STEREOTYPES OF A BLACK MALE MISUNDERSTOOD (AND IT’S STILL ALL GOOD): EXPLORING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK MALE STUDENTS EXPERIENCE AND PERCEIVE RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand African American male students’ experiences and perceptions of racial microaggressions at a community college. The qualitative study, through the use of in-depth interviews with six African American male identified students, sought to answer the following research questions: 1) How do African American males attending a community college perceive and interpret individual and institutional forms of racial microaggressions? 2) In what ways can perceptions and experiences of racial microaggressions be linked to retention, persistence and completion rates of African American males attending a community college? 3) What are the experiences of African American male participants with racial microaggressions within a community college with predominately White faculty and how do they make sense of these experiences with respect to their academic and social achievement?

The paper concludes with recommendations for future research on Black males attending community college including more integrated and intentional supports for African American male students, and to cultivate “counterspaces” for Black male students. Further, future studies should capture the experiences of racial microaggressions on African American male and female faculty, staff and students. As well as, continue to build on current research that employs Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework to examine how race and racism continue to influence and shape education and identify policies and practices that perpetuate discriminatory and racist practices in educational settings.

Keywords: African American/Black males, racial microaggressions, community college, critical race theory, counter-stories, counterpaces.
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Chapter I: Introduction

The Topic

From the years 1900 to 2000 African American males’ literacy rates increased by only 13 percent (Jenkins, 2006). In 1900, four years after the Supreme Court ruled through the Plessy vs. Ferguson case that separate but equal was constitutional, 57 percent of African American males were illiterate and one hundred years later, 44 percent were illiterate (Jenkins, 2006). The legacy of African American’s disenfranchisement from the enslavement of people of African descent, to the eras of reconstruction and segregation, and the gains of the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights era is too vast to fully explore here. However, it is essential to understand how larger social and political frameworks provide a critical backdrop to inform the examination of the experiences of African American males in higher education, specifically community colleges. Although colleges and universities have existed in the United States for over 300 years, 150 years ago it was illegal for African Americans to be taught to read (Jenkins, 2006). The history of oppression and exclusion from formal education has had devastating effects on African Americans, particularly, African American males. According to a 2012 Building a Bridge to Literacy report disseminated by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill;

- Fewer than half of African American males receive their high school diplomas;
- African American men make up only 5% of the United States college population;
- While comprising only 14% of the national population, African American men make up over 40% of the prison population;
- The unemployment rate for African American males is nearly twice that of White males.
Research on higher education has historically focused on access, persistence, and completion rates for White students (Franklin, 2016). Earlier studies did not focus on the experiences of students of color and the concept of a negative campus racial climate (Tinton, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1993; Tinto, 1991; Franklin, 2016). As a result, findings were less applicable to students of color. Further, findings rarely identified institutional racism (Harper, 2012); a hostile campus racial climate (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Ham, 2009; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) and racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin 2007; Sue, 2010) as factors that impact retention and persistence rates for students of color. Additionally, within the large bodies of research on factors that impact persistence, there are limited studies that examine African American male students attending community colleges (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Flowers, 2006; Barnett, 2011; Bauer, 2014; Coney, 2017). However, most African American men started their post-secondary education at a community college or are enrolled at a community college (Bush & Bush, 2010; Flowers, 2006; Perrakis, 2008; Wood & Williams, 2013).

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand African American male students' perceptions of racial microaggressions at a community college. Additionally, this study seeks to discover the ways that campuses with predominately White faculty impact African American male students’ academic achievements. Knowledge generated is expected to contribute to existing theories on student engagement and retention, expand the study of racial microaggressions to the community college context, as well as inform higher education policy and practice as related to African American male students.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research related to African American male students in colleges/universities and community colleges to provide context and background to
the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, connecting to the possible beneficiaries of this study. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a framework for the study is introduced and explained.

**Context and Background**

Community and technical colleges play a pivotal role in providing access to education to millions of college students, especially for students of color (Cox, 2009). Community colleges differ from four-year colleges and universities in three significant ways. First, community colleges in the United States provide open access to post-secondary education to more students than selective colleges and universities. Second, community colleges provide educational pathways to transfer to four-year colleges and prepare students for professional/technical careers. Third, community colleges serve a more racially and socioeconomically diverse student body, including first generation college students (Wood & Williams, 2013).

A large percentage of African American males start their postsecondary education at community colleges (Chenowith, 1998; Wood, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). However, research on this population has largely focused on African-American male students at four-year colleges and universities (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Perrakis, 2008; Bush & Bush, 2010; Wood & Williams, 2013). Scholars have maintained that research centered on predominantly White four-year colleges and universities combines African American males attending two and four-year colleges/universities into a homogenous group and therefore excludes important factors such as, socioeconomic background, high school preparation, and student engagement (Flowers, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010). Some ways African American males attending community colleges differ from their four-year counterparts as they tend to be older,
are parents, are less prepared academically, and come from lower income backgrounds (Flowers, 2006; Strayhorn, 2012).

African American males enrolled in community colleges have the lowest degree completion rates of all groups, including African American women (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2007; Wood & Palmer, 2013; Wood & Williams, 2013; Harris & Wood, 2014). For instance, upon entering the institution, 11.5% of African American males will leave the community college after the first year, 48.9% will depart after three years, and 83% will depart after six years, without completing their intended degree (Wood & Williams, 2013). Compared to other male groups, 42% of African American males attending community college will earn a degree within three years, 53.2% of Latino males, 55.6% of White males, and 76.7% of Asian American males will earn a degree within three years (NCES, 2007). These data points help to frame the conversation for African American males in the United States and the significance of the disparities between African American males, African American women, and other male and racial groups. Thus, the study of factors that impact African American male student retention and completion in the community college context will contribute to the literature.

Prior research has identified racial microaggressions as an important area of concern for understanding campus climate and Latino/a, Asian American, and African American students’ collegiate experiences at predominately White institutions (PWIs) and four-year colleges and universities (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009; Yosso, Smith & Ceja, 2009; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Franklin, 2016). Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso's (2000) study on the impact of racial microaggressions on African-American students at three predominately White institutions (PWIs) revealed three primary findings: first, racial microaggressions take place in
academic and social settings; second, racial stereotypes have devastating effects on African American students; and, finally, students need to create “counter spaces” as places of resistance and group empowerment. Their findings indicated that in academic spaces microaggressions were subtler and covert, and in social spaces, on and off campus, racism was more overt. When racial microaggressions occurred in a classroom setting participants described incidents of White students’ refusal to work with them in study groups because they were viewed as being affirmative action admits and therefore academically weak. Students also spoke of feeling invisible within the classroom, and that the course curriculum omitted and distorted their experiences as African Americans (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). Outside of the classroom students described incidents of racial profiling by campus police (Sue, 2010).

Extensive research has found that faculty and student interactions, inside and outside of the classroom, positively impact college students’ success (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Barnett, 2011; Bauer, 2014; Coney, 2017; Brooms, 2017; Perrakis, 2008; Chang, 2005; Flowers, 2006). Research has also shown that positive faculty-student interactions leads to positive outcomes for African American male students (Harper, 2005; Harper, 2006; Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Davis, 1994; Wood & Ireland, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011; Wood & Palmer, 2013; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Brooms, 2017). However, research has also shown that African American male students are less likely to engage with faculty because they feared faculty would view them as unintelligent and unwelcomed on campus (Harper, 2006; Harper, 2005; Wood, 2014). Sue et al.’s, (2009) study on racial microaggressions in the classroom examined how students of color perceived the relationship between racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. Their findings indicated that the most harmful microaggressions tend to be those between teacher
and student, in part because of the power dynamic inherent in a teacher and student relationship. Teachers that failed to intervene or address microaggressive incidents in the classroom were perceived as condoning the behavior (Sue et al., 2009). Further, they found that racial microaggressions negatively impacted mental health; created a hostile campus climate; perpetuated racial stereotypes and stereotype threat; impacted physical health; and decreased work productivity (Sue et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2011).

Sue (2010) suggested that racial microaggressions increase feelings of anger and frustration, and negatively impact students’ self-esteem and academic performance. African American students carry a dual burden of maintaining good academic standing and navigating a hostile racial campus climate. The cumulative stress of negotiating this space left participants feeling as if they always had to be “on guard” which led to feelings of unfairness and distrust towards faculty, staff, or students (Sue, 2010). One may argue that all college students must maintain good grades and learn to navigate a college or university environment and they are right, however; African American students described feelings of hopelessness, fatigue, and disinterest in seeking out campus resources designed to support them (Sue, 2010).

The accumulation of racial microaggressions can lead to what Smith, Allen and Danley (2007) termed racial battle fatigue. Racial battle fatigue encompasses the physiological, psychological, and behavioral strain upon people of color. For African American male students, college campuses are loaded with perceptions regarding their intellectual ability and inability (Harper, 2007; Brooms, 2017; Flowers, 2006). African American male students indicated negative stereotypes of Black males as a significant barrier to their educational attainment (Smith, et al., 2007) Harper, 2005; Franklin, 2016). They were perceived as dangerous, violent, and criminal in and out of the classroom. Further, surface judgments about
hair and clothing styles contributed to negative perceptions of their intellectual and academic capabilities (Harper, 2012; Sue, 2001; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Wood, 2014; Bush & Bush, 2010).

Understanding factors that influence Black male student attrition and retention is complex because there is not a universal Black male college experience or a single voice. As mentioned earlier, African American males are a diverse population. As such, race related experiences differ because our understandings of race and racism have changed over time. Recent research contends that contemporary forms of overt racism and White racial superiority have evolved into subtle and ambiguous everyday forms of racism, discrimination, and bias (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Offerman, Basford, Graebner & DeGraf, 2013; Rowe, 1990; Sue, 2010; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo & Rivera, 2009; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw & Okazaki, 2014; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal & Torino, 2009). Racial microaggressions are an important lens through which factors that contribute to Black male student retention and attrition can be better understood. Racial microaggressions reveal the textured nature of racism, and the ways that race and racism shape one’s experience. This study will expand on prior research on racial microaggressions to African American male students attending community college.

**Rationale and Significance**

Given that most African American males pursue their post-secondary education in community colleges, an examination of this student populations’ experiences and perceptions of racial microaggressions attending a community college will provide valuable insights into their experiences. Findings can inform policies, programs and initiatives that target African American male students in a community college setting. Additionally, research focused on non-cognitive
variables, such as perceptions, social interactions, and a student’s self-concept revealed that Black male students perceived community colleges as unsupportive (Bush, 2004; Bush & Bush, 2010). Expanding research on this student population in this domain could support more effective targeted interventions that positively impact retention, persistence, and completion rates.

Today, higher education is under scrutiny for their persistence and completion rates and ability to educate and prepare students to enter the workforce (Hillman, Tandberg, & Gross, 2014). The community college selected for this study is in a diverse, urban setting in a city with significant workforce needs for highly skilled employees in healthcare, technology, and construction fields. Nationwide, urban community colleges are 4.3% of all community colleges (The Carnegie Foundation, 2010). According to Lassiter Jr. (2013) urban community colleges are unique because of their proximity to businesses and industry and they are well positioned to build partnerships that provide students inroads in the workforce. Identification of appropriate strategies that support and increase African American male students’ academic success, retention, and persistence, should be an institutional priority.

African American male college students face a myriad of race-related stressors that can negatively impact their persistence, retention, and graduation rates, such as racial microaggressions (Smith, et al., 2007; Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011; Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2007; Sue & Constantine, 2007; Solórzano, Allen & Carroll, 2002; Yosso, Smith & Ceja, 2009; Pierce, 1989; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2009). Pierce (1970) first coined the term microaggressions to name African Americans' experiences of everyday racism that were subtle, offensive blows (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Profit, Mino and Pierce (2000) contended that "race-inspired microaggressions” are the "major and inescapable expression of racism in the
United States (p.327). This shifts the discourse on racial microaggressions as individual acts perpetuated by Whites towards African Americans to include the social environment (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). This reveals the presence of institutional microaggressions, which are much larger and have more of a structural force behind them. For example, failure to recruit and retain faculty of color is one way colleges and universities contribute to a negative campus climate for African American students. Institutional microaggressions also manifest via differential treatment by campus police towards African American students (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000), lack of culturally relevant curriculum (Allen, 2012, Jenkins, 2006, and institutions’ failure to establish a truly anti-racist learning environment (Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2007). Inclusion of institutional microaggressions will provide community college scholars and practitioners with language to identify and examine institutional practices that negatively contribute to African American male students' attrition, retention, and completion rates. More research is needed on the ways that community colleges perpetuate and maintain institutional racial microaggressions.

