This research was designed as a qualitative multi-case study to illuminate the

complexities of and in SAPOCs' voices. I examined the experiences of 10 SAPOCs who

worked at public or private 4-year PWIs in the Northeast to explore their experiences with

RBF. Data collection methods comprised one interview with each participant and a document analysis of the websites of participants' employing institutions. Once the data were collected from the participant interviews, I started the data analysis process by focusing on each participant as a case of their own. This process involved transcribing each participant's interview, coding the various parts of the interview, entering codes into NVivo, and writing a case study report for each participant. Additionally, I conducted document analysis of the websites of the institution where each participant worked and synthesized the information from the websites into codes and observations in a fieldnote document.

Given that most institutions of higher education are historically white and value hiring staff of color to reflect their student body (ACE, 2019), this study focused on gaining a deeper understanding of SAPOCs experiencing RBF. In this chapter, I discuss the meaning of the findings highlighted in Chapter 5. I then place my findings into conversation with my conceptual framework, which drew from Smith et al.'s (2007) theory of racial battle fatigue, Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations, and Hurtado et al.'s (1998) framework of campus racial climate. Lastly, I discuss the implications of my findings for higher education and offer recommendations for future research.

Discussion of the Findings

This discussion addresses the research questions and highlights how the SAPOCs in this study navigated white-centered institutions of higher education and foregrounds their high motivation as student-centered practitioners. This section presents a discussion of the findings in five parts. The first part focuses on the lived experiences of SAPOCs in the context of the RBF they experienced. The second part details the impact of RBF on the SAPOCs' work tasks. The third part illuminates SAPOCs' sense of belonging in their

respective units and PWIs. The fourth part describes the office and institutional climates the study participants navigated. Finally, the fifth part showcases how long the SAPOCs envisioned staying in the field of student affairs based on their racialized experiences and RBF.

The Struggle Is Real

The theme *The Struggle Is Real* centers on the distinct factors that SAPOCs had to navigate in their PWI workplaces, including subthemes of: constantly *navigating double standards*, *denial of human dignity*, *mental health taxation*, and the *resilience strategies* they identified to help deal with the effects of being othered. The subtheme of *navigating double standards* illuminates the hyperawareness, hypervigilance, and pressure operating in the background of participants' professional experiences. For instance, Emilia, an Afro-Latina, did not want to let down her community by being a statistic, so she placed an immense amount of pressure on herself to avoid failure in the workplace. Emilia was the only Afro-Latina in her office and focused on improving the inclusive practice of the office, but she feared that if she left, no one else would continue the work. This is an aspect of SAPOCs' work experience, as they often are seen as role models for students and other staff of color on campuses, which generates worry about failing and letting multiple people down by being a "statistic" of failure.

Often, SAPOCs do not feel heard within their roles when they offer suggestions or contributions to their departments. For instance, Mario, a Latino, shared that navigating double standards created paranoia about whether it was his positionality in the department or his race that prevented him from being heard like his white peers. Navigating double standards and stereotype threat were evident in the instance when public safety personnel,

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during an emergency response call, assumed that Faith knew what cannabis smelled like because she was Black or when Kerry gave a lot of thought about her physical appearance (namely her hair) in meetings. It was clear from the study participants' behaviors that they feared confirming negative stereotypes associated with racial and ethnic identities—another indication that SAPOCs are often not embraced for their authentic selves in these white-centered spaces, creating additional pressure for them. These examples connect directly to Ray's (2019) concept of diminished agency in his racialized organization theory, whereby the interactions of staff of color with white organizations shape the staff of color's emotional reactions and their earning potential. For these SAPOC participants, RBF manifested through stereotype threat and their constant vigilance in avoiding associations with negative stereotypes associated with their racial and ethnic identities.

Another disturbing study finding related to the subtheme of *denial of human dignity*, illuminating the microaggressions SAPOCs endured in their workplaces and the cross-racial interactions they had with other staff or students. Study participants were frequently confused for other people of color at their institutions. For example, Roberto and Jaimie, who worked at Skyline University, both commented in their interviews that they were constantly confused for each other. They happened to identify as Latino; however, they did not look alike beyond their shared racial and ethnic identity. Correctly acknowledging an individual's name is a fundamental part of recognizing and honoring a person's human dignity. Having to navigate a workspace where, at any moment, someone will flippantly address a SAPOC by someone else's name makes SAPOCs feel devalued or forces them to wonder if their work is being attributed to someone else who shares their skin color based on this careless mistake. In their study, Mena and Vaccaro (2017) illuminated the many ways staff and faculty of color felt

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invisible on the campuses they worked at, and my study provides another example of how SAPOCs are erased on their campuses, intensifying their RBF symptoms of frustration, anger, and fatigue (Smith et al., 2007).

