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“WE’RE THE BOTTOM”: AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF  
RACIAL ORDER AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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“WE’RE THE BOTTOM”: AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF  
RACIAL ORDER AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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We recommend acceptance of this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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## ABSTRACT

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The problem addressed in this study is the lack of awareness of African-American students’ feelings of deficit, attrition, oppression, and negative stereotypes as components contributing to their perception and definition of racial order. This study highlighted the perceptions of racial order through draw-and-write/talk technique by collecting data from 12 African-American undergraduate female students at a Predominantly White Institution. The findings explored the overarching question: How do African-American students perceive and describe racial order at PWI? The participants in this study reported feelings of inferiority, at the bottom within the racial hierarchy, indifference toward others, and isolated themselves as a coping mechanism to avoid racial profiling, stereotyping, and verbal slights. Supported by four components as the essence of racial order, the research focused on the influence of racial order, racial ranking, and the differing perceptions of individual views in contrast to societal norms. Thus, the essence of racial order was summarized into four components e.g., caboose, siloed, inferiority, and transformative. Connecting the discussion to empirical and theoretical literature, this research elucidates justifications for negative feelings, tactics to manage racial order awareness, and aspirations for reformation of racial order.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Rationale**

Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch (2012) defined racial order as the set of beliefs, assumptions, rules, and practices that structure how societal groups connect, interact, and relate to one another. In the American culture, societal norms created a boundary for racial and ethnic identities, reinforcing a late twentieth century ideal of race (Hochschild et al., 2012). Hochschild and colleagues (2012) identified five components of racial order: racial categories, classification by categories, relative positions, permission or prohibitions based on race, and social interactions between groups. The components extensively pinpoint how racial order is created and implemented and they illuminate how the notion of racial order is cultivated, reproduced, and sustained. For instance, racial categories are produced by labels of race, classification applied by rating individuals' social, political, and economic "worth" by race, relative positions or how the races are ranked and positioned, prohibitions highlight the limitations based on race, and social interactions explain positive and negative experiences between racial groups. The combination of these components has produced a social norm for determining or limiting one's ability to perform, learn, connect, and exist based on the way we perceive racial order. In this racial order, Whites tend to be favored, and people of color, specifically

African-Americans, tend to be disparaged.

A small amount of research recognizes and explores the notion of racial order at institutions of higher education (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018). Even more, few studies directly describe the perspective of racial order based on lived experiences of African-American/Black college students (Daniel, 2010; Debb, Colson, Hacker, & Park, 2018; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). African-American college students are influenced by racial perceptions based on racial hierarchy at White serving institutions (PWIs) and experience college differently from their peers, thus, developing mechanisms to confront racial hierarchical injustices (Foster, 2005; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014). For some students, the perceptions of their racial identity and the experience of low social ranking result in destructive academic and social outcomes (Schoulte, Schultz, & Altmaier, 2011). More information is needed to explain the cultural phenomenon of how students view their racial identity within a racial order on their college campus. This dissertation study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the essence of racial order for African-American students at Bryant University. By conducting focus groups, I intended to discover a universal reality of the phenomenon of racial order for African-American students at a PWI in the Southern region of the United States . This research influences student affairs practice, policy, and students' on-campus experiences, resulting in implications for social interactions beyond the students' college careers. The findings serve higher education practitioners, including faculty, staff, administrators, coaches, and advisors, as well as students by providing a deeper insight into how Black college students view racial order on campus. Specifically, the research influences best practices to impact campus climate, sense of belonging, and

retention efforts for African-American students at Bryant University. Lastly, the findings will detail how student affairs professionals must aim to change racial order perceptions, by challenging and dismantling the hierarchy itself, and teach campus members to cope with and manage the preconceived notions of racial identities.

### **Problem Statement**

Bryant University was founded as a private institution, with the purpose of awarding graduate degrees in healthcare to professional students. In the last few decades, Bryant University expanded their academic programs to include degree offerings at the bachelor's level. Since the graduate professional program is the flagship of the institution, undergraduates' experiences have not historically been the primary focus of the institution. As a result, Bryant University lacks research and data to support a positive campus climate for undergraduate students. From my perspective, as an internal member of the Bryant University community, we are at the beginning stages of improving the onboarding process, student experience, and overall campus climate for undergraduate students

Campus climate can be influenced by a number of factors. For instance, the lack of awareness of students from dominant social groups and the stereotyping of African-American students may create a negative campus climate leading to maladaptive racial identity development and low sense of belonging on campus for Black students (Gin, Martinez-Aleman, Rowan-Kenyon, & Hottell, 2017; Foster, 2005). This study addressed African-American students' feelings of deficit, attrition, oppression, and negative stereotypes as components contributing to their perception and definition of racial order. These life defining factors are based on experiences with campus members, (e.g., faculty,

staff, and students) and interactions in the larger community (e.g., stores, off campus events, restaurants).

The lack of research on racial order from the view of African-American college students results in a critical lack of knowledge of college educators in working with individual or groups of students of color. Higher education practitioners commit injustices towards African-American students, both intentional and unintentionally, when they diminish their Black experiences in White spaces by racially profiling, separating them as the *lonely only* student, or asking them to speak on behalf of all Black people. There is a sizeable amount of research that showcases racial dialogue and perception of power and privilege in the context of a privilege-oppression binary (Lui, 2017; Milner, 2007; Strayhorn 2014). However, the lack of focus on Black student perceptions, the categorization of race at the college level, and the self-perception of marginalized identities are serious issues. “So much research is done on schooling in the United States, yet so little of it is based on studies involving the perspective of the students” (Seidman, 2006, p. 10). In sum, the central problem is how racially-hostile campus climates, rife with overt and covert oppression affect the self-perceptions of African-American students, as well as their thoughts about belonging, persistence, and success.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative focus group study was to explore and understand the African-American student perception of racial order at Bryant University. A phenomenological approach was selected to explore and distill the essence of racial order perceived by African-American students at a PWI and to identify racial order as a cultural phenomenon. Focus groups conducted with African-American

students discovered how the participants perceived racial order at a PWI and in the larger community. I chose a constructivist framework to guide the study's methods because the notion of racial order is reflected in lived experiences of the participants and because the participants construct knowledge through interactions with other racial groups on campus (Seay, 2004). The awareness of a hierarchical order, the consciousness of ranking by race, and the perceived outcomes of the racial order for each participant are subjective and may vary. A constructivism paradigm is ideal for studying learning as an active process (Seay, 2004). In this study, the main goal was to analyze how African-American students learn to construct and interpret racial order, based on their lived experiences at a PWI and in their immediate communities (e.g., hometown, current city, state, and nation). My research site was Bryant University, a small private institution in the southern region of the United States. I sampled 12 participants, organized into three separate focus groups. Each group participated in three separate sessions. Focus groups are ideal for finding common themes for research and creating solidarity through relatable lived experiences from the participants (Harper et al., 2011). Using Harper and colleagues' (2011) study on Black male resident assistants as a template, phenomenological focus groups were chosen to build on consensus reflections and consistent experiences shared by a common group.

Aside from a standard focus group question protocol, I asked each participant to draw or create an illustration explaining their perception of racial order while highlighting their own ranking within their perceived order of race at Bryant University. Ten (2004) classified natural documents as pictures, works of art, images, and videos. Paintings, photographs, and films have been comparatively matched with reviewing

textual data (Ten, 2004). However, the difference between human-made documents (e.g., drawings or paintings) and mechanical artifacts (e.g., photographs and films), can affect the depiction of the research based on the possibilities of technical influences and manipulations of the natural document under review. The illustrations, drawn as a human made depictions, will differ among each participant. In constructivist research, those differences are important to recognize as they signal salient identity differences and perceptions of the students. Creating illustrations aided the discussion of racial order. In a study on images and identity created by teachers, Mensah (2011) used images to reveal and confront perceptions developed from historical, social, cultural, and personal stereotypes. Nomakhwezi and Wood (2015) used drawings and collages to stimulate thinking related to their participants' lives. By having the participants of the present study complete illustrations of racial order, I observed the intersections of their multiple identities and their perceptions of racial order.

### **Significance**

The common goal for colleges and universities and their practitioners is to provide access to higher education for those students who seek it, to assist in their learning and development, and to help them graduate in a reasonable amount of time. College students of non-dominant identities (e.g., African-American and Black students) are exposed to microaggressions, stereotype threat, and racism, forcing them to realize their identity is different or perceived as inferior compared to the White, male, economically-stable norm. The awareness of this notion creates a racial order among students. Lechuga, Clerc, and Howell (2009) suggested social constructs, such as race

and class, perpetuate a hierarchy and are persistent and dynamic fixtures in the American culture.

In a constructivist learning environment free from oppression, practitioners should teach cognitive and social presence (Sorden, 2011). For example, practitioners can highlight cognitive and social presence by activating students' awareness and consciousness of systemic issues such as race, social class, and gender and the effect systemic oppression has on racial order. The concept of teaching all college students should be centered on realistic strategies and methods that addresses the power, privilege and the inequities it reproduces.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) recommended creating a complex and fluid intersection of an epistemological, psychosocial, and social identity model to focus on holistic student development. Practitioners must look beyond surface implications of exposure to different identities and progress towards experiential awareness and cognitive comprehensions of identities in college students. An example of this is campus cultural events where cultural artifacts, exhibits, or cuisines are showcased to function as an indicator of social group diversity. Instead, practitioners could engage students in open forum discussions around relevant topics, surrounding the notion of race and social conflicts due differences in race. Furthermore, this study raises awareness of how faculty and staff re-examine how they may be perpetuating social inequities based on how they perceive their students. "If postsecondary educators and administrators are to support, retain, and improve the experiences of Black student leaders, understanding racial realities of their navigational journeys through PWIs is both necessary and important" (Harper et al., 2011, p. 183).

## **Researcher Positionality**

I identify as a Black and African-American man. Although both identities are used interchangeably, I prefer to be recognized as a Black American because my experiences and cultural background represent the Black socio-cultural experience, from an American perspective. My race is my most prominent and salient social identity. Although I identify as Christian, cisgender, educated, husband, and father, my Black social grouping is more significant to me than all of my other social identities. Throughout my life I have been reminded of my racial background in society and my own social standing as a result of my race. Historical and political events have affected the way people interact with one another and society gives power to or takes it away from individuals based on what society holds to be normative or acceptable. White, cisgender, Christian, able-bodied, and male identities are dominant and the most powerful social identities in a U.S. context. For example, a bisexual man may be presumed to have less power than a cisgender man; however, if one of them were to identify with a racially minoritized group, the racial category would consequently shift the balance of power (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). In the U.S. society, a White, agnostic man is afforded more power than a Black Christian man. Although cisgender and Christian identities are dominant, the racial social group diminishes the previous categories and thus the social power of a person of color. My position is that race trumps all identities and African-Americans are in last place in context of racial order. During my experiences as a student, graduate, and professional staff member of a PWI, I participated in conversations surrounding the topic of race and campus climate. As a result, I witnessed several African-American students explaining how they interpret racial order, the ranking of racial identity in comparison to

other racial groups on campus, and the experiences that shape racial identity. Therefore, this study was intended to explore a commonality in the perception of racial order from an African American student perspective.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

For the purpose of the study, the terms *Black and African-American* were used interchangeably. Ethnicity references a worldview with a foundation of language and cultural heritage (Johnson & Arbonda, 2006), including people who share similar ancestry and origins from a particular continent and historical group of people. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) defined race as a “deeply rooted sociopolitical system” with complex rankings based on physical differences. Consequently, researchers use the terms African-American and Black to categorize the same population.

*Racial order* is defined as a ranking of groups within a system focusing on the belief that some racial groups are superior or inferior to other racial groups (Hochschild, Weaver, & Burch, 2012; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). Although race is socially constructed, the concept of race has a significant impact on how we live, where we live and attend school, on human connections and relationships, careers, and on how long we are expected to live (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

*Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)* is a term that reflects the intended population the university currently serves and historically created to serve. In addition, PWIs host and promote services and experiences focusing on the largest student population on campus, Whites. In 2015, NCES reported the total White college student population at 57.6%. Although the population had a significant reduction from 84.3% in 1976, White students still make up the majority of the enrollment in college (NCES,

2015). As a result, most college curricula, policies, standards, celebrations, traditions, events, and activities reflect cultural and social norms from the dominant White cultural viewpoint. Therefore, the term PWI was used to capture all dimensions of White privilege, dominance, and assumed superiority at institutions of higher education (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

*Microaggressions* are slights perceived as offensive by marginalized and historically oppressed social groups (Campbell & Manning, 2015). Microaggressions can be communicated verbally and nonverbally and they could be unintentional and performed by individuals with oppressive identities unconsciously. For example, White faculty, staff, and students may assume that African-American students are only on campus because they are athletes receiving full athletic scholarships.

*Stereotype threat* is the concept of negative perceptions of members of marginalized communities being publicly promoted to diminish a group of people (Morrison, Polesky, Aragon, & Esmail 2017). Harper and colleagues (2011) explained stereotype threat for Black men happens when they are tokenized because of race or having to think carefully about how to speak in front of people for fear of validating perceptions of Black stereotypes from their White peers. Stereotype threat may also include feelings of inferiority as the *lonely only* student of color in an otherwise White classroom or lab, or feelings of inadequacy in a college course for which students of color do not deem themselves prepared.

### **Research Questions**

The central question guiding this study was, “How do African-American students describe racial order at Bryant University?” Three sub-questions supported the central

question: a) What campus or community experiences create an awareness or sense of racial order for African-American students; b) How do African-American students navigate the experiences associated with racial order; and, c) What are the outcomes of racial order for African-American students? The research questions (see Appendix B) and illustrations during the focus group meetings aided my exploration of the influence of self-perception of racial order to the pre-existing societal norms of hierarchical ranking of race.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction and Overview**

The literature review will cover historical concepts with a focus on racial order and challenges for African-American student experiences at PWIs, including microaggressions, hostile campus climates, and stereotype threat. The literature also explains how African-American college students develop their racial identity and cultural consciousness. Based on perceptions of racial order, the literature review will highlight how faculty, staff, and students observe and interact with individuals with other racial identities at Ps. By using the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity and Critical Race Theory (Iverson, 2011; Jones, 2009), I explored the relationship between social constructs, such as race salience (Peterson, 2009) for African-American students, and identity development for Black college students (Champman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018). In addition, the review explored the existence of a social group hierarchy based on race and the cultural consciousness students must develop to successfully navigate campus and societal obstacles.

#### **Racial Order and Hierarchy as a Historical Concept**

This section highlights the generational development and progression of racial order throughout historical periods such as slavery, the civil war, and reconstruction eras,

leading up to the postmodern era. The following information explores the connection between racial and political events with centuries of mistreatment, discrimination, and racism against African-American people.

Racism, discrimination, and racial order continued throughout the United States, despite the abolishment of slavery. “Racial exploitation did not simply end when European Americans collectively recognized the evils of racism and changed their ways” (Anderson & Metzger, 2011, p. 408). The evolution of terminology used to describe the Black race (e.g., nigger, negro, and colored) also negatively evolved. For the past three centuries, the mistreatment of African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans persisted because America and European immigrants viewed themselves as intellectually superior beings, and appearing non-White was presumed to be inferior (Karkouti, 2016). This concept of superiority is a foundational pillar of racism which is “deeply rooted in formation of the nation’s history, affecting all types of institutions including higher education institutions (Karkouti, 2016, p. 60).

During slavery in the United States, Black slaves were tormented, dehumanized, raped, and treated as property, all of which reinforced the owners’ or White domination (Womack, 2016). Unjust federal laws, state policies, and local practices were passed to maintain a status quo, positioning Black slaves as property and Whites as owners of slaves. As a strategic political move, in late 1780s American Southerners sought to use slaves a part of the state’s population in order to increase representatives in Congress (Womack, 2016). The North and South compromised, counting Black slaves as three-fifths of a White Southerner (Womack, 2016). Diminishing the value of Black people in this way set the precedent for the concept of racial order and its historical and

contemporary application. According to Anderson (2002), African-Americans were not permitted to attend any college or university from 1636 until the 1830s (as cited in Karkouti, 2016).

Post slavery, Blacks were not treated as entirely human or equals. Despite the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1865 which called for the abolishment of slavery in the United States, Blacks continued to endure lynching, medical experimentation, disenfranchisement, and Jim Crow laws (Karkouti, 2016; Womack, 2016). This positioned Black people as the unwanted, undesired, and rejected race of our nation. During Reconstruction to cope with the oppressive state of their racial position in American society, former Black slaves taught their children to manage psychological and physical stress by lowering their self-expectations (Womack, 2016). Womack (2016) explained that traumatic experiences, such as abuse, neglect, and violence in their community, impeded the education of Black students, placing the focus instead on personal safety. “For instance, in 1904, Mississippi’s governor closed Holly Springs Normal School for Blacks, because he believed that Black people should stay illiterate and never share the White privilege of education” (Karkouti, 2016, p. 61).

Despite historic decisions for Black education, including the 1890 Land Grant colleges, which provided industrial education for Black Americans under the second Land Grant act, or the *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) case that paved the way for Black and White interracial marriages, the hierarchy of race has remained at the forefront of social relations in the United States (Strayhorn, 2014). Legal cases and outcomes such as the infamous *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), and *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of University of Oklahoma* (1948) cases aided diversity and integration

efforts in education which lead to legal effort to admit high school Blacks graduates into PWIs (Strayhorn, 2014).

Thus, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were created and funded by the government to educate the emancipated slaves and the Morrill Acts were created by the government to support the foundation and progression of African-American education (Karkouti, 2016). Initially, HBCUs were the only places where African-American could seek higher education for career advantages with the support of a bachelor's degree (Debb, Colson, Hacker, & Park, 2018). The historical foundation and political rationale for the creation of HBCUs continue to provide students with support, shielding college students from racial stressors and discriminatory practices associated with ethnic stereotypes (Debb et al., 2018). "Jim Crow and its emphasis on 'separate but equal' prevented African-Americans from attaining the education need to survive in America" (Womack, 2018, p. 121). However, legal acts supported segregation of Black from White college education, therefore, reinforcing the inferiority of the Black race. Karkouti (2016) asserted HBCUs were socially perceived as less prestigious than PWIs due to low state funding, low quality of facilities, and academic programs based on agricultural, technical, and domestic education. Despite institutional financial setbacks and societal, negative social views, HBCUs persist and remain leaders in producing African-American college graduates (Karkouti, 2016). Amid the discriminatory historical events in the American community, from slavery to desegregation, African-Americans students have struggled to be considered equals among their peers leading to both academic and social struggles (Karkouti, 2016).

### **Contemporary Challenges of Black Students at White Serving Institutions**

In this section, I cover challenges faced by African-American students at PWIs, emphasizing the effects of microaggressions and deficit ideology. Moreover, the effects of stereotype threat and racial profiling are prevalent on and off campus, which directly influence students' experiences and identity development for Black students. These experiences may have a direct effect on perceptions of racial order by summarizing two components Hochschild and colleagues (2012) explained in their definition of racial order: permission or prohibitions based on race and social interactions between groups.

### **The White Student Perspective**

“Members of dominant groups are often unaware of, if not blind to, the ways in which their actions, attitudes, and assumptions help set the norm for everyone to follow” (Prstowsky, 2008, p. 38). Vianden (2018) argued while some Whites resist diversity initiatives and education, others purport to not need additional training or a curriculum focus “issues of power, privilege, and oppression because they perceive themselves as progressive and anti-racist” (p. 468). In a study measuring the rate and reason of Black and White students' cross racial interactions at the collegiate level, Strayhorn (2014) concluded White students represent the largest racial population at most institutions. As a result, White students have “the privilege to choose same race peers, acquaintances, and with whom they want to interact frequently and meaningfully in college” (Strayhorn, 2014, p. 394). In another study, Peterson (2009) observed racial consciousness of White male students at an Historical Black College. The participants reported feelings and experiences of discrimination as a result of their racial background and affiliation with the Black institution (Peterson, 2009). This experience of judgment and discrimination is similar to the Black student experience of being a minority at a PWIs. Race salience

depends on the oppressor's perspective as well. Race is only salient as a social construct because the oppressor makes race salient as an indicator for action, including racial profiling, racial joking, or racial discrimination (Rivera, Forquer, & Rangel, 2010). Aiding students in developing a positive racial identity builds self-confidence, which is vital for academic success and identity development.

### **Microaggressions**

A large body of research highlights negative experiences of African-American and other social groups of color who are often treated badly and presumed to be inferior, uneducated, second class citizens, or criminals (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Rivera, et al., 2010). According to Campbell and Manning (2015), microaggressions are slights, often interpreted by marginalized social groups as offensive. Although microaggressions are sometimes small and inadvertent, repeated experiences can negatively affect the victim's psyche (Nadal et al., 2014). In a quantitative study on the effects of microaggressions on student self-efficacy, students who experienced a high rate of microaggressions were more likely to be unmotivated academically and perceived themselves as invisible in regard to classroom and campus membership (Smith, 2017). Other studies suggested microaggressions negatively affect Latinos (Rivera et al., 2010) and Blacks (Foster, 2005), who reported feelings of self-doubt, isolation, and low sense of belonging (Nadal et al., 2014). Relative to the correlation between microaggressions and self-esteem, Nadal and colleagues (2014) found both Black and Latino/a participants reported more inferiority microaggressions (the feeling of being less-inferior) than White participants. Black college students also reported experiencing microaggressions pegging them as second-class citizens or

individuals with criminality backgrounds than other racial groups such as Asian, White, and Latino Americans (Nadal et al., 2014). In a study on Latina students and racial microaggressions, Minikel-Lacocque (2013) found that experiencing racialized practices and microaggressions can have serious long-term effects on how students perceive belongingness and feeling welcomed within the college environment.

Researchers have documented and separated microaggressions into three different forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). According to Sue and colleagues (2007), microinvalidations exclude or negate the reality and unique experiences of people of color; microinsults are demeaning and an insult to identity; and microassaults are overt forms of behavior and actions. Examples for each include presumptions about Black children growing up without a father and assuming all Black men are in gangs. Moreover, research suggested that while it is likely White people experience microaggressions, the amount and rate of experiences are significantly fewer when compared to groups of individuals of color (Nadal et. al, 2014). The experience of frequent and impactful microaggressions shapes the Black student experience at PWIs, encourages the questioning process for a college student's feeling of belonging to the institution, and supports the conscious thought process of one's own racial order in comparison to their peers.

In a study on the racial profiling of Black men, Iverson and Jagers (2015) observed participants who reported feeling academically and/or socially unprepared for college. Deficit ideology, often the result of microaggressions, is the notion that people with non-dominant identities feel inferior due to negative assumptions and stereotypes enacted by individuals with dominant identities (Iverson & Jagers, 2015).

Unfortunately, these deficits are typically presented in the unconscious, well intended, verbal slights that are meant to complement the individual (Harper, 2015). The participants in Iverson's and Jagger's (2015) study felt environmental inequities limited them from being scholastically ready for college life. In addition to feeling underprepared, Black students perceived educators automatically presumed the participants were academically limited, which left students feeling uncomfortable and pressured to perform (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). In a study on men at a Catholic high school serving mostly Latino students, researchers found that despite an institutional culture focused on brotherhood and academic achievement, teachers persisted in developing a deficit experience for the students (Aldana, 2002). Additionally, Aldana (2002) concluded teachers excluded students from college pathways, willingly and unwillingly, stereotyping students as non-achievers in comparison to their peers.

Harper (2015) studied Black male response to racist stereotypes at predominantly White institutions and found an array of slights based on stereotypes: "White students...assumed that...Black men could dance, knew where and how to find drugs, spoke broken English or used slang, knew the lyrics to hip hop songs, always came from urban high schools and economically compromised neighborhoods" (Harper, 2015, p. 658). Cultural evaluations, assumptions, and stereotypes are foundationally grounded in comparing and contrasting marginalized groups to normative groups (Iverson & Jagers, 2015).

### **Racial Profiling**

"Racial profiling" has become a recurring term in the media regarding police action and individual discriminatory practices against people from diverse racial

backgrounds (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Researchers define racial profiling as people of color being targeted by those in privilege or power, taking the form of surveillance and unfair treatment based on race, and Black men tend to be a primary target (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Oh, DeVlyder, and Hunt (2017) explained the different emotions for different people when encountering police officers. Although a number of people in the United States may react with pride and respect or neutrality to law enforcement, there is a “significant number of Americans who react with fear, apprehension, and an acute sense of urgency and danger” (Oh et al., 2017, p. 10).

Racial profiling does not simply exist in the context of law enforcement, but it has surfaced in multiple public institutions, including mental health services, K-16 practices, and legal systems (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). In schools and universities, biased racial profiling can affect the way students react to faculty, staff, and peers. In a study on Black male students at a PWIs, Iverson and Jagers (2015) found participants were stereotyped and profiled as athletes, uneducated, disinterested in education, and individuals with criminal history. Participants in the study reported disparities in ways Black men were surveilled in comparison to their White male peers in their residence halls social events; participants described consistent racial profiling as imprisonment (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Oh and colleagues (2017) concluded “the best predictor of how one views the police may be one’s own race/ethnicity” (p. 10). As a result, one’s own racial identity is the leading factor in how people position of authority will react and treat them. In a study highlighting racial disparities in policing, Epp, Maynard, and Haider (2017) gathered “in investigatory stops, the most important influence on who is stopped is not what you do but who you are: young black men are by far the most likely to be stopped” (p. 174).

