

# Social Justice Challenges: Students of Color and Critical Incidents in the Graduate Classroom

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This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) inquiry examined critical racialized incidents students of Color experienced in the graduate classroom at a predominantly White academic institution. Five African American, 4 Latinx, 4 Asian American, and 1 Biracial student participated in the study. Nine participants identified as women, and 5 as men. A total of 20 critical racialized incidents were reported and 6 dominant themes identified: (a) intersectionality and manifestation of power differentials; (b) personal devaluation, invalidation and/or shaming; (c) projection of racial stereotypes onto students of Color; (d) uncontested racist comments; (e) differences in communication styles and preferences; and (f) institutional devaluing of racial diversity. In contrast to previous research (Boysen, 2012; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009), an unexpected finding was that instructors, not students, were the most frequent perpetrators of racism in the classroom. Types of racism and magnitude of incidents were also considered. Implications for social justice education were discussed, with specific recommendations for instructors and academic institutions identified.

### **Public Significance Statement**

Understanding how the common occurrence of racism affects students of Color in higher education classrooms is critical to creating learning environments that support and honor all students, allowing effective learning to occur. Implications and recommendations discussed should help educators and academic institutions support more inclusive learning environments.

*Keywords:* students of Color, critical incidents, racism, intersectionality, social justice education

The long history of empirical research on the experience of students of Color in higher education (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hubain, Allen, Harris, & Linder, 2016; Maton et al., 2011) has focused on predominantly White institutions (PWIs), which have been described as hostile and toxic environments that are demeaning and alienating to students of Color, at best compromising their ability to learn and at worst, resulting in drop-out (Boysen, 2012;

Hubain et al., 2016; Lee, 2018). Themes from these studies include negative perceptions of academic merit, cultural isolation, tokenism, inaccurate cultural portrayals, and stereotyped projections (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Maton et al., 2011). In a study of campus racial climate, Harper and Hurtado (2007) synthesized 15 years of multi-institutional research on racial realities in college settings. Their analysis sug-

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gested that racial inequities in PWIs were deep and pervasive, penetrating interpersonal interactions through racist remarks and stereotyping, perpetuating a culture of racial segregation, reinforcing feelings of isolation through lack of culturally inclusive spaces, and espousing institutional values concerning diversity that were not manifest in actual practices or policies. Racial tensions and inequities identified as common in the campus culture of PWIs are also reflected in the classroom. Studies that have addressed students of Color's classroom experiences have reported little to no cultural representation in the curriculum (Hubain et al., 2016; Maton et al., 2011), misinformation and insensitivity to the cultures of racially diverse students, and lack of depth or avoidance of dialogues about race and racism (Boysen, 2012; Linder, Harris, Allen, & Hubain, 2015).

In recent years, social justice has emerged as a platform to redress social injustices inherent in educational practices and policies and to promote the creation of inclusive learning environments (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Social justice education calls for representational diversity in faculty and student body, curricular diversity through inclusion of culturally relevant content, engaging in explicit discussions of power, critical examination of privilege and oppression, application of professional skills to social change and activism, and institutional policies that support equality in access to resources and opportunities (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Bettez, 2008). Though it is now common for institutions of higher education to claim social justice as a value and guiding principle in their educational philosophy and practices, it is apparent through the continued operation of racism and other forms of oppression in academic settings that these principles are hard to actualize. Unfortunately, educators are often ill prepared to operationalize a social justice orientation into their teaching, resulting in classroom dynamics that perpetuate injustices that institutional and academic goals strive to eradicate.

As educators, our personal social justice goals include attracting, retaining, and matriculating historically marginalized groups in higher education, and working to dissect and disrupt the dynamics of power, privilege and oppression at our institutions. The latter is accomplished through our teaching, coaching of faculty colleagues in culturally responsive education, student advocacy, and research. Based upon our professional and personal experience in PWIs, both as students and educators, we entered into this research study assuming race would be a critical component of graduate students of Color's experiences. We wanted to determine the specifics of these experiences, across racial groups, and to give voice to students' personal and collective narratives.

Given our focus on students of Color's racialized experiences, we are employing critical race theory (CRT) as the lens for our examination. Drawing upon the work of Delgado and Stefancic (2012), several components of CRT are highlighted in our work. The first is that racism is a virulent and everyday reality in U.S. society, reflected in individual relationships as well as cultural and institutional practices. Racism is also socially constructed and designed to benefit the interests of White Americans. The social construction of race and racism is supported by dominant narratives that represent the history, values and rules that govern our society, and lock Whites and people of Color in a racial hierarchy of dominance and subordination. CRT also asserts that people of Color, as targets and victims of racism, bear the authoritative voice on racial oppression in the United States. A final element of CRT

that is relevant to this study is the importance of considering intersectionality. An individual cannot be defined by a single social identity, but multiple identities such as race, gender, class, national origin, and sexual orientation that configure one's self-definition. The intersections of these identities within the historical context of power dynamics and multiple axes of oppression, shape experience.