Given all the aspects of SAPOC experiences, it is no surprise that another subtheme to emerge from my study was *mental health taxation*. Typically, many of the study participants were drawn to the field of student affairs and higher education as a result of their undergraduate experiences and opportunities to make this a career. They wanted to give back to the collegiate experience they appreciated and "pay it forward" to the current student population. However, for SAPOCs, there is a cost to being committed to this cause. Danielle, a Black woman, talked about the heaviness and impact of helping students of color, especially Black women students who had experienced sexual assault. She stated explicitly that there was something about working with these students who looked like her and helping them through this type of trauma while being hyperaware that stress is killing Black women in their jobs. Additionally, as student affairs practitioners prepare for what is likely to be another polarizing election season, Jaimie, a Mexican man, talked about having to support students, in his role as an advisor to student organizations, who believed there were "bad Mexicans" who were "murderers, thieves, and rapists." He felt as if his identity's importance was up for debate with these students, and this exemplified the unique ways that being a SAPOC can impact the individual who is doing this work as they navigate racism in their workplace. These examples speak to an additional layer of SAPOC work experience and a marked difference in the psychological climate of staff of color at PWIs compared with their white peers (Hurtado et al., 1998; Marcus, 2000).

Yet, this study is not a sad tale of SAPOCs who have been used and abused in their workplaces; rather, it is an opportunity to showcase the strength and resilience of SAPOCs who show up to do the work required of their role. The final subtheme, *resilience strategies*, highlights how the SAPOCs in this study took care of themselves. Kerry, a Black woman, talked about the intentional coalition building she did with other Black women on her campus. She held sister circles to address the shared issues these women experienced on campus and to create a unified voice in the spaces they occupied across campus. SAPOCs were aware of the negative impact their roles had on them and made intentional efforts to do what they needed to find a reprieve. Danielle, another Black woman, discussed closing her door after challenging moments at work and doing a restorative yoga pose in the dark for 5 minutes. It was clear that the study participants understood that they had to make choices to help alleviate the heaviness of their roles to prevent it from further impacting their wellness. Okello et al. (2020) identified that self-care can become fixated on consumption, avoidance, and escapism; however, this theme provides examples of strategies that go beyond the limitations of self-care to allow SAPOCs to react to their needs as issues arise or be proactive about the issues they commonly face.

Work Is Making Me Sick

The theme *Work Is Making Me Sick* describes the ways study participants completed their work while navigating their racialized experiences, including instances when those racialized experiences did not impact their work. Subthemes included *obstacles to wellness* and *normal work experiences*. The subtheme *obstacles to wellness* showcases how SAPOCs navigated their work tasks and how this impacted their ability to do their job. For example, Lauryn, a biracial woman, talked about the long hours she worked in a live-on position in

which she was expected to maintain a standard 9-to-5 work schedule, be accessible via phone after 5 p.m., and conduct nightly rounds on weekends to monitor parties hosted by fraternity and sorority organizations. She stated plainly that her work literally made her ill, and her health was constantly compromised by the drunk students she interacted with on her weekend shift due to their lack of cleanliness in their intoxicated state. Mario, a Latino, indicated that, on his worst days in the role, he could not focus on the tasks at hand because of a previous negative racial moment. Furthermore, as Lauryn and Mario exemplified, they still performed well in their role and met the standards of their roles despite a decline in their health. This was a continued pattern of SAPOCs, who had elevated levels of productivity to the detriment of their health (Arnold et al., 2016; Corbin et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2007), which is referred to as John Henyrism. SAPOCs will focus on completing their job tasks even if they are experiencing illness, migraines, ulcers, and many other health issues, creating an obstacle to their wellness.

There were a few moments when the study participants were able to do their work without being impacted by their racialized identities. The *normal work experience* subtheme captures these moments. Kerry, a Black woman, felt most like herself when she was working with students. She never felt as if the students she worked for treated her differently because of her identities, and she believed they could appreciate the work she was doing to help improve the student experience on her campus. Lauryn, Randall, Mario, and Roberto felt that the purely administrative part of their jobs was not influenced by their racial identities and therefore did not have a racialized lens. SAPOCs accomplish their work despite the negative racist encounters in their white-centered institutions, but there are few rare moments when they can just focus on their job tasks without having to navigate the minefield of racially

distressing incidents. Randall and Roberto, stated explicitly that when they were working remotely, they were able to execute their role with no issue. This further illuminated that these SAPOCs had no issue with their work but often found tension in dealing with the nuances of the interpersonal and structural aspects of their workplaces (Steele, 2018).

Do I Even Belong Here?

The theme *Do I Even Belong Here?* details how the study participants made meaning of their sense of belonging within their offices and institutions, ranging from the ways they found community in their role to ways they felt isolated. Subthemes included *found my people* and *Get Out (student affairs edition)*. Regarding the *found my people* subtheme, all the participants were able to find a community they cultivated in their time within their roles. Randall and Danielle took leadership roles in the Black affinity groups on their campuses that expanded their connections with other staff and faculty who shared the same racial and ethnic identity and broadened their professional experiences beyond their offices. Tahj, a Black man, found a sense of community from the division of student affairs since they were intentional about recognizing the accomplishments he made with his work, whether it was sharing an article he had published or an award he had won from a national organization. Tahj articulated that he felt appreciated in a way that none of the other participants experienced. Nyunt et al. (2024) argued that the ability to be seen and valued is a way to disrupt student affairs departures in the field—and is likely the reason why Tahj's experience was more positive compared with the other study participants.