**Research Problem and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand African American male students’ experiences and perceptions of racial microaggressions at a community college. The qualitative study, through the use of in-depth interviews with six African American male identified students, sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do African American males attending a community college perceive and interpret individual and institutional forms of racial microaggressions?
2. In what ways can perceptions and experiences of racial microaggressions be linked to retention, persistence and completion rates of African American males attending a community college?

3. What are the experiences of African American male participants with racial microaggressions within a community college with predominately White faculty and how do they make sense of these experiences with respect to their academic and social achievement?

**Historical and Contemporary Theoretical Frameworks**

Vincent Tinto’s student departure theory (1975, 1998) is the frequently referenced work on student retention and persistence. In Tinto’s (1975, 1998) model, he recognized three reasons for a student’s departure: the student is academically unprepared, the student did not have set academic and career goals, and the student was not academically or socially integrated into the college environment. According to Tinto (1975, 1998) students persist when they are integrated into formal and informal academic spaces that occur in and out of the classroom, are integrated into formal clubs and student organizations, and connected to social interactions. Critics of Tinto’s theory of student departure argued that Tinto’s model is focused on the traditional college-aged student that would attend a four-year, residential, college or university (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner’s model of persistence (1985) suggested that non-traditional students tend to be older, are enrolled part-time, attend commuter campuses, and are low-income or part of a racial/ethnic minority group. Because of these differences, nontraditional students’ academics are impacted by external factors such as, jobs, family obligations, and financial issues. Termed as environmental and psychological factors on persistence, these factors can “pull” students away from their academics (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Wood & Williams, 2013).
Given that the majority of community college students are older, commuters, and attend part-time (Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014) and African American male students enroll at community colleges at higher rates than four-year colleges and universities (Wood & Williams, 2013) expanded research on this student population attending community colleges is needed. Further, contemporary theories have emerged in educational research that include racial, ethnic, age, gender, and other facets of identity in the context of student development theory and practice.

**Critical Race Theory.** This study was grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) theoretical framework. CRT has been used in educational research to challenge dominant narratives and paradigms that perpetuate deficit thinking that frame racial inequities as a failure of the individual versus a failure of the institution (Teranishi, Behringer, Grey & Parker, 2009). Critical Race Theory is a useful framework to analyze the ways in which privilege, power, and race shape education. Rooted in United States legal scholarship, CRT challenged conservative and liberal legal theories that marginalized race and the persistence of racism in society (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 2010; Alexander, 2012). As a form of counter scholarship, CRT advocates an intersectional approach to race and other social identities (e.g. gender, sexual orientation), challenges dominant ideologies that promote and privilege Whiteness, centralizes and validates the lived experiences of people of color, and maintains an interdisciplinary analysis of race and racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2005, Strayhorn, 2010). Specifically, Solórzano (1998) outlined five themes that form the basis for CRT applied to education: (1) centrality of race and racism to educational theory and practice; (2) critique of dominant ideology and deficit frameworks; (3) centralize experiential knowledge; (4) commitment to social justice and the elimination of racism, sexism,
and poverty; and (5) an interdisciplinary framework that includes a historical and contemporary analysis of race and racism (Solórzano, 1998).

A Critical Race Theory approach identifies gaps within the educational system that hamper the academic success of students of color. CRT provided a framework to examine the experiences of African American male students in community colleges and understanding factors that impact their persistence.

**Critics of Critical Race Theory.** Scholars critical of Critical Race Theory in education argue that CRT unintentionally serves conservative or mainstream purposes (Darder, 2011). Darder (2011) asserted that CRT's emphasis on race absent a discussion of class and a critique of capitalism does not address the political economy of race. She argued that race and racism are a way to justify the exploitation and domination of groups to conserve the capitalist social order (Darder, 2011). Critical Race Theorists counter this critique. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that not only is race a topic many people avoid in daily life, it also remains understudied and undertheorized in education. Critical Race Theory centers race, but it also includes other forms of oppression, including race and gender (Howard, 2013). As referenced in the literature earlier in this chapter, the severity of the state of African American males in higher education is one where most African American male students are enrolling in post-secondary education and are not persisting to completion at the same rates as African American female students, or other male groups. An intersectional analysis of African American males is important because it can mitigate the risk of oversimplification of theory and perpetuation of bias towards a group based on one social identify category (Howard, 2013).

Another criticism of CRT is that the use of counter-storytelling as a methodological tool from the victim’s perspective lacks rigor, objectivity, and accuracy (Howard, 2013). Further,
Darder and Torres (2004) argued that CRT's focus on individual experiences through narratives and storytelling romanticizes the experiences of marginalized groups and treats White people and people of color as homogeneous groups which results in essentialism. They questioned how narratives could be representative of all members of the studied group.

**Rationale.** Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework aligned with the study because it sets a social, political, and structural context for understanding perceptions of racial microaggressions by African American males attending a Seattle Central College. Three of the CRT tenets are the most relevant to the present study. The first tenet focuses on the centrality of race and racism in the field of education. The second tenet most relevant to this study was the importance of centralizing a subject’s “voice” and the experiential knowledge of people of color and historically marginalized social groups (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993). Third, by highlighting and giving space to hear to hear their experiences, the study aligns with CRT’s focus on experiential knowledge. The men’s stories challenge dominant narratives about Black men and their educational experiences. Focus on the centrality of race and racism in education and the illumination of participants’ own voices, and experiential knowledge was necessary to better understand and address racial microaggressions specific to this student population. Leading CRT scholar in education, Ladson-Billings (1998) argued that it is through personal narratives that “counter-stories” emerge as a tool to challenge the dominant narrative on race and racism in in society. Counter-stories build on our understanding of the pervasiveness of racism that mainstream American scholarship views as “rare and aberrational rather than systemic and ingrained” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. xiv). Counter-storytelling offers a methodology entrenched in the realities and life experiences of racialized individuals and to challenge dominant narratives about Black people and Black communities (Matsuda et al., 1993).
Application to the study. Researchers have used CRT to highlight the voices of individuals as they relate to campus climate and collegiate experiences (Jayakumar et al., 2009; Yosso, Smith & Ceja, 2009; Gusa, 2010; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen & Allen, 1998; Hiraldo, 2010; Teranishi et al., 2009; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). CRT as a theoretical framework provided a lens to capture and center African American male students’ narratives from the intersections of race, gender and class, and highlight ways that community colleges maintain or dismantle systemic forms of racism, sexism, and classism.

Voice. One of CRT’s main themes addresses the acknowledgment and importance of people of color’s experiences as sources of knowledge (Dixon & Rosseau, 2005). Voice, in a CRT framework, suggests that personal narratives and stories are valid forms of evidence (Dixon & Rosseau, 2005). When applied to this study, participants’ “voices” or stories challenged the dominant narrative. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) refer to this as counter-stories that can be used as a method to reveal, examine, and challenge dominant racial narratives. CRT centers and validates the narratives of people of color which aligns with the methodology.

Action. CRT calls for action to an integral piece of a CRT project (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Capturing the voice of people of color is the first step (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Once captured, CRT is the lens employed for a deeper analysis that results in improvement of the educational experiences of people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A systems’ view aligns with the study’s research questions that ask in what ways do African American males’ experiences and perceptions of racial microaggressions contribute to their attrition, persistence and completion rates. Further, their stories may capture their experiences as African American male students on a college campus with predominantly White faculty, a small
percentage of faculty of color, and a minuscule percentage of faculty that are African American male or female.

Summary

African American male students attending community colleges are understudied in educational research, especially factors that impact persistence (Wood & Williams, 2014; Hagedorn et al., 2001; Flowers, 2006). Research focused on students of color in general, and African American male students, specifically, rarely identified factors, such as institutional racism (Harper, 2012), campus racial climate (Jayakumar et al., 2009), and racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) as issues that impact persistence. This study focused on African American male students’ attending a community college and their perceptions and interpretations of racial microaggressions. Knowledge generated is expected to inform higher education policy and practice.

Chapter Two, the literature review, provides an in-depth overview of the scholarship on community colleges, African American male students in higher education, and individual and institutional forms of racial microaggressions. Chapter Three provides an overview of the research design. Chapter Four will present a discussion of the research findings and key themes. Chapter Five will provide key findings drawn from the themes, situate the findings in relationship to the theoretical framework, extant literature, discuss the study’s significance, and recommendations for future studies.
Chapter II: A Review of the Literature

The goal of this study is to examine African American male students’ experiences and perceptions of racial microaggressive instances at a community college. This chapter highlights and summarize the relevant literature pertaining to African American male students’ educational attainment in the context of community colleges, provide an in-depth review of the literature on racial microaggressions, and examine the distinct space occupied by community colleges in the higher education landscape. The chapter is organized around four areas which are: (1) Historical overview of community colleges; (2) African American male educational attainment in community colleges; (3) Leading theorists in racial microaggressions research; and, (4) Impacts of racial microaggressions on African American male academic and social achievement.

Community Colleges

As mentioned in Chapter One, community colleges are largely understudied in academic research and until the 1990’s community colleges were not the focus of post-secondary educational policy makers or scholars (Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009). In the mid-1800’s junior colleges were proposed as a way to provide relief to universities by providing general education to recent high school graduates (Jurgens, 2010). The initiative was first proposed by Henry Tappan, University of Michigan president, William Fowell, University of Minnesota president, and William Mitchell, a University of Georgia trustee (Jurgens, 2010). They believed that lower division coursework diluted the academic rigor for universities (Jurgens, 2010). Other universities began advocating and adopting a similar model where universities could focus on higher level courses and junior colleges would focus on vocational and technical education and lower level courses (Jurgens, 2010). Junior colleges met the need for a more skilled workforce
by providing education and training in the “community” which meant students did not have to move away from home to go to college (Jurgens, 2010).

Junior colleges continued to evolve from institutions charged with providing general education coursework and vocational and technical training to include transferrable education to four-year colleges and universities (Townsend, 2001). Tillery and Deegan (1985) provided an overview of the founding of the first junior college in 1901 through what they term the “fifth generation” community college. Their work provided a context for understanding the historical stages of development of community colleges and the future arc of their institutional missions. Tillery and Deegan (1985) predicted that community colleges would eventually become more focused on economic development, competition in a post-industrial economy, technology-based information systems, and would experience an increased demand for more institutional accountability.