### Racial Bias in the Classroom

Recent research on racial bias in the classroom has fallen under the rapidly growing investigations of racial microaggressions in populations of Color. Sue (2010) defines racial microaggressions as daily slights and indignities experienced by racial minority individuals. In examining the experiences of African American, Asian American, and Latinx students in the classroom, Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009) identified ascription of intelligence, alien in own land, pathologizing values/communications, denial of racial reality, and assumption of criminality as common racial microaggressions. These microaggressions manifest differently for specific population groups. For example, for African Americans and Latinx students, ascription of intelligence reflected beliefs of intellectual inferiority, while for Asian Americans this microaggression mirrored the model minority myth, stereotyping Asian Americans as smart and hardworking due to their racial membership.

Boysen (2012) described the classroom as the most common place for students to experience racial prejudice. In a study by Hubain et al. (2016) students of Color reported tokenism, isolation, invalidation, and expectations to be the "native informant" as experiences of microaggressions in their graduate classrooms. Typically the only, or one of a few students of Color in their classes, they experienced a jarring contradiction wherein their contributions were minimized or dismissed when discussing general course content, but when issues of race emerged they became the experts. Linder et al. (2015) reported similar findings, but in addition, placed the failure of faculty to discuss race and racism or to address racially hostile situations in the classroom in the category of microaggressions. Consistent with Thomas and Plaut (2008), Linder et al. (2015) identified these failures as examples of resistance to diversity, which can take the form of "silence related to issues of equity and minimization of experiences of people who are outside the norm of an organization" (p. 180). In these instances, students of Color often feel pressured to carry the diversity banner and correct misperceptions and misinformation about their cultural group.

Faculty's management of racial content in the classroom, often referred to as "difficult dialogues," has been a topic of interest in itself. Even experienced educators struggled with facilitating productive dialogues on race with many acknowledging fear of losing control, appearing incompetent, or seen as biased by others (Pasque, Chesler, Charbeneau, & Carlson, 2013; Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009). Strategies faculty identified for handling racial conflict in the classroom often involved avoidance, either through ignoring the conflict, shutting it down through distraction or diversion, or minimization. In only a minority of the cases did faculty identify processing the conflict and facilitating discussion as a commonly used strategy.

Racial microaggressions, though often assumed to be “trivial in nature” (Sue, Lin et al., 2009, p. 183), are reported to have significant consequences for the target to include emotional distress, lowered self-esteem, and physical health problems (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Wong-Padoongpatt, Zane, Okazaki, & Saw, 2017). These microaggressions have also been shown to impact student outcomes through reduced work productivity or withdrawal of engagement (Hubain et al., 2016). Though racial microaggressions can be perpetrated by individuals from any racial group, research has suggested that due to the racial hierarchy in the United States, microaggressions perpetuated by White Americans against people of Color result in higher levels of stress (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2017).

### Intersectionality in the Graduate Classroom

Though an important component of CRT, intersectionality has its roots in early Black feminism. In a legal critique of Black women’s experience in the criminal justice system, Kimberlę Crenshaw (1989) coined the term *intersectionality* to articulate the ways that the traditional use of dominant conceptions of race and gender in antidiscrimination law misrepresents and minimizes the experiences of Black women, “a multiple disadvantaged class” (p. 145). Contemporary developments in intersectionality studies have seen the concept expanded to include identities such as sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, age, and ability/disability status as similar categories of analysis (Collins, 2015). Though race and ethnicity are the primary social identifiers of interest in this study, students of Color often hold multiple marginalized social positions. These social positions intersect creating unique individual experiences that are nevertheless intricately tied to group membership and the structures of social stratification, power, and privilege in our society.