Conversely, the subtheme *Get Out (student affairs edition)* focused on the instances when the study participants did not feel a connection to their campus and continued feeling othered. Their isolation ranged from experiences in the office to the overarching institution.

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Jaimie, a Latino, noted his negative experiences in an all-white office where he felt he was constantly navigating the fragility of his white female colleagues. Danielle, a Black woman, talked about the deeply rooted top-down hierarchy at her institution and the oppressive nature of the top five leaders at her institution, who were all white and male. As a Black woman who led an affinity group and then had to interact with these power players, she did not feel comfortable in these spaces due to the racism and sexism she experienced, despite her proven track record as an effective leader on campus. Kerry, a Black woman, spoke about the chilly atmosphere in her office, where she did not connect with anyone in her all-white office and then had to seek community in other spaces when she recognized it would not occur in that setting. These feelings relate Marcus's (2000) finding that staff of color felt disconnected in their work environment and less connection compared with their white peers. SAPOCs described high levels of RBF in the form of tokenism, becoming numb to racist incidents, isolation, and stereotype threat in how they responded to these hostile work environments (Smith et al., 2007).

Must Be Something in the Air

The theme *Must Be Something in the Air* depicts the organizational structures and climates of the study participants' institutions and departments. Subthemes included *lack of support—institutional level*, *lack of support—supervision level*, *racist incidents*, and *representation matters*. Regarding the first subtheme, *lack of support—institutional level*, study participants talked about how institutions stated publicly that they valued diversity, equity, and inclusion, but that their execution of these values was lackluster. For instance, Danielle, a Black woman, discussed her experience at her PWI, where she found the president to be someone who would be willing to drag the institution back to its founding

year when it only admitted white male students. In this circumstance, Danielle vocalized the negative impact of the top leader of her institution who did not value or support diversity and inclusion beyond the bare minimum. As predicted by my conceptual framework, Danielle's experience highlights a combination of history of inclusion and behavioral climate (Hurtado et al., 1998) by working with institutional leaders not interested in creating an inclusive environment for community members of color. This pattern created moments of tokenism, fatigue, and frustration for Danielle and intensified her RBF.

Additionally, the study participants discussed how their PWIs often engaged in performative actions around short-term solutions that did nothing to improve the inclusive community conditions they claimed to value. Jaimie, a Latino, shared that when he was in a meeting, he told the university community that their incoming first-year class was over 50% students of color. When he tried to connect this update to his programming responsibilities, he was told that programming for this diverse student group only served a niche population and was therefore not necessary. Jaimie further explained that Skyline University, a business school, was very capitalistic, focusing on a "value-add" interpretation of their diversity and inclusion values; if there was no perceived value, then there was no need to do anything more. Telling Jaimie that the institution's racial identity and other marginalized racial identities were "niche" or not as important as the dominant culture spoke to the psychological climate of the institution (Hurtado et al., 1998) and the unequal distribution of resources (Ray, 2019) for supporting students of color. In relation to this subtheme, there were many instances of the white-centered spaces the SAPOCs had to operate within and that generated RBF as they fought to be seen and valued in this environment.

Another challenging aspect of the SAPOC participants' experience in PWIs centered on their interactions with supervisors. Within the *lack of support—supervision level* subtheme, there were instances when the study participants did not receive the assistance they needed. Emilia, an Afro-Latina, discussed how her white male supervisor did not know how to interact with people of color and would try to "act cool" with students of color; the darker the student, the "cooler" he tried to act. Marcus (2000) stated that the supervision of staff of color is an area of much-needed improvement related to the staff of color experience, as evidenced by Emilia work situation. Similarly, Jaimie, a Latino, reflected on his experience as the only person of color in his office of white women. He was constantly exhausted by having to navigate their whiteness and protect their feelings due to their white fragility. The standards of professionalism in PWIs are set by the white leadership and center the white status quo of the office culture, an example of whiteness as credentialing (Ray, 2019). These exhausting supervision dynamics increased the SAPOCs' racial battle fatigue.

The study participants also navigated racist incidents that occurred on their campus at a variety of levels. The subtheme *racist incidents* describes how such incidents were common occurrences at the participants' PWIs. For example, Lauryn, a biracial woman, reflected that the student population at her PWI had a very high legacy student admission rate, and these students often came from the same boarding schools in the Northeast. She felt like they operated as if they were living in the 1980s, saying problematic and racist things, but it was clear that, for many, entering college was the first time they would learn that their language was problematic.

Danielle, a Black woman, commented that a racist incident happened at her PWI every year, which impacted the retention of students of color. Students of color could not

easily find their culture or identity reflected in popular student events, such as the spring concert, which consistently included white musical artists, and no attempt was made to bring more diverse artists to campus. The websites for Lauryn's and Danielle's institutions included several pages stating that each institution was dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion, yet the institutions still struggled with a racist climate. This is an instance of racialized decoupling (Ray, 2019) and supports Gusa's (2010) argument that the embedded nature of whiteness stifles racial equity for institutions. Therefore, the RBF of SAPOCs dealing with racist incidents and environments is increased through exposure to racist structures, practices, and policies via their jobs.