Unfortunately, racial profiling has become a common occurrence in the life experience of Black people. Profiling by race is shown within media reports of killings of African-Americans by police officers and when Blacks are followed closely in shopping stores. This kind of societal treatment creates oppressive environments for college students both on and off campus, as well as historically and perpetually. As a result, Black parents must teach their children and prepare them for confrontations and mistreatment from police or other authority figures of power because of racial identity (Oh et al., 2017).

Understanding the frequent incidents of racial profiling is essential to exploring racial order. Thus, Black students' perception of racial order is contingent upon external influences and how others treat or mistreat them because of race.

### **Stereotype Threat**

Stereotype threat is based on negative stereotypes intended to affect one's self esteem or perceived as an unseen attack on one's identity (Morrison, Polesky, Aragon, & Esmail 2017; Steele, 1997). Examples of this include media and advertisements showcasing Black women as single or unmarried, promiscuous, or emotionally problematic. In the higher education landscape, students with minoritized identities often face stereotype threat when they perceive to be the only ones in a specific major (e.g., women or students of color in STEM fields) and they experience the resulting pressure to perform to standards they feel they cannot meet. Faculty and students with privileged identities seldom do enough to make students who perceive stereotype threat feel welcome or to assure them they are prepared enough to handle the coursework. In this instance, faculty members also fail to recognize stereotype threats and their role in perpetuating it.

Johnson (2012) suggested negative stereotypes reduced academic performance, weakened confidence, and reiterated the feeling of not belonging in a particular major, or at the institution. Stereotype threat may directly influence an individual's academic performance and social integration (Morrison et al., 2017). In addition, threats aimed at one's identity affect identity development, self-perceptions, and self-efficacy (King, 2011). Iverson and Jagers (2015) suggested stereotypes promote biased practices and discriminatory treatment of racial groups, which could limit the potential of advancement for college students from communities of color. King (2011) suggested that college students' perspectives about one's self-efficacy will evolve as they gain additional experience at their institution, in their communities, or in life in general. King (2011) also identified a need for students to represent themselves and their social group in a progressive way. Social groups are socially constructed to classify people who identify with one another, sharing similar characteristics. Furthermore, racial affiliation and the intrinsic aptitude for positive perception is connected to external influences and academic performance (King, 2011). For example, some Black parents teach their children to perform better than their peers because they have to "outshine" others just to be noticed. This notion suggests their racial affiliation automatically puts them at a disadvantage to be recognized, asserting Black students need to exceed expectations of their peers just to be perceived as equals. A foundational stereotype threat to African-American college students lies in the classic, White, and financially able portrayal of what a college student is. African-American students often perceive college to consist of young White men and women students who attend full time and who are supported by their families (King, 2011).

## **Internalization of Racial Order**

The hierarchy and phenomena of social order by race, which is recognized and attached to color of skin, transpires within the African-American community on micro, meso, and macro levels, expressed by various communities of color and the American society (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). The effects of racial trauma lead to internalization of racism. For example, “today, African-American parents force their children to work twice as hard because they are viewed as being inadequate by society” (Womack, 2018, p. 121).

Though some researchers agree on the mere existence of a racial order, Emirbayer and Desmond (1970) asserted the existence of sociological contexts, such as financial markets, academic disciplines, musical genres, and athletics where racial conflict occurs (as cited in Winant, 2016). For example, some acknowledge racial order as subjective to the setting or perception of the context. Historical literature acknowledged race as a social construct, providing structure for the social world (i.e. community and university settings). Consequently, the ideology of race has produced discrimination, hateful behavior, and systemic oppression in the name of race towards people of color (Daniel, 2002). As a consequential example, “Jim Crow and its emphasis on ‘separate but equal’ prevented African-Americans from attaining the education needed to survive in America” (Womack, 2018, p. 121).

Daniel’s (2002) book, *More than Black: Multiracial identity & new racial order*, delivered a historical report where multiracial individuals were afforded fewer privileges than Whites, but more than individuals identified as Black. Unfortunately, viewpoints of racial order remain persistent throughout times and up to the present day, displaying

Whites who hold the majority of resources and pitting Blacks at the bottom of social systems, including business, education, housing, and politics (Hochschild et al., 2012). Even in the post-Civil Rights era, African-Americans, along with dark-skinned or foreign looking Americans, are likely to be discriminated against (Hochschild et. al., 2012).

### **Cultural Consciousness: Racial Dynamics**

Experiences connected to racial identity primarily link the social and political impact of overt social group membership (Johnson & Arbonda, 2006). These experiences include being followed in a store by security or the fear of being stopped and harassed by law enforcement. Chapman-Hillard and Beasley (2018) applied the exploration and development of critical race thinking to academic achievement by analyzing racial barriers and encouraging students to challenge societal norms. For example, critical race thinking can be implemented by challenging students to think about how current institutional practices continue to influence racial discrimination and how students can create change for progress. Racial barriers, such as a lack of diversity in programming and activities, limited counterspaces on campus, and a missing or scarce professional diverse population, frequently perpetuate racial tension in colleges and universities (Cabrera, 2014). Research demonstrated that when White students outnumbered students of color in a classroom, students of color were resistant and silent (Gayles & Kelly, 2007). One can connect that resistance or confrontation as the reaction of being silenced by White supremacy, connecting back to power and privilege in classrooms. As a result, Harper and colleagues (2011) suggested counternarratives challenge the presumed universality of stories told by dominant and privilege identities.

Critical consciousness, or the analysis by people of their own social position (Freire, 1973), has been recognized to produce change through political action and civic engagement (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2017). Critical consciousness links critical thinking to academic motivation and achievement (Diemer et al., 2017; Freire, 1973), where reflection and action are correlated. Linking it to constructivism and the definition of racial order, critical consciousness summarizes the experience of making meaning of one's reality based on experiences. Using racial order as the foundation, critical consciousness also connects Hochschild and colleague's (2012) components of racial order, e.g., relative positions, permission or prohibitions based on race, and social interactions between groups.

In a university setting, racial power creates a chaotic and confused student environment (Blake, 2018), mimicking the larger American society. This creates an environment to observe how racial groups negotiate, inculcate, and contest systemic injustice (Blake, 2018). For example, if a historically underrepresented population, such as African-American students, becomes the largest racial group at a PWI, then the African-American population would typically control the campus climate and student-centered events. Although Georgia State University is socially known as PWI, Forbes (2018) reported the African-American population as the largest racial group at 37.4% and White student as the second largest at 28.8%. African-American students are socially perceived as minorities within the larger American society; however, in this particular university setting African-American students are the majority and may have the ability to enact change because of their relative social ranking due to the environment. This

instance is an example of relative positions and shows a range of possibilities through social interactions, two components of racial order.

### **Campus Climate for Black Students at PWIs**

Ritchey (2014) explained college is a place where young adults learn to navigate barriers in society, question their identity, and overcome socio-cultural challenges. For most college students of color, race is the most salient or prominent identity. Students of color often explain a low sense of belonging or disinterest in their institution (Johnson, 2012; Strayhorn 2014). Even online hostility through social media platforms show and reiterate the same “unwelcoming racial climate” that exists on campus (Foster, 2005), especially for African-American students (Gin, Martinez-Aleman, Rowan-Kenyon, & Hottell, 2017). Strayhorn (2014) asserted that not connecting with peers from a variety of racial backgrounds negatively affects Black students more than White students.

Issues of stereotype threat, microaggressions, and racial climate are not internal to the individuals, but manifest in the campus environment (King, 2011). At HBCUs, Johnson (2012) stresses. Furthermore, Johnson (2012) found a correlation in supportive residential climates with an increase in self-assurance, both academically and socially, and sense of belonging. Though students from different social groups are likely to report different climate perceptions (Rankin & Reason, 2005), African-American and other students of color typically reported being targeted more often in comparison to White peers. Rankin and Reason (2005) explained women of color faced dual oppression in a White and male dominated campus climate, experiencing both gender and racial harassment.

Similar to racial order, campus climate goes beyond what the individual perceives or directly experiences; campus climate also includes how the entire social group is viewed, respected, and valued in our society: “Women, LGBT students, and students of color experience harassment at greater rates than male straight, or white students because of their lack of power in the social system” (Rankin & Reason, 2005, p. 22). The concept of campus climate and the notion of sense of belongingness shapes the students understanding of racial order. Negative social experiences, both on campus and in the community, can lead to students diminished perception of their racial order. On a macro level the U.S. racial climate, the immediate community representing the meso level (e.g. the city, county, and state), and the individual campus climate signifying the micro level, blur the lines of how Black college students view their racialized identities (Mwangi, Thelamour, Ezeofor, & Carpenter, 2018). In this study, Mwangi and colleagues (2018) connected the current campus climate with negative views on race to the broader society, exposing current societal climate influences and growing pessimism involving race relations.

### **Black Female Student Athletes**

Although I did not purposefully set out to recruit only Black student female athletes, the sample ended up consisting of more than 80% female student athletes. This specific section of empirical literature was added to this review after the data analysis.

Student athletes’ concerns traditionally revolve around male athletes which results in a double barrier for African-American women, unfairly conceptualizing all women as White and all Blacks as men (Bruening, et al.2005; Sellers et al., 1997). As a result, literature on African-American female collegiate athletes is limited because researchers

often study them as either African-American students or college women (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005; Sellers, Kuperminc, Damas, 1997). This social grouping traces back to slavery when “Black slave women were expected to do fieldwork beside Black slave men” (Donovan, p. 2011, 459). In modern, day athletics, we see a similar model: student athletes participate in sports exhausting physical resources and the university benefits (e.g., financially, enrollment, and fan familiarity) from the students’ participation. Beyond the promise of an education and tuition remission at some institutions, student athletes get no compensation for their efforts. Moreover, this gender similarity among slaves was vastly different from White woman expectations (e.g., virtuous, pure, submissive, and domestic; Donovan, 2011). Stratta (1995) supported this expectation, concluding that Black female athletes felt they were treated like slaves and used for their athletic ability with little regard for their identity as women.

“While gender complaints about female athletes still lagging behind males in scholarships and opportunities, larger structural inequities associated with being Black and female remain absent from the Title IX conversation, demonstrating the dual invisibility of black females” (Theune, 2016). In comparison to their White student peers, African-American student athletes come from disadvantaged school systems and struggle academically in college (Sellers et al., 1997). In a qualitative study on Black women in athletic training programs, Siple and colleagues (2018) found that a lack of mentorship, under-preparation for college, and racism were barriers to retention and success for participants. Sellers and colleagues (1997) listed sexism, hostile campus climate, and high demands for athletic participation as contributors to the isolation and alienation of African-American female athletes in college. Siple and colleagues (2018)

concluded sexual harassment, racism, and lack of family and financial support contributed to low retention for African-American women.

Stratta (1995) asserted that White teammates disregarded historical relations, viewed other cultures based on stereotypes, and neglected to invite African-American teammates and families to social team gatherings. Bruening and colleagues (2005) found African-American female student athletes were silenced by the media, athletic coaches, and other student athletes. Bruening and colleagues (2005) also found that institutions did little to inquire about the lived experiences of Black women students and what barriers they perceived to their success. In addition to those barriers, African-American female participants felt disadvantaged because they were women who faced gender oppression in a male dominant environment (Siple et al., 2018).

In order to be successful throughout college, Siple and colleagues (2018) found that African-American women learned to rely on “previous experiences within a predominantly White and culture and environment” (Siple et al., 2018, p. 137). Code switching as a functional performance was a navigational skill developed by Black students and found essential to exist in White settings (Payne, 2014). Thus, resiliency and ability to navigate a White racial culture and environment led to persistence for African-American college women (Siple, 2018). Therefore, higher education professionals and athletic departments should close the benefit gap between gender and race so that Black women can receive sports participation benefits (e.g., degree attainment, emotional and social stability; Theune, 2016). In a study on athletes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hendricks and Hendricks (2005) suggested athletic administrators should establish an office for student athlete support services,

implement a life skills program curriculum, and hire a sport psychologist and nutritionist. Stratta (1995) concluded coaches should recognize stereotypes related to African-American women athletes, and then work towards “debunking them by highlighting other dimensions” (p. 54). Stratta (1995) charged coaches with creating safe spaces, providing leadership positions students, and inviting professionals to discuss cultural issues as strategies to support African-American athletes. In this study, athletes also recommended the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) should create rules and penalties that prohibit athletes from making racially charged comments during games, hire African-American people at all levels of the association, and analyze times for practice and games so that students can secure outside employment (Stratta, 1995). Moreover, to adequately and holistically serve the quadruple identity of the African-American female student athlete, institutional support staff, administrators, and faculty must acknowledge their unique challenges and work towards providing amenities that serve their needs.

### **Outcomes Affected by Racial Order**

This section explores the literature on topics of the persistence and graduation of Black students at PWs. Institutions of higher education have seen a recent shift in the culture of recruitment. In an attempt to stay current with financial and cultural business demands, universities and colleges have increased recruitment strategies to attract and enroll more “historically underrepresented populations, who may be considered at-risk for not persisting from matriculation to completion” (Debb, Colson, Hacker, & Park, 2018, p. 73). Even the most well-conceived recruitment strategies seldomly accounts for African-American student’s perception of racial order at the recruiting institution. This

next section will focus on how racial order may affect persistence and academic achievement for Black college students.

### **Persistence and Academic Achievement**

Athens (2018) studied perceptions of persistence of university students in an online program and found interactions with peers correlated with student success, peer motivation, encouragement, and made classroom experiences more enjoyable for African-American students. If African-American students are underrepresented at PWIs, their rates of persistence may be reduced due to the low occurrence of same race peer interactions. Additionally, challenges such as becoming a young parent, financial difficulties, being a non-traditional student, and under-utilization of campus resources increases the risk of low degree completion for African-American students (Debb et al., 2014).

Increasing enrollment, enhancing educational outcomes, and examining the racial climate on campus will aid student affairs professionals in desegregating their campuses, reducing racial hostility, and creating racially inclusive environments (Karkouti, 2016). In addition, awareness of student perceptions of racial order could aid students and practitioners in identifying methods to increase student experience through positive social interactions. The impact of Black students feeling they belong, despite being statistically a minority at a PWI, would increase persistence and academic rates for the specific population and serve as a model for other underrepresented students. King (2011) recommended student affairs professionals challenge students to discover the value and worth as a person and focus less on the importance of high and low self-esteem. Womack (2018) advocated for rebuilding the Black student community by creating spaces for them

to socialize and support one another. King (2011) suggested focusing on established self-identities (e.g., parent, chief executive officer, entrepreneur, and humanitarian) opposed to identities perceived as inherent due to negative stereotypical associations. Institutions of higher education must provide opportunities for Black students to serve their Black community (Womack, 2018) which directly connects the student to their community, even though they attend school in a White serving environment. Iverson and Jagers (2015) cited relationships developed in pre-college bridge programs as a way to build allies, both among peers and professionals. Furthermore, a culturally relevant curriculum will aid professionals to build competency, discuss institutional racism and societal norms that sustain racism, would accurately prepare individuals to work with African-American students (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Future professionals must have direct practice and demonstrate competency with underrepresented populations in practicums, assistantships, and pre-teaching experiences (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Johnson (2012) suggested developing women-only STEM programs to encourage social connection for women of color who may have fewer opportunities to connect with same race students in their academic department or major. Although some researchers assert increasing Black faculty and staff on campus will aid Black students, “it is not enough for Black students to know that Black student affairs professionals are present on campus,” assuring students that challenges will be met (Womack, 2018, p. 124).

Reframing the way professionals refer to historically and systemically marginalized groups will reduce suspicion that produces biased views in which others need to be closely watch or observed (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Identifying students as “at-risk” further perpetuates an inferior mentality of African-American students. As a

result, reconceptualizing terms or meanings, as practitioners, could produce positive outcomes for Black identity development (Iverson & Jagers, 2015).

As campus community members of PWI, African-American and Black students are exposed to microaggressions forcing them to realize their identity, culture, and presence as different than the majority. Womack (2016) suggested institutions and student affairs professionals should tell the truth about challenges Black students will face on their campus. The awareness of Black identity, and other marginalized social groups, in comparison to peers creates a racial order among students and an awakening of cultural consciousness. Lechuga, Clerc, and Howell (2009) asserted that social constructs perpetuate a social order, recognizing social constructs as persistent and dynamic fixtures in the American culture.

The focus should be on realistic strategies and methods that will address how power is produced, recreated, distributed and the inequities it procreates. Abes and colleagues (2007) recommended creating a complex and fluid intersection of epistemological, psychosocial, and social identity model to focus on holistic student development. In this instance, the epistemological approach will help practitioners separate justified belief and opinion of racial order. Psychosocially, professionals can observe factors that produce racial order, and socially, campus members will see the impact and effect of racial order from the student's perspective. The university and its change agents have the most institutional power to create transformational change and move implement the change to practice (Johnson, 2012). Institutions of higher education typically promote diversity, which many perceive as tolerance rather than acceptance (Sorden, 2011). Practitioners must look beyond surface intervention and exposure of

different identities by meeting diversity quotas. The university's diversity objective must be reimagined to progress towards experiential cognizance and social awareness of all identities.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This next section introduces theoretical frameworks used to frame the study and create the discussion. Self-authorship, multiple dimensions of identity, nigrescence, and critical race theory were used to summarize the essence of racial order for this study. Through a constructivist phenomenology model, these theories will support the purpose and questions for the study.

#### **Self-Authorship**

“Self-authorship reflects the use of an internal orientation: it is the capacity to internally define one's beliefs, identities, and social relations by using one's own voice to critically choose from multiple possibilities” (King, Magolda, Barder, Brown, & Lindsay, 2009, p. 109).

To examine the intersection of race and class as it relates to racial order, it is necessary to review an ideology exposing the individual's perceptions of their identities. Magolda (2004) confirmed internal orientation, developing a sense of self through conscious reflection and re-evaluating assumptions, is essential to student development for the 21st century college student and institutional goals. In contrast, external orientation and voices resonate from events, people, places, and things external from oneself. Magolda (2004) asserted students were able to “arrive at better decisions, participate authentically in interactions with diverse others, and become lifelong

partners” by removing fear of other’s reactions, expectations, and beliefs external to their own (p. 2).

Although self-authorship highlights a holistic development of intersecting domains, it also conveys systems of power and privilege (Jones, 2009). While the multiple dimensions of identity model grounds its works in the connection of social identity to personal identifiers, it does not make meaning of self-perceived multiple identities (Jones, 2009). For example, making meaning can conceptually validate, affirm, and sustain experiences and common familiarities of a social identity by providing people with opportunities and spaces to agree on relevant experiences. Students who use a combination of external and internal orientations are able to increase awareness and understanding when making meaning of diversity issues (King et al., 2009).

Although meaning making is associated with Critical Race Theory applications, Jones (2009) found reflecting on multiple identities is clearly connected to sociocultural contexts and the relationship between structures of privilege and oppression. The social constructs of privilege and oppression are considered external voices. Self-authorship explores the developmental transformation of internal autonomy to determine which voice, external or internal, weighs the most in defining one’s beliefs, identity, and experiences of racial order (Magolda, 2004). In this study, the purpose of self-authorship aided students to develop internal definitions of identity, empower for lifelong diverse learning, and allow them to explore how they create meaning of racial order.

### **Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

In the present study, I use the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) to connect the correlation of socially constructed identities (e.g., race, gender, culture,

religion, sexual orientation, social class) to personal attributes and characteristics, such as athleticism, musical ability, or a knack for fashion (Jones, 2009). Moreover, I use the MMPI framework to show the relationship between the paradigms of power and privilege as ideologies. MMD demonstrates the intersection of identities and its impact to racial order throughout illustrative moments of the study.

Jones (2009) conducted a study on the connection between self-authorship and identity development. The correlation between privileged and non-dominant identities depend on the level of awareness and experience of individuals at the intersections (Jones, 2009). Participants with visible oppressed identity differences (e.g., race, physical disability) faced social scrutiny and feelings of “otherness” in comparison to participants who had invisible oppressed identities (e.g., mental health concerns, sexual orientation, social class) (Jones, 2009). The shared feeling of otherness was a common experience, shared by the participants in the study and various non-dominant social groups within colleges and universities. Otherness can summarize as feeling alienated, cast out, and secluded when compared to the majority. Strayhorn (2014) suggested White students do not experience otherness because they represent the majority on traditional campuses and the effect of feeling different was greater for blacks due to limited cross race interactions. Participants also reported that awareness of otherness and difference (than the majority) began at very young age for them (Jones, 2009). One can gather from Jones’s (2009) study that the absence of feeling othered typically depends on power and privilege. That is, members of society who identify primarily with privileged identities do not often report feeling as others compared to individuals from minoritized social groups, including people and communities of color, whose salience of race or

ethnicity is always present. In a study on White male privilege and power, Liu (2017) suggested privilege is an extension of White supremacy. “Racial order functions to maintain white supremacy. Because white supremacy is anchored in an ideology of black abjection, rejecting racial privilege involves updating white supremacy and championing black people” (Blake, 2018). For members of marginalized communities, privilege cannot be transferred or applied to different situations. In addition, no identity or set of identities were safe from systemic, physical, or psychological harm (Lui, 2017). For example, depending on a particular space and members sharing the space, any identity or combination of identities can feel less privileged or powerless when comparing their identity to the members within the same space. The outcome of this comparison can damage self-perceptions and result in a negative self-identity outlook. However, in regard to multiple social identities, feminists suggest more than one female experience (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). There is no singular experience associated with women and their relation to social groups such as race, class, or sexual orientation (Abes et al., 2007). In sum, simply because individuals share the same salient, visible, or racial identity, group members are not limited to just one experience.

### **Nigrescence**

In 1971, Cross developed Nigrescence theory which was recognized as the transformational “Negro-to-Black conversion experience” (Ritchey, 2014, p. 101). However, in 1991, Nigresence theory was reimagined by Ritchey (2014) and restructured as an explanation or storyline of journey of becoming Black, explanation of Blackness, and consciousness of the Black identity process for Black Americans. Cross’s 1971 theory of Nigrescence has been a prominent foundation in Black racial identity

theoretical frameworks (Vandiver et al., 2002). Cross's (1971, 1991) claims, reexamined in Vandiver's and colleagues' (2002) study of the critical race identity scale, asserted that acceptance of one's Black identity leads to emotional and psychological benefits. However, Blacks who accepted White-dominant systems and ideologies were theorized to experience low confidence and self-assurance. Students of color accentuate the acknowledgment of race as the leading way of identity development (Champman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018; Mivelle, Darlington, Whitlock, & Mulligan, 2005) because recognizing one's skin tone, which is linked to a perception of racial identity, is the most prevalent and primary way to identify another individual. For example, it is easier to identify a person's race than it is to identify their religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and primary language.

Champman-Hillard and Beasley (2018) found that exposure to Black education, or learning more about one's culture, had a direct effect on positive racial identity development. Nigrescence is essential to understanding Black student perception of racial order based on the Black experience as a racial group and the identity journey leading to racial consciousness. Similar to self-authorship, Nigrescence is also a transformation process where students are encouraged to look internally and reflect on their identity. Therefore, students are able to explore racial order and social group consciousness by internally re-examining where a racial group is placed in the hierarchy of race and how is that determined.

### **Critical Race Theory, Counter Storytelling, and Counterspaces**

In the present study, I use CRT as a lens to review preconceived notions of race. CRT question common social perception of race linking race positions to the intersection power and privilege.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) analyzes and challenges the dominant ideology of racism and systems that perpetuate racial inequality (Iverson, 2007). Anti-Black stereotypes, misguided advertisements, and ill-advised instruction perpetuate and damage psychological well-being for Black students (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018). For example, society tends to limit Black success by encouraging Black adolescents to become either entertainers or athletes. In addition, Iverson (2007) used CRT as an analytic lens to produce implications to improve change, increase awareness among students, and achieve equity. Iverson (2007) suggested practitioners should listen to those who experience racism, sexism, classism to encounter the dominant discourses that shape our educational experiences.

With regard to CRT strategies, “counter storytelling, facilitating dialogue, and strategic deployment of discourse” were mentioned as action plans to amplify marginalized voices, assisting students in making meaning of their experiences, and increase cross difference dialogue” (Iverson, 2007, p. 603). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) identified counter storytelling as a method of storytelling used to reveal, study, and challenge narratives of racial privilege and power. Counter storytelling challenges traditional American history and re-educates Black students on the contributions, impact, and influence of people of African descent (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018).