Intersectionality can operate on multiple levels in the graduate school classroom. On the one hand, the dynamics of dominance and subordination are inherent in the traditional roles of instructor and student. The role of instructor positions them to be the expert and holder of knowledge and to yield evaluative power over students. On the other hand, students are expected to be depositories of knowledge and not to challenge or disrupt the status quo. This means that instructors “teach” while students “listen and learn,” and the norm is that the instructor’s authority and knowledge are not challenged. For a student to do so is to threaten the power of the instructor and risk a negative evaluation. As hooks (1994) noted, professors often use their power to control and indoctrinate rather than to enlighten and liberate. They prioritize what they consider relevant “knowledge” in the content they choose, often without inviting an opportunity for critical analysis of this content or facilitating divergent perspectives. Furthermore, often what is taught as normative in traditional education, privilege dominant values and worldview, minimizing or dismissing non-dominant voices and counterstories (Adams et al., 2007). In addition to the power inherent in the instructor role, these individuals often hold other privileged positions to include race, gender, and age. Taken together, the power afforded to the instructor through their privileged statuses can result in modeling democratic or autocratic practices, empowering or silencing students, shaping the student’s experience for the good or the bad. The student-to-student experience must also be considered in this scenario. Stu-

dents of Color hold marginalized social positions in relation to their White peers. hooks (1994) asserted that White students’ positions of privilege make them feel entitled to “voice,” that what they have to say is important and valued. She stated conversely, students of Color often feel that professors have little interest in hearing their voices and, in attempting to contribute in the classroom, it is easy to feel shut down or closed out. In addition to race, students of Color may hold other marginalized social positions to include gender, social class and college generational status. In the context of the sociocultural structure of the United States, for example, a Latinx woman who is a first-generation college student would hold less social and cultural capital to support her successful negotiation of higher education than her White, middle-class, woman peer. This student may also have to struggle with internalized fears of inadequacy resulting from years of negative projections of being less than or not up to par with her White counterparts. Finally, applying an intersectional lens to higher education must include consideration to context, and in this instance, specifically the cultural environment of PWIs. These institutions reflect a history of “race, gender, and class exclusion” (Sulé, 2011, p. 170) and mirror societal structures of White supremacy and structural inequality (Adams et al., 2007; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; Patton, Shahjahan, & Osei-Kofi, 2010). Considering the graduate school classroom from an intersectionality perspective highlights the challenges to social justice in higher education. Instructors must be both socially conscious and intentional to create learning environments that support equal education and opportunity for all, skills that are typically not included in our education and training.

The current study examines critical racialized incidents students of Color experienced in the graduate classroom at a PWI. The research questions addressed were: (a) What classroom experiences were significant in their learning as students of Color? and (b) What was the impact of those experiences on these students?

### Method

We selected interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, due to its emphasis on exploring thoroughly the personal lived experience of participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and its double hermeneutic, whereby researchers make sense of how participants are making sense of their experiences. Informed by social constructionism and CRT, we approached the inquiry knowing that the participants’ and our meaning-making processes would be influenced by our respective social group memberships and social interactions within specific contexts; thus, we assumed our findings would be coconstructed, value-laden, and context-specific. The data to be reported in this article is part of a larger study that examined students of Color and international graduate students’ learning histories using individual interviews, critical incidents, learning styles as assessed by the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, ethnic identity, and self-construal.

### Participants

Participants were 14 graduate students of Color who were attending a private PWI, on the West Coast of the United States, pursuing doctoral degrees in psychology at the time of data collection. Five of these students identified as African American, four

as Latinx, four as Asian American and one as Biracial, African American/Latinx. Nine participants identified as women and five as men. The ages of participants ranged from 24–53, with an average age of 31 and median age of 28. Participants were in doctoral programs of clinical psychology ( $n = 11$ ) and organizational psychology ( $n = 3$ ).

## Researchers

The researchers for this study are three women faculty of Color, educated in different disciplines (i.e., clinical psychology, education, and counseling psychology, respectively, in order of authorship). The diversity of our research team with one member being a U.S.-born African American woman, one an immigrant woman from Guatemala who resided in the United States for 27 years, and the third an immigrant woman from Japan who first came to the United States at the age of 14, enriched the cultural lens through which the study was conceptualized and conducted. Our positionality as women of Color who were once students and are now educators in PWIs both inspired and informed this work. Our educational histories and professional experiences of marginalization, isolation, and invisibility resonate with the struggles we observe and attempt to ameliorate in the students of Color that we teach and mentor. As educators we have each had students of Color come to us with personal stories of racism at the hands of peers and instructors. In entering the study, we were aware of and concerned about these individual experiences and felt not enough attention was given to their amelioration at an individual and institutional level. Were these isolated experiences or shared more broadly by students of Color at our institution? We felt it was important to give voice to student narratives related to race as a starting point for potential social justice action. We framed our question about critical incidents in the classroom to elicit both positive and negative reflections, to allow the students to share what was important to their learning experience as people of Color.