Witt’s (1994) survey of the history of community colleges provided a chronological overview of community college development by state and how World War II influenced the expansion of junior colleges. He noted that post World War II, during the 1940’s and 1950’s, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, which later was called the G.I. Bill, provided military veterans with funding to access an affordable education (Witt, 1994). The G.I. Bill had a direct impact on the expansion of junior college enrollments. Between 1944 and 1947, enrollments increased to more than 500,000 students and, of those students, more than 40% were veterans (Witt, 1994). In the decade after the war 58 new colleges were founded (Witt, 1994). During this same period, the President’s Commission on Higher Education (Truman Commission) recommended that a community college be developed within each community to deliver transfer education and vocational training for all Americans. As more new colleges were
established, and enrollments grew, junior colleges shifted to the term “community colleges” in
the 1970’s to describe any regionally accredited institution that awarded associate of arts or
science degrees (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

During the 1960’s and 1970’s community colleges continued to be in high demand. The
G.I. Bill, a growing middle class, and U.S. economic growth helped shape community colleges’
open access mission and academic and vocational offerings (Levin & Kater, 2012). Further,
populations that historically were excluded and denied access to higher education campaigned
for more rights. Civil and social movements such as the civil rights and women’s rights
movements coupled with legislative actions such the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher
Education Act (HEA) of 1965 increased access to post-secondary education for women, low-
icome students, and people of color (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). The HEA was the first federal
program that provided financial assistance to public and private colleges and students,
specifically students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). The
Education Opportunity Grants, later expanded and changed to Pell Grants, provided funding for
low-income students and the Equal Education Opportunity Program (EEOP) provided loans or
grants to low-income students and students of color (Lang, 1992). Both programs substantially
increased the number of students of color enrolled in colleges and universities (Roebuck &
Murty, 1993). During the 1970’s federal involvement in higher education increased. Affirmative
Action programs designed to ensure equal treatment for women and people of color, and Title IX
of the 1972 Federal Education Amendments, which addressed discrimination based on sex,
combined with increased access to federal financial aid, tripled African American student
enrollments at predominantly White institutions (PWI’s) and by a third at historically Black
colleges and universities (HBCU’s) (Allen, Epps & Haniff, 1991). Between 1966 and the late
1970’s African American college students’ enrollment in colleges and universities nearly tripled (Bowen & Bok, 1998). All of the growth increased competition for students across public and private colleges and universities, however, community colleges’ enrollments continued to grow as the labor market declined in the 1970’s and displaced workers sought out community colleges’ vocational programs (Brint & Karabel, 1989). By the 1980’s, President Reagan’s administration reallocated federal student aid by curtailing grants and increasing the federal student loan program (Lang, 1992). The changes in the funding model and decrease in federal support impacted access to higher education for low-income and students of color, especially African American students (Lang, 1992).

Increased involvement by the federal government also increased accountability for colleges (Miller, 1999). In particular, the 1974 Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was instituted to protect students’ privacy by requiring institutions to develop policies to protect students’ confidentiality and ensure consistent record keeping. Federal policies that granted specific funding to community colleges increased access to education. Federal financial aid dispersed in community colleges increased access for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and provided a path for those that would not meet admission criteria at selective colleges and universities (Geller, 2001). This open-door policy continues today. The open-door admissions policy allows any student with a high school diploma or equivalent the opportunity to enroll and further their education. Community colleges also have lower tuition rates compared to four-year colleges and universities. The open access model and lower tuition rates are major selling points for perspective students interested in pursuing a post-secondary education.
Community colleges continue to evolve in their academic and programmatic offerings. Community colleges in many states have begun to offer applied baccalaureate degrees (BAS) and baccalaureate degrees (BA) (Fain, 2013). The shift from academic transfer degrees, professional/technical degrees, and continuing education to include baccalaureate degree offerings is significant because baccalaureate degrees have been viewed as four-year colleges and universities’ domain (Fain, 2013). Many state legislatures and community college leaders argued that four-year colleges and universities lacked the capacity to provide all citizens with a post-secondary education, and that industry demands for skilled workers in high demand fields such as health care, as a rationale to offer baccalaureate degrees at two-year colleges (Fain, 2013).

In the United States community colleges serve as the sole system of open higher education. Critics of community colleges have argued that community colleges lack academic rigor and that students are not academically prepared to attend college or motivated to learn (Carlan, 2001). This rationale has been used to explain low graduation rates for African American males and is important to unpack and understand given the high numbers of African American male students attending community colleges. Understanding the intricacies of community colleges and how institutional characteristics impact the majority of African American males enrolled in postsecondary institutions is an important variable that has not been adequately explored in studies (Wood & Williams, 2013).

Summary. A review of the literature on the structure of community colleges and the ways they align or differ from four-year colleges and universities revealed that institutional type matters. Community colleges are structured differently than four-year colleges and universities, serve more diverse student populations, and focus on teaching rather than research (Wood &
Williams, 2013). Further, community colleges provide more options than they did in the 1800’s. They are no longer simply the venue to educate those who cannot afford college or earn admission into four-year colleges and universities. Today over six million students are enrolled at the twelve hundred community colleges nationwide (Cox, 2009). Community colleges enroll the highest number of students, including African-American male students.

**African American Males and Community Colleges**

Enrollment trends revealed that the majority of African American students chose to begin their post-secondary education in community colleges (Chenowith, 1998; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood, 2014). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report published in 2015 stated that African American males’ enrollment in community colleges was higher than those at four-year colleges and universities (NCES, 2015). Fifty-four percent of college going African American males choose to attend a community college compared to 37.1% that attend a four-year college or university and 8% that attend career colleges and for-profit colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2009a). In some states the percentage of African American males enrolled in community colleges is higher. For example, in California, 81% of Black males enrolled in public colleges and universities were enrolled in community college (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2006). Although African American males enroll in community colleges at higher rates than four-year colleges and universities, there is a dearth of research on African American male students enrolled in community colleges (Hagedorn, Maxwell, Hampton, 2001; Perrakis, 2008; Bush & Bush, 2010; Wood & Williams, 2013).

Research that is focused on African American male students enrolled in community colleges reveals a troubling picture of a student population most likely to enroll and most likely to drop out of college when compared to other groups, including African American
women (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2007). In 2009, among African American students, African American women earned 68% of all associate degrees compared to 32% degree completion by African American men (NCES, 2010). Overall, African American male students have lower degree and certificate completion rates than any other student population (NCESA, 2007; NCES, 2015).

Institutional context plays important roles in fostering the academic success and social adjustment and integration for students of color. Overwhelmingly, educational research has shown that student retention correlates to the level of connection a student feels to the institution (Tinto, 1987) and on the strength and quality of the institutional match between college and student (Brewer, 1990). For students of color, especially Black students their “level of comfort” on PWI’s can feel as if they are “guests in someone else’s house” (Turner, 1994, p. 356). As guests, their images are not reflected on building walls, they rarely encounter faculty that look like them, and they often feel uncomfortable in most academic and social spaces (Turner, 1994).

**Institutional Characteristics.** The majority of studies have focused on African American males attending PWIs, thus, ignoring the differing institutional characteristics between community colleges and four-year institutions, and obscuring the different experiences and backgrounds between African American males who attend two and four-year schools. For example, between 1971 and 2009 eight peer-reviewed articles and four book chapters were published that studied African American male students in community college (Wood, 2010). Research only centered on PWIs combines African American males attending two and four-year colleges and universities into a homogenous group and minimizes important student demographic factors, such as socioeconomic background, high school preparation, and student
engagement (Flowers, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010) and overlooks unique characteristics inherent to community colleges, such as structure, processes, and institutional mission (Wood, 2012). However, commonalities between African American males in four-year institutions and those students in community colleges do exist because of similar issues such as institutionalized racism and discrimination (Bush, 2004). Therefore, this section of literature review draws from theories and research on African American males in both settings and focus on community colleges unique characteristics that are relevant to that sector of higher education.

Educational research on African American males tends to focus on cognitive variables such as high school grade point average, level of parental education, level of math completed, test scores, and placement scores (Hagedorn, Maxwell, Hampton, 2001; Perrakis, 2008; Bush & Bush, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2013). Cognitive data provide a look into factors that contribute to the academic successes and failures of African American males but will not provide insights into revealing non-cognitive variables. Factors such as students' perceptions, attitudes, social interactions, motivation, and a student’s self-concept (Bush, 2004; Bush & Bush, 2010). Flowers (2006) suggested the use of qualitative research to better understand academic and social challenges and supports that impacted African American male students’ persistence and graduation rates.

Research found that there is a correlation between non-cognitive variables and the academic achievement of African American males in post-secondary education (Bush, 2004). However, there is less research on institutional characteristics as variables that impacted African American male academic achievement in community colleges (Wood, 2010). Carroll (1998) maintained that research centered on PWI’s, and focused on cognitive factors, excluded the
unique role of community colleges and how African American students attending community colleges tend to be less prepared than those attending four-year colleges and universities.

Hagedorn et al.’s. (2001) study at an urban community college examined data on 202 African American male students’ retention over a three-year period. Their findings indicated that factors such as high school grade point average, course load and level of high school preparedness contributed to increased African American male retention and academic success (Hagerdorn, et al., 2001). Traditional aged (18-21) college students were retained at a higher rate than older students, students with stronger high school academic records earned higher grades, students with an identified major or goal, and full-time students were more likely to persist (Hagerdorn, et al., 2001).

Lang (1992) examined barriers that impact Black students’ educational achievement and found that higher attrition rates of Black students was due to their socioeconomic background and institutional characteristics. Lang (1992) argued that when socioeconomic factors were controlled there was little difference between the attrition rate of Black students to White students. According to Lang (1992) the attrition rates between Blacks and Whites could likely be attributed to the significance of institutional factors rather than socioeconomic backgrounds. Lang’s (1992) research is supported by more recent research examining the impact of institutional factors on African American student achievement in community colleges.

Bush & Bush’s (2010) mixed method study examined the ways that institutional factors impact the academic achievement of African American males. The study examined three areas that can negatively impact the academic success of African American male students attending community college. They were faculty interaction, campus climate, and peer interaction (Bush & Bush, 2010).
The study utilized a qualitative and quantitative mixed method approach. The researchers analyzed Inland Community College’s (ICC) district student survey data. These data included district records of student participants over a six-year period (Bush & Bush, 2010). In addition, the researchers used questionnaire data from first-time ICC students. Quantitative analysis used a mix of statistical methods, such as descriptive, correlation, and multiple regression statistics (Bush & Bush, 2010). This provided the researchers with a broad context on the achievement of African American males. Thus, they first observed the correlations between institutional variables and academic outcomes and, second, they analyzed the impacts of institutional and non-institutional variables on the achievement of African American men (Bush & Bush, 2010). In addition to the quantitative methods, the researchers also held a focus group of six participants enrolled at ICC.

The authors concluded that African American males faced a myriad of institutional and interpersonal challenges. Participants’ disengagement from the institution negatively impacted their academic achievement. Furthermore, participants’ perceptions of lack of institutional support along with the absence of meaningful faculty and peer interactions made them less likely to access college resources and support services designed to support students. In other words, the “build it and they will come” model many colleges and universities utilize is not reaching some students already marginalized in that environment.

Based on their findings, Bush and Bush (2010) proposed that institutions engage in the practices that target African American males, engage them through mentoring opportunities and orientation programs, and diversify their faculty and college curriculum. This study is applicable to further research on the impacts of racial microaggressions on African American male academic achievement at the community college because it studied the same population and
same type of institution. In analyzing factors that impacted the students’ academic achievement, the authors identified both institutional and individual barriers that created unique challenges for African American males—including racial slights, discrimination, social snubbing, and other treatment that can be defined as racial microaggressions. Thus, a potential climate is created within two-year colleges where institutional microaggressions can develop and impact retention and persistence rates. Although the researchers did not cite microaggressions as a factor that contributed to African American male underachievement, one could make the argument that the institutional factors described in the study are a version of institutional microaggressions. Institutional microaggressions are described and examined later in this chapter.

**African American male student characteristics.** The community college provides open access and a myriad of program options for students. Research showed that students of color and first-generation college students experienced additional challenges (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008). An NCES (1996) annual report on the condition and progress of education in the United States found that community college students were more likely than their four-year counterparts to begin college with many of the following risk factors:

- Delayed college entry post high school
- Have children or responsible for a spouse or parents
- No high school diploma
- Lacked financial support from family
- Employed part-time or full-time

African American male students may check one or more of the attrition factors identified on the NCES list. African American male students often faced additional stressors such as serving as the sole financial provider in their households (Cuyjet, 2006).
Flowers’s (2006) study compared the effects of attending either a two-year or four-year college on African American males’ differences in background demographics and their integration academically and socially. Flowers (2006) found that African American males at four-year institutions held higher educational goals compared to two-year students, were more likely to engage with faculty; utilized student support services, and participated in student engagement activates such as athletics, school clubs and campus events. Higher levels of interaction with faculty in and outside of the classroom, more contact with advisors, and more involvement in clubs, translated into higher levels of academic and social integration (Flowers, 2006).