Counter storytelling is practiced in safe spaces identified as *counterspaces*: places where people of color can be challenged, nourished, and encouraged by their

college peers and higher education professionals (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018). Such counterspaces at PWIs, formal and informal, provide students with the opportunity to network with students of the same social group (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018). For example, a *formal counterspace* could be a professional program, living learning community, or African-American student group space recognized by the student body and government. Conversely, an *informal counterspace* could be a frequent group hangout spot in the campus game room, a weeknight restaurant gathering, or traveling with friends over an academic break. For the purpose of this study, the focus group sessions resembled a counterspace setting. Participants in the study will be asked to commit to counter storytelling with the intent to produce findings to inform practice. At this point, I will give a few instructions to the students to create and name their counterspace, construct how they will govern the space, and encouraging them to create rules for that space. The original rationale for providing spaces for Black students to gain self-awareness is connected to the common experience of Black students facing stereotypical and oppressive views, usually in the form of racial microaggressions. “It is vital for student affairs professionals to be aware that the microaggressions they commit against students of color (whether conscious, intentional, or not) may have a harmful impact on the ways students view themselves” (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014, p. 469). Stereotypical offenses can affect not only academic achievement but can damage African-American students’ mental and emotional health (Nadal et al., 2014).

## **SUMMARY**

The literature review explores historical points, experiences, and theories that explain how racial order impacts African-American college students. The concept of racial order produces discrimination, racism, and micro-aggressive actions against people of color. As a result, race remains at the forefront diversity conversations due to the historical, social, and political events that shaped racial order. For African-Americans racial profiling, stereotyping, and the feeling of deficit are recognized as contemporary challenges at PWIs. Race as social construct produces psychological consequences when experiences from internal and external sources shape how one constructs their own truth of race. Additionally, the literature linked identity development, race salience, and racial consciousness to the broad theme of racial order. The study gathered perceptions of how racial order is created, applied at a PWI and in the community, and the effect it has on African-American identity development.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### Research Design

The following section highlights the steps I implemented to complete the research study on African-American students' perceptions of and experiences with racial order at Bryant University. From a constructivist lens, merged with phenomenology, I conducted three focus groups sessions with 12 African-American undergraduate students. I choose qualitative inquiry through phenomenological research because I wanted to understand the experience and phenomenon of racial order for African-American undergraduate students at a PWI. Lin (2013) suggested a phenomenon can be explored through emotional feelings. "A phenomenological account gets inside the common experience of a group of people and describes what the participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and the meanings they make of their shared experienced" (Harper, 2011, p. 186).

As a starting point, the participants were asked to create an illustration (e.g., drawing, sketch) of racial order as a social phenomenon and identify how they interpret their own racial ranking at Bryant University (see Appendix B). The illustration was created and discussed during the initial focus group session (Mair & Kierans, 2007). Phenomenology showcases the connection of a "social and psychological phenomenon from the perspectives of the

people involved” (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 189). Further, phenomenology highlights the students’ perceptions of power and privilege and promotes individuals’ realities as absolute data (Gronewald, 2004). A phenomenological approach “describes the way that human knowledge comes into being in consciousness and clarifies the assumptions on which human understandings are founded” (Adams & Manen, 2008, p. 2). Thus, the illustrations demonstrated the social, psychological, and relative knowledge of racial order for African-American students.

A key piece of phenomenology is that it “allows the researchers to reveal the *essence* of things and provides insights to social phenomenon” (Lin, 2013, p. 469). In this study, I aimed to explore the group’s perception and individual reflections of experiences on campus to interpret meaningfulness and significance to provide insight to the human experience (Adams & Manen, 2008). Lin (2013) asserted that the *essence* cannot be discovered through observation using natural sciences. As a result, phenomenologist seek to reveal the structure and meaning of experiences by observing individuals and societies (Lin, 2013; Adams & Manen, 2008).

Phenomenologists seek clarity through qualitative methods such as observation and interviewing (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015). As a qualitative researcher, I will interpret African-American college student experiences and summarize their perception of racial order.

### **Research Site**

Bryant University, a small private comprehensive institution located in southeast region of the United States, will serve as the research site. Although the university primarily enrolls professional students, the enrollment also comprises students seeking

other graduate and undergraduate degrees. Bryant University's student population amounts to 2,736, about 55% of whom identify as women. I will only sample participants from the 833 undergraduate students on campus. Within the overall student population, 48.3% are White, 25.8% are Black, and 13% are Hispanic, 3.1% are Asian-American, 2.4% international students, 1.7% of American Indian or Alaska Native, and 5.8% of unknown racial or ethnic origin (Bryant at a Glance Report, 2017).

The 12:1 faculty-student ratio includes undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral academic levels. BU has struggled to increase the 13% retention rate which results from professional students leaving the institution because of academic and financial reasons. In addition, the lack of focus on undergraduate student success, such as low number of social events, organizations, and clubs, meal opportunities for nights and weekends, on-campus health services, and limited on-campus housing contribute to students not thriving at Bryant University. The university's biggest academic program is the doctoral degree program, which maintains an annual enrollment of over 1,645 professional students. As a result, 69.8% of students are over the age of 25 and reside off campus (Bryant at a Glance Report, 2017).

### **Sampling and Participants**

For this study, I recruited 12 undergraduate African-American female student participants from Bryant University. I used purposeful sampling to identify participants. In contrast to random selection, the logic of purposeful sampling lies in the selection of participants directly connected to the research and the phenomenon under investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Purposive recruitment activates an enlistment process that is deliberate, concentrating on the dimensions of participants that will impact the

perceptions of issues researched (Hennink, 2013). This study required the participation of my colleagues as expert nominators. I sent an email to my colleagues at Bryant University requesting them to send out my initial recruitment email to students in their classes or programs who may be interested in participating in the study (see Appendix E). At first, only a few female students responded. Consequently, I used snowball sampling to identify additional students from the committed participants (e.g., their friends, roommates, teammates, or classmates). Although I did not intend to recruit females only, females were the only students who showed interest in participating and attending the focus group meetings.

Although there is no age limitation for participation, each participant must have completed at least one year of education at BU as a prerequisite for participating. The rationale for this criterion was to make sure the participants have experienced the campus climate and southeastern cultural climate. After the expert nominators sent my recruitment e-mail (see Appendix D) out to potential participants, and students indicate to me that they would like to participate, I scheduled them into focus groups (Hennink, 2013). Prior to the focus groups, I assured the participants that their confidentiality will be maintained. Since nature of the study and phenomenological inquiry suggests diving into the lived experiences and personal meanings., I asked for participants to volunteer sharing their experiences to intentionally create a counterspace culture. I ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms for student names and redacting any identifiers from a quote or student comment I cite in this dissertation or subsequent publication. In addition, I also used a pseudonym for the institution and altered details to ensure the reader could not identify the university. Each participant signed a consent form before

participating in the study (see Appendix A). Although all of the participants identified as African-American, belonging to the same community of color, differences among them included length of time at the institution, academic level, on campus organization participation, financial aid need, gender, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs.

### **Data Collection**

To explore African-American student perception of racial order, I used three main research questions to obtain relevant and appropriate information. Using Seidman's (2006) three step, in-depth interviewing process as a template, the overarching questions will illustrate perceptions, practice, and impact of racial order as a cultural phenomenon. In the three parts of Seidman's (2006) interview series, the interviewer's task is to focus on participants life history, concentrate on details of the experience, and reflect on the meaning or essence of these experiences. Although Seidman (2006) suggested conducting a series of three separate interviews with each individual, participants, for this research I implemented the strategy in a focus group setting. I asked the participants to provide answers by connecting their experiences to cultural consciousness of racial order. Lastly, I used the data to summarize the impact of the experiences and knowledge developed as a result of the events. The research questions explore a) African-American college student perceptions of the existing racial order at institutions of higher education; b) campus experiences and encounters linked to the discovery of racial order, including their rationale for a hierarchy of racial groups and where students believe to be ranked as African-Americans in comparison to peers from various racial groups; and c) the outcome of racial order perceptions on African-American college students and the impact on identity development.

In the focus groups, each participant recounted social experiences by connecting their truth, or perception of it, to reality and how the ideology of racial order affects their perception of social order. I purposeful choose not to define racial order for the students because I wanted them to establish illustrations and discussions based on their own understanding of racial order. The notion of recounting experiences and making meaning of reality is directly tied a constructivism framework through a pathway of counter storytelling. A phenomenological approach was selected because it “describes the way that human knowledge comes into being in consciousness and clarifies the assumptions on which human understandings are founded” (Adams & Manen, 2008, p. 2). In this study, explored each individual’s perceptions and reflections of experiences on campus to interpret meaningfulness and significance to provide insight to the human experience (Adams & Manen, 2008).

Prior to beginning the focus group sessions, I explained researcher bias by stating my identity, the aim of the study, and addressed my expectations for the focus groups. First, I explained my identity to the participants. I identify as a Black, cisgender, heterosexual, and a Christian man. Second, I explained my intent of the study, with the purpose of hearing the experiences and perceptions of racial order from African-American students. Third, during the focus group sessions, I did not address any behavior I perceived as potentially racist or regressive to give the impression of a non-judgmental, open discussion counterspace. At the beginning of each focus group, I asked the participants to create an illustration of racial order on their campus. In a study on South African children, researchers Nomakhwezi and Wood (2015) used the draw-and-write/talk technique (Mair & Kierans, 2007) for data generation. “First participants

[responded] to a research prompt with a drawing. Second, participants [were] asked to elaborate on a drawing through written or oral explanations to further describe and clarify the content meaning of the picture” (Nomakhwezi & Wood, 2015, p. 3). The illustrations were used to observe participants perceptions of racial from an African-American student female perspective. Similar to Mensah (2011) study on drawings and images, I used the illustrations to stimulate a discussion on “prior experiences and a lifetime of socialization” to understand influences of racial order (p. 380). Thus, Mensah (2011) recommended presenting the drawings to administrators, faculty, and staff to increase their awareness of hierarchical issues on campus.

The focus groups took place during the fall semester of 2019. I separated the participants into three focus groups based on the students’ availability. Group A had 6 participants, group B had 3 participants, and group C had 3 participants; a total of 12 participants for the entire study. I conducted 9 overall sessions, giving each group three, separate focus group meetings. Seidman (2006) explained the objective of each series of three focus group interviews:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants experience.

The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them” (p. 17).

The focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each and I transcribed each focus group verbatim. The location for each meeting took place in a meeting spaces away from classroom locations. Focus group discussions created an ideal space for

individuals to interact with each other while empowering individuals to speak on common experiences shared by group members (Delamont, 2012). Participants were able to recount social experiences by connecting their truth, or perception of it, to reality and how the two ideologies, power and privilege, affects their perception of racial order. As the moderator, I was responsible for facilitating and guiding the discussion. Delamont (2012) asserted that facilitation does not only consist of asking questions, but also working together with the participants to create an environment where learning and meaning are co-constructed.

The questions used during this study were separated into three focus group sessions. The first series of questions were a) define racial order, b) share a story where you realized your position within the order of race on campus and/or in the community c) describe where you see others (on campus or in the community) on the spectrum of racial order, and d) what initially compelled you to enroll at Bryant University? Questions for the second focus group included a) how is racial order created or implemented, b) how would you describe the racial climate on campus and in the community, c) how can you tell if peer is ranked higher than you in racial order, and d) how can you tell if a peer is ranked lower than you in racial order? The questions for the third focus group session included a) describe the power you have to reposition your racial order? b) how does society or community influence racial order on campus? c) given the challenges you have discussed in these sessions, explain your reasons for choosing to stay at Bryant University? and d) if another African-American student was considering enrolling at Bryant University, what advice would you give, which experiences would you share, and

what would you say to prepare them for the racial climate on campus and in the community?

Each question was designed to promote thought provoking responses and offer an opportunity for the participant to provide the researcher with their single story. Furthermore, the questions were selected to create dialogue that encouraged phenomenological reflection. “Thus, phenomenological understanding is distinctly existential, emotive, enactive, embodied, situational, and non-theoretic” (Adams & Manen, 2008, p. 4).

As the researcher, my goal was to make sure the study is credible and transferable. It is important for potential readers and practitioners to see trustworthiness in this study and how it was ensured. I presented the data based on my perceptions of how the participants think, feel, and believe in regard to their Black identity within the social ranking of race. To reduce the likelihood, of misinterpretation, I employed various procedures of data gathering. “Using multiple procedures to achieve regulations is important to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of racial order” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 154). The two methods of data gathering for this study will be reviewing illustrations and conducting focus groups. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) asserted that focus groups provide participatory social environments for participants to feel relaxed and discuss related items naturally. The analysis of documents can provide the researcher and study with rich information, displaying the values and beliefs of individuals within a social group setting (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The term document is used to cover the illustrations as artifacts created by the

participants with the purpose of explaining various facets and social experiences as complex data from multiple sources (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

To limit distractions for the interviewer or interviewee, Clark (2008), suggested researchers should make observations when physically present. Observing nonverbal cues (e.g., hand motions, head nodding, hesitations) increases the researcher's ability to learn details about the participant's views. Before beginning with questions centered on the study, each participant will be asked a set of simple questions about their current outlook on their overall quarter and academic career. The purpose of the preparatory questions is to assist the participants in feeling comfortable in a group environment before going into the questions directly related to the study.

“As with qualitative research, moderating a focus group is more than data collection exercise, as the moderator must also use their judgment to skin topics, to include new ideas, follow leads, recognize a blind alley, and even close down discussions when appropriate to generate a productive discussion” (Delamont, 2012, p. 394). In the event a participant gave an unclear answer, description of people or social group, I asked follow-up questions to either clarify, redirect, or refocus the responses with regard to the original purpose of the research. Refocusing and redirecting a participant's responses can be challenging and should be done with caution. Moreover, it may be difficult to identify at the time of the interview if the participant's response is directly related or not to the proposed question. As a result, all questions were explained in detail before progressing to the next question.

## **Data Analysis**

Each focus group meeting was recorded on a laptop. I collected the data through audio recording, which is the most common method for capturing words of lived experiences for qualitative research (Firmin, 2008). At the beginning of each focus group, the participants were asked to share who they are and how they identify at the institution. During the analysis, I searched for complementary and argumentative interactions. Delmont (2012) explains complementary interaction as participants giving verbal and nonverbal cues in agreement to what is being said. In contrast, in argumentative interactions, groups display misunderstanding, hostile cues, and opposition (Delmont, 2012). Once the transcription for all focus groups were complete, I used open and axial coding to explore codes and themes to support central and sub research questions.

I used open coding to identify potentially interesting events, characteristics, growing stages of a process to be arranged and integrated into a smaller number of categories. "Open coding is the identification of concepts and categories by segmenting data into smaller units and labeling and describing their conceptual properties" (Lin, 2013, p. 472). Through aforementioned categories, I was able to connect a pattern and show a relationship through labels from the data (Benaquisto, 2008; Lin, 2013). After identifying overt concepts, I performed line-by-line coding of the participants' responses to the questions mentioned in the sampling and data collection section. The intent of coding was to identify common shared experiences and feelings within the group of participants, while promoting concepts from the data and not the researcher's assumptions and viewpoint (Lin, 2013). The data produced patterns of loneliness, resiliency, rebelliousness, awareness of social order, and acknowledgement of privilege.

In the addition, the data also linked frustration and anger to outcome of aforementioned themes. The data exposed links between the participants and their separate but similar lived experiences. The largest of the themes, caboose and inferiority, was persistent among all participants. As Bloomberg and Vlope (2016) pointed out, as the researcher, I am responsible for creating a textual and structural description of their experiences to convey the essence of racial order as the phenomenon. Performing member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I followed up with the participants after data analysis to confirm my interpretations. These member checks were done in the form of a fourth focus group with each set of participants. Delmont (2012) explained member checking as a way to improve analysis and interpretation of the data. Through member checking or peer reviews of the researcher's work, one can increase the overall trustworthiness because it minimizes a bias of interpretation from a singular opinion of the researcher (Delmont, 2012). I chose two fellow doctoral students in my cohort as peer debriefers. They helped me flesh out questions to ask participants, interpret findings, and support me in the conclusion of results. The two students were also conducting qualitative dissertations. I created an audit trail (e.g., all transcripts, notes, memos, emails, communication, etc.) to allow readers to trace my work. In case of a potential question or misinterpretation, the researcher should be able to show a trail of original works and evolution of codes, themes, and information leading to the final presentation of data (Delmont, 2012).

### **Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness**

“Issues of ethics focus on establishing safeguards that will protect the rights of participants and include informed consent” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 161). As the researcher, I was responsible for communicating the intent of the research, explaining

participant voluntary rights, and ensuring the protection of each student's personal information. Participants were asked to answer the questions using lived experiences and stories, relevant to the overarching topic, African-American student perception of racial order. One can assume the thoughts and experiences of the participants will be highly personal. Since the study takes place at one small private university, and the Black student population is less than one-third of the total student body, it is likely that those involved may not only relate to these experiences and stories but may also be a part of them or know of people involved in student's story.

In addition, the information shared during the study would be safely secured with research related data. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) asserted researchers should be attentive and consider the impact of the researcher's role, status, and culture in connection to the participants. My role as a full-time staff administrator on campus could impact the participants and affect the outcome of the study. Although I may self-identify with the participants' social identity and cultural norms, the intersection of identities with a focus on my position as a staff member within the institution, may appear biased to some or many of the participants. Before beginning the focus groups, I reminded all participants, although I have considered all possible ethical implications, it is entirely their decision to participate and determine the personal level of autonomy within the study.

### **Limitations**

Although this study addressed student perceptions of racial order at PWIs power, it has a few limitations. First, the data collection in regard to the phenomenological methodology, reflects lived experiences of only African-American and Black college

students. Second, although the research site is a university, it is only one of many universities in the Southeastern region of the United States. In addition, the campus is mainly populated by graduate and professional degree students. Therefore, due to the location and type of the institution, more research on the racial order at various campuses could yield comparable yet different results. However, one can argue the participants may find their perception of the immediate campus environment and ideological worldview of their society to be synonymous in most aspects. Another limitation stems from the researcher's relationship with the participants. Although the role of the researcher is to help make the participants feel comfortable, the results may have differed if the researcher and participants did not have a professional relationship, prior to the study.

### **Chapter Summary**

In conclusion, this chapter highlighted a description of the research methodology. I choose a qualitative method to showcase the cultural phenomenon of why, how, and what racial perception is for African-American and Black college students a PWIs. The participant sample summarized 12 purposefully selected individuals. Focus group interviews and illustrations were used to collect relevant data, then compared to themes apparent within the literature review. Credibility and transferability are transparent throughout the research and data collection.

After comparing the data discovered through research, with the pre-existing literature, interpretations connected with conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations to expand research. In closing, this study will be valuable to future scholarly practitioners, higher education administrators, and faculty members who desire

to understand the link between racial order and experience that shape racial identity at a PWI. Racial order is a powerful social hierarchy with the ability to shape, alter, and, in some cases, limit identity salience and success for Black and African-American college students.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

In this chapter, I introduced the participants in short profiles, and I described the themes that emerged from the focus group data. A short profile of each participant helps provide the reader with a deeper insight of their lived experiences as it relates to this study. Following the participants profiles, I categorized the data into three main themes exploring how African-American students at Bryant University perceived, described, and experienced racial order. The three major themes that grew out of the study are 1) hierarchical illustrations of racial order, 2) racial order and oppression, and 3) making meaning of racial order.

#### **Participants in the Study**

This section provides a brief overview of the participants. Instead of creating an extensive biography for each student, this section touches on essential similarities and notable differences that existed among all. Participants, comprised of 12 African-American undergraduates, completed at least one year or more at Bryant University (BU) prior to participating in the present study. All of the participants completed a demographic survey prior to participating in their first focus group session (see Appendix C). Ten of the participants were current, student athletes and two never competed in organized sports on campus. All of the student-athlete participants received partial

scholarships for competing on a team as well as an option for discounted housing as a part of their athletic contract. Although all of the participants identified as women, gender was not a specific selection criterion for participation in the study.

Table 1 shows the pseudonyms I selected for each participant. I did not specify the type of sport for the student athletes to maintain their confidentiality. This table is helpful to the reader because it includes participants' major, age, year in college, housing location, and whether or not they identified as an athlete. Ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 53 (median age was 20). Most of the undergraduate programs at Bryant University were represented by the participants' major fields of study, with the exercise science program having five participants; and, the biology and computer information management programs both with two participants. Two participants were pursuing double majors. Three students lived in on campus housing while nine students lived off campus.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

Name	Age	Major	Year in College	Housing	Student Athlete
<b>Latoya</b>	19	Exercise Science	2	Residence Hall	Yes
<b>Mikayla</b>	20	Exercise Science	3	Off Campus	Yes
<b>Anna</b>	53	Dietetics & Culinary	3	Off Campus	No
<b>Ashley</b>	21	Biology	3	Off Campus	Yes
<b>Kianna</b>	19	Exercise Science	2	Off Campus	Yes
<b>Tia</b>	21	Biopsychology & CIM**	3	Residence Hall	Yes
<b>Donna</b>	20	Business	5	Off Campus	Yes
<b>Katrina</b>	21	Psychology	4	Off Campus	No
<b>Sadie</b>	18	CIM**	2	Off Campus	Yes
<b>Sasha</b>	20	Exercise Science	2	Off Campus	Yes
<b>Cathy</b>	19	Exercise Science	3	Off Campus	Yes
<b>Tyler</b>	19	Biology	2	Residence Hall	Yes

Note. \*\*CIM denotes the academic major Computer Information Management at Bryant University.

All indicators that could identify the participants have been altered. Due to the small population of undergraduates at Bryant University, and even smaller population of

African-American students, hometowns, family and friends' names, and detailed background information were removed from the profiles. As a result, the profiles are concise, but reflects relatable characteristics of each participant while connecting to findings later on in the chapter.

### **Mikayla**

Prior to enrolling at Bryant University, Mikayla lived on the east coast of the United States majority of her life. During the focus group sessions, Mikayla explained the majority of her friends identified as White. She was one of the few participants in the study who felt like her racial background did not disadvantage her. She stated that, “the opportunities my parents were able to give me...were the same exact opportunities that other people's parents gave them... So, I, personally, have never experienced a time where I felt like my race was less than another race.” Ultimately, Mikayla understood that other African-Americans, especially her teammates, had plenty to share about race-related experiences on campus, but she did not relate to their experiences.

### **Anna**

Anna was the oldest participant in this study. As an adult learner, her mature outlook on life included experiences of parenting children and mentoring younger students on campus. Anna planned to be a licensed nutritionist by pursuing a master's degree in clinical nutrition after completing her bachelor's degree. She was born and raised in the Southern region of the United States. As a mother, she connected several of her experiences to moments when she attempted to educate fellow Bryant University students and be their guide: “I have...about seven [Black] girls that I've taken up under my wing.... If [they] need anything, you know, I'm here [for them].” Of all the other

participants, Anna had the strongest desire to aid other students, especially those who identify as African-American women.

### **Ashley**

Similar to the other participants in the study, Ashley decided to attend the institution because she received an athletic scholarship. As a top high school player, she was heavily recruited by several southern institutions. Two of her main reasons for choosing to attend BU were based on the new women's team in her sport and the closeness of the institution to her hometown in a neighboring state. During the focus group meetings, Ashley spoke more than all other participants in her group. Her opinions about racial order and experiences of awareness were insightful. In one instance, she expressed her frustrations on how she could not be herself around college instructors with different racial backgrounds. She stated, "Why can't I show my emotions to my teacher like I discussed? Let me try to explain that [her life struggles] to a teacher that's not like myself – they're not going to understand." She also openly shared personal details about her sexual orientation and family upbringing. Ashley recently came out to her family as a lesbian woman and was living with her girlfriend. What set Ashley apart from other participants was her bluntness and comfort during the focus group sessions, perhaps due to a prior relationship she had with me as her former academic advisor.

### **Tia**

Tia was from a mid-sized community in the Midwest region of the United States. Her family consisted of a Black father and a White mother. During her junior year, Tia participated in women athletics, a work-study position, and a part-time resident assistant position on campus. Tia had lived on campus since her first-year year in the athletic hall.

Tia referenced several microaggressions she experienced at BU. Perhaps more than other participants, she explained that most of these oppressive experiences took place in the classroom and originated from an instructor or professor. As a result, she felt an enormous amount of pressure to counter misperceptions as a result of her race by exceeding general academic expectations:

When you walk up into a classroom on your first day... It's how they perceive you right off the bat [sic]. Like your first assignment, you could either rise to their expectation, and if not, [you have to be] that for the rest of the time.

### **Kianna**

Kianna was a student athlete recruited by teammate and friend, Tia, to participate in the study. Kianna identified as African-American who has a Black father and a White mother. At the beginning of our first focus group meeting, she mentioned how she never gave much thought to racial order and differences by race on campus. At the beginning of our second meeting, she shared how she counted and tallied the type of students she saw during a recent walk in the area of BU's campus:

So, when we left, I took into consideration what she [Ashley] was saying about how everyone's always grouped up. And I took a count too. As I was walking to my car...I came across, like 18 to 20, White students, four [students with] Hispanic background. Then there were three African-American students including me and Tia... And all I did was walk from here to the Waffle House. Yeah...I was like, wow, that's crazy [*She sounded shocked and in disbelief*].