## Measure

Participants engaged in a 90-min semistructured individual interview that inquired about critical incidents in the classroom during the pursuit of their current degree. A critical incident was defined (see Robson & Kitchen, 2007) as a classroom experience that was significant in their learning as a student of Color, meeting the specific criteria of (a) having elicited a strong cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral response; and (b) having had a lasting impact on them. Participants were informed the incident could be positive or negative, were asked to describe the incident in detail and queried about their thoughts and feelings about the incident, its immediate and long-term impact, and in retrospect if there were things they wished they or others had done differently in response to the incident.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited via campus e-mail and posting of study flyers on campus bulletin boards. Since the research team consisted of faculty members at the same institution, participants were interviewed by a member of the research team that had no affiliation to their individual programs or had no current or antic-

ipated formal academic or evaluative relationship with the participant to avoid potential conflict of interest or dual relationships. Within the larger study, the critical incident interview was the second interview held with each participant, days after eliciting the student's learning history. All interviews took place in a quiet private room and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis.

## Data Analysis

The three authors adapted the steps of IPA (see Smith et al., 2009) to a seven-step team approach that entailed: (a) Independent reading and rereading of a subset of four interview transcripts to understand each participant's lived experience and point of view; (b) Independent exploratory coding of the same four transcripts (i.e., noting the participant's thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to each critical incident, as well as the researcher's preliminary interpretations of the incident and what it meant to the participant); (c) Collaborative development of a coding template, which was repeatedly revised by consensus and reapplied independently to subsets of transcripts until all transcripts were consistently coded. When coding discrepancies occurred, we clarified meaning by jointly reviewing the excerpt in the context of both the critical incident interview and the participant's learning history; (d) Collaborative clustering of codes and naming of single-case themes. At this point, the incidence of race-related negative critical incidents was evident; therefore, these were additionally coded to identify type of racism and magnitude of the incident; (e) Collaborative identification of dominant themes across cases, and written description of these themes by the first author; (f) Independent review of dominant theme endorsement by all researchers; and (g) Narrative description of six dominant themes by the first author.

To ensure trustworthiness of findings, we paid special attention to credibility by employing: analyst triangulation, source triangulation (i.e., couching the critical incidents in each of the participant learning histories), and reflexivity. From inception to completion of the study, we engaged in numerous dialogues with each other where we asked questions to ensure that we drew from our respective disciplines, we shared our own perspectives, and reflected where we felt our various identities and preexisting thoughts were at play in specific interpretations.

## Results

A total of 34 incidents were reported by participants, 13 positive and 21 negative, with only one non-race-related negative incident. Of the 20 racialized negative incidents, nine were reported by African American students, six by Asian American students, four by Latinx students, and one by a biracial African American and Latinx student. This article addresses the racialized negative incidents to identify and understand racial aggressions that interrupt and interfere with the learning experiences of students of Color. Findings are shared in two ways: (a) Dominant themes, and (b) Type of racism and magnitude of incidents.

## Dominant Themes

Six dominant themes are presented, from most to least endorsed: (a) issues of intersectionality and manifestation of power differ-

entials; (b) personal devaluation, invalidation, and/or shaming; (c) projection of racial stereotypes onto students of Color; (d) uncontested racist comments; (e) differences in communication styles and preferences; and (f) institutional devaluing of racial diversity. As shown in Table 1, all incidents reported by participants, except 1, reflected two or more of the six dominant themes. The first theme, issues of intersectionality and manifestation of power differentials, seems to underpin the other five themes, as it illuminates how status differentials contribute to sustaining racist behaviors in the graduate classroom. The other themes portray varied ways in which these students of Color experienced racism in the learning environment.

**Theme 1: Issues of intersectionality and manifestation of power differentials.** This theme was coded specific to the social identities of the “target” and “perpetrator” of the racial aggressions reported in the critical incidents. All 20 incidents reported by participants reflected this theme. Three specific status differentials were represented in the vignettes: (a) the *roles* of student versus professor; (b) their *racial group membership* as a minority versus a member of the White dominant group; and (c) *gender* as woman or man. In 12 out of 20 of the critical incidents, the perpetrator held two or more dominant social positions. Specifically, in eight of the incidents the dominant positions of race and role (White instructor) characterized the perpetrator, in three incidents race and gender (White man) characterized the perpetrator, and in five race, role, and gender (White man instructor) characterized the perpetrator. In the remaining eight incidents, the perpetrator was characterized by one dominant social position (i.e., race, 3; role, 4; gender, 1). It is important to note that in 60% of the incidents, the instructor was reported to have made a direct racial assault on the student. These incidents do not account for others reporting instructors being complicit in a racial aggression perpetrated by a student by virtue of their lack of awareness, acknowledgment, or intervention in the classroom. Reflective of this theme, an African American man

stated, “I had an instructor (White woman) who would pick on me in the classroom, she would tell me my writing wasn’t academic. Then one day she literally told me to leave the program. I didn’t feel I could directly challenge her, so I spoke to a couple of other professors and they were shocked and supported me. I was pissed but still felt I needed her approval . . . It was in response to this person who was White and an authority judging me.”