Student development and student engagement structures and offerings vary between two and four-year campuses (Maxwell, Hagedorn, Cypers, Moon, Brocato, Wahl, & Prather, 2003). Maxwell (2000) advocated that the classroom is the sole space many students attending community colleges are engaged because of limited access to spaces that serve to build community outside of the classroom. Utilizing classroom surveys of 1,359 students across 19 general education courses, Maxwell (2000) explored patterns of student peer relations at a diverse community college. He found that most peer relationships formed during class time (Maxwell, 2000). In the classroom, student relationships centered on studying together, coursework discussions, and informal interactions, not through participation in extra-curricular activities (Maxwell, 2000). Additionally, Maxwell (2000) found that peer relations existed yet differed when compared to four-year colleges and universities and residential campuses because those students participated in extra/co-curricular programs and activities at higher rates, and spent more time on campus. Research specific to first-generation and other historically underrepresented students found lower participation rates in engagement programs, such as first-
year experiences, study abroad programs, and learning communities when compared to majority students (Kuh, 2008). Intentional support targeted towards African-American males surfaced as a consistent recommendation in other studies (Bailey, 2005; Bush & Bush, 2010).

Ingram, Williams, Coaxum, Hilton, and Harrell’s (2016) qualitative study utilized focus groups comprised of 14 African American male students enrolled in a community college in an urban setting. Their findings revealed that students experienced significant educational and personal obstacles. The study focused on motivational factors toward persistence. Participants identified motivating factors such as: (a) improving life status, (b) societal pressure, (c) “man of the house,” and (d) encouragement from faculty and staff as factors that influenced their motivation to attend and complete college and were also considerations they had to manage in addition to going to school. These students experienced higher level of stress than their White counterparts (Ingram et al., 2016). They felt pressured to earn a college degree in order to improve their lives and the lives of their families. They also had to balance the tension between academics and financial responsibilities for themselves and their dependents (Ingram et al., 2016). At the conclusion of the focus groups, many participants asked for more opportunities to connect with other Black male students on campus for support to mitigate for often being the only Black student in the classroom, and off campus they were often the only one amongst their peers pursuing a college education (Ingram et al., 2016). Towards this end, the researcher’s findings supported previous research (Bush & Bush, 2010) and recommended community colleges create and support designated spaces for African American male students on campus that incorporated faculty and peer mentorship programs. This study also reiterated findings in previous studies regarding the influence of positive or negative interactions with faculty on the

**Faculty perceptions.** Faculty perceptions of African American male students and negative stereotypes can contribute to negative college experiences and lower educational outcomes for African American students compared to White students (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012). In Brooms’ (2017) qualitative study titled “Being Black, Being Male on Campus,” the researcher described how for African American male students their “Blackmaleness” is often negatively perceived by faculty (Brooms, 2017, p. 90) and therefore can increase or reduce their educational outcomes. Blackmaleness referred to the intersectionality of race and gender and the ways it shaped the Black male college experience (Brooms, 2017). Participants described feeling safe and welcomed in their Black studies class, however, in classes taught by White faculty, they were often belittled and patronized. One student highlighted a challenging experience with a White professor;

I had this one White professor and I told him I was interested in astronomy and he told me
I wasn’t smart enough for astronomy. He told me I would have to take a higher-level math
and I’m pretty good at math (Brooms, 2017, p. 105).

According to Sue (2010) the most damaging racial microaggressions occur between teacher and student. Racial microaggressions in the classroom and the impacts on African American male students are explored later in this chapter.

**Summary.** Overall, the literature identified here revealed that the lack of studies on African American males attending community colleges offers a one-dimensional view of a population of students. Additionally, the plethora of scholarship on African American males attending four-year colleges and universities overshadows the unique characteristics of
community colleges and the differences between African American male students at two and four-year institutions. As aforementioned, much of the literature on African American males in community colleges focuses on cognitive factors. Factors that supported African American male persistence and retention included faculty interaction, peer relationships and mentors, and identified academic goals. Factors that negatively impacted African American male persistence and retention were students enrolled less than full-time, older students, external pressures such as family and financial responsibilities, lack of peer engagement, feeling unwelcomed on campus, and faculty held stereotypes and negative perceptions of Black males. Referenced studies found that institutional characteristics that support Black male students were intentional academic and engagement programs specifically designed for African American male students, interventions designed to help Black males identify their academic goals, and opportunities designed to connect faculty and Black males.

The review also showed that African American male voices are missing from the discourse on factors that positively or negatively impact their collegiate experiences. Researchers recommended more qualitative studies that include students’ first-person accounts to provide a deeper understanding of their needs and the institutional characteristics that enriched or hindered their academic and social success. For the majority of African American males community colleges are the first and last option for them to obtain a degree, yet far too little is known about their experiences at community colleges.

**Racial Microaggressions**

In the last two decades researchers have identified racial microaggressions as an important area of concern for understanding campus climate and students’ collegiate experiences primarily at predominately White four-year colleges and universities (Solórzano, Ceja &
As mentioned in Chapter One, Pierce (1970) invented the term racial microaggressions. Pierce’s work focused on African Americans. Pierce (1970) viewed racism as a public and mental health issue. He stated that to examine “the substance of today’s racism one must not look for the gross and obvious” but identify and measure the outcomes of the “subtle, cumulative and miniassault” of racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1974, p. 516). A microaggression is a common, daily offense that appears harmless, but can have traumatizing effects on the victim (Barbour, 1970). Building upon Pierce’s research, scholars from disciplines such as Psychology, Counseling, and Education have applied Pierce’s work to other racial/ethnic groups, and identified new forms of racial microaggressions. For instance, racial microaggressions can be pervasive forms of racism (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000); “incessant, stunning, and subtle racial assaults” (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano, 2009, p. 660); degrade people of color (Allen, 2012); are subtle forms of oppression (Allen, 2012); accumulate over time (Pierce, 1995); and can cause extreme stress that negatively impacts social, mental and emotional well-being (Pierce, 1995; Sue et al., 2009; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo & Rivera, 2009). Racial microaggressions manifest via unfair treatment, racial slights, stigmatization, and personal threats or attacks (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999).

**Types of Racial Microaggressions**

In their research on racial microaggressions, Sue et al. (2007) identified three types of racial microaggressions; microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are often conscious and overt manifestations of racist thoughts or actions and are most closely linked with blatant acts such as degrading public spaces, such as hanging a noose or drawing a swastika on a wall on or near campus. Additionally, microassaults include racial profiling, use of verbal
racial slurs, and racially motivated hate crimes. Microinsults are subtle slights that convey bias through hidden messages such as assuming African American students were admitted on athletic scholarships, or when a White professor fails to acknowledge a student of color in the classroom (Sue et al., 2007). Microinvalidations tend to nullify a persons' experience or negate race. Sue et al. (2007) suggested that microinvalidations are often the most damaging types of microaggressions because they nullify a person’s lived experiences and reality. For African American males in community colleges, racial microaggressions reveal the nuances of racism and the ways that race and racism shape their academic experience. For example, educators may hold racialized assumptions of intelligence (a microinsult) of African American males by ascribing a lower degree of intelligence based on race (Sue et al., 2007). Frequent and common incidents of racial microaggressions experienced by African American students in general, and Black male students, specifically, were a persistent theme in many of the studies on racial microaggressions (Allen, 1992; Smith, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2002).

Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso’s (2000) study of racial microaggressions on African American students attending four-year colleges and universities utilized a critical race theory (CRT) framework to explore how racial climate affects African American students’ experiences through racial microaggressions. The objective of the study was to examine the connections between “racial stereotypes, cumulative racial microaggressions, campus racial climate, and academic performance” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 62). The researchers utilized a qualitative, focus group research design for the study. The use of qualitative focus group methodology highlighted the links between racial microaggressions and campus racial climate (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).
They hypothesized that stereotype threat can negatively impact academic achievement of African American students because of their fears of conforming to negative stereotypes about their racial identity group. Findings from the study supported the researchers’ hypothesis and indicated that the linkages between racial microaggressions and stereotypes manifested in detrimental and devastating ways for participants in the study. The authors found that students experienced microaggressions both inside and outside the classroom in addition to social spaces on campus. One participant described his frustration with the frequent assumption that he was on an athletic scholarship when in fact he was attending college on academic scholarships (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). Most prevalent among their in-class experiences, participants described feeling invisible and isolated in the classroom, found that their lived experiences were omitted and stereotyped in the curriculum, and perceived that faculty held low expectations of them based on their race.

Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso's (2000) study revealed three primary findings. First, racial microaggressions take place in academic and social settings; second, racial stereotypes have devastating effects on African-American students; and, finally, students need “counter spaces” as places of resistance and group empowerment. Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, (2000) defined counterspaces “as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p.70). Counter spaces can provide African American students a safe space to find support, process and make sense of their experiences on campus, and feel validated. Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) found the cumulative microaggressive incidents on campus left students feeling drained, frustrated, and isolated on campus. Students identified and created counter spaces within and outside of the classroom to cope. Students sought out study groups, Black Greek organizations, and Black
student organizations as safe spaces (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). It is important to note that for African-American male students attending community colleges, Black fraternal organizations are uncommon. The researchers concluded that on the surface, colleges and universities may appear to be equitable and fair. However, when viewed through the perceptions and experiences of African American students, subtle forms of racism manifested via racial microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). This study is applicable to further research on the impacts of racial microaggressions on African American males’ academic achievement in the community college setting.

Studies that included both African American female and male college students and their perceptions and experiences of racial microaggressions, tended not to explicitly identify gender microaggressions although they have similar impacts to racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). McCabe’s (2009) study utilized critical race theory to examine racial and gender microaggressions in a multi-racial student group that identified as Latino/a, White and African American. McCabe (2009) utilized a multi-methodological approach and conducted 68 one-on-one interviews, four focus groups, and ethnographic observations. All participants described feelings of isolation and discomfort on campus, however, Black and Latina/o students experienced isolation at a higher rate than White students (McCabe, 2009). African American male students described feeling ignored or perceived as threats on campus, and reported more interactions with campus and local police than other participants (McCabe, 2009). Chris, an African American male student related a frequent incident that occurred in his dormitory, “…and the whole citation thing… [when the police] found liquor on our floor, we’re going to jail, and it’s like, Why is that? They [White students] just got a citation! I don’t understand that” (McCabe, 2009, p. 139), African American women reported more microaggressive
incidents occurring in the classroom such as being treated as representing the entire Black race, and ignored in class discussions which resulted in feelings of discomfort and isolation. Study participant, Margaret, an African American female student described the “burden of representation” as heavy, she explained:

   It’s very difficult—especially if you’re talking [or] dealing with anything about race—when you’re the only person in the class because it feels like everything you say has to be representative of your whole culture, and that’s a big burden to carry. We all don’t think alike. (McCabe, 2009, p. 142).

   Study findings supported prior research on racial microaggressions and students of color. African American male and female students felt isolated and uncomfortable on campus differently. For Black, male students, negative interactions with campus and local police affirmed stereotypes of Black men as aggressive, threatening and criminal, and Black women expressed frustrations over expectations to represent their entire race (McCabe, 2009). Both Black men and women credited their treatment to their race and gender.

