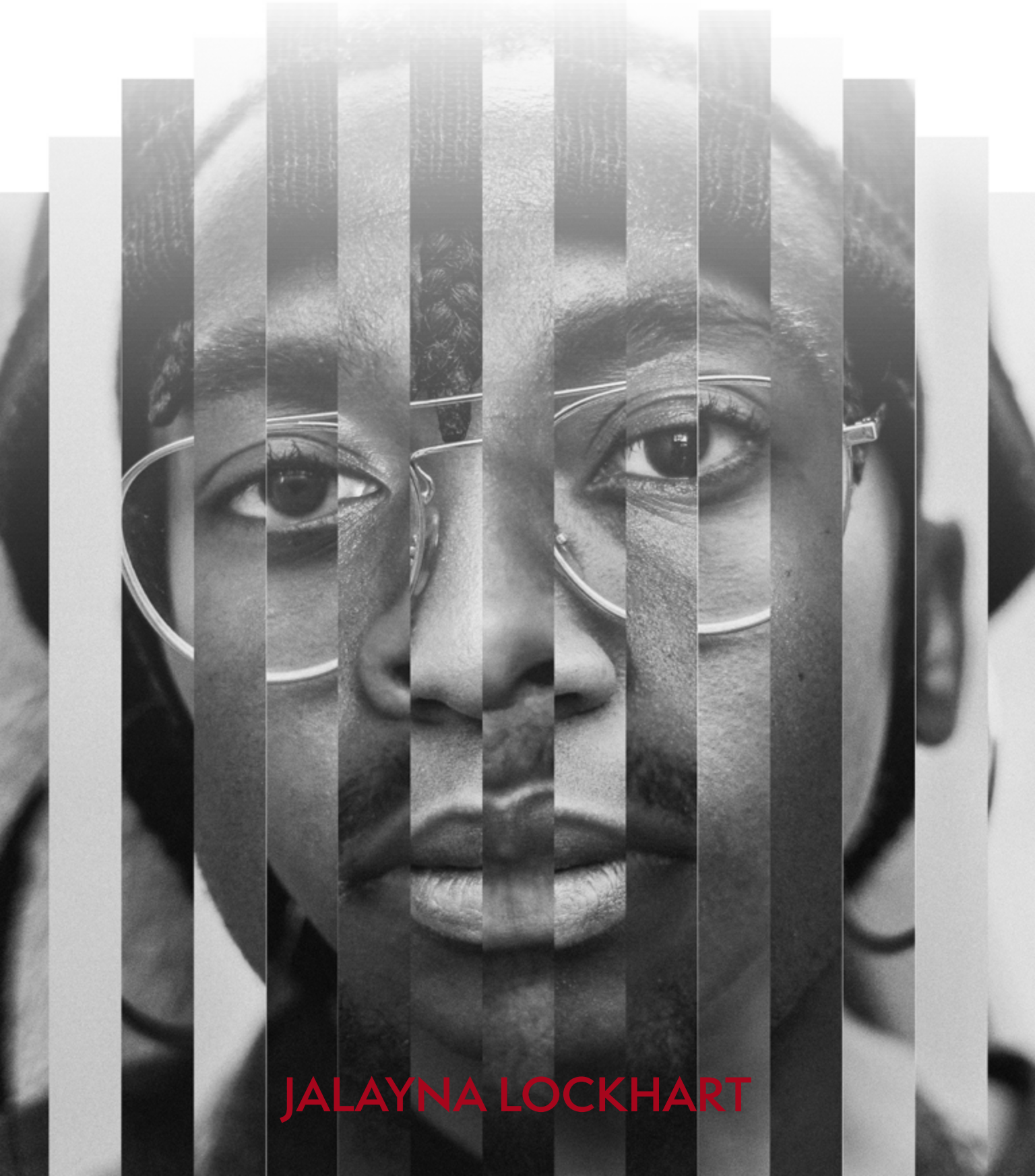
Psychological Effects of PWIs



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PREFACE

Although a great deal of research has been conducted around the psychological well-being of Black college students at Predominantly White Institutions, few have studied their personal experiences. This is concerning, given that quantitative studies cannot solely provide the full extent of the ways in which these environments impact Black students. This is due to the fact that an innumerable amount of factors contribute to these negative experiences. Through a sample survey and extensive research, this book explores the negative factors that Predominantly White Intuitions have on the psychological well-being of Black college students. The sample survey gave students a platform to voice their opinions and express the ways in which they are affected by these environments. The findings show that adjustment, campus climate, social support, integration and race-related stressors all aid in impacting the psychological well-being of Black college students.