During data analysis, I estimated her walk was slightly over a mile long. The conversation from the previous week impacted her by creating an awareness of low numbers of African-Americans in comparison to other racial groups.

### **Latoya**

Latoya was an athlete and one of three participants who lived in the athletic residence hall on campus. Born and raised in the Southern region of the United States, Latoya decided to attend Bryant University because it was close to home, had a small campus population, and provided an athletic scholarship. Latoya shared she did not anticipate any racial challenges when she initially attended but assumed, she would automatically find a low population of African-American students in comparison to White students. Latoya stated, “Most private institutions are ran [sic] by White people... and when I got here, there [were] not as [many] African-American's here [as] Caucasians and every other race.”

### **Donna**

Donna engaged with each participant in her focus group. She answered each question with a story and sometimes dominated discussions when replying to other participants answers. Her stories were usually met with head nods from group members, showing the participants were intently listening to her. Many of her stories ended with laughter from her peers due to her charismatic nature. Donna was from the southeastern region of the United States and she lived in the South all of her life. Although she had multiple athletic team offers at various institutions in the area, she decided to attend Bryant University because the institution was close in proximity to family and friends. During the time of data collection, Donna participated in campus organizations and

desired to increase student participation at BU events. She discussed racial order and racism were learned concepts:

Racial order is basically...Whites versus Blacks, just those two examples. The most common, I think, it's more like a fear type thing. I mean, I take care of a little light baby every Saturday, and he's the sweetest baby ever. But then his parents could be racist and teach him, you know "those are the bad people, those are the good people. Don't hang out with [these], hang out with [those]." And then the cycle just continues because then he grows up, like, okay, my parents taught me this. So, I got to teach my kids. That's basically how the order is like, set.

### **Katrina**

Katrina was one of two participants who had not participated in intercollegiate athletics on campus. She considered herself a loner and uninterested in activities many peers her age engaged in (e.g., sports, parties, social media, fashion). Katrina reflected on experiences with racial order awareness at both high school and college. Although she mentioned being raised in a predominantly White community, she was aware of potentially racist issues in her neighborhood:

I lived in a pretty dominated White area and a lot of parents there [were] super stereotypical racist, White, Trump supporters, but their kids are nearly completely different from them. And my sister...she doesn't have a problem making friends with White people, but her White friends will always tell her before coming to their house like "Hey, be careful. My parents are a little bit racist." ...Our friends' parents never really interacted with people outside of their race. So, they

just listen to racial stereotypes with Fox News, with parents, or any conservative outlet media.

### **Sadie**

Sadie was from the Northeastern region of the United States and an all-American athlete at Bryant University. Sadie decided to enroll because her cousin, of a similar age as she, decided to commit to another sport in BU's athletic department. Sadie wrote and recorded her own music and worked off campus at a gym. Although it took some time for Sadie to warm up to the group, halfway through the first meeting she perceived that racial order is set by socioeconomic status: "Like [the racial order of] any peer, any color ...If they show off like they got money." For her, racial order was connected to wealth and socioeconomic status.

### **Sasha**

Sasha was an athlete from the Midwest. She loved kids, worked part time as a babysitter, and at a gym close to campus. Although she did not have many friends, she enjoyed her roommate's company (Cathy, who also participated in the study). When asked if she would recommend the institution to another African-American student, Sasha shared potential students should attend elsewhere because the only reason to attend is based on athletic team participation. Sasha explained, "It's just like culture wise, on our [athletic] team, [us Black kids] are like three of the five people we have. Yeah, the [athletic] team is the only reason to come here."

### **Cathy**

Cathy hailed from a major town of an island country in the Caribbean and was the only international student in the sample. At the time of the study, she was a work study

student on campus and an athlete. Unfortunately, Cathy had sustained several injuries and could not play during the time of data collection. She was an introvert but participated well in her focus groups. On campus, she mostly kept to a small set of friends with whom she shared racial background and athletic association. Her illustration was perhaps the most colorful of all the drawings from all three focus groups:

So, I have two men, a Black man and a White man. And I shaded him a little more because he is Black [*laughs*]. And he's [the Black man] in a box. And he's like a little smaller and shorter. And then to his right there's a long, big White man. And he was like, "What's up kids" [*as said in an adult voice*]. He's like, free and stuff. And I draw the sun and it shines down. And the sun is like society shining on everybody.

### **Tyler**

Tyler was an athlete who lived in the athletic residence hall during the time of data collection. She viewed herself as an outsider because her teammates were mostly White. Although Tyler had a quiet nature, she spoke on racial topics when engaged by other participants in her focus group. After one participant discussed teammate interactions, Tyler shared how she felt a disconnection with a teammate she could not explain:

I've always felt that vibe with her though... I don't know what it is... I have nothing against her like, I mean, I say "hi" to her if I see her, but like, we just don't click. And I don't know if it's because like she is White.

Tyler felt unsure about Whites in her past school and on-campus experiences. During the member check, she explained she was unsure if teammates and other individuals were not

connected as a result of her race or other characteristics (e.g., personality, performance, humor).

In the next section I share the main themes that emerged from data collection.

## **FINDINGS**

The present study focused on the following overarching research question, “How do African-American students perceive and describe racial order?” and three sub-questions: a) What campus or community experiences create an awareness or sense of racial order for African-American students; b) How do African-American students navigate the experiences associated with racial order; and c) What are the outcomes of racial order for African-American students? Paired with the illustrations, the evidence discovered during the focus groups aided in the exploration of participants’ perception of racial order, how the perceptions manifested, and how participants made meaning through their lived, racial-order experiences.

### **“We are the bottom”:** Hierarchical Illustrations of Racial Order

This theme highlighted how the participants conceptualized racial order. All but one of the participants reported feeling a wide range of emotions, which produced an array of reactions, when describing racial order. Prior to the beginning of the focus group meetings, I discovered the majority of the students had not considered what the term racial order meant to them nor had they had formal conversations around their experiences that created an awareness of racial order. Many of the participants explained they often complained to friends, teammates, classmates, and faculty about their perceptions of racial experiences on campus but did not formally frame or link it to racial order.

At the beginning of the first focus group, I asked each participant to draw an illustration of racial order, and to identify themselves within the illustration. All except one participant identified racial order as a hierarchical positioning of races with African-Americans positioned in last place or at the bottom of the ranking. After they completed the exercise, I asked them to explain their drawing in a few details. In the following sections, I described each illustration followed by a cropped image from the participant's illustration. The illustrations were cropped, with few redactions, to avoid displaying confidential information (e.g., name and details about the university).

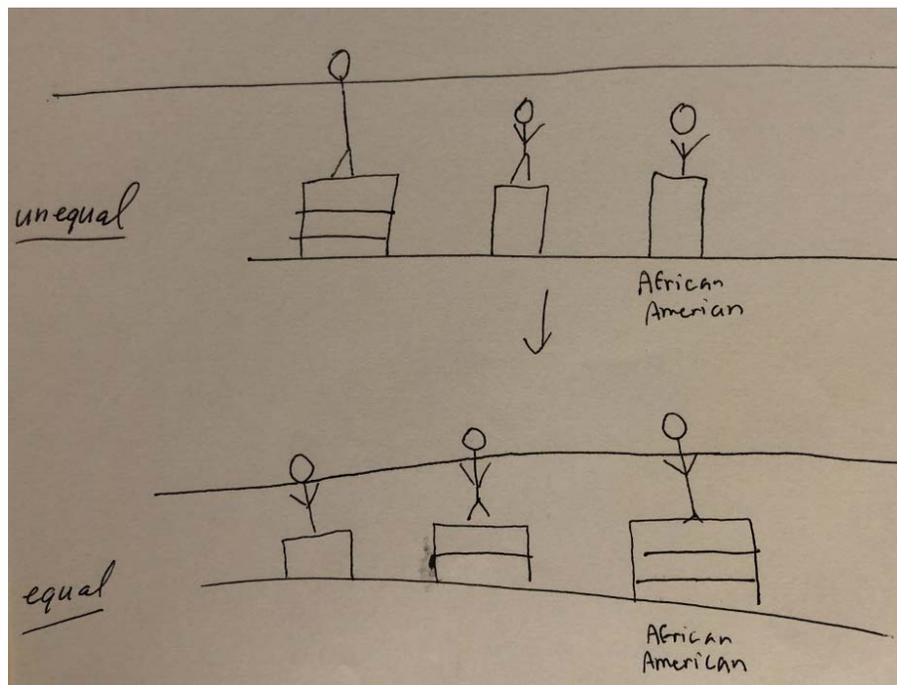
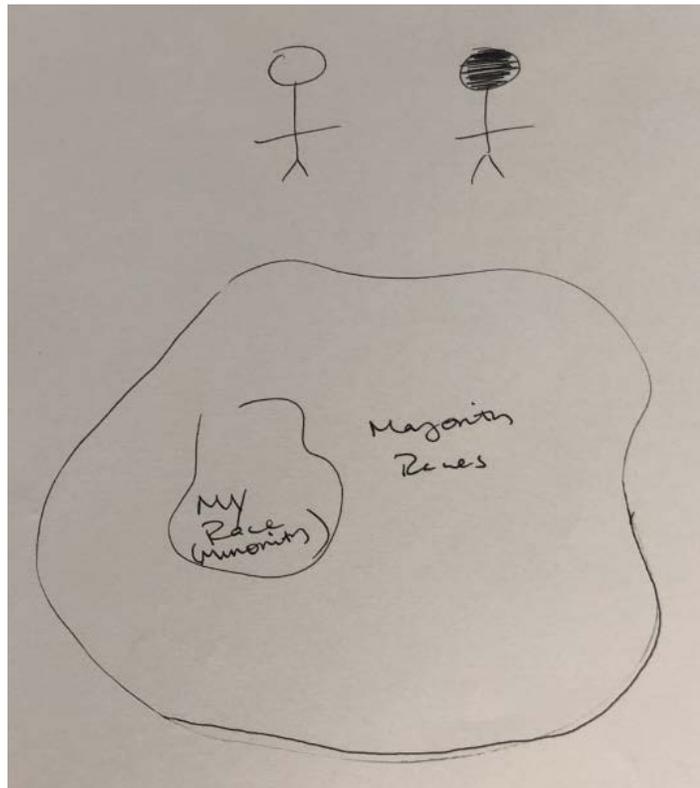


Figure 1. Latoya's Illustration

In one of the focus groups, Latoya drew two stick figure images. Although she labeled the images "unequal" and "equal," I learned, during the member check meeting, the images reflected the difference between equity and equality. In the first image, she drew a line and three stick figures at different positions in reference to the line. She identified and labeled her African-American identity on the third figure positioned at the

lowest point on the line and did not identify the races of the two other stick figures. The second image listed the same three figures but at equal positions on the line. In this image, the second and third figure showed stairs or boxes under the stick figures to make them equally positioned to the first stick figure, who was at an advantage and above the line in the first image. Additionally, her second image highlighted her intent to transcend racial order to provide access and equity for African-Americans.



*Figure 2. Mikayla's Illustration*

Mikayla drew two stick figures and shaded in the face of the second figure, representing White and African-American races. Then she drew a large circle and a much smaller one within the large circle. She labeled the large circle "Majority Races" and the smaller circle "My Race – Minority." Although Mikayla depicted the lower overall African-American population of students at Bryant compared to White students,

she did not identify with the concept of racial order or perceived rankings by race.

Mikayla was the only participant who did not describe a racial order, but recognized she is from a minoritized racial group on campus and in the community.

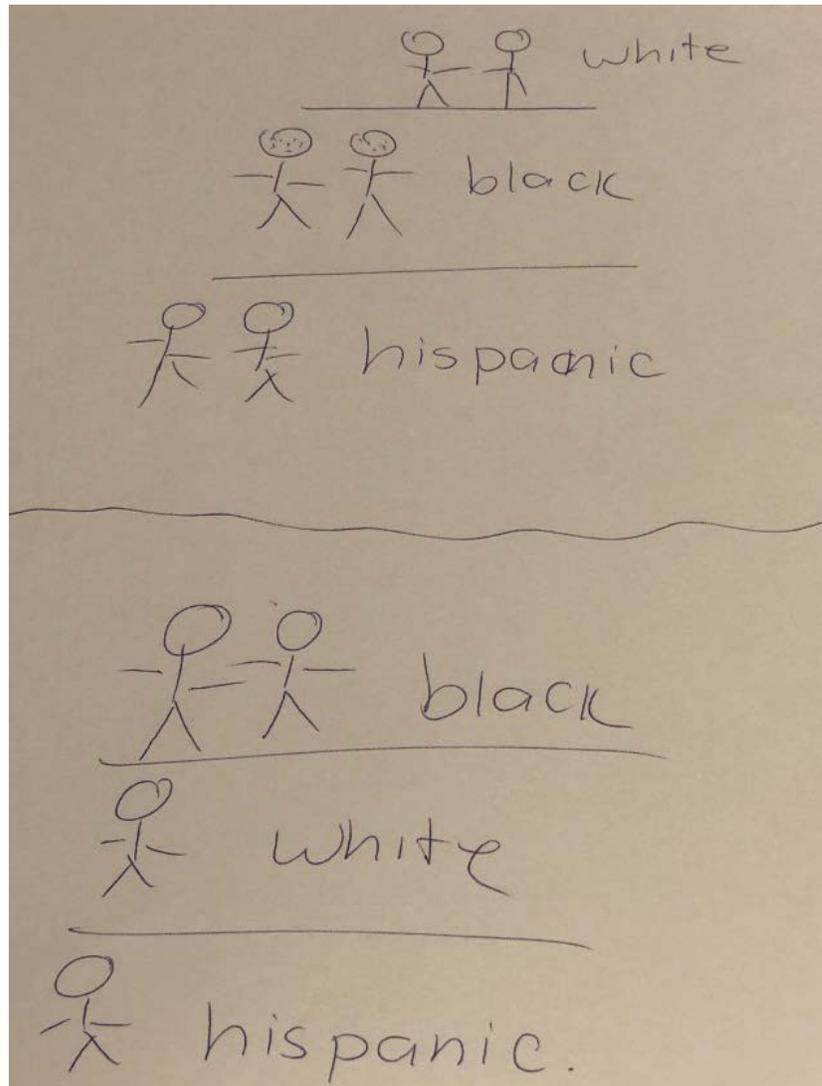


Figure 3. Anna's Illustration

Anna drew two series of stick figures in a tier-like system. The first series displayed an order of White figures above Black figures, with Hispanic figures below the Black figures. In her response to the second question, she changed the order of racial stick figures by labeling Black at the top, White in the middle, and Hispanic at the

bottom. Her illustration suggested individuals may perceive racial order differently than others. Furthermore, Anna's first and second images highlighted the disparity in internal versus external perceptions of racial order. Internally, she perceived blacks at the top of racial order which exemplified a transformative perception. However, her external perception based on life experiences positions Blacks at the bottom of racial ranking. During the member check, she confirmed the first image represented her societal view of racial order and her second image represented her internal or preferred view of racial order.

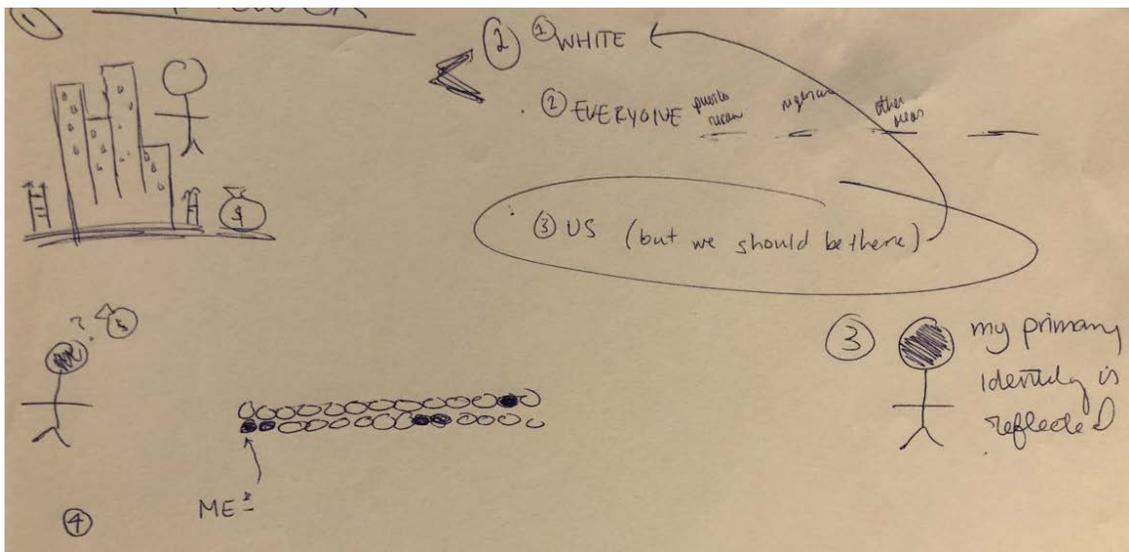


Figure 4. Ashley's Illustration

Ashley produced four separate drawings. The first image showed a stick figure above a city with a money bag nearby. The second image showed a numbered ranking of 1) White, 2) Everyone. She elaborated by adding labels of Puerto Rican, Nigerian, and other races, and, 3) "Us" (African-Americans). She also drew a line from the number 3 to 1 and wrote "but we should be there." The third image was a shaded stick figure which reflected her African-American identity. Lastly, the fourth image had 23 small circles and only 5 were shaded in black. She labeled one of the 23 unspecified shaded

circles "Me." During the member checking process, she clarified the drawing, explaining it symbolized low diversity numbers on the campus and in the community. Ashley's illustration is a clear representation of her perception of racial order, highlighting African-American students at the lowest or bottom point of racial group ranking. In addition, her illustration also showcased low population numbers for African-Americans and wealth as a connection for racial group positioning.

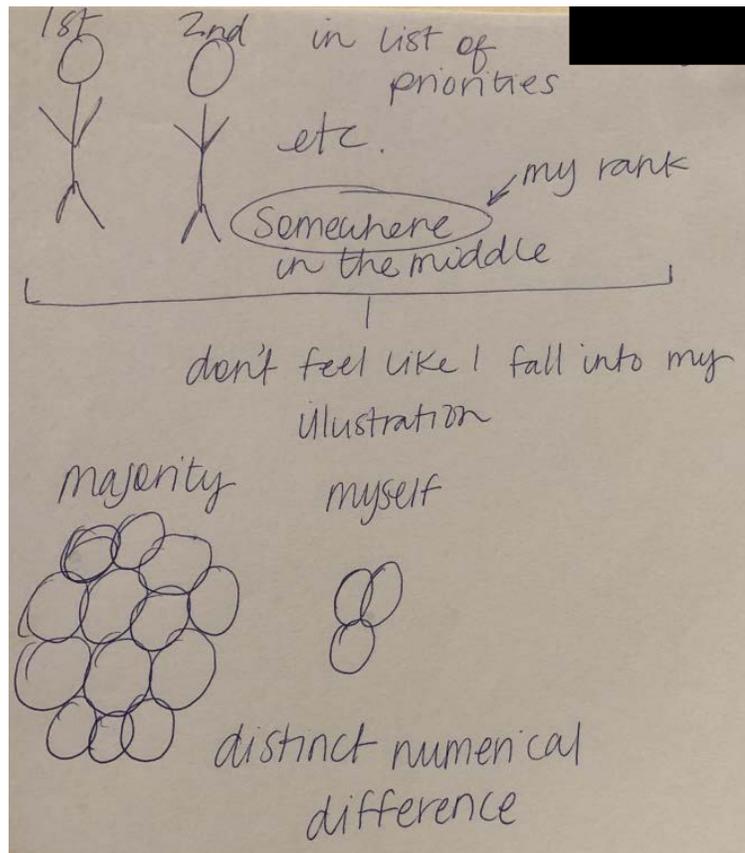


Figure 5. Kianna's Illustration

Kianna drew two images answering both questions. The first image showed two stick figures labeled "first" and "second." Underneath the stick figures she drew a scale with a mark in the middle labeled "my rank, somewhere in the middle." Then she wrote "don't feel like I fall into my illustration." Later, she elaborated saying that due to the lack of people with whom she identified, she felt her identity fell in the middle of the first

and second figures, not below. In her second image, she showed 13 circles grouped together labeled "majority" opposite of three circles grouped together labeled "myself." Under the second drawing she wrote "distinct numerical difference." Kianna's illustration did not show races in order by ranking, but demonstrated a ranking using the wording "first" and "second." Additionally, Kianna used her own words "a distinct numerical difference" as a way to describe racial order and her identity. During member checking she explained she did not feel like her illustration represented her because of her mixed-race identity (Black and White).

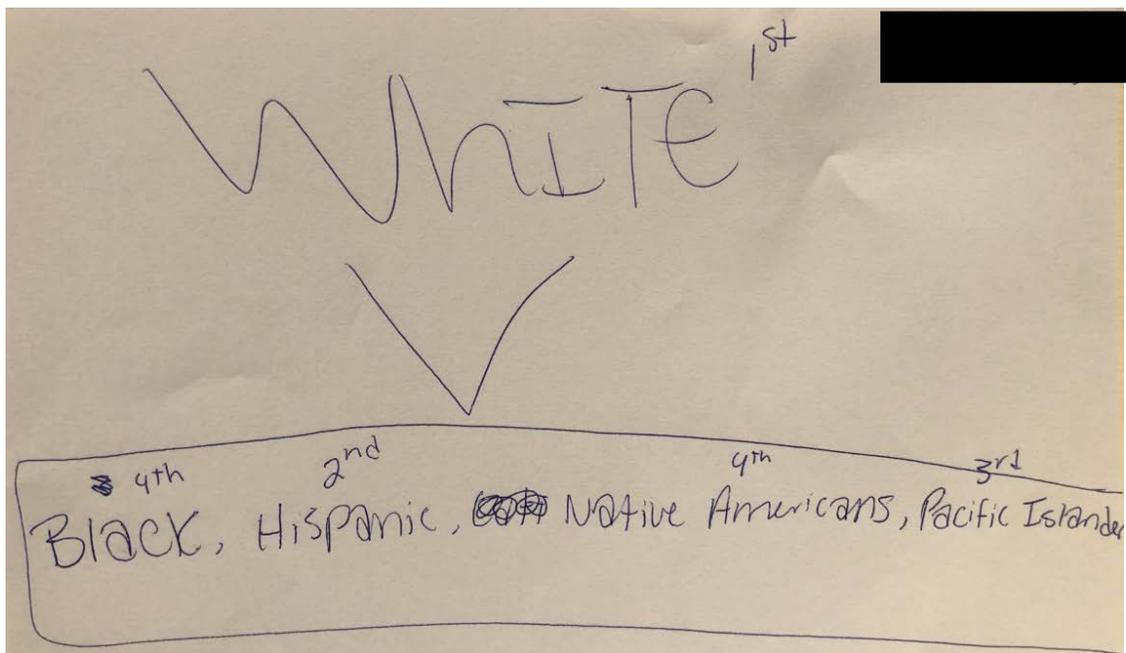


Figure 6. Donna's Illustration

Donna wrote the word "White" in large letters and then "Black, Hispanic, Native Americans, and Pacific Islander" on one straight line underneath. In her response to the second question, she provided a numerical ranking by each race: "1<sup>st</sup> - White, 2<sup>nd</sup> - Hispanic, 3<sup>rd</sup> - Pacific Islander, 4<sup>th</sup> - Black, and 4<sup>th</sup> - Native Americans." During member checking I asked if the duplicate ranking of 4<sup>th</sup> place was a mistake. She explained that

she perceived both Native Americans and Blacks tied in last place. According to Donna's illustration, Whites clearly dominate all other races, as well as racial order in society. In addition, her racial ranking highlighted an inner ranking of minoritized racial groups.