Even when PWIs diversify their student body and staff, there remains an embedded culture of whiteness resistant to change that would make the environment more inclusive. Jaimie was told in a straightforward manner that since he worked at a PWI, the students of color were seen as a small population that did not need any additional support. This dismissal was damaging on two levels: (1) it was a disservice to the students whom the institution recruited, and (2) it was a harmful statement that invalidated SAPOCs' identities and increased their RBF.

However, when I considered the stories that some of the study participants shared about the spaces in which they found racial representation, there emerged a more positive aspect of the *Must Be Something in the Air* theme. The *representation matters* subtheme highlights the importance of having more than one staff of color in an office or senior leadership role. Kerry, a Black woman, discussed how the highest-ranking person in the student affairs division was a woman of color. Kerry was mentored by this person and found support as she navigated challenges in her workplace. The opportunity for mentorship is a

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vital component to creating a more inclusive experience for staff of color (Marcus, 2000).

Likewise, Tahj, a Black man, and Mario, a Latino, worked in departments that consisted of

more than 50% staff of color. They both felt that the racial representation limited

opportunities for tokenism and was a positive aspect of their work experiences. Steele (2018)

cited the importance of having other staff of color in the workplace as a form of mutual

support, which was illustrated by Tahj and Mario and their more diverse offices. In these

more diverse settings, there was no evidence of RBF for these study participants.

Why Stay?

The *Why Stay?* theme is an expression of the question any person asks at some point

in their career and highlights the struggle of SAPOCs to determine whether they will remain

in student affairs. The study participants were evenly split on whether they wanted to stay in

the field. Some discussed what kept them in the field. Tahj, a Black man, had the most

positive experiences at his current institution, Sage College, compared with the other study

participants. Though Tahj had had negative experiences at other institutions that increased

his RBF, it was clear that working for an institution that supported race-focused initiatives

and was committed to recognizing the efforts of their staff promoted retention, both in the

institution and the field. Tahj was not looking to leave the institution for the next few years

and felt that this work represented his life calling. He aspired to work his way up to the

senior-level role of vice president of student affairs and received much joy from the work he

did. Mario, Randall, and Danielle were enrolled in doctoral programs in higher education and

did not foresee leaving their institutions until they completed their degrees. In all these

instances, their PWIs were providing financial support for their degrees. Jackson (2002)

stated that supporting staff of color's professional development is a strategy for promoting

retention in their roles, which is what they were achieving by earning doctoral degrees in higher education.

Conversely, some study participants openly discussed leaving the field based on their experiences at their current institutions. Lauryn, a biracial woman, shared that she had a passion for working in the fraternity and sorority life functional area, but she no longer wanted to work in higher education based on her racialized experiences. RBF seemed to accelerate participants' burnout and turn their passions into harms, reflecting the findings from Gorski's (2019) study on faculty and staff who identified as social justice activists. SAPOCs who felt called to their work to improve conditions for students of color were often discouraged by institutional structures and politics, making change difficult. Danielle was willing to stay at her PWI while her degree was being paid for, but the moment she graduated, she would be ready to leave her role and institution. This was partly because there was nowhere for her to move up at her current institution but mostly based on the poor experience she had as a Black woman working at her institution. There seemed to be a perpetuation of the differences between staff of color's and their white peers' experiences, as highlighted in Marcus' (2000) study, which concluded that staff of color often have a more negative experience, which often lead to them not feeling supported to grow within the institution leading and, ultimately, their departure. SAPOCs whose racial identities had been attacked in their roles and who had experienced a high level of RBF were less willing to stay at their institution.

## Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

This section offers a brief review of the conceptual framework that guided my research. First, Smith et al. (2007) illuminate the nuanced ways racial battle fatigue manifests

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for SAPOCs. Second, Ray (2019) detailed how organizations do not operate in a race-neutral fashion and have their own racialized environment and culture. Third, Hurtado et al. (1998) guided my exploration and understanding of each participant's institutional climate and the impact it had on their work experience. I used the four tents of Ray's (2019) racialized organizations and four tenets of Hurtado et al.'s (1998) theory of campus racial climate to examine the institutional and departmental factors surrounding a SAPOC's experience working at a PWI.

As shown in Figure 3, the first contextual element in the "funnel" of the conceptual framework shows Hurtado et al.'s (1998) history of exclusion and structural diversity and Ray (2019)'s whiteness as credentialing and racialized decoupling as factors in the institutional sphere. When analyzing the institutional websites in the study, they all revealed a history of exclusion in their establishment as schools that catered to white students, namely white male students. This history persists through the structures and organizational climates that cater to the predominately white staff members in PWIs. This history also influences the structural diversity of PWIs as their enrollments still comprise predominantly white students or the institutions have policies and/or structures that uphold whiteness. The study participants discussed whiteness as credentialing as the ways they were expected to show up as professionals and the way professional standards often had a white-centered lens focusing on how they dressed, spoke, and wore their hair.