BEING BLACK AT A PWI

When I started at the University of Minnesota, which is a PWI, I did not think that I would be affected as much by the change in environment. I have always been able to adapt to different environments and easily get along with people. However, this is completely different than anything I have ever experienced in my twenty-three years of life. It often feels like a language barrier, and in a lot of ways it is. The ways in which I communicate as a black person and the experiences that I bring are completely different from the language and experiences of the white students I encounter. These differences in lifestyles along with the overall environment of PWIs tend to have negative effects on the psychological health of Black College Students. As a black student attending a PWI, I can speak from personal experience on the ways in which my psychological health is affected. Some of these effects include anxiety and/or depression, lack of self-identity and feelings of alienation.

JANSPORT
THE NORTH FACE
FJÄLLRÄVEN KÅNKEN

What is a PWI, one might ask? A PWI is a Predominantly White Institution, which is exactly how it sounds. As insinuated in the introduction, it is an institution whose student body is made up of mostly white students. My freshman year at the U was the most diverse of my entire college experience even though there was still a large culture shock. Despite being surrounded by an adequate amount of students that looked like me or related to me in some way, I still couldn't find my community. I was aware of the racial demographic at the U before coming in, which is why I made it a point to try to seek out my community in other black students and students of color. However, when I couldn't form solid bonds in those spaces, I began to feel disconnected from myself and the overall culture on campus.

During my freshman year, I went to therapy for the first time. I knew I felt down in high school, but I just thought it was because of the environment that I was in. I assumed it would change once I got to college, but I was wrong. My therapist at the time diagnosed me with a mental illness. I could finally put a name to exactly how I was feeling. Depression. A word that I had never heard in my household and probably majority households in the black community because of the stigma around it. I once told my mom that I thought I might be depressed and she dismissed it. The plethora of problems that I tucked deep down inside started to spill out. I was no longer in control of my physical, mental and emotional state. I had multiple breakdowns and went home many weekends because I feared being alone. Each of these factors prompted me to take my first yearlong break to figure things out. After reading this one might think, well how does being at a PWI affect something that you were already struggling with? Being at the U did not cause my depression, but it most certainly did not make it better.

In coming back to the U, I decided to pursue Graphic Design since I already had a background in drawing, but I was not prepared for the complete transition in environment. I believe this is what caused me to really question my identity. I went from being one in four black students in a classroom to the only one in a classroom. Not only was I the only black student a majority of the time, I was also one in maybe seven other students of color in a majority white female dominated setting. I knew nothing about Graphic Design coming in, which I assumed was where most other students were, but that was not the case. I did not have the same knowledge, language or experience that most of the other students had coming in which put me at a disadvantage as I had to work harder to play catch up. Not being able to keep up with or contribute to conversations because I'm not educated on certain topics, lack experience in certain areas or lack the ability to effectively communicate my thoughts leave me feeling inadequate, not only as a student, but specifically as a Black student navigating an all-white space.

I have always excelled in school, so to feel as if I am constantly at the bottom has greatly affected my confidence. It makes me self-conscious overall but specifically with my abilities as a student and potential graphic designer. The more I question myself and my abilities, the more I lose my sense of self. My entire four years in graphic design have felt like I have consistently been one step behind. I have never been much of a talker, but I am almost mute now. I don't like participating in class discussions or group critiques because I fear not sounding smart enough. I've always struggled with expressing and articulating myself which seems to come so easy to other students. When I do try to speak up or contribute, I feel as if my thoughts and ideas aren't as significant. Everyone around me seems to catch on to everything so quickly, but I process information differently so it may take me a little longer. For this reason, I usually save my questions for the end of class because I don't want to sound foolish in front of the other students. I can't count the number of times I have broken down in front of my professors because I didn't believe that I was good enough or capable of succeeding. Factors like these contribute to my feelings of inferiority and loneliness.

I have been in the Graphic Design Program since 2016 and I still cannot say that I have made ONE friend this entire time, despite the fact that I have the same classes with practically all of the same people. I have worked on group projects and have had numerous personal interactions with different students where I thought I had made some sort of connection with them. Regardless of the number of interactions exchanged, they still pass me in the hallway or in another class and act as if I do not exist. It's a very defeating feeling. One group project that I worked on, I was brainstorming ideas with my team and no one was responding or acknowledging anything I said except one other member. However, whenever another person shared their ideas, they got immediate feedback. Majority of the connections that I have made have been with my professors because they are literally the only people that see me and acknowledge my existence.