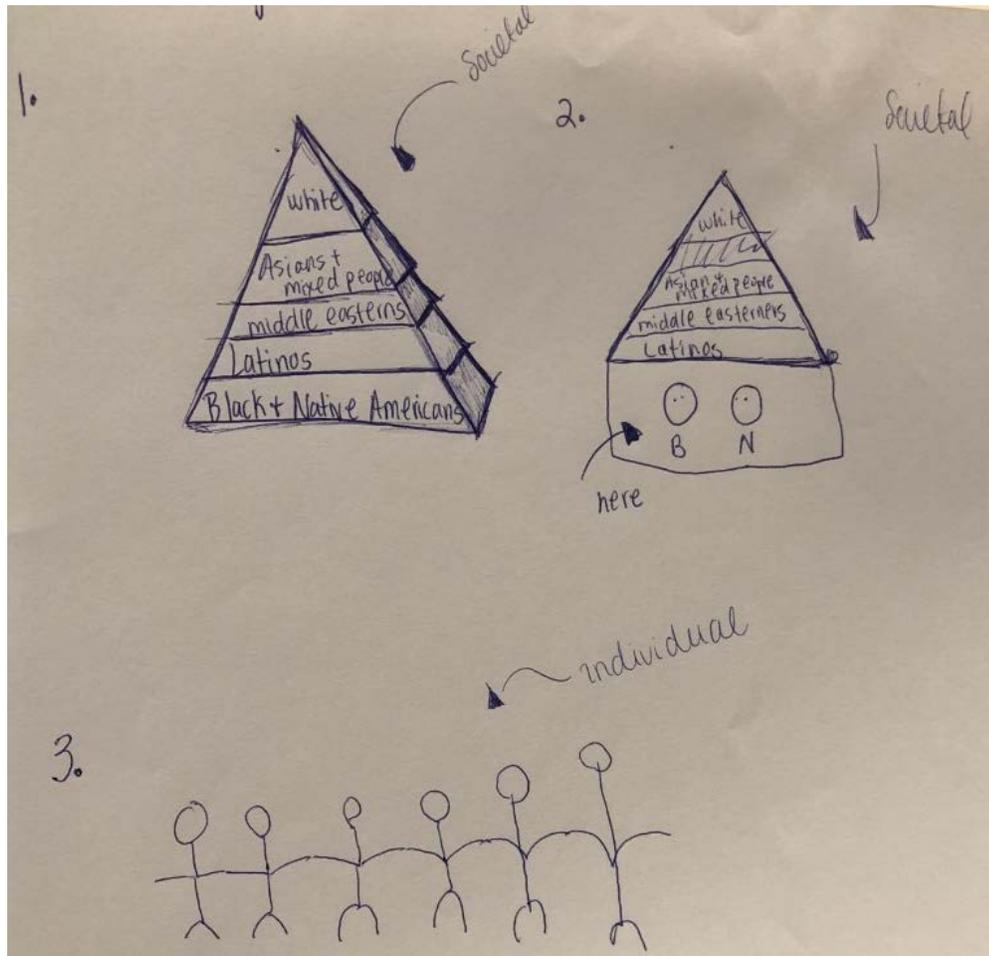


Figure 7. Katrina's Illustration

Katrina drew three images. The first, a pyramid, listed “White” at the top. The following identities were labeled in order, top to bottom: White, Asians and Mixed People, Middle Eastern, Latinos, and Black and Native Americans (identical to Donna’s ranking of African- and Native Americans). In the second image, she drew an additional arrow which identified her race, African-American, at the bottom of the pyramid. The

first two images were labeled "societal," indicating the way Katrina perceived racial order displayed in society. However, her third image was labeled "individual" and showed stick figures linked by their hands with no indicators of race or ranking. During member checking, she clarified "individual" meant this is how she perceived racial order, as flat and communal. Katrina's third image is another example of a participant's conviction that all races should be equal. Her example is also one of contrasting internal and external perceptions or racial order within the same participant. Lastly, Katrina also highlighted another example perceived racial ranking of minoritized groups.

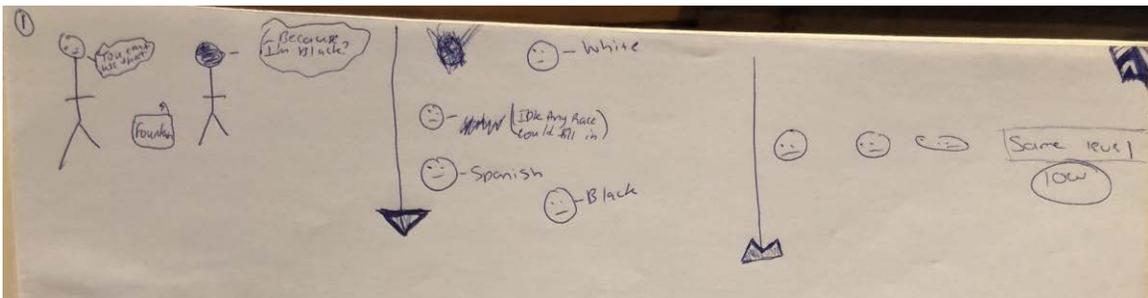


Figure 8. Sadie's Illustration

Sadie drew a series of images. The first displayed two stick figures having a conversation about a water fountain. In the drawing, the White figure is telling the Black figure "You can't use that [water fountain]" and the Black figure responded, "Because I'm Black?" During member checking, she elaborated on the drawing by adding that her notion of racial order stems from racial segregation and limitations placed on African-Americans because of race. Her second image indicated a linear order based on race; from top to bottom, she listed "White," "IDK any other race," "Spanish," and "Black." Her third image showed stick figures side-by-side in a straight line, showing a nonlinear concept of racial order. During member checking she mentioned "this is how it [society] should be." Sadie's images, like other participants, demonstrated a perception of racial

order that positioned her race at the bottom of the racial ranking. Her illustration also connected historically negative racial experiences to racial order.

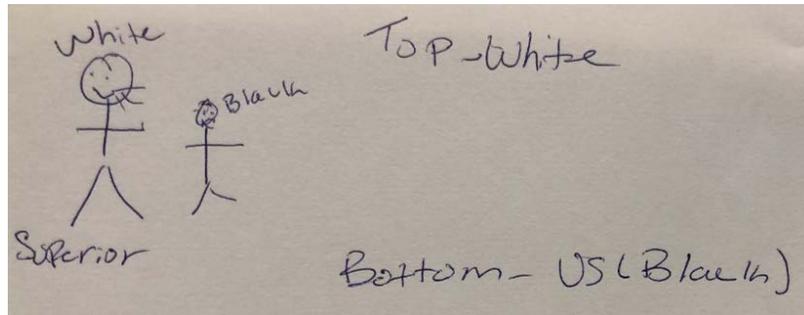


Figure 9. Sasha's Illustration

Sasha drew two stick figures, one larger (“White”) than the other (“Black”). The large figure included "Superior" underneath it. To the right of the figures, Sasha included: "Top – White" and underneath, "Bottom – Us” (Black). Although Sasha mentioned only two races in her illustration, she perceived her Black identity as inferior to Whites. Additionally, her racial order perception was confirmed when she wrote “Bottom - Us (Black).”

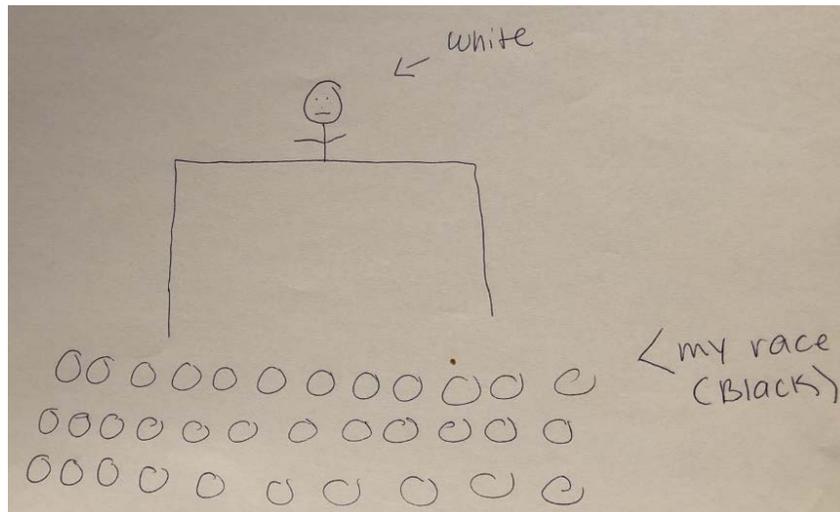


Figure 10. Tyler's Illustration

Tyler drew an image that represented power. Her image showed a stick figure (labeled “White”) on a stage or at a podium and raised above a large group of circles

which she identified as “my race (Black).” She illustrated the circles stood for “my race (Black).” When asked to elaborate on what she drew, she indicated that the image was a White stick figure above a large group of small circles, which represented her race. Tyler’s image demonstrated another racial order view that positioned Blacks [African-Americans] at the bottom or below White peers. Tyler’s image displayed the concept of power, space, and privilege she perceived White people had above her race.

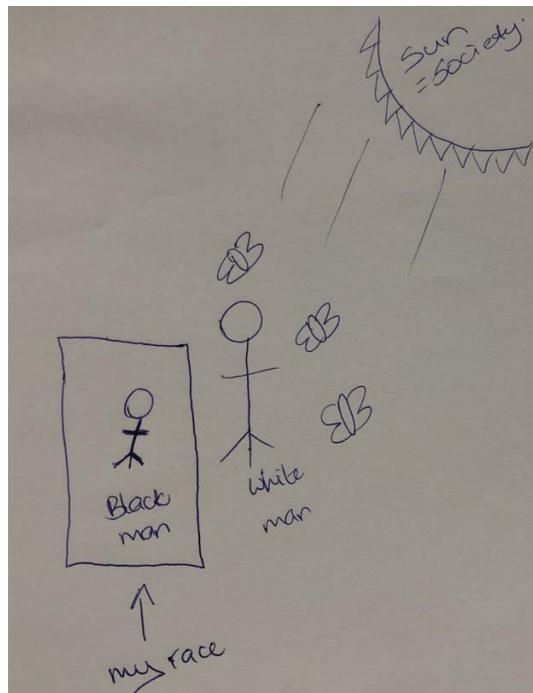


Figure 11. Cathy's Illustration

As I mentioned in her profile earlier, Cathy drew an illustrative image of a sun shining down on the two stick figures. The stick figures represented a Black man and a White man, with the White figure drawn larger than the other. Her detailed explanation of the drawing showed her peers in the focus group that she had a playful way of describing racial perceptions. The imagery in her drawing was similar to the majority of

the participants' perceptions of racial order, which positioned her race at the lowest racial ranking or below White peers.

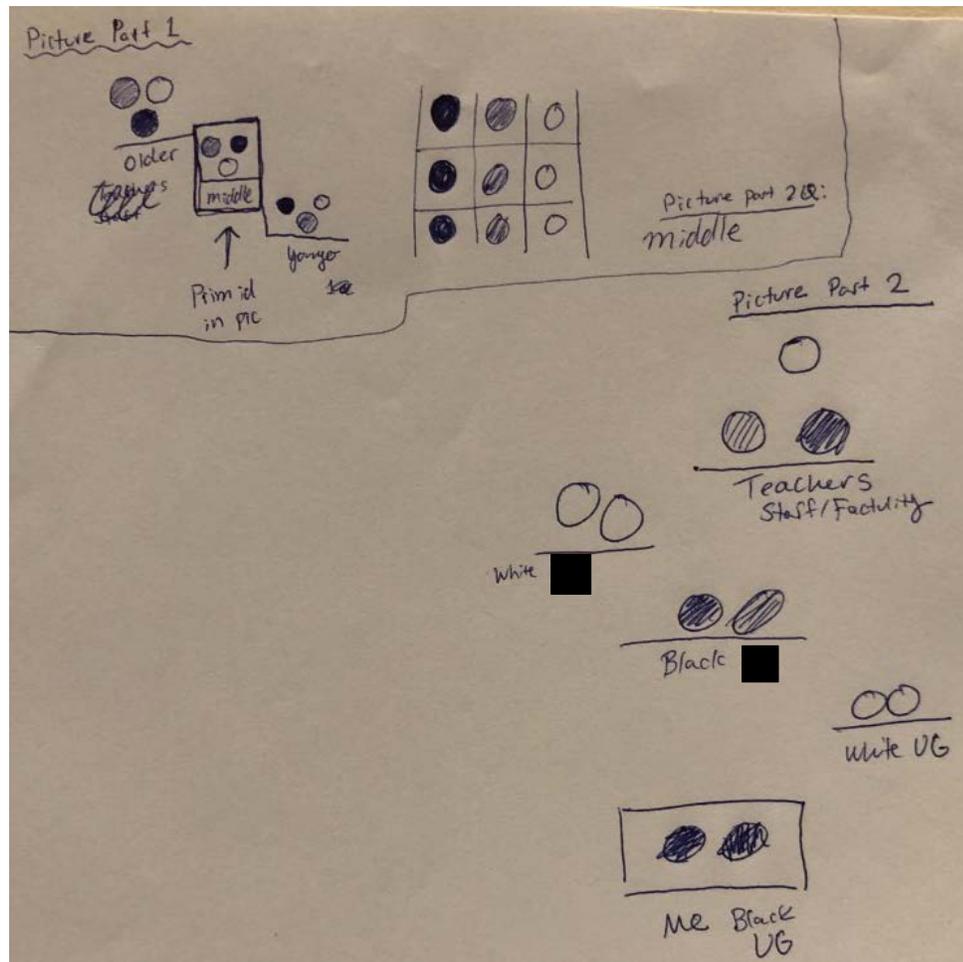


Figure 12. Tia's Illustration

Tia drew two separate series of images. The first image showed racial order ranking based on age. She used the words “older,” “middle,” and “younger” to explain the ranking. Her second series of images explained the ranking of race and campus classification. For example, she ranked White staff and faculty above Black Faculty and other racially minoritized faculty. In addition, she ranked White graduate professional students above Black graduate professional students, White undergraduate (UG) students above herself and other Black UG students. Tia was the only participant to indicate age

and campus classifications as characteristics in her illustration. During member checking she elaborated that she perceived racial ranking is more complex. According to her images, on campus racial ranking is based on a combination of identities. Despite the combination of identities perceived for various on campus members, Tia also ranked her Black racial group at the lowest position within racial order. Similar to majority of the participants, her images defined racial order as a linear, hierarchical concept positioning her racial group at the bottom; making her the 9<sup>th</sup> participant to position African-Americans as the lowest racial ranking.

Based on experiences, participants shared their understanding that society places African-American identities at, or near, the bottom of racial order. In figures five, six, and eleven, I used black text boxes to redact potentially identifying information of participants and the university. Several participants indicated they perceived Whites enjoyed superiority over other races, including African-Americans, by making their White figures larger or situating them above Blacks in their drawings. Some participants drew secondary images of Blacks being at the top or forefront of racial order while others drew images of equality and equity they would like to see occur in the context of racial order. The illustration activity showed that all but one participant had a linear or hierarchical perception of racial order; however, most of the participants also felt they were equal to or in similar positions to other races and should be treated as such. Their positive imagery of community or togetherness highlighted this wish.

### **“Suffer in Silence”: Feelings of Isolation**

As we have seen, the illustration activity engendered student awareness around their perceptions of racial order. To the participants, racial order took place in

hierarchical ways. This section elaborates on experiences of five participants who framed racial order by explaining their racial position through emotions as a result of experiences. The participants perceived racial order as linear or hierarchal which showed an internal and external perception of how African-American students may see themselves and how they perceive society or others see them.

Ashley shared her deep concerns about feeling lonely on campus. She worried about not being able to connect with other students who identified similarly, and about graduating stating, “I definitely feel like a super small minority like [there] is not enough of us at all, like, so I'm really uncomfortable on campus a lot.” As she continued with her reflection, Ashley shared the following realization:

We've got Puerto Ricans...and [other races] and yet everybody here is a freakin' majority except for us.... I'm not meeting [Black] people in my class because there ain't none... I'm not meeting anyone anywhere else because there ain't no [place to meet].... I'm [a] minority; I just want to get the hell out.

Ashley's emotions about being one of a few African-American students at BU reduced her sense of belonging. During the focus group meetings, other focus group participants and I sensed her strong intent to leave the institution. Although Ashley provided several examples of other minoritized groups feeling superior or perceiving their ranking higher than African-Americans, the entire group agreed with her claims of minority tiers. Similar to the descriptions of illustrations defining racial order, in this instance, Ashley explained an internal ranking of minoritized racial groups, also positioning African-Americans below other racial groups:

Ashley: These other teachers, regardless what their other races or whatever, they still carry like a disposition because then if you're in a superior position.... You might be a minority but you're not us.

Tia: They just need someone [racial group] to put under them, so they don't feel like the bottom.

Kianna: We're [the] bottom.

Ashley: Because no one, for some reason, expects us to be so great outside of anything [but] sports.... I'm a minority, okay but let's break that down. [For example] You're [a] minority plus 10 a I'm a minority plus five, you know what I'm saying? [*A rhetorical question, comparing herself to a person from another racial group*].

This led me to question the focus group if they believed there was a ranking within the minorities on campus to which participants agreed by nodding their heads in unison.

Ashley included, "Everyone that's not Black or don't have some piece of the Black in them is above us on this campus...It is what it is." I questioned if her statement reflected society and Kianna jumped in the conversation by stating, "Absolutely. Yes. I feel like it happens just a lot more outside of campus. Just what I've seen." Then, Ashley added:

I had a track coach that's Jamaican and he [told me], "White people love us [Jamaicans] and – tell us that we're different from y'all." White people do not associate, like Jamaicans [or] Nigerians with us as Black people? ... We are not putting the same but same basket [minoritized racial group ranking].

In the same group meeting, I asked what participants would say to prepare other incoming Black BU students. The feedback from participants was jokingly negative yet connected to their experiences as current students:

Kianna: Be alone. Tell them to be prepared to be alone.

Tia: [*Jokingly and laughingly*] Tell them to bring a friend.

Ashley: Put your head down. And what you came here for is what you come here for. So, don't expect anything else. Don't expect no favors from nobody and [don't] expect [any] help. If you came here because you want to get a biology degree, just come and get your biology degree and get your ass out of the way... If you want to be an athlete, that's fine, you just do that, but don't have any expectations. Because the minute you get let down...it's gonna hurt you for real... [It] ain't gonna be no family environment.

Tia: Get in, get out [in] four years.

Considering this exchange, some of the participants did not feel connected to the campus environment and felt isolated due to their racial identity. The participants suggested future African-American students should not enroll in Bryant University if they intended to be social, wanted to connect with other undergraduates, or simply desired to have a lively collegiate experience.

In a separate exchange, Cathy and Katrina recalled moments in which they or others they knew acted unbothered towards someone as a response to racial order perceptions.

Cathy: If I don't talk to [White people] they can't tell me nothing... One thing [my father] taught me is that if somebody gets you mad or whatever that gives

them control of you so I'm not giving no White person control over me but if they talk to me crazy they want me to actually care, so if you [act] nonchalant they're going to leave you alone.

Katrina: That's what my sister does because when she was in eighth grade... She was in a predominant[ly] [White] high school. [Some White guy] Went up to her and kept calling her the N word multiple times to her face. But she didn't care, she like, she just kept staring at him... He wanted a reaction. When she told me she was like, "I don't know this guy, I don't know why he was [calling] me the N word multiple times" but she said she didn't care about him.

In these instances, the participants' indifference toward White people or their choice to ignore racially motivated acts of discrimination created a barrier. From their lived experiences, participants also created a protective shield towards moments of oppression which resulted in isolation.

During a brief conversation about campus amenities afforded to White but not to Black students, all participants gave verbal affirmations and showed physical signs of discontent when Cathy stated, "You always see like White [students] with comfort animals in the housing facility but I know you never see Black people with them because they won't let [us] have [comfort animals] ... So, we just suffer in silence." Cathy's example of "suffering in silence" refers to the emotion African-American students experience when they feel limited and deprived as a result of their racial identity. According to her perceptions of racial order, shared by her entire group, White students receive privileges, such as keeping a service animal on campus while Black students were

restricted from the same. Racial order, thus, is the reason for Black students' isolation and suffering.

This theme illuminated examples of how the participants defined racial order. Even within minority groups, a racial ranking existed, positioning African-Americans at the bottom of the lower ranking of racial groups. In the next section, I will highlight perceptions of the campus and community racial climates.

### **Racial Order and Oppression on Campus and in the Community**

Perhaps the most grounded theme in the data stemming from the focus groups featured the participants' experiences with racial oppression on campus and in the community. Many of them shared stories describing early school as well as current on-campus experiences with overt racism and microaggressions originating from community members, fellow students, and Bryant faculty. To the participants, experiencing racial order meant facing oppression. Three subthemes are included to show the depth of the participants' experiences with oppression, including oppression in the community and on campus, oppression stemming from faculty, and perceptions of racial climate. For the participants, perceived oppression in the community and on campus, oppressive faculty, and perceptions of racial climate provided evidence for their perceptions about how racial order manifested.

#### **“You look shady”: Oppression in the Community and on Campus**

This subtheme captured the voices participants voices who shared many examples of overt racism, as well as microaggressions, including microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations on campus and in the community. In addition, the participants shared

their perception of oppressive insults and assaults from early school experiences as well as current encounters at Bryant University.

Anna provided an example of a microaggression toward African-Americans by shopkeepers in the area who display racist images:

Well, I know in [this state] it is prejudice for real...If you put a confederate flag in your window you just saying “I don't want your black ass in my store, I want don't your money.” That's still here...‘bout to be 2020. We still have stores like that in [the next town over], which is crazy.

In this instance, I gathered oppression could also be experienced by public displays of historical racial images, such as the confederate flag. Anna continued her reflection on microaggressive experiences in the community and in her workplace:

White people that come in the door [they don't speak back to me] and I speak very loud[ly]. So, it's not like you can't hear me – We always have to say, “Welcome to Big Lots” when you walk in the door. [The White people] won't even look at me. They'll just walk in the door.... When they come to the counter [to checkout], they put the money on the table; They won't put it in [my] hand.

Racial order, in Anna's experience, included the perceived distance (e.g. verbal and physical) White people kept from her in a store in which she was working.

Sadie experienced insults directed at her name due to its social connection to White women: “People always ask me why my name is Sadie. “Aww, that's such a White name. Why would they name you that?” It's my name what I supposed to do. I didn't give myself the name. My parents named me Sadie.” Although Sadie did not share the origins of her name, Tyler took this as an opportunity to talk about hers:

My mom, she purposely [named me Tyler]... Tyler is a normal White-collar name and unisex. So, when I go into an interview, they don't know. Like, oh, "this could be a boy or girl or White or Black. [They won't] know what the race is..."

I gathered Tyler's mother's strategy of naming her African-American child included not giving away her daughter's identity before she was able to present herself in person and to prevent Whites from stereotypically assessing Blacks based on prejudice.

In another instance, Katrina reflected on a high school experience with a White friend:

"I had a white friend in 11th grade, like, there were some Black girls...being very loud in the cafeteria. And my White friend was like, "Oh, they're so ghetto." And I was like, "They're just being loud." I guess he's like, "You know, you're one of the good ones."

The participants experience with micro-insults are all insensitive and based on centuries-old stereotyping and framing of African-Americans. Each act also diminished the racial position perceived by our participants by apparent attacks or critiques of their self-perception and identity. The manifestation of racial order, thus, took place by reminding Blacks of their status of exotic, loud, racially inferior, or as someone to avoid as judged by Whites.

Microaggressions also come in the form of microassaults, which can be verbal or nonverbal attacks (i.e., name calling and discriminatory behavior). Sadie, who did not share as much as her focus group peers, made a point to speak up about a White student who was verbally harassing her and her cousin in the residence halls at Bryant University:

He's always talking about [me and my cousin] being Black, which is like, "Why is he always talking about us?" Like, what's wrong with us being Black. But [the] thing is he wants to be Black.... So, my cousin was walking, he came out the shower. And he was like, "Why are your feet White on the bottom? I thought your feet would be all Black?" Then he asked to see the inside of my hands.

The group's response to Sadie's experience was rowdy; her verbal and non-verbal responses to her story showed their disbelief and fury. None of them, myself included, ever heard of a similar, blatant microassault about African-Americans' hands and feet. Due to Sadie's quiet nature throughout the group sessions, I could tell that assault made a deep negative impression on her.

During a semester where Ashley reported family and financial hardships, her White professor noticed that she was less engaged during daily class activities. The professor approached Ashley after class to inquire about her personal life. Initially, Ashley declined to provide much detail, but the professor insisted Ashley open up about her personal struggles. Ashley shared the following about their interaction:

I had a teacher, she's like, "You know, you haven't really been coming to class. And then when you're here, you're disconnected. You look angry? What's wrong?" So finally, I just broke down [*into tears and gave in to discussing her problems*]...I'm angry, and I'm discussing it with her, and... she's like, "I think we need to call someone else in here" because she was, like, scared of me. She got up [and] backed up [*imitating the teacher by acting scared*]...You asked me to express myself and then when I express myself you act like this was like this too much, So, I saw her facial expressions, then I asked is it because I'm Black and

your scared? You think I really about to nut up on you [hit, fight, or push you].

She responded by saying “No, it's not that it's just you're really talking in a certain tone.” I can't tell you what's going on my life without being emotional about it.

While she shared this experience and throughout the focus group meetings, I noticed that Ashley used her hands quite often when speaking. She assumed the teacher felt threatened by her emotional display of body language. The story ended with the professor signaling a student who happened to be a White male to come over to assist. Ashley perceived the faculty member felt uncomfortable and needed someone to save her.

In another instance, and during a conversation with me, Tia elaborated on her experiences on campus with individuals from other racial backgrounds and their fear of Black students:

Tia: I feel like the Puerto Ricans are more scared of us than the White kids. Sometimes I'm in the [athletic residence hall on campus] and like I'm wearing my RA (resident assistant) shirt. I'm just patrolling and like we have like sections where you can like cross and go to the other hallway. [The Puerto Rican] student crossed and [to] go to another hallway. I was like, I work here, [I'm] not gonna jump you in your house.