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework
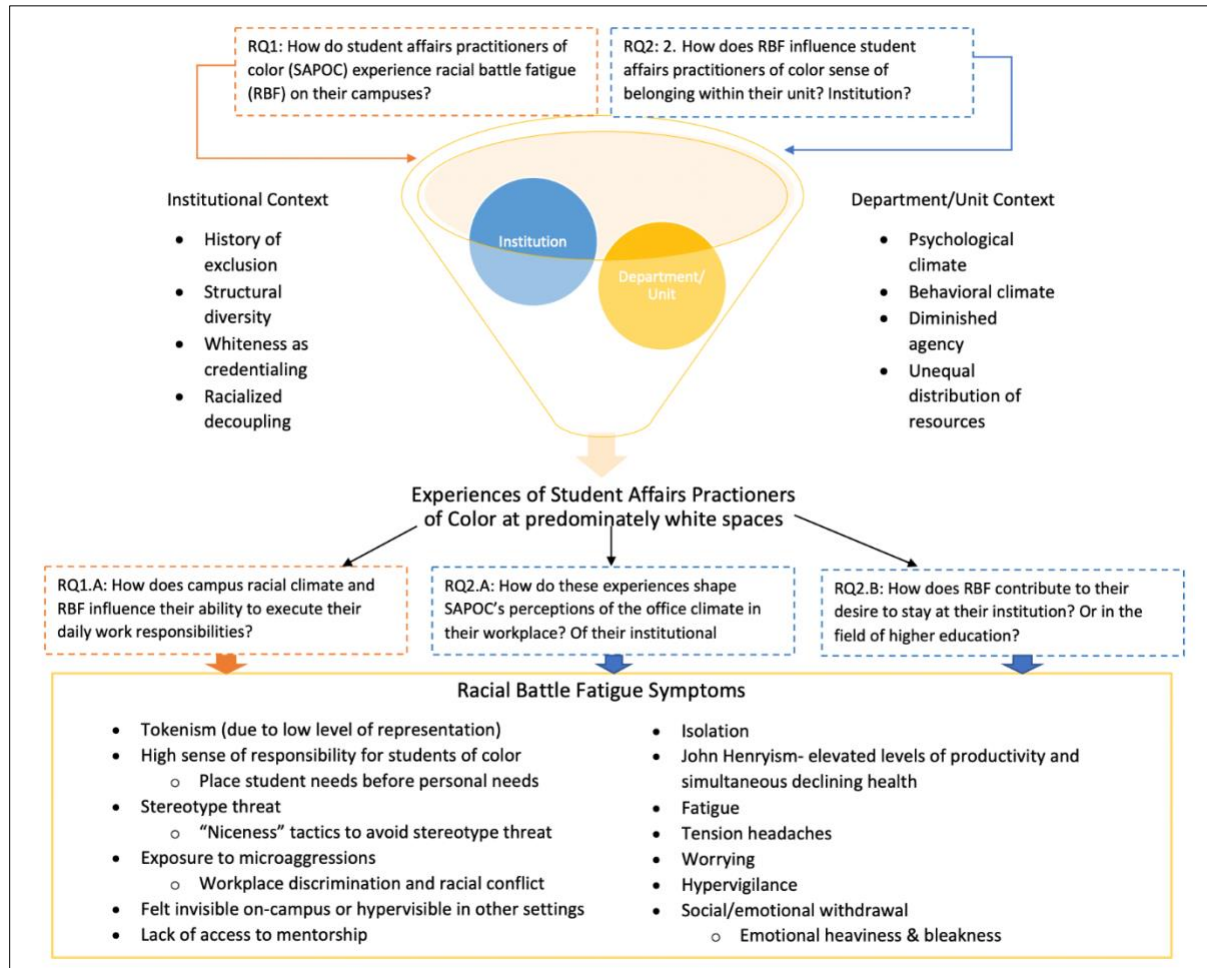
The second contextual element in the funnel highlights Hurtado et al.'s (1998) psychological climate and behavioral climate and Ray's (2019) diminished agency and unequal distribution of resources as factors in the department/unit sphere. When analyzing the study participants' experiences, all indicated a level of psychological burden and stress as they navigated the white-centered departments for which they worked, whether due to microaggressions, stereotype threat, or tokenism. The participants described many cross-

racial interactions that illuminated the behavioral climate a SAPOC must endure in their workplace, such as comments about their hair, being called the wrong name, or being mistaken for another person of the same race or ethnicity. Despite their level of experience—whether they were an entry-level or senior-level professional—study participants noted that their agency was negatively impacted by the departmental or institutional structures they interacted with in their workplace or by the unequal distribution of resources they received to succeed in their role. The participants discussed the ways the institution did not support them as staff of color or the lack of needed support from their supervisor.