Have you ever been the first one in your class, but be the last one to get sat next to? Well I have on many occasions. Sometimes it feels like people avoid me like the plague, because whichever table I'm at, is literally the last one to get filled up. Situations like this make me question everything about myself. Am I a bad person? Am I too quiet? Did I do something to offend someone? Am I not likeable? Is it because I'm black? Being in these environments make me feel so alienated and insignificant. I hate when professors tell us to get into groups rather than choosing them for us, because I know that no one is ever going to willingly ask me to be in their group. The little pride I have left won't allow me to subject myself to ask to join someone else's group. I often prefer to work alone because in group settings I get talked over, my ideas are often dismissed and my presence isn't always acknowledged.

In conclusion, attending a Predominantly White Institution can have negative effects on the psychological health of black college students. Many of these effects are not only attributed to psychological well-being, but also to overall identity as a young black student, not having a sense of community and lack of support at home. Speaking from personal experience, the effects that it has on me include anxiety and/or depression, lack of self-identity and alienation. None of these issues are separate from the other, they are all intertwined to create a combined overall negative effect. Despite the outside factors, the environments of these institutions alone have the potential to leave even greater marks on the well-being of black college students.

"Have you ever been the first one in your class, but be the last one to get sat next to? Well I have on many occasions. Sometimes it feels like people avoid me like the plague, because whichever table I'm at, is literally the last one to get filled up. Situations like this make me question everything about myself. Am I a bad person? Am I too quiet? Did I do something to offend someone? Am I not likeable? Is it because I'm black?"

INTRODUCTION

Historically, African American students have been and continue to be marginalized at innumerable colleges and universities in America. Marginalization is most apparent in Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), which are routinely comprised of a vast majority white student body, faculty and staff, to whom this system is often catered to (Lawson, 2013). Due to this disproportionate number of whites in comparison to blacks, the overall environment at these institutions tend to have negative effects on the psychological well-being of black students, as they find a disconnect between themselves and their surrounding environment. The effects are influenced by a variety of external factors; the most salient including adjustment, campus climate, social support and integration and race-related stressors. These factors offer a means to better comprehend the experiences of African American students at PWIs and the ways in which they have a direct influence on their psychological well-being (Bourke & Bray, 2019).

METHODS

Participants

Participants in this study include a total of 40 college students currently or previously enrolled in Predominantly White Institutions. Majority of participants were students who had graduated within the last five years (35%), followed by Juniors (20%), Seniors (15%), Sophomores (12.5%), Graduate Students (10%) and Freshman (5%). 27 participants were Female (67.5%) and 13 were Male (32.5%), all between the ages of 19 and 27. Participants in this survey self-identified racially between African, African American, Black American and Biracial/Multiracial.

Materials

Participants were asked to complete a sample survey conducted through Google Forms, which was widely distributed through Facebook and email. The survey included four quantitative demographic questions which asked about race/ethnicity, age, gender and education level. Seven other quantitative questions were asked, dealing with a range of topics around campus community, alienation, support systems, discrimination, mental illness and their high schools racial demographics. Seven qualitative questions were posed to afford participants the opportunity to expound on their own experiences when navigating these environments. When referencing this sample survey throughout the paper, participants will be identified by their respective numbers in which the data was received.

ADJUSTMENT

The nature of African American psychological well-being has been disputed in literature for decades (Carter, 1991). Psychological well-being consists of positive relationships with others, personal mastery, autonomy, a feeling of purpose and meaning in life and personal growth and development (Ryff, 1989). Significant bodies of research have determined that the environment at PWIs have strong impacts on black college students' adjustment (Lawson, 2013). "Adjustment refers to students' ability to adapt successfully to the expectations of college" (Woldoff et al, 2011, p. 1050). This success is linked to integration within the institution as well as adapting both academically and socially. Black students may find their transition into these unfamiliar spaces as more challenging compared to their white peers, considering that they are faced with the additional stressor of being a minority in a space that fails to reflect the racial make-up of their home communities (Lawson, 2013; Ross et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2011; Woldoff et al., 2011). For many black students entering college, this might be their exposure to being a minority in a majority white atmosphere, as they may come from racially segregated or predominantly black environments (Wei et al., 2011; Woldoff et al., 2011).

However, it is also likely that black students come from primarily white or more integrated communities which aid them in their transition. Some researchers have proposed that compositionally diverse neighborhoods afford students the ability to be more culturally accepting, tolerant and adaptive (Woldoff et al., 2011).