**Theme 2: Personal devaluation, invalidation, and/or shaming.** Common to this theme were experiences of cultural ethnocentrism, directed at the student, reflecting dominant cultural values and worldview leaving the participant feeling invisible, unheard, “othered,” and unappreciated. This included a lack of understanding of culturally normative behaviors and assumptions of deficits due to cultural characteristics. Eleven incidents reflected this theme. In seven of the 11 incidents the perpetrator was an instructor. A biracial African American/Latinx man stated, “In a diversity class we were discussing family dynamics and the disciplining of children. When the discussion came to physical discipline, it was pathologized. I stated not all physical discipline is abuse and shared I had been spanked as a child on occasion. There was sort of a gasp; everyone was shocked. I felt there was a dominant culture presence in the room and I was on the outside of that.” Two participants reported feeling publicly shamed because the instructor dismissed or “shut down” their comments or commented on their cultural difference in class. A Latinx woman participant stated, “The professor (White woman) had favorites. When I tried to contribute to class discussion, she shut down my comments. I didn’t feel she wanted me to speak up. I felt degraded and ashamed.”

**Theme 3: Projection of racial stereotypes onto students of Color.** This theme reflects statements made that resulted in students experiencing being personally identified with a racial stereotype. Eight incidents reflected this theme, all of which were perpetrated by instructors. The theme includes students’ percep-

Table 1  
Results Summary

Type of racism	Critical incident	Participant-Incident #	Target race/ethnicity, gender	Perpetrator role, race/ethnicity, gender	Magnitude of emotional response	Themes endorsed
Individual racism 10	1	P01-1	Asian American woman	White woman instructor	Moderate	1, 2, 3, 4
	2	P01-2	Asian American woman	Instructor	Moderate	1, 3, 5
	3	P02-1	African American woman	White man instructor	Moderate	1, 3
	4	P03-1	African American man	White man instructor	Moderate	1, 3
	5	P03-2	African American man	Instructor and student	Moderate	1, 3
	6	P04-1	Asian American man	Instructor	Moderate	1, 3
	7	P05-1	African American man	White woman instructor	Intense	1, 2, 3, 4
	8	P06-1	Latinx woman	White man instructor	Intense	1, 2, 5
	9	P07-1	Latinx woman	White-identified Latinx woman instructor	Intense	1, 2, 5
	10	P08-1	Asian American woman	White woman instructor	Intense	1, 3, 5
Institutional racism 3	11	P09-1	Latinx woman	Predominantly White Institution (PWI)	Mild	1, 2, 6
	12	P10-1	African American woman	White man instructor	Mild	1, 2, 5, 6
	13	P03-3	African American man	White women staff (2)	Mild	1, 2, 6
Cultural racism 7	14	P11-1	African American woman	White man student	Intense	1, 4
	15	P11-2	African American woman	White woman student	Moderate	1, 4
	16	P10-2	African American woman	White man instructor	Moderate	1, 2, 4
	17	P12-1	Biracial African American and Latinx man	White woman student	Moderate	1, 2, 4
	18	P13-1	Asian American woman	Man student	Moderate	1, 2
	19	P14-1	Latinx man	White man student	Intense	1, 2, 4
	20	P08-2	Asian American woman	White men students (3)	Mild	1

tions that these instructors related to them almost exclusively through a racial lens (“It doesn’t matter what I do, some people are only going to see color”), assuming that they were not up to par academically or that they could speak for all people in their racial group. As an example of the latter an Asian American man commented, “I have had professors ask me what I thought in the scope of Asian issues and I feel I have to speak for the entire Asian Pacific Islander culture. I am expected to be an expert when I’m just a student.”