Curtis: Are you saying that they avoided you?

Tia: Yes... they see you and they move. There's enough space for like three people to walk down this hallway and you move all over to another walkway. All I'm doing is walking the hallways.

Curtis: You don't think it's because you're an athlete or nothing else?

Tia: I'm wearing like RA shirt.... I'm wearing my work shirt that I need to wear right? But like they go around [me]. I work here! You know who I am [*in a frustrated tone*]!

In the shared situations, students felt like other students and staff perceived them as threatening and feared engaging with them.

Several participants experienced oppressive insults about their hair from community and campus members. Although both of Tyler's parents are African-American, she explained how other classmates in middle and high school would tell her she was mixed because of her type of hair:

People like in middle school and high school [tried] to tell me that I'm mixed.

Like, they try to tell me that one of my parents [were] White and I'm like, no, I'm not mixed. How [do] you go tell me what I am [*Imitating a classmate from her childhood*]? “[Hers is] like really curly – you have good White people hair.”

Donna shared a similar experience about others' perceptions of her family's hair:

When I had my Afro out, I think when I was in high school, my grandma came to bring some lunch. She's Polish and Turkish. My grandma's hair is really long so we both wore our afros and she is really light skinned. People asked about her being White, and me being half White. I said, “No,” so they asked, “How did you get that good hair?” I said, “Because I have good genes.”

These experiences implied one must be White in order to be perceived with good hair.

Unlike Tyler and Donna's experiences being told they were White because of their hair texture; Cathy experienced the polar opposite. She reflected on how a female student at Bryant University assumed she knew how to braid hair and asked her, repeatedly, to braid

hair for her. Cathy responded by saying she could not perform that skill, to which the other student quipped, “Then what are you Black for?” This experience depicted a notion Black people should have assumed skills. Additionally, if a Black person lacks the assumed skills then their Blackness is no longer valid.

Although former classmates thought Donna’s hair was White-like shared a recent story when she was verbally harassed by a law enforcement officer at a grocery store based on her appearance. The officer said: “Oh, you can't go on [in] the store.” Donna responded by asking “Why can’t I go to the store? He’s [the police officer] like, “You look shady...you have dreads.” During her story all of the participants showed signs of being shocked, jokingly laughing in disbelief.

While peers and community members were the culprits of microaggressive and oppressive acts, participants also recalled several moments where faculty members contributed to racial order perceptions. The next section elaborates on participant experiences with faculty at Bryant University.

### **“Make sure they can't tell if you're Black”: Oppression Stemming from Faculty**

Representing all three focus groups, five participants connected experiences of racial order to interacting with White faculty members at BU, leading to feelings of inferiority on the parts of the students. Participants echoed one another when they discussed the lived experience of Black student athletes. This seemed to produce a strong sense of solidarity between all the group’s participants:

Tia: When you walk up into a classroom on your first day, you're either going to be that Black student or the latter. [Faculty] think you're just a mad Black

student.... [If] you mess [up] on your first exam or your first assignment...they're just like, "Well, they have to be here because they're athletes."

Ashley: Yeah, cause if you an athlete and your Black, baby, they can't stand you.

Tia: Yeah, they can't stand you!

Curtis: Really?

Ashley: We had a professor here that our coach was like, "Do not go to this man."

Curtis: Usually a lot of people in society, look at being an athlete, being Black as a benefit, a favor, an advantage. But you're saying on this campus it's a...

Tia: It's two strikes on you.

Ashley: Disadvantage.

In this dialogue students felt that professors tolerated them, instead of supporting their student athlete identity. Thus, if students perceive their racial identity as negative and felt mistreated because of their student athletic background, then students may deduce that the dual identity (e.g., Black and student athlete) was a disadvantage in comparison to their peers on campus.

Kianna shared her perception of faculty members who neglect engaging with Black students, but cater to White students:

They're more interested in what [White students] have to say than [to] give you the same respect...I feel like it's so difficult to get some professors to engage in what you're saying. They're just so easily to brush off just like, "Yeah, that's what that was supposed to be" instead of giving you like further explanation.

In each meeting of her focus group, Tia provided several on-campus experiences of covert racism from different White faculty members. At one moment, she explained:

Tia: My first teacher.... He was elated that I knew how to spell. And he's like, "You have such great grammar," and I'm like it's... [*stopped to indicate she did not know how to respond to the comment*].

Kianna: I talk like a regular person, what do you mean?

Tia: He was over the moon that a Black athlete knew how to write.... I told my father this and he's like, "In your heart, stay Black. But once you're out in public, pretend you went to Harvard Business School as a White man. You have to project what they want from you. I know it sucks [but] that's how you're going to survive."

While Tia shared her story, her peers showed their support by interjecting "yep" or "right." During another part of the same focus group, Tia explained another White male professor suggested she change her name to sound White, resulting in feelings of inferiority:

When I was in a business writing class, [the teacher] was like, "When you're writing an intro letter, make sure the person reading it can't tell what culture you're from." And I [asked], "Can you give me an example, Sir?" He's like, "When someone's reading this, make sure they can't tell if you're Black, Hispanic, Asian...I don't know, maybe instead of José, use your other name that people call you by [like] George." And then he's like, "instead of Tyler, you can just put Ty – or better yet, Miss Johnson, that's a White last name." And I'm like [*she makes a confused and offended face*]...make sure the people who are going to pay my bills hire me for a job know that I'm not Black. But once they see me in the interview, they have to know I'm Black before, so yeah, that just irritates me to no

sense. But I sat there smiling like, yeah, okay, because you're grading my papers, so I want you to pass me.

This was another example of an experience during which Tia encountered situations where she perceived she had to suppress her racial identity in order to advance. Although both may have been intended to propel her forward, Tia's father recommended his stance as a survival tool to navigate the racial climate, while the instructor recommended a stance to suppress a perception of unwanted cultural difference in name and dialect. Unlike the father who considered his daughter's feelings and showed empathy, the instructor at Bryan may not have considered the negative impact his assignment instructions had on Tia and her racial identity.

In another focus group, Donna explained how she perceived a White faculty member gave her repeated bad grades because he did not enjoy her topic choices for writing:

Donna: I had a White English teacher maybe my sophomore [or] freshman year and every time [he would say write on] a topic or anything you want. It had to be on current events. I would do like racism...or something like that. And every time I turned in a paper they'd be like [the assignment grade], C, D, B minus. [He would leave comments saying] "I don't like your topic" or "you didn't word it right". Because your topic is like, "not interesting" or something like that. I ended up failing that class; I had to take it again...And then the final I did another topic and he told us do it on gun control. I was like oh that's easy. I did it again [and] he gave me an F.

In this example, Donna's story reflected potential instructor bias in topics related to politics or race which she perceived affected her academic performance. We can also surmise her negative classroom experience influenced her overall perception of all faculty members at the institution.

Anna explained her classroom experiences with White literature professor opposed anyone who did not like literature as well. She stated: "She makes it known that unless you're really into literature, you're not going to get an A in [her] class. Anyway, she tells you right off the rip – [that] you probably can't write well enough."

For the participants interactions with faculty whom they perceived as oppressive contributed to the students' feelings of inferiority, academic and emotional stress, perceived disadvantages, and racial profiling. Ultimately, faculty to student interactions played a critical role in the way the participants may make meaning of racial order.

### **"We don't exist": Perceptions of Racial Climate**

Some participants felt their perceptions of both campus and community climates produced feelings of invisibility, a sense of being devalued, and, in some cases, blatant discrimination. When I asked them to describe the racial climate at Bryant University, two participants struggled to answer:

Tia: They try and make [Bryant University] sound like a happy place. That like everyone is holding hands and singing out there, and we all love each other...I forget that we have more than 10 black graduate and professional students [*sarcastically speaking*]. Like all I see is White and Puerto Rican. And then in undergrad, all I see [are] the athletes – we're not connected.

Ashley: There is no climate...It is non-existent. We don't exist. Like we're dead ass ghosts.

Tia: You're basically asking the climate between like Antarctica and Rio. What's the climate between those two worlds? They're not in the same space [so] you can't compare the two.

Ashley: We're invisible. We are dead ass invisible.... [There's] not enough of us.

At a later point during the same focus group, I asked if the climate on campus reflected the greater community on a local or national level. Kianna shared the following:

Yeah on campus we don't talk to no one. It's really hard to make any kind of connection with anyone, especially being an athlete outside of athletics. It's kind of like a place where people just kind of keep their head down and keep to themselves.

According to Kianna, outside of athletic teams, students do not communicate with one another. Ashley closed the discussion by adding her dismay of possible resolutions to any changes in the campus climate:

[The] majority of the people that have the most room to make the decisions probably don't see that there's a problem...How can we expect [the administration] to even really give a damn about what's going on with like the climate here on campus when you don't even want to be honest with the professional and graduate students that y'all [are] on probation and y'all [graduate professional program] might be fucked up? [The administration] can't be honest with them and the 60 grand [sic] that they [spend on tuition and fees annually], so how can I expect [them] to really give a damn about my Black ass.

The group agreed with Ashley's final assessment of the recommended climate change although it appeared to be coming from a pessimistic notion. Ashley, along with the group showed their doubt and distrust in Bryant's administration to create change for African-American students.

For many of the participants, the perception of racial order began with experiences of racial discrimination, which were connected to climate perceptions within the campus and larger community. Tyler shared a memory from her fifth-grade class at an all-White private school. Her classmates said harmful things about the presidential election of the United States first Black president:

Some of the white kids would always say, "I don't want him to be president" or "I wish I could take my AK 47 and [shoot him]" and stuff like that. I would just think like, "I'm the only Black person in the classroom. So, why aren't you saying this about other presidents? Why does it have to be about Obama? That's when I first started to realize like – I'm kind of inferior to everybody else.

Tyler's story presented another example of racial awareness creating hierarchical perception of racial order and its impact on Black identity development. Her story also reflected a shift in racial climate perceptions based on political climate factors.

Assessing the climate on campus was extremely difficult for the students because they did not feel included in the climate. The participants defined their perception of climate structure, within the institution and the larger community, with feelings of being treated differently, being invisible, and sensing low institutional concern to increase diversity and improve the campus climate. Similar to Tyler's story, the next theme will elaborate on the concept of racial order and oppression negative experiences from

campus members (e.g. peers and faculty) and community members (e.g., White people within the community and law enforcement).

As these data have shown, the African-American participants in this study felt invisible on Bryant University's campus. Additionally, the participants mistrusted university administrators and their intent to create positive change to improve the racial climate. The concept of feeling inferior was also shared from their experiences within the community.

In the next section, I will explain making meaning as process some participants experiences throughout the study.

### **“You will never accept me”: Making Meaning of Racial Order**

The notion of making meaning was first introduced in Chapter II as a way one creates knowledge by the validation and affirmation of common familiarities. Thus, as the participants continued to share life stories and found solidarity in similar experiences, they transitioned into a process of making meaning during the last focus group meeting. In regard to racial order, the process of making meaning was demonstrated by explaining the impact of Black faculty presence, realizing privilege can be accessed through White allies, and the concept of transcending racial order.

### **“I guess we only have two”: Awareness of Black Faculty Presence**

To help them connect, feel at home, and belong, some participants discussed interacting with Black faculty and staff. In comparison to the White faculty members, the students reported favorable attitudes towards the few Black faculty members on campus.

Anna shared:

I did see a challenge with not knowing that there were Black professors here. Like for instance with chemistry, General Chemistry. There's a White professor, [Dr. Martin] and there's a Black professor, [Dr. Nichols]. Dr. Martin acts like she's stuck up and like you're supposed to know chemistry already... If you haven't had chemistry in a couple of years – or did horrible in college, you want to go to Dr. Nichols because Dr. Nichols explains. She doesn't make you feel stupid for not knowing.... [If] I would have known that there was a black professor [who taught chemistry], I would have picked her. If I had a choice, I'm always going to a Black professor.

In a separate focus group conversation, the participants and I made an interesting discovery indicating a major limitation for Black faculty representation on campus.

Ashley: But I see teachers give certain compassion to other students that are not like myself, so let's give it to all of us.... It's not hard to just be able to be an understanding empathetic person right now, no matter what your color is. So, it shouldn't only just be happening for five black teachers we got here on campus. – I don't know how many we got; I've only had two.

Curtis: So, could it be the same two?

Ashley: Child! [*in playful tone*] Then I guess we only have two.

Tia: [*quickly begins naming Black professors*] Mr. Davis.

Ashley: Everybody loves him.

Tia: And Dr. Anthony.

Kianna: Wow. I had them too!

Ashley: The only other one I know of is Dr. Simmons.

Curtis: Wow. I know there's more, but the fact that y'all have separate majors, exercise science, biology, and computer information systems. Wow. And you've been here how long? *[Question directed at Kianna].*

Kianna: This is my second year.

Curtis: Okay, *[directing the question to Ashley]* you've been here for four years? *[Ashley nods head].*

Tia: Yeah, I saw them during our first two or three quarters.

Curtis: Right because the freshman level classes, and Dr. Nichols teaches chem 1 and 2.... And then Mr. Humphrey teaches math and statistics.

Unlike Ashley's experience in the nutrition program who reported having a majority of Black faculty members, we discovered that despite their large differences in academic degree programs and classifications (e.g., sophomore, junior, graduating senior, non-transfers), within their full time in college they have only had the opportunity to interact with and take courses from two Black faculty members.

Latoya mentioned she was "surprised by the amount of African-American faculty and staff members." However, I learned during the discussion she referenced more African-American staff members, with no mention of African-American faculty members. As a result, I followed up by asking her, "How many [faculty members] were Black on the academic side? What about in the classroom? Teachers?" She paused for a moment and responded, "Um, one." Which means she did not initially separate Black faculty members from Black staff members on campus. Furthermore, all five participants were only able to take one or two courses taught by Black faculty members. For most of the African-American students, this instance of Black faculty to Black student interaction

was a small window of opportunity taking place at the beginning of their academic career at Bryant University.

Anna explained she is only here on campus one day a week, and on that day all of her professors are black. Moreover, in the nutrition department most of the professors are black. I followed up by asking:

Curtis: Do you think that plays a part in your experiences or your positive experience on campus?

Anna: Oh, absolutely! I talk to them all the time. Even when I don't have a class with them. Dr. Nichols – I can't wait for her to come back [from medical leave] because... I go to her office and we just kick it and just talk and nothing to do with school.... I'm talking to [Dr. Nichols] all the time about getting into the master's program. So, yeah, I think having Black professors really does make [a difference] because I'm going to be [*talking to Black faculty for guidance and advice*].... I wouldn't be doing that with White professors.

Curtis: Yeah. Why do you think that is?

Anna: Um, because there's an underlying [thing] that [White professors] don't have my best interests at heart.... The Black professors [do]. And I truly feel that I have never felt from one black professor that [they] didn't have my best interests at heart. Professor Pendleton, (another Black faculty member), she says, “When you become a dietitian, I want you to know everything I know... So, everything I know, I'm gonna pour into you.” You know, you don't you don't hear that [from the White professors].

Anna's positive experience was another example of how the making meaning process and connecting with faculty members helped students to identify helpful people on campus. The oppressive realization and acknowledgement of only a few Black faculty members encouraged the participants to identify other allies within their environment. The next section will explain participants perceptions of a White Network, where some benefit from access and those without access do not. Although previous themes highlighted two subthemes per theme, making meaning presents benefits of White Network as a stand-alone subtheme.

### **“It's because you're White”: Benefits of a White Network**

Another emerged theme from the focus groups reviews the notion of a White network. This subtheme features the experiences of eight participants who received benefits from the White network, which resulted in making meaning of their racial order. Several of the participants reported receiving benefits or attributing their success due to White community members who aided them in specific situations; While other participants reported a lack of privilege attributed to not being White or access to White allies. The specific data categories that made up this theme included benefits of other's white privilege, privilege through association, and lack of privilege.

Participants recalled advancements in their academic, social, and work experiences due to a relationship with a White person. Through the relationships, participants recognized their own efforts to foster the relationship in order to obtain what they needed. The participants' stories demonstrated their perceptions of the benefit of being part of the White network.

Latoya recalled a moment where she perceived she did not receive a work study position because of being African-American, but her White friend was able to get the job.

Latoya shared:

I don't have work study funds. [So, I talk to my friend] about it, and she is like “yea I didn't have any work, study funds, and I still got an interview – I was able to get the job.” So, I talked to my mom about it. And I was like, well, what do you think the issue is. [My mom asked], “Is she white?” I was like, “yes.” It could be any other reason, but I saw it as [racially related].

In this instance, we see a White student with no available funds for work study was selected over a Black student with no available funds for work study. Although Latoya admitted the possibility that other reasons could be responsible for not being selected, her intuitive thought placed her African-American identity as the central reason she was not selected. Thus, African-American students who do not have access or connections to the White network experience restrictions and limitations. Making meaning of racial order created the notion that racial identity was at fault for not being afforded certain societal benefits. For the participants, this perception is reality, on campus and in the community.

Katrina recalled a moment where she perceived she only received an opportunity to gain work study because of a White woman who liked her in the HR department:

Last year they sent an email saying, “Hey, you want to earn \$200 in a day,” and I [inquired] and a lot of people [inquired] but one of the leaders there she was White. She liked me and she recommended me to do more work study. So, I do think that if it weren't for her, I probably wouldn't have work study.

After discussing employment, two participants elaborated on their experiences with scholarships and financial aid. In these instances, they connected their ability to obtain financial assistance due to allies within the White network. Donna stated:

I became friends with Dr. Johnson, I mean I'm his best friend. Every time I got someone going on, I be like, "Oh, [I go to him often for help].... I got my presidential scholarship because of him. And I think my track scholarship.

Katrina recalled her own experiences with a scholarship application:

When I kept applying for scholarships, they always asked me about my race. And I always did their requirements like, oh, write this essay, and I try to go in depth as much as I can, but they never gave it to me. And I was [finally] able to get a scholarship, but I had two White teachers who really liked me, and convinced their other researchers to let me have it.... So, I do think if it wasn't for them, I probably wouldn't have that scholarship.

Both Katrina and Donna's experiences reflected financial benefits from knowing White allies on campus. When I probed whether other participants in this group felt they needed White allies to advocate for them, the majority verbally agreed. Cathy continued up by saying "this is why I don't bother," which implied she was discouraged from applying for scholarships. I gathered she was aware of the potential barriers, distrusted the process, and was disheartened by the thought of obtaining a scholarship through the traditional application route. Cathy anticipated race related barriers in the academic scholarship process which is why she did not bother with applying. She used meaning making to arrive at the conclusion that her lack of privilege would be the primary reason for not receiving a scholarship.

During another focus group, Sasha recalled an experience where she was stopped by a police officer for speeding, while she was driving in a car with her mother as passenger. In that instance, she was sure she was going to get a ticket:

So, I was driving and the [police officer] pulled me over for speeding. I was speeding, like a lot. He came over and he goes to my mom's side [and] doesn't really see her at first. Then he sees her. He looks at me [*Sasha imitates a surprised look from the officer*]. And he's like, "Oh, I just wanted to make sure you're safe." [*Then she said to the group*] So, you see that my mom's White? And now that you see [her] you don't give me [a] ticket. "Hey, just want to say, Oh, it's just a warning. You just need to slow down" [*Announced in a different voice to imitate the officer*]. So, he saw me first, but you didn't see my mom and he pulled me over. And then when you see my mom was White, you switch? My mom was like, "Oh, he's just being nice." "No, mom, it's because you're White. And you have White privilege."

Sasha continued to explain that every other time she has been by herself and stopped by the police, she received a ticket. The traffic stop with her mom as a passenger was an isolated incident when she was able to only receive a warning, which she attributed to her mom's racial identity. We are not sure whether the police officer used racial motives to not issue a ticket; however, her perception of this incident is reality that race played a role, and that access to a White network implied benefits for African-Americans.

Ashley explained how the White students in her class gained access to test questions the Black students could not:

I've struggled a lot in my classes. The science is kicking my butt and I really feel like [faculty] just expect that from us. I tried talking to a Dean about this particular teacher. The way that she teaches isn't conducive to like some of our learning. Like the failure rate is ridiculous. Then at the same time these [White] kids are passing. But the White kids have...the answers to the test from last quarter and stuff like that, that [Black students] just don't.... You can't say nothing to [faculty] about it, because they're going to tell you every reason in the book as to why we fail [while White students pass].

Sadie shared a similar story when she felt discriminated against by an academic athletic, elective professor at Bryant University because of her race. After competing in a tournament out of state, Sadie informed the teacher should could not participate due to a dislocated shoulder. She stated:

I couldn't participate in athletic class. I let the teacher know. I had [an arm] swing and everything. [There] was another girl who [also] got hurt. She was White.... Basically, the teacher, she gave her [a] free pass. [*The professor told the White student*] Oh, you don't have to come to class for a week. She failed me just because of that one incident and.... She was like "you're not even hurt." Like, just screaming in my face. And it was just it was just sad because...she passed [the] girl with the [grade] A but I got an F. She changed the grade eventually because I keep emailing her and I told her I would report her for what she did. I had witnesses around the class; [they] saw what happened. And I have a video of me dislocating on my shoulder, like I'm not gonna lie about it.

Despite the similar injuries, Sadie's making meaning process concluded she was treated differently because of her race. This story exemplified another experience where an amenity or privilege was granted to a White student or student because of race; but not a Black student, because of race. While Sadie's story illustrated another oppressive experience stemmed by faculty [an aforementioned theme], the acknowledgement of lack of access to the White network was foundational for her making meaning process.

In sum, access to White allies (students, faculty, family, or friends) and the privilege that comes along with Whiteness, are linked to participant stories about opportunities to advance, progress, and inherit privilege. Consequently, students (e.g., Ashley and Sadie) who lacked access to the White network struggled at one or more levels (e.g., financially, professionally, or academically).

### **“It's really about money and opportunity”: Transcending Racial Order**

Tyler shared her emotional concern for current students on campus: “I feel bad for other [Black] students. I don't want them to have to go through the same thing that I went through; it's not fair. Like we're here to learn. Put your personal opinions [aside].” While she did not desire for more Black students to be mistreated, her recommendation highlighted an optimistic and hopeful attitude toward racial order change.

Other participants showcased prideful attitudes in moments of despair. Anna explained she viewed identity as superior and able to access the superiority in a competitive-like spirit:

I see myself differently. I'm one of those Black women. I don't have [any] fear of anybody. So, to me, nobody is over me of any other race. You're not better than me. I could run circles around you if I really wanted to embarrass you, right? So,

I don't see anyone above me. So, I always see myself at the top regardless of any situation.

For Katrina, similarly, exhibiting self-pride was a way of coping with racial order perceptions. Katrina felt, despite the racial climate, that she would remain resilient and proud of her African-American identity:

For me, it was just a matter of accepting who and what I was. I take more pride in who I am as an individual. And especially with our political climate, I am reminded that there are people who look down on me because of my race...No matter what I say you will never accept me, so I'm going to do whatever the hell I want. If it pisses you off, that's great. Because I'm going to keep living my life while you're just going to be hating on me [*acting jealously*].

Although Katrina and Anna acknowledged people may perceive them as inferior or occupying a lower ranking as a result of race, it did not alter their internal views of themselves. Anna's and Katrina's examples connected to the majority of the illustrations mentioned earlier as contrasting internal versus external perceptions of racial order for some of the participants. Despite the salience of their racial identity for society, peers, community members, or faculty viewing them as potentially inferior (external view), the participants exhibited pride, resilience, and a sense of wanting to transcend traditional racial perceptions of African-Americans (internal view).

Despite the majority of the participants sharing experiences of being racial profiled or feelings of the oppressive manifestations of racial order, Mikayla felt differently than her group participants: "A lot of times people have these

experiences... They're just very, like, angry with the situation they're in and they're angry with the situation that they've been grouped into.”

Mikayla showed she was familiar with the concept of racial order, but all throughout her group meetings she remained consistent that people, African-Americans and Whites, create racial tensions and problems. Among these participants, her opinions on racial order were a clear outlier as she felt racial order was an internalized, self-inflicted position. Although Mikayla shared that she never experienced any forms of racial oppression or feelings of inferiority by race due to her upbringing, she understood how racial order was created and sustained:

Just based on racial [order] I think it's really about like money and opportunity. So, stereotypically [and] statistically, people who are Caucasian, really have sometimes more opportunity and more money. And their children and grandchildren [inherit] that, and then [it] continues [for] generations to come...Just based on like [statistics], Black people [and] Mexican people are more like lower income... That's, that's obviously how it starts.

Mikayla's explanation of racial order perceptions connected to other participants' illustrations highlighting power, wealth, and income as direct effects of racial order.

Additional exhibitions of pride were also highlighted when participants acknowledged someone of the same race with simple, but powerful cultural greeting and gesture. Although I was aware of the gesture, I asked them to elaborate for context:

Tia: My favorite is walking the hallway and doing like a little head nod.

Ashley: Yeah man that's my favorite too [*excitedly*].

Tia: The little head nod! You could be walking in the group with like a lot of people and my like White athletic friends and then like, there's like one black girl on the Lacrosse team and we're passing with our group and we do this little *[makes the head nod gesture]*.