Participants of the sample survey were asked to rank the racial demographic of their high schools from greatest to least student body population. 22 of the 40 participants attended high schools that were comprised of a majority white student body, where 12.5% exhibited strong adaptability skills to their primarily white college environments. The other 87.5% struggled with adjustment and reported feeling alienated.

In congruence with these findings, the challenges posed with navigating these environments tend to be associated with alienation and/or isolation, as this transitional stage makes them more susceptible to adverse psychological adjustment (Barry et al., 2017; Lawson, 2013). A study conducted by Loo and Rolison explored the feelings of alienation experienced by minority students in relation to their environment, finding that African American students at PWIs encounter greater feelings of alienation than white students. If black students do not feel welcomed or included, they are more likely to disengage and feel discouraged about their position as a student, affecting their desire to persist (Lawson, 2013; Wei et al., 2011).

When participants of the sample survey were asked about their experiences with alienation at PWIs, 72.5% of students claimed to experience feelings of alienation at their institutions.

Being the only black student in a classroom can heighten these feelings of isolation (Wei et al., 2011), as prior research has demonstrated that the racial make-up of an academic setting can be connected to psychological well-being (Kimbrough et al., 1996). Therefore, feelings of alienation and isolation deter black students from wanting to engage in their campus community as they feel displaced.

Participant # 7— African American, Female, age 21 and a Senior in college— expressed,

"I have classmates that have refused to sit next to me. I have had individuals that I work with in class refuse to say hi to me in public."

CAMPUS CLIMATE

Black students need to feel welcomed and accepted within the general campus climate in order to thrive in these settings (Woldoff et al., 2011). Without this sense of belonging— "defined as feelings of membership in the larger community"— students will develop negative perceptions about their institution which can affect their psychological processes (Rodgers & Summers, 2008, p. 176). The campus environment consists of any physical space which can aid in either nurturing or dissuading social interaction, including but not limited to, classrooms, residence halls and facilities (Mighty, 2016). Previous investigations have found that African American students generally perceive their campus climate more negatively than white students (Lawson, 2013); viewing them as "hostile, unwelcoming, socially isolating, discouraging, discriminating and unresponsive to their needs and interests" (Wei et al., 2011, p. 196).

Having these negative beliefs, significantly impacts students' adjustment and academic achievement (Bourke & Bray, 2019). Positive and diverse peer interactions foster a sense of community which have proven to be some of the strongest indicators of a positive racial campus climate and overall satisfaction among black students (Wei et al., 2011; Park, 2009). Promoting satisfaction among black students is crucial in creating an environment that is geared towards their development (Park, 2009). However, when institutions fail to provide support to students throughout their adjustment period, it could lead them to further detach academically or discontinue their schooling altogether due to continued feelings of seclusion (Woldoff et al., 2011). Although the lack of inclusivity of black students effects their perceptions of the general campus climate, it also influences their persistence and retention rates.

In the sample survey, the question "Do you feel as if the social/racial environment at your institution has a direct effect on your psychological well-being?" was posed.

Participant # 32— Black American, Male, age 20 and a Junior in college— declared:

Yes. I began my college career as a very outgoing person. In class it is my nature to make friends with whoever I can. The people in this school have shown they do not want to be friends or even acquaintances. Now, after three years, I don't even bother trying to befriend people in class.

Participant # 36— Black American, Female, age 19 and a Sophomore in college— declared:

Yes, because if one begins to isolate themselves it can lead to negative thought patterns and possibly detrimental mental health. We are social beings no matter what race we are.

Participant # 18— African American, Male, age 24 and Graduated/finished school— declared:

It definitely impacted how I saw myself and in turn how I would interact with others! On top of that, it impacted the spaces I felt comfortable in and the groups of people. With the environment around us, it was very easy to feel nervous around certain groups or in certain settings.

Research has indicted that the persistence rates in black college students remain lower than their white counterparts (Bourke & Bray, 2019), as students are failing to complete either a 2-year or 4-year college degree (Hamilton, 2009) due to their lack of institutional connectedness (Ross et al., 2016).

Of the 40 participants surveyed, only one student reported having dropped out. This participant— #2, Black American, Female, age 24— had also reported feeling alienated, not feeling as if there were a community for them and not feeling seen or heard by their peers. Participant # 39— African American, Female, age 23 and a Graduate student — stated,

> *"I am less invested in courses and the institution as a whole. I do enough to extract the information I need to pass or what is of interest."* These primarily white institutions could aid in retention efforts by meeting the specific needs of black students (Rodgers & Summers, 2008) to create a more supportive environment (Bourke & Bray, 2019).