   For African American male students, college campuses are loaded with perceptions of their intellectual abilities and inabilities. African American male students have indicated negative stereotypes of Black males as a significant barrier to their educational attainment (Smith et al., 2007; Harper, 2012). Microaggressions directed towards Black men are racialized and gendered. Collins (2000) described these intersecting oppressions as “controlling images” that operate as “powerful ideological justifications” to maintain anti-Black male sentiments (p.69). Often Black make students were perceived as dangerous, threatening, violent, and criminal in and out of the classroom and experienced frequent interactions with campus and local police (Sue, 2001; McCabe, 2009, Harper, 2012).
Racial Battle Fatigue. The accumulation of racial microaggressions can lead to racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2011). Racial battle fatigue is defined as the result or outcome of “constant, physiological, psychological, cultural and emotional coping with racial microaggressions,” (Smith et al., 2011, p. 555). In their study (Smith et al., 2011) hypothesized that African American males experienced a gendered racism unique to their sex and race. One, as members of the African American race, Black men experience anti-Black racism. And, two, as Black males, they experienced Black misandry, which is defined as anti-Black, male oppression (Smith et al., 2011). The study utilized purposive sampling to identify 36 male students who self-identified as African American at six four-year colleges and universities throughout the United States. The researchers were interested in understanding the location and intensity of racial microaggressions experienced by participants, and the participants’ psychological responses. Two major themes emerged in their findings: (1) anti-Black male stereotypes and marginalization and (2) Black males experienced hypersurveillance and control on and nearby their campuses (Smith et al., 2011). The researchers catalogued these domains as: (a) campus-academic, (b) campus-social, and (c) campus-public spaces (Smith et al., 2011). Across each domain, participants described being treated as if they were “out of place” on campus, and criminalized and racially profiled as “fitting the description” of an alleged criminal by campus police (Smith et al., 2011). Although participants described incidents that ranged in severity from assumptions around admission status (e.g. academic or athletic admits) to frequent stops by campus law enforcement, the participants were unanimous in their perceptions that they were targeted because they were Black and male, and that the campus environment was more hostile towards them than other groups (Smith et al., 2011). Similar to Brooms’ (2017) concept of Blackmaleness, participants described feeling targeted by faculty, staff, students, and campus
law enforcement based on their race and gender. For example, a participant shared an experience their freshmen year when they were stopped by campus police and asked why they were on campus;

He asked me who I was and why I was there. I told him that I was a freshman looking around. He asked me to show ID, which I did, and then he said, “Okay, be more careful next time” and drove off (Smith et al., 2011, p. 564).

A negative but uncommon experience with other students or campus police can be rationalized away more easily than multiple experiences over time. For example, two participants described feeling upset, angry, and shocked when White students frequently approached them and asked if they attended the university, and one participant estimated campus police had stopped him 15-20 times over a three-year period (Smith et al., 2011). Continued race-based distress via racial microaggressions triggered racial battle fatigue such as, shock, anger, hopelessness, helplessness, resentment, disappointment, fear, and frustration (Smith et al., 2011). Further, participants described feeling caught in a catch-22 dilemma described by Sue (2007) where people of color are penalized for confronting a microaggression or for lack of a response. Sue (2007) states that feeling caught in a catch-22, is a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” (p. 279) position and is a common response for victims of racial microaggressions. For Black male students racially profiled by campus police, an expression of anger or discontent directed towards police could result in arrest, violence, death, or feed into negative stereotypes such as aggressive and violent associated with Black men (Smith et al., 2011). Further, it is the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions that are most damaging because the accumulation of microaggressions can undermine Black male students’ ability to successfully transition into
college life and integrate into academic and social spaces, both important factors that contribute to student retention and completion (Smith et al., 2011; Tinto, 1993).

**Racial Microaggressions in academic and social spaces.** Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo & Rivera's (2009) study on racial microaggressions in the classroom examined how students of color perceived the relationship between racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. They defined difficult dialogues as interactions that included a) unequal status relationship of power and privilege b) differences in worldview and perspective c) occur and are challenged in public d) offensive e) trigger emotional responses and f) often reveal bias and prejudices (Sue et al., 2009). Their findings indicated that negative interactions with faculty and Black males in the classroom were extremely harmful because of the power faculty hold over students (Sue et al., 2009). Further, they found that racial microaggressions negatively impacted mental health; created a hostile campus climate; perpetuated racial stereotypes and stereotype threat; impacted physical health; and decreased work productivity. This is significant when we consider the heightened importance of the classroom as a sole space of engagement for many African American students attending community colleges.

**Institutional forms of racial microaggressions.** Racial microaggressions are not limited to individual actions, thoughts, and behaviors. The three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations can be maintained by macrolevel factors such as policies and laws (Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014) and social, educational, political, and economic messages that are communicated institutionally to marginalized groups (Sue, 2010). Also referred to as systemic or environmental microaggressions, institutional microaggressions affect all people of color that interact with that institution or system (Nadal, 2011). According to Sue et al. (2007), environmental
microaggressions are the manifestation at the systemic level of racial assaults, insults, and invalidations. Institutional microaggressions are defined as the "racially marginalizing actions and inertia of the university” that are built into the higher education enterprise” (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2000, p. 673). Examples of institutional microaggressions are differential treatment by campus police towards African American students (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000), lack of faculty of color (Allen, 2012), White centered curriculum (Allen, 2012, Jenkins, 2006), failure to establish a truly anti-racist learning environment (Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2007).

Institutional microaggressions do not usually involve personal interactions (Sue, 2010). For example, the absence of faculty or administrators of color sends a message to people of color that their opportunities and likelihood of success is limited (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In addition, institutional microaggressions may be the result of the lack of images, artwork or campus buildings by people of color or named after people of color (Sue, 2010). Further, when images of people of color are visible they are often sports mascots that misappropriate or demean indigenous groups (Sue, 2010).

**Conclusion.** A review of the literature revealed numerous studies on factors pertaining to the academic achievement of African American males; however, there is a lack of literature focused on the effects of racial microaggressions on African American males. Similar to research on African American males in higher education in general, the majority of studies on racial microaggressions were at four-year colleges/universities. Research focused on African American males attending community colleges failed to adequately explore the ways that community colleges’ policies and practices impact African American males. The literature revealed that individual and institutional forms of racial microaggressions negatively impacted mental health,
created a hostile campus climate, perpetuated racial stereotypes and stereotype threat, impacted physical health, and decreased work productivity. When applied to African American males, the accumulation of microaggressive incidents, racial profiling and damaging stereotypes can impact their academic achievement in myriad ways to include feelings of isolation, cultural alienation, aggression, self-esteem, and student engagement (Bush & Bush, 2010). More research is needed on student development and achievement of African-American males at community colleges and the ways that institutional fit and institutional commitment impact student experiences.

**Summary**

Based on the considerable evidence that African American male students at community college have unique experiences compared to their counterparts at four-year colleges and universities and knowing that community colleges serve the majority of African American males seeking post-secondary education, it is critical for scholars and practitioners to identify ways to support their social and academic success to ensure they successfully meet their academic and career goals. Understanding and addressing how race and racism manifest via racialized and gendered microaggressions is an important element to providing support, identifying barriers to completion, and ways to improve their student experience. This literature review examined research related to African American male students and their experiences and perceptions of racial microaggressions, their persistence and completion rates compared to other racial groups, and institutional racial microaggressions. The review highlighted the historical and contemporary context of community colleges and how community colleges play a pivotal role in providing education to this student population yet is largely understudied in research. The majority of studies on this student population focus on African American males attending four-year colleges and universities, thus, conflating the differing institutional characteristics between community
colleges and four-year institutions, and obscuring the different experiences and backgrounds
between African American males who attend two-year versus four-year schools. The literature
revealed that African American male college students are likely to experience challenges
associated with their race and gender that distinguish their college experiences, such as negative
stereotypes of Black males, lack of a diverse faculty and staff, lack of culturally relevant
curricula, and challenges associated with navigating relationships and interactions with faculty,
peers, and police. The need for more research on African males attending community colleges
and a multifaceted understanding of how African American males perceive and experience racial
microaggressions in higher education emerged throughout the literature, offering support for
studies that examine the nuances of African American male students’ college experiences.
Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand African American male students’ perceptions of racial microaggressions at a community college. The following chapter describes the study’s research design and the rationale for the researcher’s methodological choices. The chapter begins with an explanation of the research approach. The second part of the chapter focuses on procedural elements of the project by providing a detailed account of how this study was conducted. The data collected for the study sheds light on the racial microaggressive experiences of six Black male students at Seattle Central College.

Qualitative Research Approach

This study utilized a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methods focus on exploring a problem (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research also focuses on learning from participants, data collection over a period of time, and the context within which the participants reside (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research seeks to discover and uncover meaning within lived experiences and draw connections to practice and the broader world (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

In qualitative research, the researcher’s biases can influence the meaning making process between participants and the researcher. Flexibility and variability of qualitative methods can provide rich and detailed data. Because of this inherent flexibility and variability, maintaining quality controls throughout the study is vital. To ensure quality control, Tracy (2010) suggested the importance of achieving meaningful coherence to ensure quality. Meaningful coherence is described as the alignment between the purpose of the study, methodology, theoretical framework, and the utilization and integration of relevant literature.
To ensure quality, this study utilized Critical Race Theory as the appropriate theoretical framework and the use of qualitative methods to explore the problem. The philosophical underpinnings and research design are described in the following sections, as well as the researcher’s potential biases statement.

**Philosophical Underpinnings and Overview**

This study aligned with a constructivism-interpretivism paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivist-interpretivists consider the existence of multiple realities that include the social and historical context of the subjects thus making it a good model for understanding racial microaggressions in community colleges. Constructivism places value on the interactive process between the researcher and the participants as they make co-meaning through dialogue and reflection (Ponterotto, 2005). In the constructivists-interpretivists paradigm, the researcher’s values frame the research and their biases are explicit. For example, as an African American woman who has experienced racial microaggressions, I did not seek to test the existence of racial microaggressions; I believe they exist. Additionally, I believe that the nuances inherent in racial microaggressions are better conveyed through the participants’ own voices.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative research approach emerged in 1996 and is widely used (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Smith (2004) defined IPA as, “part of a stable of closely connected approaches which share a commitment to the exploration of personal lived experience, but which have different emphases or suggested techniques to engage in this project” (p. 41). IPA is also described as a phenomenological approach that is concerned with understanding the first-person perspective via intersubjective inquiry and analysis which situates personal meaning in context (Larkin, Eatough, &
Osborn, 2011). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a qualitative approach commonly used in psychology. Many of the studies within psychology that utilize an IPA approach study how individuals experience their illness (Smith, 2011). For example, Osborn and Smith's (1998) study on chronic pain illustrated how a participant’s experiences with pain transformed their relationship with others and how they experienced the world. Similarly, perceptions and experiences of racial microaggressions by African American males could be viewed as a form of chronic pain, or as Smith et al. (2011) describe as racial battle fatigue, the accumulation of racial microaggressions that can lead subjects to experiences feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and fatigue.

IPA focuses on an examination of personal lived experiences, the meaning of experiences to participants, and how participants make sense of that experience (Smith, 2011). Viewed via the lens of the research questions, IPA provided the researcher a window into experiences of racial microaggressions and how the men interpreted those experiences. Because microaggressions impact different people in different ways, participants attending the same college (shared experience) interpreted and drew meaning from their experiences in different ways. This is common in racial microaggressions literature because the focus is on the perception of the victim (Sue, 2001).

IPA is grounded in three theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. First, Phenomenology is the study of being. Phenomenology has been described as both a philosophy and as a research method (Dowling, 2007). Smith et al. (2009) described phenomenology as “thinking about what the experience of being human is like, in all of its various aspects, but especially in terms of the things which matter to us, and which constitute our lived world” (p. 11). Inspired by the work of Franz Brentano, Husserl, often called the father of
Phenomenology, is credited with the concept of phenomenological reduction, (Dowling, 2007). Phenomenological reduction is defined as allowing the phenomenon to show itself in an unprejudiced way, so it can be described and understood (Dowling, 2007). Therefore, a researcher must "bracket” or identify their biases to view the phenomenon from an objective lens (Dowling, 2007). Heidegger, Sarte, and Merleau-Ponty are credited with contributing a more existential and interpretative approach to phenomenology (Dowling, 2007). Heidegger studied under Husserl; however, he was more interested in gleaning understanding instead of pure description, and as a result, his approach explored intersubjectivity. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) defined intersubjectivity as the “shared, overlapping, and relational nature of our engagement in the world” (p. 17).