The final component of the conceptual framework comprises the experiences of a SAPOC, which encompasses Smith et al.'s (2007) psychological, physiological, and behavioral symptoms of RBF for people of color. The study participants described the impact of being the only one or one of the few staff members of color at their institutions and in their departments. Often, they had to deal with negative outcomes of isolation, invisibility, hypervigilance, or anxiety about dealing with their workplace in a PWI. My conceptual framework presents three multidimensional areas that exemplify the complex nuances and scope of the SAPOC RBF experience within a PWI. As evidenced by my study's findings, all areas of the framework were present among the study participants. For instance, the participants highlighted how their institutional and departmental context influenced their RBF. Oftentimes, the institution and departments were not prepared to support the needs of SAPOCs as they navigated their white-centered institutions, nor were the institutions willing to change their structures to provide an inclusive environment for SAPOCs. The findings also revealed other important areas contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the SAPOC RBF experience at PWIs.

Implications of the Study

This dissertation has outlined the importance of understanding the influence of the PWI environment on staff of color and RBF. Staff of color are inherently harmed when an institution focuses solely on increasing its compositional diversity without reflecting on the practices embedded in its culture and climate. Staff of color are always on guard, anticipating a threat or avoiding behaviors associated with stereotypes as a way to navigate double standards and stereotype threat. This type of behavior requires a high level of mental work prior, or in addition, to the job-related tasks they must accomplish within their role. The following section discuss implications for the following areas: (1) institutions, (2) departments, and (3) student affairs practitioners of color. It should be noted, however, that in states that have recently passed legislation limiting or eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, the recommendations outlined here may not be possible to execute.

Do Better: Implications for Institutions

Higher education is still battling significant attrition within its workforce, with employees are overworked and tired and their institutional leaders silent about their needs of (McClure & Barrett, 2023; Nyunt et al., 2024). Institutions often recognize the need for staff of color to increase structural diversity. The critical area where institutions fail, however, is creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for staff of color. The presence of staff of color is a necessary component of a healthy campus racial climate (Hurtado et al., 1998). Staff of color can help provide a more tailored approach to supporting the students of color on campus by connecting with them on shared cultural and racial experiences, guiding them through their own racial battle fatigue, and providing racial representation for them after they have been hired (Jackson & Flowers, 2003 while also helping form and maintain

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relationships with the predominantly white students. This study illuminates that hiring staff of color within the existing structures of a white-centered institutions can do immense harm to those staff and can impact the length of their retention.

The first vital component of creating an inclusive environment for SAPOCs is institutional leadership that sets the tone for the experiences of the campus community. Institutional leaders must align their actions with the espoused values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. They must be aware of the needs of their staff of color and act on them. This requires engaging in conversations with staff of color about their experiences and looking critically at the environment the institution promotes for its staff to be inclusive of the needs of SAPOCs. For instance, institutions will often regularly conduct an institutional climate survey that asks community members to describe their experience on campus. Yet, the results of such surveys are not widely shared to the campus community, resulting in a racialized decoupling (Ray, 2019), since the institution asks for information about the racialized experiences of staff but then does not use the information to effect change or make clear that they are making data-informed decisions from the climate survey to bring about change. At other times, institutions only survey the climate for the student population and do not consider staff perspectives.

Institutional leadership must be attuned to the needs of SAPOCs to create more inclusive spaces on campus, such as mentorship programs geared toward staff of color. Given that SAPOCs often feel that they do not have any social capital to navigate the unwritten norms of the institution (Marcus, 2000), a program could be crafted to illuminate the norms of the institutional culture, allow networking opportunities with top institutional leadership, and create connections with other staff of color to foster community building in

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the future. Based on the study participants' experiences, it is clear that affinity groups at PWIs allow SAPOCs to connect with other staff of color and provide an opportunity to discuss shared issues. Institutional leadership should be cautious about not making this a performative action by appropriately funding community-building opportunities and creating a regular space to allow affinity groups to address issues they have seen and other logistical needs that arise.

To combat the racialized decoupling (Ray, 2019) from diversity action plans at PWIs, institutional leadership should imbed accountability for DEI values through a yearly reporting mechanism. Institutional leadership should require departments and units to identify goals that align with DEI strategic plans and values that are espoused and stated. Then, when the reports are submitted, the progress in the DEI goals should be measured to determine their effectiveness. Modifying or creating a regular examination period for the DEI goals could allow the institutional leadership to gain an accurate understanding of how their DEI values and strategic plans are progressing. When an institution has reached of level of inclusion and created a welcoming environment, the staff of color will speak positively about their experiences and make it easier to for the institution to recruit and retain more staff of color in the future (Arnold et al., 2016). SAPOCs want to work in an environment where they can bring their authentic self and feel supported. Therefore, it is a worthwhile pursuit for an institution to embed DEI in their regular reporting structure and create spaces for mentorship and community. This can create a rich environment for all community members (Hurtado et al., 1998).