Participant # 24— African American, Female, age 24 and Graduated/finished school — suggested:

> *I feel like it always comes down to a systemic change A lot of people who come to PWI's (at least in the Midwest) are from smaller whiter towns, so they'll automatically have certain ideas about POCs and that can be hard to work against. I guess having a robust support system and resources for POCs to help us feel included and like we have the right to be on campus even when most of our peers don't look like us.*

Therefore, it is sensible for black students to feel supported and accepted within the campus climate (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Researchers have acquired a great deal of knowledge surrounding the concept of social support through various relationships and its effect on black college students (Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). When the concept of social support has been examined, it is typically related to the previous factors outlined; adjustment, climate and retention (Kimbrough et al., 1996). Support systems can be found within family, peers, faculty as well as the surrounding campus community (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Those who have a solid support system are believed to be shielded from the negative impact of chronic stressors, because they alter how individual students judge stressful situations. Scholars within the field of cultural studies provided perspectives in understanding the ways in which black college students are impacted by family dynamics (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010) which in turn can either positively or negatively affect their psychological well-being.

Families play a vital role in fostering a supportive environment for black college students outside of an institution, which can act as both strengths and weaknesses throughout their collegiate careers. A qualitative study conducted by Guiffrida & Douthit (2010), uncovered some of the circumstances in which familial support may affect black college students. The study examined the differences between the support experienced by low achieving students and high achieving students. Those who identified as low achieving frequently expressed the lack of support received from their families. This lack of support presented itself in a variety of ways including, but not limited to; families not valuing education and not receiving emotional or financial support. Many low achieving black students could potentially come from low-income households and or be first-generation college students. These students then feel obligated to take on the financial burdens of their families by obtaining a job while in school, affecting their academic performance. On the other hand, high achievers regularly expressed receiving emotional, financial and academic support from their families as being one of their most important assets. These students were often encouraged by their families to focus solely on school as it was their most important obligation. As proven, familial support has an effect on black students, however, they need to feel socially integrated.

INTEGRATION

Social integration involves having positive and supportive social interactions with peers and faculty outside of the classroom, along with participating in the larger campus community (Severiens & Schmidt, 2008). Successful integration can be linked to involvement, which requires navigating the complex social environments (Mighty, 2016; Bourke & Bray, 2019). Educational aspirations and achievements can be influenced by peer interactions (Bourke & Bray, 2019), which are at the center of college social networks (Mighty, 2016). When a student feels integrated into the social environment of an institution (Bourke & Bray, 2019), it allows them to form positive relationships with others (Ryff, 1989). However, if support and integration are not achieved through peer group interaction, they could have a negative impact on students' psychological processes (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Student-faculty interactions are also correlated with social integration.

The relationship a student has with faculty also determines the ways in which they are socially integrated within their institution (Loo & Rolison, 1986). Research indicates that obtaining solid relationships with faculty are vital to students' success, as they can impart feelings of acceptance, support and encouragement (Loo & Rolison, 1986; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Despite these findings, studies have shown that black students often fail to build strong relationships with white faculty at PWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Some of the reasons for this failure to connect, include faculty lacking effective communication skills and black students perceiving them as either culturally insensitive or prejudiced.

The data from the sample survey found that only 50% of participants reported feeling supported by faculty and staff.

Black students also often do not view white faculty as role models as they lack the cultural viewpoints and perspectives conducive for black students learning (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Sedlacek, 1970). Several studies have reported black students concerns about the lack of black faculty, staff and role models in higher education (Sedlacek, 1970). Without this representation and accessibility to black staff, black students tend to seek support and integration elsewhere.

Participant #19— African American, Female, age 19 and a Freshman in college — stated,

"Another important thing is to see more black staff. We need to see people that look like us to inspire us."

For African American students at PWIs, the social integration they experience is often limited within the larger campus community, as their opportunities for involvement generally present themselves in the form of minority-based communities (Bourke & Bray, 2019). In an effort to manage their feelings of isolation, black students tend seek out these cultural networks as they typically cater to their interests, allowing students to form support systems through racially separate enclaves (Kimbrough et al., 1996). Enclaves are referred to as African American affiliated organizations, such as Black Student Union (BSU) and Greek organizations, which create subcultures (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). ***The most important aspect of these organizations is that they provide a safe space for black students*** to wind down and socialize comfortably without the fear of perpetuating stereotypes (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Although research has proven that engaging in these organizations are extremely beneficial to the social integration of black students (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010), not all students find solace in their own ethnic groups.