The second theoretical underpinning essential to IPA is called hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation. Hermeneutical theorists focus on the methods and purpose of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics is closely linked to Heidegger’s work in its emphasis on uncovering parts of a phenomenon that initially may be invisible to the researcher, and to allow the researcher to facilitate the process of uncovering what is hidden. Within IPA, the hermeneutics process of interpretation is described as “detective work” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35) where the researcher is required to delve beyond the text and conduct many levels of interpretation that include the context and lived experiences. The IPA approach recognizes the impact of social and cultural experiences and allows the researcher to hermeneutically make meaning of the experience along with the participants (Dowling, 2007; Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Described as a double-hermeneutic process, the participant is attempting to make sense of their world, while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants’ sense making process (Smith, 2011). Smith and Eatough (2007) described this as a two-stage endeavor
that is accomplished via empathetic and critical hermeneutics. Empathetic hermeneutics involves putting oneself in the shoes of the participants to view the world from their lens. Critical hermeneutics differs from empathetic hermeneutics because it involves the separation between the researcher and participant and to interpret the participant’s experiences from an external view. When blended, a complete view is likely to surface that lends itself to a multi-layered and rich interpretation of the phenomenon (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

Lastly, IPA is idiographic in its focus on the particular. IPA researchers focus on detail regarding their analysis and focus on understanding the identified phenomena that includes context and participants’ individual perspectives (Smith et al., 2009). IPA research relies upon detailed analysis that allows the researcher to examine individual cases and then compare to other cases. Ultimately, it works to provide a narrative that balances the nuances of an individual case and underlying themes that cross multiple accounts in the study. Smith (2004) described this core of the idiographic lens as a way that experiences specific to an individual connect us to a shared experience, “the very detail of the individual brings us closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity” (p. 43).

**Rationale for IPA**

IPA tries to understand the lived experiences by conducting a detailed analysis of an individual’s personal accounts and how they attribute meaning to those experiences (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). The goal is to illuminate participants’ voice by capturing the substance of their experiences and sharing how the content is interpreted (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). The interactions between researcher and participants are critical. In IPA experiences cannot be gleaned from participants without a process of engagement between the
participant and the researcher and without interpretation of the researcher (Smith, 2011). In IPA context is important.

The IPA provided a method to explore and to better understand the ways that participants experienced and perceived individual forms of racial microaggressions and the impacts of institutional microaggressions. IPA research centers on a topic that is relevant to participants. In this study, the ways that participants experienced and interpreted racial microaggressions was the central topic. Given the research on the state of African American males in higher education, and the unique pressures they experience being Black and male on a college campus (Flowers, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010; Brooms, 2017), a closer examination of racial microaggressions as understood through participants own words and stories underscored the relevancy of this topic. Centralizing participants’ stories and voices, the study called attention to the unique experiences of African American males attending a Seattle Central College. As previously mentioned, IPA was also consistent with one of the five tenets of CRT which is to centralize experiential knowledge through storytelling, personal narratives and lived experiences. The men’s’ experiences in college were similar and dissimilar. The men shared similar experiences such as negative stereotypes applied to their group, and different experiences based upon their multiple identities, such as sexual orientation.

Participants

IPA research is conducted with a selection of individuals that can speak to the research topic (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, IPA samples are small with similar characteristics. In this vein, the study sample was small. I conducted semi-structured interviews with six Black/African American male students over the course of three interactions.
**Sample characteristics.** In IPA research a uniform sample is ideal because it allows for an analysis of group similarities and differences within the research problem (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were between the ages of 19-31. Participants completed a minimum of 24 pre-college or college level credits and were enrolled in a minimum of 10 credits at the time of the interview.

**Sampling procedures.** Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is the practice of selecting participants that can speak to the research question (Creswell, 2013). The researcher utilized the following recruitment steps:

1. A recruitment email was sent to various campus departments, such as TRiO, Student Leadership, and Veteran’s Student Support Services. This email described the study. Interested students were asked to contact the researcher directly.
2. The researcher sent an email to specific students at the research site that she knew and invited them to participate in the study.
3. If necessary, seven days later the researcher sent a follow up email to students who received the initial invitation to prompt a response.
4. Students that responded and expressed interest in the study received a response within one day. The researcher offered to answer questions about the study, sent interested students a consent form, interview guide, and set an initial meeting. Participants were given $25 to participate in the study.

**Research Site**

The site chosen for this study is a community and technical college set in an urban setting in a large city in the Northwest region of the United States. It is primarily a commuter campus with limited housing available only to international students. The college is part of a state
community college system comprised of 34 community and technical colleges. The college is part of a district with three colleges, North, South and Central, as well as multiple instructional sites across the Puget Sound region. Although the college is under the district umbrella, all three colleges hold separate accreditations. Established in 1970, the research site, Seattle Central College (SCC), is an open access institution that provides academic transfer degrees, professional/technical degrees, short-term certificates, adult basic education, continuing education, and select applied baccalaureate degree programs. The college also provides specialized training centers at four locations throughout the area.

**Student demographics.** Fall 2016 data reported that the college’s 2015-16 annual full-time student equivalency (FTE) was 7,393 and a student headcount of 15,520 (Facts and Figures, n.d.). The college’s student body is diverse. The median student age is 27; sixty-one percent of students identify as persons of color; four percent of students have a documented disability; fifty-eight percent identify as female; and forty-two percent as male (Seattle Central Facts and Figures, n.d.). Fall 2017 data reported 1,260 students or 14% identify as African American, and 515 or 41% of the 14% identify as male (Facts and Figures, n.d.).

**Institutional strategic goals.** The college’s 2016-2020 strategic plan outlined five strategic directions to fulfill the college’s mission, set the priorities for the college (Strategic Planning, n.d.). Of the five strategic directions outlined in the document, strategic direction three titled, “Address institutional racism and achieve equity and diversity” closely aligned with the study’s research questions (Strategic Planning, n.d.). The college has a history and culture as one that promotes social justice and equity, and often serves as the location for citywide activism such as, protests and marches. The college recognizes the need to understand the experiences and needs of vulnerable populations.
**Institutional student supports.** College departments such as the office of Multicultural Services, the TRiO Student Support Services department, Disability Support Services, the Veteran’s Student Support Services office, Re-entry, and Prison Education Support Services. Women’s Programs, Parent Support program, STARS office (serves foster youth and alumni of foster care students), and MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement) are examples of services designed to engage and retain vulnerable student populations. The college’s office of Student Leadership offers “Fellas’ Fridays” a learning and support group for male students of color. Recently, the college president instructed the researcher to continue her work to lead an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) articulation agreement initiative. The goal of this project is to build a transfer pipeline for Seattle Central students to directly transfer to an HBCU partner. As of this date, three articulation agreements have been completed by the College President. The researcher is tasked with adding new partnerships. The researcher is also leading a team to research local and national program models that focus on Black male initiatives. The college recognizes Black male students as a student population in need of targeted strategies specific to this group of students.

**Data Collection**

In IPA data collection methods such as focus groups, questionnaires and email dialogue have been used, however, the most common data collection method is in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2012). Semi-structured interviews are the preferred data collection method by IPA researchers because they elicit stories, thoughts, and feelings from study participants. Further, in-depth interviews allow the researcher and participant to build a rapport and to be active participants in the research process. After securing Institutional Review
Board (IRB) approval from the researcher’s institution and the study site, data was collected in four phases.

**Phase one.** In phase one, the researcher developed an interview guide (see Appendix A). The interview guide was designed to capture data aligned with the research questions and also adaptable to allow insights which emerged during the interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

**Phase two.** In phase two, the researcher and participants held the first interview. At this meeting, the researcher described the study in more depth, obtained signed informed consent forms answered participants’ questions, and obtained their biographical and background information (see Appendix B). Participants were asked about their program of study, length of time they have attended the college, grade point average, and employment status. To protect confidentiality, participants selected a pseudonym during phase two.

**Phase three.** In phase three, the researcher conducted 45-90-minute individual interviews with each participant. After each interview, the recordings were sent to a transcription service, Rev.Com, for transcription. The researcher password protected all files that contained documents which referenced participants’ real names and their pseudonyms. Audio and written files were on the researcher’s personal computer and a password protected external storage device. Paper documents, such as consent forms and field notes, were stored in a locked file cabinet only accessible to the researcher. The researcher also kept notes with her reflections to reflect on the data collection and interpretative processes (Smith et al., 2009).

**Phase four.** In phase four, the researcher emailed the transcripts of the interview to each participant. The participants edited (if needed) and approved the content. The researcher provided participants the option to convey their responses to the transcripts in writing or an
additional meeting with the researcher. All participants preferred to communicate with the researcher by text or email.

**Data Analysis**

To add structure to the analysis process, the researcher followed Smith et al.’s (2009) guidelines or steps. The steps are outlined as follows.

**Step one.** The first step in the analysis process involved reading and re-reading the written transcript and listening to the audio file from the interview (Smith et al., 2009). The goal was to ensure that the researcher was focused on the participants’ voices and to help the researcher avoid drawing premature conclusions (Smith et al., 2009). As previously mentioned, the researcher bracketed and recorded her initial thoughts and observations to reflect upon later.

**Step two.** The second step in the process was a detailed analysis and initial coding of the data (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher reviewed each transcript and made initial comments of the participant’s words. This allowed me to engage in an analytic process of documenting what the participants’ comments meant and to attempt to understand the meaning making process for the participant. This step allowed me to identify key words or phrases used by the participant, and to reflect upon how participants utilized language, such as pauses, inflection and tone to express themselves.

**Step three.** The third step in the process involved forming initial interpretations as the themes emerged from the interviews. The researcher clustered identified codes from step two into buckets of information drawn from the participant (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, in this step, the researcher reviewed notes from steps one and two to identify patterns and connections.

**Step four.** In step four, the researcher analyzed the emerging themes to look for connections. During this step, she began to take the large amounts of data and distill them down
to discrete chunks (Smith et al., 2009). Once a set of themes was identified under each research question, step four involved charting or mapping the themes to think about how they fit together (Smith et al., 2009). Some themes were discarded at this stage depending upon the scope of the research question (Smith et al., 2009). For example, a potential theme surfaced around participants’ experiences with their fathers. If their fathers or a father figure was in their lives during their formative and adult years. The researcher followed guidelines for step four that recommended the researcher incorporate consideration of context and consider comments by the participant that were mentioned multiple times or were emphasized (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher also created a chart to structure themes that emerged for each research question, for each interview. Steps one through four were repeated for each participant.

**Step five.** Step five involved identifying patterns across each case (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher looked for connections across each case that revealed overarching themes from the interviews.

**Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical considerations researchers needed to be aware of during the research process (Creswell, 2013). The researcher received approval through the IRB process and followed guidelines to ensure protection of participants’ identity and confidentiality of the participants. Further, the researcher conducted this study at college where they are employed. Therefore, it was critical for the researcher to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and to recognize potential power imbalances inherent in their role as a college administrator interviewing students that attend the college. To mitigate for this concern, the researcher established a safe environment for participants by having them select where the interviews and related meeting were held. The researcher met with participants in a variety of locations such as
a coffee shop, her office and conference rooms located on campus. She stressed that they could end the interview at any time, and they were not required to respond to any question that made them feel uncomfortable or they preferred not to answer. If I crossed paths with the men on campus, I did not discuss their interview with them.

Trustworthiness

Smith et al. (2009) noted that IPA is a process that does not necessarily follow a step by step rule book. Because of that it was critical that the researcher demonstrated trustworthiness throughout the research process. To ensure trustworthiness, validity and reliability, the researcher provided participants with three opportunities to share their experiences and check for accuracy at the initial interview, during the in-depth interview, and through the follow-up emails and text exchanges.