**Theme 4: Uncontested racist comments.** This code was applied when participants reported racist comments made by either peers or faculty, in the classroom, that were unnoticed and/or unacknowledged. These statements fell into three categories: (a) negative cultural stereotypes; (b) cultural misinformation; and (c) denial of racial influence. The first two categories refer to misconceptions about a racial or cultural group. The third category was coded when a lack of cultural consideration in viewing and understanding individuals’ experiences was reflected in the incident. As a result of these statements going unchecked by the instructor, there was concern that they stood as “fact” or were perceived by others as accurate. These comments were immediately apparent to the participant, experienced as offensive, and typically resulted in feelings of shock (“how could no one have noticed that?”), alienation, and disempowerment. Seven incidents reflected this category with four comments made by peers and three by instructors. As an example, a Latinx man student reported that, in a course on diversity, a White man peer stated he had learned from experience that Latinos were “lazy and unmotivated” without comment from anyone in the class. The participant felt so sad and irritated he could not challenge the comment until much later, but he noted it was the instructor’s responsibility that the curriculum addresses the sociocultural factors affecting Latinx success. In another incident an African American man stated a White woman instructor emphasized “volunteering and nonprofits” were the best fit for African American professionals including the participant, without discussion or challenge. Her uncontested comments were offensive and experienced as degrading.

**Theme 5: Differences in communication styles and preferences.** This Theme was coded when the critical incident reflected issues of language ability, as well as cultural differences in norms related to communication in a learning environment. Examples of the former were students who felt self-conscious and were viewed negatively by peers and instructors because they lacked the “academic language” characteristic of their peers, spoke with an accent or were quiet. The latter was reflected in participants’ inclination to “listen” rather than speak, which they felt was culturally normative and showed deference and respect for the authority of the instructor. Five incidents reflected this theme. As an example, one Asian American woman expressed her frustration at the differential assumptions professors make when Asian American students are quiet in class. She said, “I guess it’s a cultural thing, a lot of the quiet ones are minorities and the more verbal ones, Caucasian. But when I don’t speak in class it is seen as lack of engagement and participation. This is not the case for the White students when they are quiet.”

**Theme 6: Institutional devaluing of racial diversity.** This theme was coded when participants reported concerns related to diversity representation in faculty and student body and a Eurocentric curriculum. Three incidents reflected this theme. For ex-

ample, a Latinx woman participant disappointedly stated, “My educational experience here has been dominated by White professors and students. In my program there are only one or two people of Color in classes, and topics important to me are often not reflected in the course content.”

There were no specific gender or racial group variations in the themes presented by participants.

### Type of Racism and Magnitude of Incidents

Type of racism was coded using Ridley’s (2005) definitions of individual, cultural, and institutional racism. Ridley defined *individual racism* as differential treatment or behavior based upon race that has harmful consequences for the target of such treatment. These consequences can include emotional or psychological harm like lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and helplessness or limiting opportunities or access to resources. *Cultural racism* is defined as the unrealistic elevation of cultural products and achievements of one’s own racial group while actively ignoring or denigrating those of other groups. *Institutional racism* as defined by Ridley, is differential treatment or behavior based upon race by organizations or institutions that result in systematic and repeated disadvantage or victimization of the target(s) of such treatment and includes institutional policies, practices and procedures. Ten of the critical incidents reported were coded as individual racism, seven as cultural racism and three as institutional racism.

Magnitude of incidents were categorized into three types: intense, moderate, and mild. Six incidents were coded as intense, 10 as moderate and four as mild. Intense incidents were experienced by participants as a direct attack on their personal integrity, often resulting in feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, or diminished self-esteem. Moderate incidents were experienced as indirect and were interpreted as a personal fault of the perpetrator (i.e., prejudice, cultural insensitivity, ignorance). Though participants reported feeling angry or upset about these incidents their sense of competence and agency seemed to remain intact. Some degree of disengagement in the classroom was reported in response to both intense and moderate incidents reflected in statements like, “I didn’t want to have anything more to do with that class,” “for the rest of the semester I felt uncomfortable and shut down,” and “I decided to keep things to myself, to speak out less.” Mild incidents were reactions to institutional policies and practices that had either no direct consequences for the target, or were related to an ally experience. In these incidents, participants typically reported disappointment or frustration at the institution. Forty percent of incidents coded as individual racism were intense in magnitude, and 60%, moderate in magnitude. Approximately 33% of incidents coded as cultural racism were intense in magnitude and 66%, moderate. With regard to the former, though the specific comments made by the perpetrators related to a negative cultural stereotype, they were also internalized by the participant as a personal affront. Responding to one such incident an African American woman stated, “I felt like that’s what people thought of me. I felt people were agreeing with him that I was less than.” All incidents of institutional racism were coded as mild in magnitude.