> Data from the sample survey suggests that many black students do not feel connected to their ethnic subcultures. Participant #9— African, Male, age 22 and a Senior in college — expressed:
>
> I had communities like the BSU and Huntley House to lean on for support. As I became an upperclassman, the dynamics of the communities began to change with graduation. I started to dissociate myself from the BSU and felt more isolated and lonely. There is a sense of strong division between the black population and identities, it is easier to remove myself from it.

The values of black students usually differ in comparison to their white peers, explaining their feeling alienated from the larger community, but at the same time feeling integrated within their ethnic subculture (Loo & Rolison, 1986). However, studies have shown that subcultures allow students to bridge the cultural gap between the black campus community and the larger primarily white campus community, ultimately achieving social integration (Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010); which can also be linked to bi-culturalism— "the ability to function within two distinct cultures" (Rodgers & Summers, 2008, p. 183). It has been indicated that African American students at PWIs are best integrated socially once they are able to establish bi-cultural competence, which allows them to navigate these environments while retaining their ethnic identity as black students. Race and ethnicity are more visibly prominent in majority white academic environments which often result in racially-related challenges that most black students encounter (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

Participant #37— Biracial/Multiracial, Female, age 19 and a Freshman in college — stated, **"My two white roommates said...There you go with that sassy black girl attitude"**

RACE-RELATED STRESSORS

Qualitative findings have suggested that race-related stressors are significant predictors of psychological well-being among black college students (Neville, 2004; Wei et al., 2011; Pieterse & Carter, 2007). Despite the increase in diversity throughout PWIs overtime, black students still frequently experience racism and discrimination, specifically by their peers and oftentimes faculty. A common form of discrimination experienced by black students are known as microaggressions (Lawson, 2013). Microaggressions convey negative messages and reinforce negative stereotypes about blacks by people who are negatively biased, ultimately invoking black students' feelings of anger, mistrust and self-doubt (Ross et al., 2016). Microaggressions are typically subtle and often present themselves in an academic setting. For example, professors being racially insensitive or peers being invalidating or dismissive during group assignments.

Participant #18— African American, Male, age 24 and Graduate/finished school— expressed:

I had a professor that was talking about the Muslim community and began asking me questions about it, as if I could represent the community. I am not Muslim. I also on hundreds of occasions would be asked if I was a student athlete and was treated differently because of this. Mainly, I felt I always had to prove myself in most situations ESPECIALLY during group work.

The sample survey found that 85% of participants expressed experiencing some form of racism or discrimination, many of them being men.

Would you be willing to share an experience of how your race played into your experience at a PWI?

Participant # 26— African American, Male, age 21 and a Junior in college— declared:

During class I would present my work and everyone would be shocked that a person of my color could achieve such greatness. Another example is where I would personally speak out and be engaged in class discussions regarding race and all the students would whisper why is he always talking about race we are passed that now.

Participant # 36— Black American, Female, age 19 and a Sophomore in college— declared:

Yes, because if one begins to isolate themselves it can lead to negative thought patterns and possibly detrimental mental health. We are social beings no matter what race we are.

Participant # 25— African, Male, age 27 and a Senior in college— declared:

Whenever you working in group and you propose something, it's always harder for people to accept it. This happens several times. But when someone else says something, it taken more seriously.

Participant # 11— African, Male, age 26 and Graduated/finished school— declared:

There was a period of time when many of the crime reports had very vague descriptions and almost any black male college student would fit these descriptions. There was a situation on West Bank where an incident had occurred. I tried to get into my student job building on East Bank campus but there was a white girl who didn't want to let me in. I had to call my boss to validate that I belonged in the building.

Participant # 31— African, Male, age 20 and a Sophomore in college— declared:

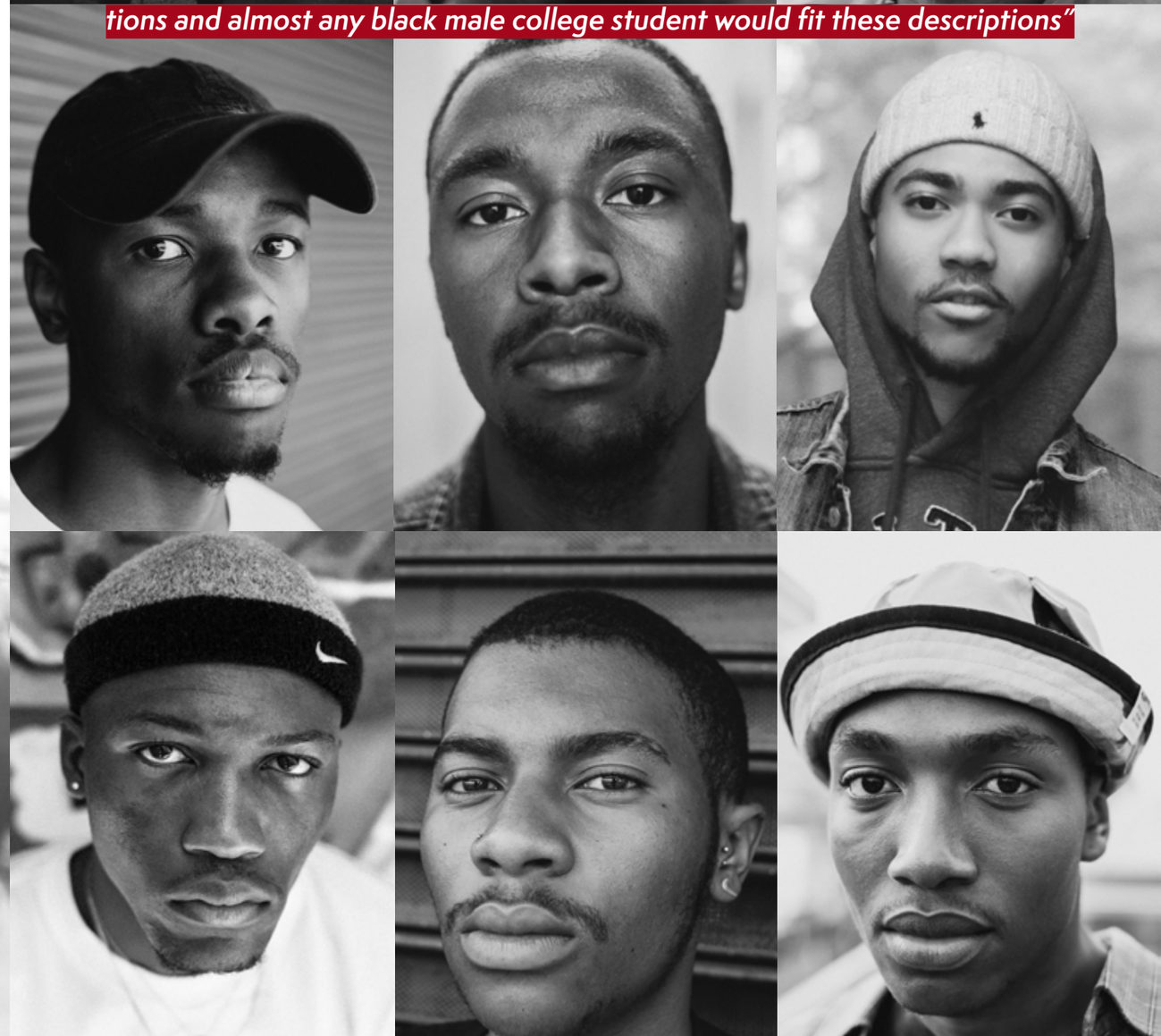
On the campus bussing white people refuse to stand or sit next to you unless necessary. I have been sitting down before with open seats on either side of me and looking around there are people standing cramped all around me.

Evidence has shown that across several areas, including education, black men experience a greater intensity in relation to discrimination than black women. Black men are often perceived as dangerous and are prone to be negatively assessed through other bias assumptions and stereotypes, rather than by their actual characteristics and achievements. Studies have shown that black men have a high occurrence of harassment and discrimination (Pieterse & Carter, 2007).

32.5% of the participants of the sample survey are male, with 92% having reported experiencing some form of racism or discrimination.