Potential Research Bias

Writers often have preconceived ideas based on their personal background and experiences (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). The researcher’s interest in this topic stemmed from her personal identification as a Black/bi-racial woman and her professional experiences as a community college administrator. As a Black woman, I have been profoundly affected by race, racism and experienced racial microaggressions during my undergraduate and graduate studies and as a college employee at the three community colleges where I have worked. Racial microaggressions were and are a frequent experience and have led to my varying levels of distrust and disillusionment in higher education. One reoccurring theme in the research on racial microaggressions at colleges and universities is some participants described being treated as if they were not college level material (Brooms, 2017). I have had similar experiences as an undergraduate student. Once during class, the discussion was about affirmative action and
admission policies in higher education, a White student pointed to me and stated to the class, “my brother had a 4.0 grade point average in high school, scored 1200 on the SAT’s, and wasn’t accepted to UCSD [University of California, San Diego] and she’s here.” A similar experience occurred during my graduate studies with a student in my master’s in education class when I was awarded a partial scholarship during her first year. When my name was announced in class as the scholarship recipient, a White, female student stated to the class that it was “arbitrary and odd that she [me] was named as the recipient.” Further, in May 2016, I was the victim of a hate crime. I was attending a meeting with a colleague at coffee shop when an unknown White male verbally and physically assaulted me. The man approached me when I was not looking, spit on my face, neck and chest area and shouted, “You fucking Nigger bitch, yeah, that’s right you fucking Nigger bitch,” while employees and patrons looked on. These experiences as a college student and Higher Education professional profoundly shaped and changed me. I feel a deep obligation and moral imperative to have a positive impact on the lives of all students, especially Black students.

In addition, I have worked in the community and technical college systems for 18 years at three community colleges. I have held a range of professional positions, such as graduate intern, hourly employee, minority student advisor, multicultural retention coordinator, director of multicultural services, student conduct officer, vice president of Diversity/Chief Diversity Officer, and my current role as vice president of Student Services. As such, I am personally invested and familiar with this student population. It was through my academic advising meetings with Black male students, and informal conversations with staff and faculty of color where I first was introduced to racial microaggressions language. Their stories about
marginalization, discrimination and racism on campus led me to identify racial microaggressions as an area of interest.

A researcher's demographic background is not a neutral space, their social identities may impact their ideological points of view but does not necessarily negatively impact their research (Briscoe, 2005). Briscoe (2005) argued that based on the inherent role of power and privilege in research, the act of studying the other, is a form of oppression. However, a researcher should not be evaluated solely on their demographic positioning, but on the other "dimensions of positionality" (Briscoe, 2005, p. 38). My positionalities and personal values drive my desire to gather facts with the goal of systemic changes that improve conditions for students, faculty and staff at the college. Many factors shape my views on higher education, social justice, and equity. My identities as heterosexual, college educated, middle-class and able-bodied. These are all identities where I draw privilege. Salient identities for me are my race and gender where I experience discrimination and marginalization. As the researcher, it was critical for me to articulate to the men that although I have not had their experience, I am sensitive to it based on my personal and professional backgrounds. For this study, it is important to articulate that the researcher is sensitive to this population of students.

**Limitations**

IPA aims to provide the perspective from people that experience the phenomenon. In IPA research, the goal is not to generalize but to specify something about a specific experience (Smith et al., 2009). There were several limitations to this study. First, the study’s findings may not be generalizable to other student populations or types of institutions. Further, participants were recruited based on how they self-identified in terms of their race and gender. Therefore, their experiences should not be interpreted as representative of all Black male college
students. Secondly, the research site is a community and technical college located in an urban city in the Northwestern part of the United States. Participants’ experiences at the college may not be transferable to students that attend other types of schools, in different regions of the United States, or have a different racial or gender identity. Lastly, participants had differing levels of familiarity with the concept of racial microaggressions and displayed different levels of comfort levels sharing their backgrounds and experiences with race, racism, and racial microaggressions. Some participants shared a lot of personal stories and their reflections on this topic and some struggled to identify specific racial microaggressions they experienced at the college.

**Summary**

This study explored experiences of African American male students that have experienced racial microaggressions. IPA methodology was used to make sense of participants’ experiences via in-depth interviews. The researcher followed IPA procedures to collect and analyze data. Given that the research site was also work site for the researcher, and the active role the researcher plays in IPA, precautions were implemented to control for confidentiality, trustworthiness and bias.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of six African American/Black, male students and how they perceive, experience and made meaning of their experiences in and out of the classroom, specifically as they relate to racial microaggressions. The researcher conducted six semi-structured interviews with the purposefully-selected participants. Data gathered were divided into emerging themes, subthemes and supported with direct quotes from participants. The themes emerged from the central research questions for the study which asked:

1. How do African American males attending a community college perceive and interpret individual and institutional forms of racial microaggressions?
2. In what ways can perceptions and experiences of racial microaggressions be linked to retention, persistence and completion rates of African American males attending a community college?
3. What are the experiences of African American male participants with racial microaggressions within a community college with predominately White faculty and how do they make sense of these experiences with respect to their academic and social achievement?

Participants

This chapter examines and discusses concepts that surfaced from the qualitative data gathered during the in-take meeting and semi-structured interviews; in addition, it provides the demographic backgrounds and profiles of the six research participants: Diablo, Eli, Jack, Jay, Tony and Warren. All research participants were students at Seattle Central College. All participants self-identified as Black/African American and male. Two of the participants
identified as gay. Three of the participants are veterans. Further, names and titles of third parties were changed or omitted to maintain confidentiality and privacy.

**Diablo.** Diablo is an 18-year-old college student. He identified as bi-racial. His mother is White and his father is African-American. He is from the Seattle area and Puget Sound region. He lives with his parents and younger brother. Both parents earned colleges degrees. His mother completed her bachelor’s degree and his father earned his doctorate. His father is a significant role model in his life and he sees himself following in his father’s footsteps to eventually earn a doctorate. Diablo described his socio-economic status as upper middle-class. He attended a mix of public and private schools from elementary to high school. He attended a predominately Black private elementary school and predominately White public elementary and private high school.

Diablo always planned to attend college but did not pursue a college or university right out of high school. He comes from an education-oriented family and college was promoted as a given in his family. As he grew up, he always planned to attend college. He chose to attend Seattle Central College because he wanted to remain in the local area and SCC’s location is convenient for him. His parents also know a senior-level administrator who works at the college and that person serves as a resource to him now that he is a student. He is involved in Student Leadership and student clubs and activities. He serves as an officer in student government, serves as an intern in an administration office, and participates in Fellas Friday, a program for male students of color, and the Black Student Union. He also has an off-campus part-time job. Currently, he is pursuing an Associate of Arts degree with an emphasis in Business. He plans to transfer to a university upon completion of his Associates of Arts degree.

**Eli.** Eli is a 23-year old college student. He identified as Black/African-American. He is from Seattle. He grew up with his mother and extended family. His father was not in his life in a
consistent fashion. He described early memories with his father as a toddler and later in his in early teens but since the age of 13 he has not had a relationship with his father. Eli described his socio-economic background as lower to middle class. Both parents earned graduate degrees. He currently lives with his mother, step-father and step-sister.

Eli struggled academically in high school. He attended a private, predominately White, religiously affiliated all boys high school but transferred to a diverse, public high school after his freshman year. He transferred high schools because he was not having a good experience at the private school. It was not a good fit for his learning style. After high school, he took two years off and worked. He chose Seattle Central because it was close to home, the college has a good reputation in the community and because he felt it was a good place to start his college education. Also, he realized that a college degree is important for his future. Prior to starting college, he made sure he was mentally prepared to tackle college. He is pursuing his Associate of Arts degree with an emphasis in Communication studies. He plans to transfer to a nearby university when he graduates.

**Jack Frost.** Jack is a 31 year old college student. He identified as African-American. He grew up in the Seattle area and from the ages of 7-12 years old lived in the Midwest. Later he returned to South Seattle and attended public middle school and four public high schools. He was raised by his mother. His father died when he was very young, aged 4 or 5. He described his socio-economic background as poor. Although they utilized public housing, his mother hid financial troubles from him. After he graduated from high school, he was accepted to a college out of state but decided not to go because he did not want to leave his family, friends and girlfriend. Instead, he chose to work. During this time, he was convicted of a crime and was incarcerated for 10 years. He was released from prison in early 2018. While incarcerated he
attended classes, earned several certificates and participated in Seattle Central’s pilot program for incarcerated individuals to earn college credit and transition into higher education upon their release. This program is a pilot program that allows Pell eligible students to use Pell funds for tuition while still incarcerated.

Upon his release, Jack decided to enroll at Seattle Central College because it was conveniently located. Jack is involved on and off campus. On campus, he holds a work-study position in a campus office and is very active in the college’s Prison Education/Re-Entry office working with people transitioning out of incarceration and into high education. He serves on a college advisory board, attends Fellas Fridays, Black Student Union club, and Veteran’s Support Center and student lounge. In addition, he mentors male teens of color through a local mentoring program for men of color. At Central, he plans to earn an Associate’s of Science degree in Computer Science and transfer to a university. Ultimately, he views college as a means to earn money and become financially stable. He wants to help improve our world.

**Jay.** Jay is a 25-year-old college student. He identified as bi-racial, White and Black/African-American. Jay is originally from the Southwestern United States. He attended a public, predominately Mexican high school in a predominantly Mexican community. His mother identifies as White and father identifies as African-American. His step-father is Mexican. Jay’s biological father was not a consistent presence during his younger years. Jay grew up with a large, extended family in the same household, with his mother, stepfather, grandparents and siblings. There were 15 people in the same home. In an effort to fit-in, Jay recalled often identifying as Mexican since most people assumed he was Mexican, and Latino and Mexican culture was what he was exposed to through school and the larger community.
After high school, Jay enrolled in the armed services and was deployed to Afghanistan twice. He joined the military as a way to make his family proud and to follow his older brother’s footsteps. After his military service, Jay struggled to transition back into civilian life because of the effects of the overt racism he experienced while enlisted and the traumatic effects of serving as a soldier in a war. He spent time working for an airline and enrolled in college. However, the school he chose was not a good fit for him. He decided to focus on reading for his own critical consciousness and learning. During this time, he felt he was suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He had trouble developing relationships with others and experienced anxiety in social situations. Ultimately, he decided to return to higher education because he believed that if he got an education he could be of better service to the Black community. He chose Seattle Central because a relative lived in Washington State, he could use his G.I. Bill for college expenses, and he felt that Seattle Central’s history with the Black Panther Party, championing social justice, and history of protests and activism would align with his own values. Jay plans to earn an Associate’s of Arts degree and either transfer to a college or university in his home state or complete his undergraduate degree in another country.

**Tony.** Tony is a 26-year-old college student. He identified as an African-American, gay, male. Tony is from the Southern United States. He was raised primarily by his mother and stepfather. His mother was a young mom and while Tony was growing up, she served in the armed forces and later earned her undergraduate degree. When he was younger, Tony described their socio-economic status as low income and unstable, but when his mother married his stepfather and began her career, their financial situation improved. Tony did not grow up with his biological father in his life and does not have a relationship with his father. Tony described his stepfather as very Southern and strict.
Tony attended a predominately White high school where he was active in sports and bullied by other students. He described starting advanced placement (AP) courses, but negative experiences with White teachers and harsh discipline he experienced for unclear reasons sent him to the principal’s office and resulted in his frequent removal from the classroom. He described being kicked out of class on multiple occasions for no given reason. After high school, he went into the workforce and at 20-years of age Tony enrolled in the armed forces and served six years in active duty.

After serving in the military, Tony attended another community college prior to moving to Washington State to attend Seattle Central. He chose Seattle Central because of the convenience, low cost, the diversity and diverse surrounding area. He was looking for a place to use his G.I. Bill for college in an affordable city. Tony secured housing, but he lost his lease due to a dispute with the manager soon after he relocated to the Northwest. As a result, he lived in his car while attending Central for two months.

Tony is pursuing his Associates of Arts degree in Nursing. He plans to complete his Bachelor of Science in Nursing at Seattle Central, too. At Central, Tony works in the Veteran’s Support office helping student veterans find housing. He also participates in Fella’s Fridays and the Black Student Union.