### Discussion

Consistent with previous research and CRT principles, findings in this study demonstrated that racism is a common and persistent

experience for students of Color in the graduate classroom. Experiences of students of Color reflected the racial hierarchy of U.S. society with reports of socially constructed stereotypes to include assumptions of academic inferiority, labeling as experts on race and their cultural group and the experience of racial essentialism, or being related to through a racial lens to the exclusion of other defining characteristics. Themes from the present study are similar to several commonly identified racial microaggressions in the literature, including ascription of intelligence, second-class citizenship, pathologizing values/communications, alien in own land, and denial of racial reality (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Sue, Lin et al., 2009). It might be assumed that because of the self-reference inherent in individual racism, these incidents would be experienced as having the greatest impact on the student, but this was not always the case. Incidents that were identified as intense were those in which the student tended to internalize the cause of the incident (e.g., “I began to wonder if I was smart enough for the program,” “I found myself doubting my abilities”) or when public shaming was involved. For example, the impact of an instructor’s assumption that English was an Asian American student’s second language was heightened by this being addressed publicly in class.

Though implied in its focus on marginalized populations, intersectionality has rarely been considered directly in research on racial microaggressions (see Nadal et al., 2015). Articles on difficult dialogues in the classroom speak to the power, authority, and responsibility of instructors to manage and facilitate these discussions, but do not analyze the dynamics in the classroom from an intersectional lens (Pasque et al., 2013; Sue, Lin et al., 2009). In this study, intersectionality and its relationship to power differentials was a theme reflected in every critical incident shared by participants. This drew our attention to multiple cultural identities and interlocking privilege and oppression based upon one’s membership in dominant and subordinate social groups. It also allowed us to consider how status differences and the power inherent in social positioning influence interactional dynamics.

In most research on racial microaggressions in the classroom, the focus has been on White students as perpetrators (Boysen, 2012; Sue, Lin et al., 2009). Our study demonstrated that instructors were identified as the perpetrator of racial aggressions in 60% of the reported incidents, shifting what has previously been a focus on classroom management and facilitation to what the instructor brings into the classroom in terms of personal cultural history, biases, stereotypes, and cultural misinformation. In 35% of the incidents, instructors were complicit in the racial aggression through their silence or lack of intervention. Research has shown that faculty avoidance of racial tensions in the classroom is a common response (Pasque et al., 2013; Sue, Torino et al., 2009) with Linder et al. (2015) labeling faculty’s failure to address racism in the classroom as “resistance to diversity” and a microaggression. It is unclear whether instructors’ lack of response in this study reflected limited cultural knowledge, agreement with the racial aggression, whether it was stereotyping or misrepresentation of a cultural group, or a desire to avoid an uncomfortable conversation. What is more important is what is communicated in this silence. For the students of Color in this study, the silence of the instructor legitimized racist statements by their peers and perpetuated a misinformed and distorted view of their culture. For many, the incidents resulted in withdrawal and disengagement in the classroom affecting their learning experience. While for others,

self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy were the consequences. Though no instructors of Color were responsible for direct racial aggressions, several were complicit in their lack of response to incidents that were perpetrated by students. This means that faculty of Color also bear the responsibility to critically examine their cultural knowledge base, biases, and potential internalized oppression to create classrooms that feel safe and welcoming for all students. Gender of target did not appear to influence the number of critical incidents reported or their intensity, suggesting women and men of Color are equally susceptible and vulnerable to racial aggressions in the classroom.

## Limitations

In this study, a purposive convenience sample of 14 students of Color volunteered to share their experiences with us, three women researchers of Color who were also faculty members at the research site. While we are confident that our ethical managing of researcher insider status enhanced participant rapport, trust, and openness, researcher insider status may have also prevented students of Color with divergent experiences from participating in the study. In addition, the research findings concerning students of Color in one PWI on the West Coast may not represent variations in regional experiences and are not inclusive of Native Americans because of lack of representation at the institution. Finally, this study focused on racialized experiences of students of Color in graduate education. It did not examine other marginalized identities that may impact these students’ experiences including social class, sexual orientation or ability status. Neither did it query unexplored areas or biases students of Color may hold and enact in understanding and interacting with other cultural minority groups. These are rich areas for exploration in future research.

## Implications and Recommendations

This study provided insight into racial aggressions that hindered the learning of graduate students of Color and uncovered the role of intersectionality and its relationship to power differentials in the graduate classroom. A key finding was that instructors were central to racial aggression incidents as either perpetrators or silent agents. This finding has important implications for instructors committed to preparing professionals who can act as social change agents, as they must continually consider how to best integrate and model social justice practices into their teaching. Though this study focused on racism and classroom dynamics, institutional initiatives that support diversity must also be considered in promoting the learning and success of all students. The recommendations that follow identify instructor and institutional activities in line with social justice education.