Create Space: Implications for Departments

        The department serves as the first and most consistent connection point for a SAPOC at a PWI and, therefore, can have a major positive influence on SAPOCs if they can be intentional about the structure and support they build for SAPOCs. Departmental leadership should invest in establishing a common language and understanding around diversity, equity, and inclusion. This shared understanding of DEI can create a foundation for an inclusive environment in the department. In this study, SAPOCs cited that people frequently called them the wrong name on a regular basis; thus, establishing approaches to addressing conflict can create a healthier culture around addressing this type of racialized behavior. In combination with this foundation for DEI, there should be specific training on having open conversations and how to handle conflict in a proactive manner to provide skills to staff members to address issues as they arise. There is also a need for white practitioners to recognize the nuances of RBF and the SAPOC experience to help disrupt racism and actively engage in allyship by naming issues when they see them. Overall, there should be a culture of continual professional development and support for growth around DEI topics. Lastly, all training efforts should be mandatory, not optional, for staff to join.

        Departmental leaders should be aware of the climate of the department and should state publicly their commitment to creating an inclusive environment for staff. There should be accountability and follow-up when a SAPOC reports that they have experienced microaggressions in the workplace or other harmful behaviors described in this study. Special attention should be given to departmental supervisors, and they should receive specific training to ensure they can meet the needs of SAPOCs, given that supervision is a critical part of the role of SAPOCs and can exacerbate their negative experiences (Marcus,

2000; Steele, 2018). Supervisors need to be equipped to support SAPOCs without creating further damage.

Take Up Space: Implications for Student Affairs Practitioners of Color

To my fellow student affairs practitioners of color: You are not alone in your experience. You may be the only person of color in your role or department, but there are pockets of community available to you within your institution or region that can serve as a sounding board to share the nuances of your situation. Having a community is an essential part of persisting in your professional journey at any role or institution. Mentorship is crucial to helping you navigate the departmental and institutional aspects of your role. You should actively seek and ask for what you need to succeed in your role. Often departmental and institutional leaders are not aware of what you need.

As a SAPOC, you should always know and claim your worth. You should conduct a regular self-reflection of your experience and be honest with yourself when it is time to move on. Truthfully, PWIs need us more, given the structural deficits within higher education and the growing diversity of the student population. No job should diminish anyone's quality of life. While most of us started this career due to our own student experiences and we want to provide an equally enriching or better experience for students, we do not have to martyr ourselves, and we can role model boundaries to the students we care about by not being complicit in a system that was not built for us.

<div align="center">

Recommendations for Future Research

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It would be worth conducting research on SAPOCs in the community college setting. This study did not include community colleges in its sample, but I believe equally rich data would emerge from speaking to those in that setting. Also, given this study's focus on Black,

Hispanic, and Latine practitioners, it would be important to conduct a study on Asian and Native American student affair practitioners. Moreover, it would worth conducting a study that focuses on one racial and ethnic group and gender expression to illuminate the nuances of their experiences with RBF in the workplace and the strategies they implore to manage their RBF. For example, when I spoke to the Black women student participants Kerry and Danielle, they had similar strategies around coalition building, networking, and mentoring. It would be helpful to have a study focused explicitly on race and ethnicity and gender expression to gain a deeper understanding of how to support this specific population of staff on campus. A study focused on the experiences of SAPOCs in states that have passed legislation eliminating DEI efforts would be critically important in light of the latest changes in the landscape in these impacted states. Lastly, future research should examine institutions (like Sage College, where Tahj worked) that reduce RBF and create positive conditions for SAPOCs. There seem to be some PWIs that are intentional about the spaces they cultivate for SAPOCs that decrease their RBF due to racial and ethnic representation and inclusive practices, from hiring to onboarding to retention. This area of research would provide a clearer picture of how other institutions can model their own practices for the betterment of the SAPOC experience.

Conclusion

The field of student affairs is in crisis. While student affairs preparation programs have revised their curricula to include supporting diverse student populations, there is nothing to prepare the next generation of incoming student affairs practitioners of color to navigate the white-centered institutions of higher education. It is also well known that most student affairs practitioners cycle out of the field within 5 to 7 years (Marshal et al., 2016;

Nyunt et al., 2024). It is less known how those statistics apply to SAPOCs specifically and how much RBF plays in their attrition. Higher education institutions know it is crucial to their campus to hire staff who reflect the student population, but they have not given any thought to what they should do to retain their staff of color beyond a 2 or 3 years.

Additionally, SAPOCs are being harmed in ways that follow them beyond the campuses where they work and have real implications on their physical and emotional health. No one should have to enter a workspace and continually strategize how they will present themselves to others or wonder if someone will call them another person's name who shares their racial or ethnic identity. SAPOCs provide a level of understanding and commitment to serve all students of the institution and mean a great deal to students of color who are looking to connect with someone who understands their experiences. Fostering a higher education institution that can cultivate an environment that allows all community members to be their authentic selves and have their racial identities respected is the purest ideal of higher education. In fact, institutional leaders can create positive experiences (with less RBF) when they have more representation in their office and division of student affairs, create intentional recruitment processes for SAPOCs that continue into their onboarding process, and provide recognition for the inclusive work their SAPOCs execute, as testified by Tahj's experiences. SAPOCs are critical in supporting students of color and fostering a positive racial climate through their presence (Hurtado et al., 1998). This crisis must be addressed or the failure will have longstanding ramifications for future generations.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:

The goal of the interview: To understand the racialized experience of Student Affairs practitioners of color and their experiences with racial battle fatigue within the workplace at historically and predominantly white institutions of higher education.