Curtis: *[The rest of the group reciprocates or imitates the nod]*. What does that mean?

Tia: Like the head bob[s] up. It's like "I see you, I'm with you." If something goes down, we run together *[jokingly]*.

Kianna: Like she was saying in the last meeting, you feel like people don't even really see you right...Just passing by someone and just be like, hey *[gestures for a head nod]*, like, you don't have to say anything, just, "Yes, I see you."

This moment during the group discussion was filled with laughter and an apparent feeling among the participants of gratitude, respect, and understanding. The participants found solidarity in discussing lived experiences in the form of a greeting. The greeting not only acknowledged their presence, it also helped them feel connected to one another. This dialogue was parallel to previous examples from other participants, demonstrating internal minoritized ranking, perceptions of African-Americans positioned at the bottom, and the process of making meaning as a result of current racial climates.

### **Chapter Summary**

Essentially, this chapter directly answers the overarching question of the student: How do African-American student's perceive racial order. Through illustrative images and designs racial order was defined as linear positioning based on race and a tier like system with hierarchical principles. Furthermore, African-American students connected

racial order to wealth, socio-economic status, and historical power dynamics of race. Through focus group discussions and a member checking process, participants confirmed data gathered from the illustrations by elaborating on their lived experiences which showcased racial order within campus and community climates as oppressive events. The stories of the participants, organized into themes and subthemes, shared in the focus groups all play a part in illustrating lived experiences of racial order. Fundamentally, the lived experiences of the participants highlighted the perceptions of racial order and were used as tools to make meaning of racial order for African-American students.

In conclusion, this chapter highlights themes supporting the unique African-American student experience at Bryant University. The chapter aligned experiences with outcomes while showcasing microaggressions that shaped the participant's perception of campus and community racial climates. Although some of the discovered themes support my own prior assumptions, I also made new discoveries during data analysis.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

This study explored the perceptions of racial order of 12 African-American students at a PWI. In this chapter, I interpret the findings from this study in light of the empirical and theoretical literature I reviewed in Chapter II to make meaning of how the participants perceived racial order, how racial order manifested in their experiences, and how they navigated racial order on campus and in the community. The chapter closes with limitations of the research, implications and recommendations for student affairs and higher education practice, suggestions for research and theory development, and a call to action. Furthermore, this chapter directly connects racial order to Black Identity Development; The internal (how students view themselves) and external (how others view the students) perceptions of Black identity develops through racial group awareness and cultural consciousness of racial group placement, positioning, and ranking based on race (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018; Mivelle et al., 2005).

#### **Discussion: The Essence of Racial Order**

I used the theoretical and empirical frameworks reviewed in Chapter II to distill the essence of racial order perceptions for African-American students at Bryant. The theoretical frameworks include, self-authorship (King et al., 2009), multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI; Jones, 2009), nigrescence (Ritchey, 2014), and critical race theory

(CRT, Iverson, 2007). The main themes from the empirical literature include systemic and internalized oppression (Karkouti, 2016; Womack, 2018), microaggressions (Campbell & Manning, 2015; Rivera et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2007), campus climate issues (Nadal et al., 2014; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013), gender (Harper, 2015), student-athlete identities (Iverson & Jagers, 2015), and faculty-student interactions (Aldana, 2002). Considering the constructivist framework of the present study, distilling or discovering the essence of racial order perceptions— that is, what most African-American students experienced or had in common – is necessary and appropriate in phenomenological studies.

In order for Black students to develop positive racial perceptions of themselves, racial consciousness and awareness at the college level will be pivotal moments in the African-American student development journey and beneficial for aspirations to transform racial order concepts. Thus, the aforementioned properties were constructed to summarize the essence of racial order. The next section will provide the reader with answers to fundamental qualitative questions (e.g., how students experience racial order and why students experience racial order), analyze findings, and state conclusions. First, the African-American students in the sample interpreted racial order as a hierarchical positioning of racial groups due to microaggressive insults from faculty, students, and community members. Second, as a result of socialization on campus and in the community, the participants developed an awareness of their position as African Americans at the end or the bottom of racial order in society. Their awareness prompted diminished feelings of self-identity as a result of oppressive interactions with faculty, students, and staff members. Third, the awareness of racial order led to an inferior

feeling, which reflects privilege and power dynamics and the cognizance of underrepresentation of African-American students on campus and in the community. As a result of messages from administration, faculty, staff, and students, participants felt unwanted and devalued. Fourth, participants used coping mechanisms of apparent isolation or distancing from Whites to avoid pain or trauma due to negative racial climates in the community and on campus. These coping mechanisms were supported by other African-American peers and family members of the participants. Finally, the participants expressed a desire to transcend their bottom racial order position by asserting that racial order should no longer exist. The notion of transforming racial order was supported by positive self-images and inspired by their potential to create a social, cultural, and systemic revolution. As a result of the data collected, I categorized the essence of racial order perceptions, experiences, and manifestations in four phases/ spheres/ components in four properties: a) The Caboose; b) The Siloed; c) The Inferior; and d) The Transformation.

The first component/phase, caboose, summarized the ranking, positioning, and hierarchical approach to racial groups for participants. They felt in last place, like the caboose on a train. The second phase/component, siloed, recapped the participants feelings of isolation, otherness, and low sense of belonging. The third phase/component, inferiority, explored their internal acknowledgement of privileges afforded to other racial groups as a result of disenfranchisement and marginalization, and the lack of other African-American staff, faculty, and students on campus as a systemic and institutional limitation. The fourth phase/component, transformative, recognized participants' optimistic thinking of transcending their perceived bottom racial position and reforming

the concept of racial order. The transformative property is a result of the journey of becoming Black, Black identity development, and mindfulness of power and privilege.

### **The Caboose**

In Chapter I, racial order was defined as a set of beliefs, assumptions, rules, and practices shaping how racial groups connect and interact with one another (Hochschild et al., 2012). I confirmed all but one participant used their beliefs and perceptions to construct a social perception of racial order that included a top-bottom hierarchy or inferiority (Karkouti, 2016; Lechuga, et al., 2009).

These perceptions were essential in creating rules and practices (e.g., ignoring discriminatory behavior and identifying White allies for student success), for understanding the participants' perceived racial position in comparison to their White peers. Moreover, the participants positioned their racial identity as last place or at the lowest linear point in terms of a hierarchal order (Karkouti, 2016). This means the African-American students in the sample believed they are both externally and internally seen at the rear, behind, or lower than their White peers on campus and in the community.

The illustration exercise concurred with Hochschild and colleagues' (2012) conclusion that racial order is manifested by social interactions, permissions and prohibitions, and defining racial categories. Confirming extant research findings, the present study showed that all but one participant produced similar constructs of racial order perceptions for African-American students (Freire, 1973). From the students' perspective, negative social interactions with faculty, perceived disadvantages as a student athlete, and oppressive acts from community members led to perceptions of lower

ranking in regard to racial order, being unwanted in the community, or feeling unvalued on campus, a finding that confirms prominent existing research (Hoschild et al., 2012).

Compared to the literature I reviewed earlier, my study points to a new discovery the dual identity experience of student athlete and being African-American. Using the MMPI (Jones, 2009) framework to connect socially constructed identities (e.g., race, gender) and personal attributes (e.g., athleticism), I gathered the Black student athletes in the sample felt they were at a disadvantage comparison to their peers. All student athletes in the study (10 of the 12 participants) communicated negative profiling from faculty as a result of their dual identity, such as faculty assuming that Black athletes lack reading skills, are a threat to others, and do not want to learn because they are only there to play sports as suggested by Liu (2017). The majority of participants identifying as women athletes who were invested in the conversations on racial order. This may be because they were acutely aware of how some college educators or their peers viewed them. I conclude that a quadruple identity intersection of Black, female, student, and athlete positioned the participants at the lowest point of societal, racial, and environmental ordering in comparison to other races, marginalized groups, genders, campus stakeholders, and community members.

Fundamentally, the participants' perception of racial order underscored King and colleagues' (2009) definition of self-authorship: "the capacity to internally define one's beliefs, identities, and social relations" (p. 109). Throughout the study, participants described their internal perceptions of racial order using illustrations and how they found themselves at the end or the bottom of a hierarchy in which White people were situated at the top. Considering the aspect of social relations (King et al., 2009), the perceptions of

social order influenced how the participants saw themselves in the world. Through self-authorship, the participants experiences, both positive and negative, were used to define their African-American identity, social interaction with peers, and their belief of racial order.

### **The Siloed**

The data collection process highlighted an emerging theme where participants exhibited pride and resiliency within their racial group. Surprisingly, I found participants used isolation to protect their positive self-perceptions. Throughout all focus groups, some participants displayed a relentless attitude to remain proud of their Black identity. In these instances, participants demonstrated indifference toward others and isolated themselves as a coping mechanism to avoid racial profiling, stereotyping, and verbal slights. These coping mechanisms are featured prominently in the literature on African American student experiences at PWIs (Harper, 2015; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Oh et al., 2017; Rivera et al., 2010). This means participants isolated themselves intentionally or unintentionally from students and staff to avoid discriminatory, racist, and demeaning experiences to protect and preserve their dignity. Extant research confirms similar coping behaviors of students of color to avoid oppression, microaggressions, or blunted feelings of belonging on campus (Lui, 2017; Strayhorn 2014; Milner, 2007). In these moments, the coping does not feed into negative stereotypes (e.g., angry Black woman or scary Black man) and it shows the oppressor that their action had little effect on the oppressed person (Oh et al., 2017). I conclude that the participants may have shielded their positive self-identity perceptions from potential oppression from White faculty, staff, and students at Bryant. by using isolation as a coping mechanism.

The effects of racial order diminish positive perceptions of Black identity and decrease sense of belonging on campus or in the community for African-Americans, which confirms prior research (Blake, 2018; Foster, 2005; Gin et al., 2017; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). Racial order awareness is always a precursor for students to navigate community climates. The outcome of the perceived environment leads to racial group consciousness, feelings of inferiority, and forced isolation (Nadal et al., 2014). In fact, isolation is likely not what my participants would have chosen as a coping strategy but what they had to do in order to be successful on a predominantly White campus. In addition to the participants' community and campus experiences, I found pre-college experiences attributed to an awareness of racial order, such as neighborhood relationships and high school experiences (Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Some of the participants experienced stereotyping and microaggressions from Whites in their communities that made them question their Blackness, such as questions about mixed racial identity or hair (Harper, 2015; Prstowsky, 2008). I conclude that the participants reported a near unanimous notion of the way racial order affected them by drawing from experiences prior to college, external occurrences in the larger community, and interactions with campus members. Thus, racial order is formed and demonstrated in how the society, community, and campus recognizes, acknowledges, and includes African-American students.

The methods used to navigate the social climate on campus and the community connected to a low sense of belonging for African-American Students, confirming important existing research (Johnson, 2012; Morrison et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2014). The participants in retold stories about feeling invisible and devalued as a result of their race

(Johnson, 2012). They struggled to explain the racial climate on campus because they felt like a “ghost” and non-existent (Smith, 2017). These feelings resulted from a low number of African-American students on campus, a lack of social experiences that could connect students, and a lack of interest from staff and administration in their unique experiences as African Americans (Johnson, 2012; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Therefore, participants felt siloed because of the low numbers of Black students on campus, the amenities and privileges automatically afforded to White students, and the plethora of microaggressions they experienced (Foster, 2005; Nadal et al., 2014). This experience supported Strayhorn’s (2014) conclusion that White students represent the largest racial population at institutions of higher education. The privilege of being the largest population at an institution comes with living and learning in an environment where faculty, staff, and students mostly identify like oneself (Strayhorn, 2014). The opposite of privileged experiences, for African-American students specifically, was exposed in this study (Debb et al., 2014). Comparable to Peterson’s (2009) study of participants who were numerically viewed as a minority race on that campus, the participants in my study reported discriminatory experiences as a result of their race and minoritized position. This study did not showcase racial perspectives from the oppressor’s viewpoint or from a dominant racial group. Therefore, I cannot support the Rivera and colleagues (2010) conclusion that race salience depends on the oppressor’s viewpoint. Moreover, present findings support Rivera and colleagues (2010) notion that race salience manifest through racial joking, profiling, and discrimination. Thus, I conclude that the participants’ experiences with oppression and their awareness of low numbers of African-American’s in their environment heightens the students’ emotional perceptions of racial

order and psychologically reduces the Black students' development of self-identity. This forces them to realize their lack of privilege and amenities as a result of race.

In addition, the present study also confirmed the critical need for have Black faculty and student leader representation to create a sense of belonging among Black students as asserted by much prior research (Foster, 2005; Gin et al., 2017; Johnson, 2012; Womack, 2018). I conclude African American student internal struggles and to be seen as academically and socially equal to their White peers (Karkouti, 2016; King, 2011) is also connected to their consciousness of a low number of other African-Americans on campus.

### **The Inferior**

Superiority is a foundational pillar of racism (Karkouti, 2016) and the manifestation of racial order has been conceptually grounded on an ideal that superior races dominate inferior ones (Lui, 2017; Strayhorn 2014; Milner, 2007). This framework informed and was confirmed by the illustration exercise with the participants and subsequent focus group discussions. Historically, the diminished value of Blacks in comparison to Whites, due to systemic oppression that started with slavery and Jim Crow laws, positioned one race lower than the other (Karkouti, 2016; Womack, 2016). Despite constitutional and state legislation to support the abolishment of slavery, the creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, ending Jim Crow and desegregation, and recent legal acts to establish access to human rights, the historical events have created a base for racial order to manifest (Debb et al., 2018; Karkouti, 2016; Strayhorn, 2014; Womack, 2016). As a pervasive result, race continues to be the most salient identity for African American college students and college may be the premier environment for them

to discover identity and overcome socio-cultural barriers (Richey, 2014). If this is the case, colleges and universities must align their practices to extend privileges to all students and work to eliminate the perpetuation of racial inferiority felt by students from communities of color. For example, at Bryant University, African-American history courses are lower in credit hour value, while American, British, and European history courses are greater. This skewed academic standard is a manifestation of racial order and a vestige of oppression. Further, it sends a clear and racist message to students about what the institution values (Foster, 2005; Johnson, 2012) and many Black students at Bryant may realize that they clearly are not. Not adjusting or getting rid of this glaring oversight, inadvertently but decidedly, positions African-American history, culture, and experience as inferior and reinforces White dominance (Womack, 2016). Thus, I conclude historical moments on a macro level (e.g., slavery, segregation, Jim Crow) hinder the institution's ability to view African-American history as equal on a micro level (e.g., culturally equal academic curriculum, diversity programming, and social organizations for African-Americans) (Mwangi et al., 2018). As a result, Black students and others are less likely to enroll in similar courses because they are not weighted as equals in credit value.

Participants' experiences with microaggressions align with Iverson and Jagers' (2015) framework of deficit ideology. Deficit ideology, in this case, means that participants had internalized racist perspectives and begun to view themselves as inferior. Some participants felt Bryant University was not asserting the institutional culture they initially promoted when they recruited the students. For example, some participants explained their campus visits and orientation appeared to be socially friendly and

inclusive. However, once they enrolled participants perceived the institutional culture supported dominant racial groups instead of all students. These instances align with Aldana's (2002) findings where students experienced deficit ideology, including lack of diversity programming, social organizations, and staff and faculty representation for African-American; despite the advertised institutional culture of welcoming, caring for, and guiding all students. This means that the participants felt the institution's initial presentation of positive climate, open culture, and welcoming diversity and inclusion was misleading. I argue that the participants did not enjoy campus life and that the majority of them communicated a strong desire to leave BU. Although the institution marketed good intentions to recruit a diverse student population (promoted in the mission, vision, and values), it failed to create a supportive organizational culture to help African American students thrive at Bryant.

I conclude that my participants felt inferior on campus because of actions by faculty, staff, administrators, and peers who did not do enough to create a welcoming climate and who made oppressive remarks toward the students. Second, the participants did not strongly connect to the institution because they were unable to engage with campus members of their same race. Next, African-American students craved participation in social gatherings on campus. Finally, African-American students wanted to see a consistent and diverse institutional culture (e.g., welcoming campus life, various cultural events, vibrant activities, and race- or ethnicity- related social organizations) as a message from the institution that, as African Americans, they no longer need to feel inferior or unvalued.

This study also reflected the findings of literature on racial profiling and stereotype threat from people of authority in both campus and community climates (Foster, 2005; Gin, 2017). Two participants perceived negative encounters with police officers in the community (DeVylder & Hunt, 2017). Racial profiling occurred in this study during faculty to student and student to peer interactions (Johnson, 2012; King 2011). In comparison to Iverson and Jagger's (2015) conclusions, I found six participants were negatively profiled as uneducated athletes or extensively surveyed by law enforcement in both campus and community climates. Specifically, participants reported disadvantages in classroom experiences because faculty wrongfully profiled student athletes as unmotivated confirming what Iverson and Jagger (2015) asserted. In addition, participants explained moments of profiling where law enforcement perceived them as suspicious (DeVylder & Hunt, 2017; Epp et al., 2017). This means it is essential for African-American students at PWIs to develop an awareness of self-identity and an equal awareness of how others perceive them. A related conclusion, and pivotal pillar of racial order, is that Black students must be cognizant of how authoritative figures in the community perceive African Americans (Oh et al., 2017). A lack of awareness of how authoritative figures perceive African Americans could result in physical harm or even death (Epp et al., 2017). I argue that it is not merely enough to understand how other races or marginalized groups see African-Americans; all individuals must equally invest in learning about their own racial identity, and then how their racial identity may affect authoritative personnel (Oh et al., 2017).

Experiences of microaggressions also contributed to feelings of inferiority. Through counter storytelling, participants explained navigational strategies as a result of

the microaggressions they faced (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018; Iverson, 2007; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Ultimately, how participants drew meaning from their experiences determined their overall outcome of minoritized populations was affected by racial order (Jones, 2009). My study supported previous literature demonstrating that negative experiences and mistreatment on campus and in the community attribute to White faculty perceiving African American students to be of low socioeconomic statuses and exhibit lawless traits (Nadal et al., 2014; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Rivera et al., 2010). This study also reinforced that microaggressions lead to lack of motivation, invisibility, and low sense of belonging for Black college students (Foster, 2005; Smith, 2017; Nadal et al., 2014; Rivera et al., 2010). As suggested by Sue and colleagues (2007), the participants unknowingly explained each form of microaggressions that happened to them including microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. During each focus group, several participants shared experiences of intentional verbal assaults, invalidations by faculty, and insults by oppressive statements or actions from peers as a result of race (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Although all the participants identified as women, none of them alluded to their gender being a result of oppressive and microaggressive experiences. However, results of my study complimented the literature with evidence that all of the women in this study reported being targeted more than their White peers and experiencing racial harassment (Rankin & Reason, 2005).

During the study, the participants unknowingly showcased multiple moments of their Black identity development in forms of illustrations, counter storytelling, and facilitating dialogue. Describing racial order, developing navigational tools, and identifying outcomes of racial order are essential in Black student identity development

(Cross, 1971, 1991; Vandiver et al., 2002). Research shows Blacks that accept White dominant ideologies experienced low levels of self-confidence (Chapman Hillard & Beasley, 2018). However, Blacks who accepted their identity and were exposed to Black education had a positive impact on their identity development (Vandiver et al., 2002). Although this study does not pinpoint when racial consciousness and Black identity development occurs, the discussion summarizes experiences that birthed racial and cultural consciousness, prompting identity development for African-American students.

Using CRT strategies of counter storytelling and facilitating dialogue, a large part of the focus group meetings was dedicated to counter storytelling to find commonalities in the participants' shared lived experiences (Chapman & Beasley, 2018; Iverson, 2007; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Thus, the focus group meeting space was unconsciously transformed into a counterspace where students challenged narratives of racial privilege and retold their personal life experiences. It follows that the participants may share feelings of inferiority, otherness, and alienation at BU. Additionally, defining, perceiving, experiencing, or navigating racial order is difficult for participants to do without storytelling. Therefore, another relevant conclusion is that recanting oppressive and microaggressive experiences is the fundamental approach for expounding on racial order.

### **The Transformation**

The participants explained how they made meaning of racial order and the impact of that meaning affected their identity development (King et al., 2009; Magolda, 2004). Interactions that constructed racial order perspectives occurred in both community and campus locations, transpiring during younger ages as well as their current college career

(Seay, 2004). Seven of the twelve participants explained how they would like to see a transformational reform, positioning African-American students either on the top of the hierarchal order or aligning all races in an equitable framework (Ritchey, 2014).

Participants shared moments where they received motivational talks from parents or peers which confirmed Oh and colleagues' (2017) research. Parents play a vital role in preparing African-American children for conflicts with and challenges from White authoritative figures on campus and in the community (Oh et al., 2017). My study provided a concise example of a parent challenging their child to persist and succeed despite racial stereotypes which was supported by King's (2011) perception of self-efficacy and racial affiliation. Therefore, the parents encouraged emotional and mental transformational of self-perceptions for their children, despite the harsh reality of societal perceptions. Parental support was also framed by Chapman-Hillard and Beasley (2018) to encourage students to push beyond societal perceptions. I found that perennial socio-political issues, like access to housing and education, transportation, or the wealth gap are connected to racial order as discussed by Johnson and Arbonda (2006) and Hochschild and colleagues (2012). The participants of the present study mentioned racial positioning was determined by wealth, housing location, and educational attainment. I conclude the participants and their parents were aware of limitations as a result of race. In addition, their awareness led to aspirations to transform internal and external identity perceptions for African Americans.

As I mentioned above, about half of the participants showed strong sense of self-respect and pride in their Black identities. To them, this sense of pride enabled them to aspire to transform their perceived bottom-status into a equal status with others. This

confirms research by Vandiver et al. (2002) who suggested that African Americans who develop this proud Black identity take away emotional and psychological benefits. Despite this pride, some of the participants expressed two different perceptions of racial order; though they understood not all members of other racial groups would view them as favorably as they, their pride remained unswerving and supported their strong sense of their Black identity challenging social norms (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018; Magolda, 2004). I conclude that despite their perceptions of how society ranks African-Americans, they do not agree with their ranking (Vandiver et al., 2002). I interpret this to mean that the sum of their lived experiences was directly connected to Black identity development (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018; Mivelle et al., 2005).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) challenges how racism and institutional systems, such as schools or colleges and universities, maintain racial inequality (Iverson, 2007). CRT re-imagined the act of making meaning through counter storytelling and facilitating dialogue, which encourages students to explore, articulate, and understand their experiences (Iverson, 2007). Throughout this dissertation study, students shared stories within a group setting we identified as a safe space (Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018). While listening to other participants share their stories, I encouraged participants to make meaning of their own experiences with racial order on campus and in the community and find solidarity within the shared experiences of their focus group members (Iverson, 2007; Jones, 2009; King et al., 2009; Magolda, 2004). Accordingly, making meaning cultivates a transformational identity moment for African-American students. Thus, nigrescence explained the journey of becoming Black, explanation of Blackness, and consciousness of the Black identity process for African-Americans (Ritchey, 2014).

Conversely, the participants defined racial order as an internal transformative concept that African-Americans are equal to other races and should be treated as such (Cross, 1971, 1991; Vandiver, 2002). The participants' illustrations described a transformative desire to move racial order beyond current societal norms or frames (Ritchey, 2014). I argue that the majority of the participants felt racial order was imposed on them. I conclude racial order positioning is not solely based on race, but on the intersection of race with other identities (e.g., class, socioeconomic status, gender, athleticism) and racial order can be transformed by African Americans who gain, develop, and sustain positive racial identity development. This transformation will result in a reformation of the racial order, the repositioning of African-Americans, or the outright eradication of the concept of racial order.

It is important to note the aforementioned themes or properties of racial order (e.g. *The Caboose*, *The Siloed*, *The Inferior*, and *The Transformation*) are nonlinear components. They are equal components within the essence of racial order; no one is greater than the other. The next section provides practitioners, campus leaders, and institutional members with implications, recommendations, and strategies to aid racial order perceptions.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

This section introduces recommendations for college educators who must create positive change for African-American students at PWIs and who must do their part to change societal racial order perspectives which impact college students, higher education institutions, and the communities in which they are located. Connecting academic and social learning experiences is the ultimate goal of higher education, and repeatedly

emphasized in BU's mission, vision, and values. These include focusing on holistic learners, creating positive change agents, having a global vision, and engaging in diversity and social justice.

### **Curricular and Co-curricular Innovations**

The institution should implement a variety of curricular and co-curricular changes. First, the academic leadership of the institution must make all courses with specific culture content equal in credits, including African-American history, culture, or literature courses. The value of racial or cultural content in one course must not be lower than any other course. Furthermore, in the liberal arts programs, faculty must expand their course offerings to include African-American cultural courses and increase content on the African-American experience within current courses.