**1. Build an inclusive learning environment that seeks to disrupt the dynamics of racial oppression, privilege and power.** This begins with personal preparation and careful course design. Personal preparation should include a cultural self-assessment with a critical examination of individual biases and knowledge gaps as well as staying abreast of cultural developments in your particular areas of expertise. Select course content, readings, and activities that reflect the history and lived experiences of culturally diverse groups. Include teaching strategies and assessment modes that attend to diverse learning and communication preferences. For

example, pair-share and small group activities encourage students to interact with each other, consider different perspectives, provide genuine contributions, and feel actively engaged in the classroom. Activities like after-class journaling provide students prone to reflection with an alternative to demonstrate understanding.

Affirm diverse student voices by openly acknowledging and valuing classroom contributions of students of Color. This can be accomplished with gestures as simple as making eye contact or a head nod to providing positive feedback and following up on student comments. Students of Color are made to feel invisible and invalidated when their comments are overlooked, dismissed or minimized while the voices of White students are reinforced. Equally important is to manifest your commitment to inclusion and equity in the syllabus by including a diversity statement that addresses engaged participation, honoring diverse perspectives, and the instructor's responsibility to support students in respectfully expressing and evaluating their own ideas.

**2. Model leadership and responsibility for discussing race and racism in the classroom.** Instructors must be engaged and purposeful in setting the frame for open and honest dialogues about race. Research has shown that when instructors approach these difficult discussions with openness and authenticity, students feel safer in acknowledging areas of ignorance and naiveté, exploring personal biases and allowing genuine emotions to emerge (Linder et al., 2015; Sue, Torino et al., 2009). Instructors must be willing to take the risk of being vulnerable through sharing personal stories and acknowledging challenges and fears, which might include their own missteps in addressing racism in their personal and professional lives.

Instructors must also remain vigilant to the occurrence of verbal aggressions related to multiple marginalized identities. To do so requires stepping out of your personal space to be aware of others' experiences. While you might not be able to pinpoint the specific aggression, monitoring emotional reactions in the classroom can be helpful. You must be prepared to respond and make clear that derogatory comments about any group are not acceptable. For example, you could model inquiring into the beliefs underlying the statement, bring forth statistics and scholarship to reveal misconceptions, or incorporate a follow-up activity to develop social justice learning.

**3. Engage in ongoing collegial collaboration and student advocacy.** A commitment to social justice education goes beyond individual classroom responsibilities to include activities that encourage and support institutional accountability. Collaborating with colleagues to support the development of their knowledge and skills in implementing social justice principles in their teaching and student interactions contributes to a campus climate that is inclusive and respectful of all students. Collaborative activities can include problem solving with colleagues around responding to actual classroom incidents and participating in peer teaching observations to implement social justice education practices. Facilitating faculty discussions of their own processes and experiences of culture, race, oppression, and privilege expands their experiential knowledge base as well as tools for engaging in difficult dialogues. At one of our institutions, faculty diversity discussions are incorporated into monthly program meetings. This has allowed faculty to explore their personal cultural identities, and how these affect their professional lives and interpersonal interactions in order to engage in difficult discussions about their own experi-

ences of oppression and privilege. Faculty have commented on the multiple ways this has impacted their teaching of diversity content including increased awareness of and empathy for the challenges students often experience when discussing race and racism.

Advocating for students of Color includes educating colleagues and administrators of the institution about their unique and varied needs for succeeding in higher education. This is particularly important since, in addition to negotiating their academic obligations, students of Color also often have to manage the emotional strain of racism in the classroom and institutional climate. Institutions must make a firm commitment to provide individually tailored assistance, support, and resources (Patton et al., 2010), which could include tutoring and faculty-sponsored affinity groups for socialization, guidance, and mentoring. As noted by Lee (2018), faculty participation in creating and sustaining counter-spaces, or settings where students of Color can engage in culturally affirming experiences, are vital to their survival at PWIs.

**4. Institutional initiatives.** While many academic institutions pay particular attention to recruitment of faculty of Color, more effort is needed in retaining and promoting such faculty members. More specifically, ensuring that their presence, teaching, research, expertise, mentoring, and services are acknowledged, appreciated, and valued are imperative aspects of retaining quality faculty of Color. Validating and supporting their lived experience in academia and providing resources, such as professional development opportunities, available funding for research projects, and institutional initiatives of creating a campus climate that value their narratives and contributions, help faculty of Color to forecast their professional future at a particular academic institution. Faculty of Color's presence and retention in the institution reduces students of Color's experience of isolation and provides important modeling and mentoring opportunities to support student success. A university's culture is also strongly influenced by leaders in the institution, the administrators who make decisions about the priorities and directions of the university and how resources should be allocated. It is also important that these people be educated about the racial realities of students of Color and sensitized to both the opportunities and constraints their decisions place on students of Color.

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