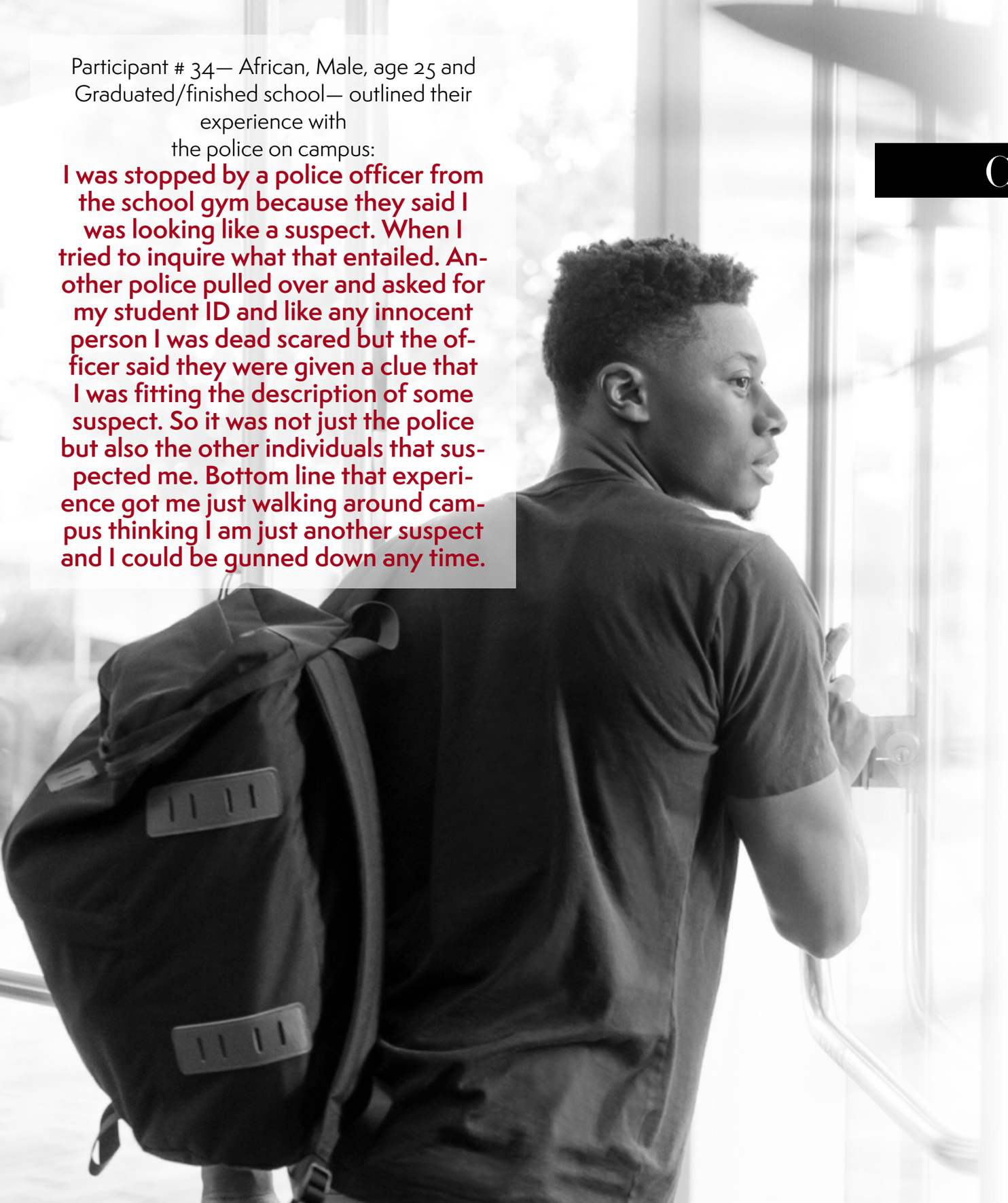
Many students undergo this mistreatment and it can significantly affect their academics.

"There was a period of time when many of the crime reports had very vague descriptions and almost any black male college student would fit these descriptions"



Participant # 34— African, Male, age 25 and Graduated/finished school— outlined their experience with the police on campus:

I was stopped by a police officer from the school gym because they said I was looking like a suspect. When I tried to inquire what that entailed. Another police pulled over and asked for my student ID and like any innocent person I was dead scared but the officer said they were given a clue that I was fitting the description of some suspect. So it was not just the police but also the other individuals that suspected me. Bottom line that experience got me just walking around campus thinking I am just another suspect and I could be gunned down any time.



CONCLUSION

To conclude, copious amounts of research has proven that the relationship between African American college students and their overall campus environments tend to have negative effects on their psychological well-being. The imbalance of representation within these institutional spaces contribute to the disconnect felt amongst students. The negative external factors that aid in this disconnect are impacted by the degree to which black students can successfully adjust to their environments, their general perceptions of the campus climate, their access to social support networks, the lack of social integration and dealing with race-related stressors. Overall, the effect of these different factors hinder the progression of black college students, potentially leaving them more marginalized than ever, impacting their overall psychological well-being.

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