Second, learning communities should be implemented to increase student connection to their academic and social environment. In this instance, learning communities will become a support and foundation for all new students. Learning communities have long shown promise in college student success, academic achievement, and social integration (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). One specific learning community at Bryant should include students of color who live together in a specific residence hall and who take at least one course together in the same major or general discipline. The community would include out of class social and educational events with faculty, staff, and external constituents, including community partners. A learning community aims to increase the sense of the belonging for students (Johnson, 2012). Housing and residence life members can take the practice a step further to create

living learning communities within the halls. Thus, the outcome of a living learning community will develop a supportive residential climate to increase positive self-identity.

Third, require students to participate in two high impact practices (AACU, 2005). According to Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP, 2005), high impact practices include first year programming, intensive writing, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, internships, service learning, capstone projects, and global learning. As a mandatory requirement, one high impact practice must be completed within their first academic year of enrollment. These practices have been shown to benefit students from historically underserved backgrounds (AACU, 2005). The outcome of high impact practice implementations should increase retention and student engagement, thus, fulfilling institutional goals for academic persistence, creating global leaders and developing holistic learners with a focus on diversity.

Fourth, campus leaders should also create an online portal for students to report incidents where they may have felt oppressed because of their race, ethnicity. Along with this portal, the institution should create a Hate/Bias Incident Team which would review the reports and potentially connect with and serve oppressed students. This will track incidents in order to implement better practices to serve the students and disrupt racial oppression on campus. In addition, the team will assess institutional accountability from a hate/bias perspective, observe the climate and institutional culture, and establish a network of trained responders for future incidents.

Although administrators must seek to create a vibrant and welcoming campus life for all campus constituents, this goal is even more vital for African-American students who, according to the findings, recommended offering more social organizations and

increasing social interactions with all campus members. Two students compared Bryant University to a “commuter school” and “community college” explaining that the institution does not have much to offer outside of sports and academics. Therefore, formal counter spaces at PWIs are mandatory for African-American students and other marginalized communities to communicate challenges and find support from same race peers.

The student success department should collaborate with the athletic department to properly welcome athletes during their conditioning and training in the summer months, prior to fall enrollment. Comparable to a summer bridge program, this initiative should emphasize introductions to campus resources, the campus events calendar, and mandatory learning community seminars. The athletic and student success departments can track athlete student success by assessing progress in academic courses and attendance of advising appointments, academic coaching sessions, and student sponsored events.

### **Athletic Department Innovations**

Athletic Directors should provide sociocultural or social racial awareness training for athletic coaches and all athletes. This will help individuals go beyond their authoritative coaching role or role as player to provide advice on social issues and personal experiences, while also learning to recognize and identify race related concerns for marginalized populations. Coaches should also be required to distinguish and recommend various services on campus to students of color who may struggle (e.g., counseling services, student success, and campus organizations, and university advisement). The outcome of the training should enable coaches to encourage students to

expand their time on campus, experiencing the university as more than just an athlete. Coaches should embolden students to explore social organizations, work study, and support through residential living. The Athletic and Student Success Department should together create a student athlete success checklist to encourage and enforce a holistic student experience. The checklist would require students to participate in a student organization year-round, work at an internship related to their intended career, and participate in a professional mentorship program facilitated by a professional staff member.

### **Faculty and Staff Training and Development**

Participants in this study described the essence of racial order as mostly negative experiences of cultural and racial awareness. Although these interactions were not limited to campus experiences alone, participants highlighted multiple moments where student peers and faculty members displayed forms of microaggressions. Campus administrators must implement strategies to reduce these negative campus experiences. A part of the nigrecence theory elaborated the journey to Blackness as Black consciousness in relation to other races. I argue campus community members should participate in racial bias training and engage in conversations and seminars on racial perceptions and factors that socially construct the hierarchal orders of race. Similar to an onboarding process for new employees where one must learn about the culture of the institution and proceed with formal job training or safe space training that highlights ally development for the LGBTQ+ community, the Diversity and Inclusion department can design a parallel training or curriculum with racial constructs at the forefront. Within this curriculum, facilitators need to expose campus members to conversations about

White privilege, power and oppression, and the effects of systemic and historical marginalization.

We also know that faculty are major institutional and socialization agents for the success or failure of college students. This role positions them responsible for the impact they have on the college students in the classroom and beyond. Faculty should host a training that exposes them to theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory (CRT), nigresence, and multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) as a part of a quarterly series on Racial Bias Training. Focusing on CRT, faculty must understand barriers African-American students face at PWIs. In addition, concepts connected to nigresence will aid faculty in understanding how awareness of race is linked the student's journey of Blackness. Integrating MMDI into the series will support the notion that same race does not always equal same characteristics or traits. The outcome of the training will result in faculty awareness of the Black student experience help. With the help of the aforementioned theories, faculty will also learn that identity development at the college level is critical moment for African-American students.

Finally, provosts, deans and department chairs must hold faculty accountable to refrain from microaggressions, racial profiling, and undervaluing African American students. Too many incidents in which the participants felt oppressed originated from faculty on campus. This is not acceptable and must stop. Faculty who continue with these behaviors ought to be put on notice or forced to go through a performance management process led by their chair or dean.

### **Recommendation for Student Affairs Practitioners**

The findings of the present study point to several non-trivial implications for student affairs practitioners. As a high touch partner of student success and retention initiatives, academic advisers should have the ability to discuss engagement and on campus involvement with students and actively enroll them in student organizations through student portals. Thus, course registration and social organization engagement should occur consecutively.

Regarding enrollment management, new student recruitment strategies should consider holistic approaches to inform prospective students BU has on campus support for marginalized students. The enrollment department should market and advertise high impact practices as strategies to increase student engagement, connection to the university, and reaffirm student career decisions. In addition, recruitment efforts must inform students from marginalized backgrounds that BU has the unique support they need to achieve academically and pursue their social and collegiate goals. For example, the unique support for African-American students may be in the form of a professional to student mentorship program, study abroad opportunities, and specific annual events. Recruitment strategies could also use written student reflections in marketing materials, echoing the positive opportunities and support BU created for African-American students.

In a focus group a participant suggested Bryant University recruit more Black student leaders and increase representation on campus. I argue, the director of orientation or student activities must obtain a diverse student leader population. When new Black students see that they are represented in campus organizations and acknowledged as leaders on campus, it provides them with assurance that they are welcomed, respected,

and valued. Additionally, Black student leader representation gives other Black students a source to connect with from day one on campus.

In addition to increasing Black student leader representation, BU should create a mentoring program for students of color, with an emphasis on recruiting African-American students. Open to all staff and faculty, professionals can choose two students to mentor per semester. Initially, interest must be prompted from staff and faculty members. With this initiative, each faculty or staff member will reach out and offer services, advice, and suggestive points of for personal, academic, and professional success.

### **Policies, Rules, and Standards**

The Student Success department and executive leadership should develop institutional policies mandating participation in first-year student learning communities. Such learning communities are a practice of grouping first-time, first-year college students by common interest (e.g., major, race, organization). An institutional policy would require incoming first-time freshmen to participate which would include African-American students and help build a connection with other students and their environment. This effort could ultimately impact their first-year experience and beyond. To go a step further, policies could be designed to include at-risk sophomores and juniors to increase their connection to campus, with hopes of positive impacts on retention. In this instance, students within the FLC would be required to seek out counselor services, advisement, and financial aid offices to aid in their perception of a supportive campus climate.

Research has shown that standardized college admission testing (e.g., ACT and SAT) creates a disadvantage for African Americans and other student of color because they lack financial assistance, parental support, and wealthy school districts (Fraire, 2014). These amenities are vital to achieve high test scores necessary for admissions and college course placement. Therefore, administration should amend college admission requirements and create a new policy with the SAT and ACT tests as optional for first time freshmen students. Removing this requirement will provide access for a wider range of students from marginalized groups.

This study demonstrated the strong influence Black faculty members have on Black students, while also demonstrating the impact the absence of Black faculty members have on Black students throughout their academic career. As a result, the administration should require academic deans to intentionally recruit, hire, and retain qualified Black faculty members throughout multiple undergraduate programs within given national, state, and local policies. Ultimately, a new standard should be created to sustain faculty that resemble a similar percentage of the population they serve; this standard should be implemented for all marginalized populations.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Further research is needed to examine the concept of dual identity oppression (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Specifically, one must research the dual identity of Black students and student athletes. Several participants who were involved in athletic sports at the institution mentioned the combination of both Black and student athlete as a disadvantage. I suggest scholars, athletic directors, and coaches should study the combination of identifying as Black and a student athlete. Several of the participants

viewed their dual identities as hindrances in the classroom and academic spaces. On a national level for institutions of higher education, I suggest undergraduate deans and athletic directors meet to discuss these student experiences and gather focus group data to verify the emerging theme from this study. Then, administrators can meet with coaches and faculty members to eliminate future classroom interactions, to help eradicate low sense of belonging for Black student athletes in academic spaces.

Further research is needed to explore why Black female students were more willing than their male peers to participate in the study. Compared to students who chose not to participate, scholars should research the level of interest in the topic by comparing females to their male counterparts (e.g., impact of topic and financial incentive). I also suggest scholars develop a similar study with a quantitative approach to researching racial order perceptions for African American students, Black female athletes and belonging, the connection between persistence and oppression, and additional qualitative studies with various methodologies (e.g., narrative, journals, ethnographies).

### **Limitations**

To participate in this study, the participants needed to identify as African-American undergraduates who had completed at least one academic year of coursework at Bryant University. Of 833 undergraduate students, I was able to recruit 12 African-Americans to participant in this study. Although this study aimed recruit members of all genders, only two men showed initial interest in the research. Unfortunately, they did not respond to follow up communication and the request to set up focus group participation. As a result, all participants of the study identified as women. This is a limitation as

members of other genders may have conceptualized and navigated racial order differently.

Although Minkel-Lacocque (2013) summarized negative racial experiences and microaggressions lead to long term effects and emotional damage, this study only takes into account participants' experiences to date. This study did not focus only on exploring the lived experiences with racial order of biracial or multi-racial students. Some of the students shared with me that their primary identity is Black, but they also identified with other racial and ethnic groups. More research is needed to compare perceptions of racial order for students who identify as multiracial, including Black, in comparison to students who only identify as Black.

A final limitation may be inherent in the focus group moderation. Perhaps as a principal investigator, I could have prompted better follow up questions to the participants that were not as forthcoming, talkative, or open with their responses. This would have provided equal opportunities for participants to share their lived experiences, as well as additional data to consider for analysis and reporting. At some points during data collection, some participants dominated the discussion of theory focus group which may have stifled the chance for others to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences.

### **Summary of the Study**

Overall, little published research has acknowledged and documented racial order perceptions for African-American college women, how they describe racial order and how they make sense of their experiences that create awareness of that order. This study supports the definition of racial order as a systemic set of beliefs and assumptions, rules, and practices that shape how social groups interact with one another (Hoschild et al.,

2012). This study was prompted by the lack of focus on the undergraduate experience, social interactions, and campus climate perceptions for African-American students at a specific Southern institution, Bryant University. I chose to explore racial order through a constructivist framework in a phenomenological study by exploring and aiming to understand participants' lived experiences to distill the essence of racial order for African-American students at BU.

I asked each participant to draw an illustration of racial order and participate in a series of focus group discussion on the topic of racial order perceptions in their environments (Seay, 2004). This study is significant because African-American women, as a marginalized group, are exposed to an array of experiences that perpetuate a consistent hierarchy based on race and gender (Lechuga et al., 2009; Rankin & Reason, 2005). The literature review chapter highlighted historical events about oppression and discrimination, featured theoretical frameworks to center the experiences of minoritized students, and explained microaggressive and oppressive experiences from a Black female student perspective. In addition, the literature review emphasized concepts such as cultural consciousness in the campus and community climates, internalization of racial order, and outcomes affected by racial positioning.

I chose phenomenology as the methodology of the study with the intention to study the participants' lived experiences with the social phenomenon of racial order (Lin, 2013). A series of qualitative research questions were used to stimulate relevant information about a) African-American student perceptions of racial order; b) experiences that created an awareness of racial order; and c) meaning created as a result of racial order.

I used pen and coding to categorize the data into themes of a) hierarchical illustrations of racial order; b) feelings of isolation; b) racial order and oppression on campus and in the community; and c) making meaning of racial order. The conclusion and answer to the central question framed the essence of racial order for African-American students as caboose, siloed, inferior, and transformative. The study closes with implications, recommendations for practice, suggestions for further research, limitations, and call to action.

### **Call to Action**

I hope reading this study will motivate student affairs practitioners, faculty members, researchers, and executive leaders at institutions of higher education to become more aware of the experiences of African American college students at PWIs. African-Americans have been oppressed in this country for 400 years, including slavery, Jim Crow laws, racial segregation in cities, schools, and universities, as well as pervasive prejudice, discrimination, racial profiling, systemic oppression, and police brutality. We have arrived in a time where black lives are still endangered at the hands of Whites in a system of White supremacy. Perceptions of racial order, and subsequent manifestation of oppression, bottom-rung placement, frustration, isolation, and lack of belonging continue to be issues facing Black college students today. If the institutional mission and goals include language related to diversity and inclusion efforts, providing equal access, or developing holistic learners, then campus leaders must plan to include actual student voices, experiences, and feedback into the strategic planning process. When African-American students feel isolated, siloed, and inferior on their campus as a result of their race, then their perceptions will play a large factor in their persistence, academic

achievement, and overall success. According to Athens (2018) student perceptions of academic programs were based on interactions with peers with a direct connection to student success. Therefore, examining the racial climate will benefit African-American students by reducing perceptions of racial hostility and the institution by increasing positive student experience affecting persistence.

Furthermore, negative racial interactions with students and faculty will play a monumental part with long term effects on their Black identity development. If the goal is to prepare, empower, and educate the holistic student, then institutional leaders must realize the racial identity is the primary and prominent part of the student. Thus, institutional leaders must attend to the needs of African-American students and their racial perceptions while also creating an environment to engage and challenge all other campus members on their racial perceptions, biases, and predispositions.

I argued here, with the support of empirical and theoretical literature, as well as my own study and findings, that the undergraduate experience is a critical moment in Black identity development. Consequently, with negative interactions from peers, faculty, and campus members, the overall college experience could prove to be detrimental for African-American who report feeling inferior, siloed, and in last place. Like researchers before me, I charge student affairs professional to aid students in discovering their value, help establish confidence in their identities, and provide opportunities (e.g., organizations, living learning communities, and social meeting spaces) for students to engage and serve their same race peers (Iverson & Jagers, 2015; King, 2011; Womack). I challenge institutional leaders to adopt culturally-responsive curricula that address social constructs, racial perceptions, and pre-dispositions of campus

and community experiences for all college students. Institutions must continuously and conscientiously confront and learn from the historical, social, and political impacts of racism. If institutions heed this call, we can do our part to significantly reduce racial hostility on college campuses and achieve what my participants aspired to achieve: the transcendence of racial order on campus and in the community.

To engender change and growth on college campuses, one first must realize their racial dominance and position. Next, one must look to educate themselves on various racial perspectives aside from their own race. Third, one must apply their awareness of racial order and knowledge of various racial perspectives to transform the racial climate on campus. As dominant group members (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class), it is ultimately the administration's responsibility to change the culture and provide practices that support diversity and inclusion at Bryant University.

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APPENDIX A:  
INFORMED CONSENT (EXEMPT)

Title: African American Student Perceptions of Racial Order at Predominately White Institutions  
Principal Investigator: Curtis L. Coleman  
Co-Investigator(s): n/a  
Faculty Sponsor if Student Investigator or Outside Researcher: n/a  
Funding Agency (if applicable): n/a

### **Procedures**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. If you decide to take part, you will a research study about your perceptions of racial order as well as your thoughts on the impact it has on peer relations on campus, student identity development, and community experiences. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand how African American college students perceive racial order in academic and social environments.

We will conduct up to two focus groups of 6 undergraduate students at Bryant University. Focus groups will be arranged according to the participants' schedules and will take place in a location on campus which guarantees the confidentiality of information shared. All focus groups will be audio recorded and will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Your total time commitment will be no more than five hours during the month of November 2019. Aside from focus groups, you will spend time communicating on e-mail with the researcher to check the investigator's interpretations of your contributions (member checks) once all focus groups are completed.

### **Alternatives**

Risks are negligible. You may experience negative thoughts or feelings about your experience as a participant in the research. During the focus groups, you may choose to skip any question that makes you uncomfortable.

### **Compensation**

The information will be used to offer insight to institutions about how African American students perceive racial order on campus and the larger community. Participants will receive a total of \$40 in cash for their engagement in this study, \$10 immediately after each focus group meeting, and \$10 after completing the member check.

### **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal**

You do not have to be in this study. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate or to stop participating, you will not lose any benefits that you would otherwise receive.

A pseudonym will be chosen in place of your name on all written records, focus group transcripts, and in the final report. Transcriptions will be kept indefinitely under lock and key. Should this research be presented in a written publication, or during a presentation, your name will not be mentioned, nor any other identifiable information about your institution.

### **Contact Information**

Contact Curtis Coleman at 912-508-3362 or [Curtis.coleman@bryant.edu](mailto:Curtis.coleman@bryant.edu)

- If you have questions about the study or your part in it
- If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study
- If you think you have been harmed by the study

Contact the Chair of the Bryant University Institutional Research Board, Dr. Jeffrey C. Rupp at 770-426-2771 or irb@bryant.edu

- if you have questions about your rights as a research participant
- if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research

**Consent**

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX B:  
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

## Focus Group Questions

In these focus groups we will discuss your thoughts on racial order, racial climate on campus, racial climate in the community, and how racial order is created. At the start of the first focus group, each participant will be asked to take 3-5mins to draw an illustration of racial. The illustration should answer the following:

- What does racial order look like for you?
- Where is your race ranked in comparison to other races?

Each participant will be asked to explain illustration in detail. Additionally, the illustrations will be reference during each focus group session and reviewed during data analysis.

### Focus Group Meeting 1:

- a) Define racial order.
  - a. Is race your primary identity? Why or why not?
    - i. How is your primary identity reflected in your illustration?
- b) Share a story where you realized your position within the order of race on campus and/or in the community.
  - a. Based on your response, do you feel like that has strengthened or weakened your position as a student and why?
- c) Using your illustration as a source, describe where you see others (on campus or in the community) on the spectrum of racial order.
  - a. Why do you think African American students are ranked first, last, etc.?
- d) What initially compelled you to enroll at Bryant University?
  - a. Did you acknowledge your position in racial order before attending Bryant University?
  - b. Describe the racial barriers you foresaw, if any, before attending Bryant University

### Focus Group Meeting 2:

- a) How is racial order created or implemented?
  - a. Share an experience where you've challenged others in a conversation because you felt racially profiled, discriminated against, or threatened because of race?
- b) How would you describe the racial climate on campus and in the community?
  - a. Explain how your illustration reflects the racial climate on campus and in the community.
  - b. Describe the similarities or differences of racial order on campus vs. the community.
- c) How can you tell if a peer is potentially ranked higher than you in racial order?
  - a. How does that make you feel?
- d) How can you tell if a peer is potentially ranked lower than you in racial order?
  - a. Please give an example of both lower and higher rankings of racial order.

### Focus Group Meeting 3:

- a) Describe the power you have to reposition your racial order?
  - a. Please share an experience where you feel like your racial order changed in an environment.

- b) How does society or community influence racial order on campus?
  - a. In regard to racial order, how does the racial climate on campus reflect the community? Why?
- c) Given the challenges you have discussed in these sessions, explain your reasons for choosing to stay at Bryant University?
  - a. What does a welcoming campus look like for you? In what ways does Bryant University fit that?
  - b. How would your experiences at Bryant University change if you were a different race?
    - i. Using your illustration, please mark where your order would change if you were a different race.
  - c. How would your experiences at Bryant change if you were White?
    - i. Using your illustration, please mark where your order would change if you were White.
- d) If another African American student was considering enrolling at Bryant University, what advice would you give the student?
  - a. Which experiences would you share?
  - b. What would you say to prepare them for the racial climate on campus and in the community?
- e) What role do you play in supporting other African American students at Bryant University?

APPENDIX C:

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL ORDER SURVEY

**African American Student Perceptions of Racial Order Survey**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Institution:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Year in College (please circle):** 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> or beyond

**Major:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Current Living Arrangement (please circle):**  
Residence Hall   Off-campus House/apartment   Fraternity/Sorority House  
Parent/Guardian's home   Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**How much face-to-face contact (conversations lasting longer than 30 minutes) during a regular week do you have with campus members who are supposedly "higher" in racial order than you? – please circle:**

Very Little (0-1 hour)   Little (2-3 hours)   Some (4-5 hours)   Quite a bit (6-7 hours)  
A lot (8 hours or more)

**How much face-to-face contact (conversations lasting longer than 30 minutes) during a regular week do you have with campus members who are supposedly "lower" in racial order than you? – please circle:**

Very Little (0-1 hour)   Little (2-3 hours)   Some (4-5 hours)   Quite a bit (6-7 hours)  
A lot (8 hours or more)

**Below is a list of common events you could be involved in or experienced. Please indicate involvement by either circling Yes or No based on your entire college experience up to this point**

Organized sports (intercollegiate athletics, club team, or intramurals)

Yes   No

Performed in theater, music, or arts programs or events

Yes   No

Felt that you didn't belong or unwanted on campus as a result of your race

Yes   No

Participated in discussions on campus climate perceptions

Yes   No

Racially profiled by a student

Yes   No

Racially profiled by a faculty or staff member

Yes   No

How many registered student organizations are you currently a member of \_\_\_\_\_ N/A

How many hours per week do you work for an on-campus job \_\_\_\_\_ N/A

Approximately how many times do you visit professor office hours per academic year \_\_\_\_\_ N/A

Approximately how many times do you discuss race related issues on campus with students \_\_\_\_\_ N/A

Approximately how many times do you discuss race related issues on campus with faculty and staff \_\_\_\_\_ N/A

APPENDIX D:  
STUDENT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

October 10, 2019

Dear Bryant University Student:

The African American Perceptions of Racial Order at Predominately White Institutions (AAPROPWI) study explores African American students' perceptions of and experiences with racial order. If you identify as African American or Black, we hope you will consider participating in a 60 to 90-minute three-part focus group, with 14 other students at Bryant University. Studies on racial order are not often conducted, but they are very important to understand more about the perceptions of campus climate, factors that influence identity development, and how students manage racial climates at Predominately White Institutions.

If you are interested, our scheduled focus groups will take place at the end of October 2019, throughout the beginning of November. You either can participate in group A, meeting on Mondays from 4-6pm or group B, meeting on Wednesdays from 4-6pm. All focus groups will be audio recorded and meetings will be held in the Office of Sponsored Research conference room. Once your focus group has been scheduled, your total time commitment will be no more than five hours. Aside from focus groups, you will communicate with us one more time via e-mail to authenticate our interpretations of your contributions (member checks) after the focus group. After each meeting you will receive \$10 in cash, for a total of \$40.

There are no foreseeable risks to your participation but during the focus groups you may choose to skip any question that makes you uncomfortable. A fake name will be chosen in place of your name on all written records, focus group transcripts, and in the final report. Should this research be presented in an article, or during a presentation, your name will not be mentioned, nor any other identifiable information.

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may refuse to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

We hope you will participate in this study. If interested, please e-mail [curtisc.coleman@bryant.edu](mailto:curtisc.coleman@bryant.edu) to indicate which of the groups fits into your schedule. Once you are scheduled, we will send you a reminder a few days ahead of October 10, 2019.

Sincerely,

Curtis L. Coleman

Assistant Director of Admissions Operations, Enrollment

Doctoral Student, Department of Student Affairs Administration, UW-La Crosse

APPENDIX E:

EMAIL TO BRYANT COLLEAGUES

Greetings,

My name is Curtis Coleman and serve as Assistant Director of Admissions Operations at Bryant University. I was recently approved by our institution's IRB committee to begin research on **African American Student Perceptions of Racial Order at Predominately White Institution (AASPROPWI)**. The purpose of this research is to study African American college student perceptions of racial order at a small, private university in the southeastern region of the United States. By conducting semi-structured phenomenological focus groups, I will explore the essence of racial order for African American undergraduate students. I plan to conduct a series of three 60-minute focus groups of 6 students per group (2 groups/12 students total). The rationale for using this group of students is grounded in the notion that African American students have similar experiences, affecting their perception of racial order and identity development. Exploring the racial perspectives of African American students provides an opportunity for college administrators and faculty to intentionally focus on increasing experiences that drive student success while decreasing potential racial barriers on campus and within the larger community.

To those students who express interest, I will send a brief Qualtrics survey to determine demographic and engagement eligibility. To participate, African American students must classify as sophomores, juniors, or seniors at the undergraduate level. The e-mail invitation (see attachment) will outline the study, ensure the confidentiality of the participants, and provide the Primary Investigator's name and contact information. The invitation will also explain the cash incentive for participation (\$40 total/\$10 per group meeting).

If you would like to participate, please read the attachment and respond to this email with your contact information. Feel free to share this email with classmates who may be eligible and interested. Should you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Best,  
CLC

**Curtis Coleman, M.Ed.**, Doctoral Candidate  
Assistant Director of Admissions Operations