Instructions:
- Check to make sure microphones and cameras are working properly. Gain verbal consent (written consent already electronically submitted)
- Thank the participant for participating in the research. Remind them, participation is voluntary, and they can decline participation at any time, without reason or penalty.
- Introduce myself and explain the purpose of my research.
- Review time commitment (By agreeing to the research, you agree to an interview. This will take approximately 60- 90 minutes. You also agree to review the transcripts and themes generated from the research electronically).
- Review the interview protocol and confirm pseudonyms: This session will be recorded, but only pseudonyms will be used.
- Only I will have access to the interview recording. I ask that you keep the information shared during the interview confidential.
- Explain incentives (As a token of appreciation, participants will receive a gift card following the electronic review of the themes generated from the research).

Questions:
Opening & Rapport Building
1. Please share a story of what led you to your current position as a student affairs practitioner.
    1. Probe: How long have you worked at this institution?
2. What does it mean for you to work in Student Affairs?
    1. Probe: How has it evolved?

Professional of Color Experience
3. What is it like to be a professional of color in your department? Institution?
    1. Probe: How do your identities interact with the work you do?

      2. Probe: What areas of your work do you feel your identities are most present? Where do they feel the least present?

4. What is it like to walk around your campus as a professional of color? Do you see other folks who look like you?
      1. Probe: Do you see photos of people of color on campus? On the wall? Statues?
      2. Probe: How does it feel when you step on campus? Are you acutely aware of your racial identities when you step on campus?

5. How is the university leadership doing at supporting staff of color here on campus? How do they support students of color?
      1. Probe: How do current events nationwide and on-campus impact your well-being when you are in your work environment?
      2. Probe: Have any bias-motivated incidents on campus attacked your racial identities?
      3. Probe: What kind of support does your job provide to help you cope with a nationwide and/or on-campus bias-motivated event at work?

[Show SNL clip on racial tension headache with Queen Latifah]

Racial Battle Fatigue Oriented

6. What are your thoughts about the video? Have you experienced any distressing encounters because of your race in your Student Affairs role(s).
      1. Probe: Can you recall any mental, emotional, and/or physical reaction you may have experienced during or after the incident?
      2. Probe: How did you feel when that situation was occurring? How did your body feel?
      3. Probe: What did you do right after the incident?
      4. Probe: What did you think about the situation?
      5. Probe: How often do you take personal/sick days (for yourself versus some other family issue/commitment)?

7. How often do such encounters occur? Are such encounters more or less obvious to you?
      1. Probe: Can you speak to the accumulation of these events? What is the impact of it on you?

[Read the definition of racial battle fatigue below:]

Racial Battle Fatigue Definition:
Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) refers to the accumulative physiological, psychological, and behavioral symptoms of People of Color experiencing prolonged exposure to racism in the form of blatant and overt discrimination and microaggressions at historically white organizations, including HWIs/ PWIs in higher education (Franklin, 2019; Smith, 2004).

There are three dimensions to how RBF manifests in People of Color, including psychological, physiological, and behavioral symptoms. The first dimension refers to the psychological

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symptoms that include, but are not limited to denial, resentment, frustration, constant worrying or anxiety, emotional and social withdrawal, difficulty in thinking coherently or being able to articulate (confirming a stereotype), and loss of self-confidence (Smith et al., 2007). The second dimension focuses on the physiological symptoms that include, but are not limited to, extreme fatigue, ulcers, tension headaches, elevated heart rate, and elevated blood pressure (Smith et al., 2007). The third dimension emphasizes the behavioral symptoms that include but are not limited to stereotype threat, impatience, changes to eating habits, procrastination, or disturbances with sleep (Franklin, 2019).

8. What kind of RBF symptoms do you experience during work?
    1. Probe: How does your work affect your health and well-being? How are your health and well-being affect your role?
    2. Probe: Do these events impact your ability to do your work tasks?
9. How does your supervisor support or drive your RBF?
    1. Probe: What identities does/did your supervisor(s) carry?
10. What is one thing you wished you knew before applying to the role, especially with the ways it interacts with your identities?
11. How long do you envision yourself staying in your role? And at your current institution?
    1. Probe: What makes you want to stay longer in your role/ institution?
    2. Probe: What makes you want to leave your role/institution?
12. Is there anything else you want to share? Or thought I would ask.

Thank the individual for participating in the interview. Assure them of the confidentiality of their responses and future potential interviews.

DATA COLLECTION MEMO

Document Name:

Date Produced:

Author:

IN THIS DOCUMENT	TEXT	THOUGHTS
Who is the intended audience?		
What does it state about resources for staff of color?		
What type of culture of inclusivity does it promote?		
How is the culture described?		
Other notable things		

Overall Reflection of the document:

REFERENCE LIST

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