**Warren Peace.** Warren is 27-year-old college student. He identified as an Africa-American, gay, male. Warren grew up in the Southwestern part of the United States in a large household in a predominately Latino community. He described his socioeconomic background as below the government’s poverty line (less than $25,000 in combined household income). He is the youngest of 7 children. Besides his parents and siblings, his grandmother, two cousins, and great-aunt, all lived in the home. His home life was fun and at times, chaotic, especially since
everyone shared one bathroom in the home. Warren attended a predominately White public high
school. He shared a poignant recollection of an experience with his high school counselor during
his freshman year. His White friends were put into AP classes and he was told that he needed to
test into those courses by the same counselor. He was never provided an opportunity to take any
placement tests. Instead, he was placed in remedial English and no honors classes. Later, he
learned that his White friends never tested into the AP classes. The high school counselor put
them in although the same counselor told Warren was told he had to “test” in the classes.

After high school he enrolled in a community college in his home state. He did not know
what to expect in college. He relied on images he saw in movies and media representations of
college he saw on television to pick his classes. For example, at the first college he attended, he
chose classes based on what the classroom looked like. If it was taught in a lecture hall, as he had
seen on television, or he liked the way the room looked, he tried to enroll in that class. This
resulted in Warren enrolling in courses he was not prepared to take. Over the course of the next
few years, Warren attempted college multiple times, enrolling at two different community
colleges. Finally, he joined the military and served in active duty for 4 years and 1 year of
Reserves. It was during this time that he enrolled at Seattle Central. He chose Central because it
was convenient and he could use public transportation to get to school. He is pursuing his
Associates of Arts degree with an emphasis in Sociology. He plans to transfer to a four-year
college or university and eventually earn his doctorate in Sociology or Epidemiology. He wants
to work in public health, social services and start a non-profit business focused on addressing
social determinants of health.
Data Collected

The following sections present the overarching themes resulting from the data collected and analyzed drawn from the interviews. The researcher used data from each interview presented under each research question.

Research Question 1: How do African American males attending a community college perceive and interpret individual and institutional forms of racial microaggressions?

During this portion of the interviews, participants were asked to share common assumptions that are made about them because of their race and gender. That is, they were asked to describe what it is like to be a Black male student at Seattle Central and to describe their interactions and relationships with faculty and staff. Three key themes emerged. The themes that emerged are presented in Table 1. As a point of note, the main title of the themes are taken from statements that students offered during the interview.

Table 1

Themes from Participants in Response to the First Research Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You don’t know how to interact with me: Longing and belonging.</td>
<td>You don’t know how to interact with me: Longing and belonging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wish there were more: The Role of Black Faculty.</td>
<td>I wish there were more: The Role of Black Faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’re born into our survival stories: Reactions, Resilience and Responses to Racial Microaggressions.</td>
<td>We’re born into our survival stories: Reactions, Resilience and Responses to Racial Microaggressions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You don’t know how to interact with me: Longing and belonging. Prior research has identified negative stereotypes and assumptions held by faculty, staff and other students about African American male students as a significant barrier to their educational attainment (Sue, 2000; Collins, 2000; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; McCabe, 2009; Bush & Bush, 2010; Harper, 2012; Wood, 2014). Context is important to understanding racial
microaggressions and their impacts. It is important to understand that racial microaggressions are based on the perception of the victim, not the intent of the perpetrator (Sue et al., 2009). Many participants shared feelings of isolation, common (mis)conceptions about them, and how perceptions held by faculty and students revealed how uncomfortable they were interacting with Black men. Common stereotypes participants shared were that they felt they were viewed as unintelligent, as physical threats, dangerous, criminal, violent, and athletes. It is worth noting that Seattle Central College does not have college athletics. Diablo described a frequent assumption he experiences. He stated:

They start with, “Do you play basketball? Well, you look like an athlete, what have you done?” It's sort of like being seen for that before being, I'm the Executive of Finance, I'm the President's intern. I feel like there's a lot of other things that would come before just, you see me, you're like “Oh, you're Black.” People usually see me, and I don't think that's the very first thing that comes to their mind. It's definitely not like, “Oh you're a student, you know? You're involved with student leadership, you look at yourself as a leader.” It's more just like I get the basketball question all the time.

For Diablo, these questions and statements that assume an athletic ability are uncomfortable because he doesn’t play basketball and views himself as a student leader first, not a student athlete. Because he is tall, Black and male, Diablo doesn’t fault people for that assumption; however, it is the fact that a basketball player is the only way people see him that is problematic. Many people of color that experience racial microaggressions are aware of the stereotypes applied to their group(s) and may try to minimize or dismiss them by using humor as a coping strategy (Sue, 2010). When asked his response to the basketball question, Diablo often
will “brush it off.” He stated, “I'll be like, ‘No, I wish!’ Well, I wouldn't be here if I played stuff like that.”

When asked about common assumptions made about him, Warren shared:

So many. Dangerous, not trustworthy, unpunctual, non-intelligent. I stand and sit big and dopey, so that I ... Yeah, unless someone actually talks to me, I think I come off as what people would classify as dumb... I'm very progressive-minded and Black, which leads a lot of people to think that I'm hostile.

As a gay Black male veteran, Warren’s identities are contextualized depending upon his surroundings. He stated:

Yeah, it's very intersectional. My sexual orientation is almost never seen individually because I'm a Black male. There's an assumption of toughness, within the GLTBQIA context in particular. Overall, gay men are seen as weaker because they're effeminate, which makes no sense. My Blackness stands out primary with people within the gay community, which is very insular, [they] expect toughness, or brute strength, or danger of some sort, which is wildly annoying.

On one hand, Warren’s identity as a Black man is perceived as menacing, tough and dangerous. And, on the other hand, his identity as a gay man is viewed as effeminate and weak.

He described his experience vacillating between the Black community and predominately White gay community as “unstoppable wave meets an unmovable rock.” He stated:

A significant portion of my GLTBQIA friends, the people who are really in the trenches with me, are White. Unfortunately, they are insanely racist. I'm making a choice between can I go hang out with the non-racist homophobes, or the non-homophobic but racist gay
people? It is really tiring. It's a constant battle between either how much racism am I willing to tolerate or how much homophobia am I willing to tolerate.

For Warren, dating or hooking up with gay White men often included dealing with their stereotypes about Black men:

I had a series of sexual encounters when I first moved to Seattle before I met my partner, and this one guy, he came to my apartment. After the whole process he was like, "I've never been with a Black dude before, “I feel so dangerous,” and I was like, "I work at Metro Transit. My taxes are paid on time. If that's your level of danger, sure.” Then he kept referencing me being very attractive for a Black person, and I was like, "Okay, so you're coming in hot with the microaggressions then. Okay, cool.” The gay community is very insular, so you can't really escape the people even if you don't really talk to them again.

Racial microaggressions are often framed as compliments (Sue, 2010). Warren’s experience highlighted this common theme found in microaggressions literature. As Warren transitioned into classes at Seattle Central, he described feeling surprised when he joined the Black Student Union. His experiences in BSU provided him a space to bond with heterosexual, Black men, something he had not experienced previously:

One of the things I love most about the BSU was it's actually a large collection of Black males who are very in tune and have a finger on the pulse of social and sexual development, things like that. I was like, “Whoa, I'm around a group of Black men who show emotion.” I'm like, "I'm gay,” and they're like, "We don't care about that at all.” This is weird, because normally me being the sole gay person in a room full of Black men would be more or less volatile. Masculinity is heavily enforced. This was a place
where it wasn't, but there were people who looked like me, and we had conversations, and intelligence. I recognize it's a privilege, but man, it was really refreshing.

As evidenced in the research on African American males in colleges and universities, they are not homogeneous (Bush & Bush, 2010). Tony’s experience is similar and dissimilar to Warren’s. Tony chose Seattle Central because of its convenience and diversity. However, as a gay, Black male veteran, it was clear to him through interactions with others that people were uncomfortable around him. Like Warren, Tony often feels uncomfortable in the gay community. He stated, “a lot of the LGBT space I feel like it's comfortable for White people. It's not really comfortable if you're Black, or Asian, or Latino.” Unlike Warren, Tony chooses to avoid LGBT spaces, both on and off campus:

And as a Black man new to Seattle who's not from anywhere close, I think there's definitely the whole passive-aggressive and, “I'm not gonna talk to somebody new.” But I think here I just say, "I feel uncomfortable being in Capitol Hill, so I'll go to school and to my classes, but I'm not gonna stick around and I'm not gonna stick around for like the events. You know? Just because I had a little taste of it in the beginning and I was like, “No, thank you.”

The stories shared by Diablo, Warren and Tony described in racial microaggression literature would fall under microinsults, interpersonal or environmental messages that communicate “stereotypes, rudeness, and insensitivity and that demean a person’s racial, gender, or sexual orientation, heritage or identity (Sue, 2010 p. 31). Microaggressive themes (Sue, 2010) such as “ascription of intelligence,” assuming a person of color is dumb or only an athlete; “criminality”; a person of color is dangerous or deviant; and “pathologizing cultural values/communication styles,” a belief that White, male, and heterosexual groups’ cultural norms
and communication styles are the norm, revealed how microaggressions are racialized, sexualized and gendered for participants. These “controlling images” — “powerful ideological justifications” (Collins, 2000 p. 69) — maintain anti-Black male and anti-gay male sentiments. They are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear as normal parts of daily life.

Diablo, Warren and Tony’s experiences also revealed how diverse African American/Black male students are—they are veterans, heterosexual, gay, athletes and intellectuals etc. CRT advocates an intersectional approach to race which includes other social identities as a way to identify gaps within educational systems that impact students of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). When applied to this theme, CRT’s tenet of counter-storytelling revealed how counter-stories give voice to their unique experiences (Hiraldo, 2010). In addition, counterspaces can provide African American students a safe space to find support, validation and make sense of their campus experiences (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). For Warren, BSU served as a counterspace where he found support and validation as a gay, Black male within a predominately heterosexual Black college club. As mentioned in Chapter Two, most community colleges, including Seattle Central, are commuter campuses and therefore, students tend to spend less time on campus. Programs that foster student engagement can prove more challenging to capture students than four-year colleges and universities. The critical role of counterspaces surfaced in all interviews and will be explored in-depth in the following sections.

**I wish there were more: The role of Black faculty.** Institutional microaggressions are defined as actions colleges and universities take that further marginalize people of color and endorse a hostile racial campus climate (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Failure to recruit faculty of color is a critical way institutions contribute to a negative campus climate for students of color. Colleges and universities continue to grapple with ways to implement
programs and processes to diversify their faculties with limited large-scale success (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi & Richards 2004; Turner, 2002; Turner, 2003). Campuses convene diversity councils, taskforces, and teams to tackle this issue and often diversity statements, objectives, goals and policies are adopted by institutions to highlight their diversity priorities.

Likewise, Seattle Central employs many of these strategies. The strategic plan explicitly calls for dismantling institutional racism as an institutional objective and recruitment and retention of diverse faculty is a strategic priority. Participants were asked if they ever had a Black or Black male teacher in their entire schooling and if they have had a Black or Black male faculty member at Seattle Central. Across all interviews, participants shared having fewer than two Black teachers or no Black teachers in high school. At Seattle Central, participants stated they had at least one class taught by a Black male faculty. Diablo and Jay had two courses with the same Black male instructor and one with a Black female instructor. This is significant when one considers how many White teachers they had in high school and college. As the researcher, this was a salient moment for me because it mirrored my own experience in high school and at all stages of my secondary and post-secondary education—high school (0) undergraduate (1), master’s education (0) and doctoral program (1).

All participants expressed a desire for more Black faculty, male or female, and saw the value Black teachers and professors brought to their educational experiences. Participants described their educational experiences with Black faculty at the college as “comforting,” “a sigh of relief” to see someone who looked like them teaching the course, and as something that made them “just feel good” when they walked into the classroom. Warren expressed how having a Black professor altered his view of teachers. He stated:
…but it’s actually really neat because I’ve always, my entire life I have understood that teachers are White people. Only middle-class White people are teachers. [Until attending Seattle Central] … I had very much a homogenous view of teachers. They were not men. They were not people of color. But when I got here, I was like, “Wow, teachers can be Black and male?” One of my teachers was Black, male and African. I didn’t even perceive of an African teacher before. I thought African teachers were only in Africa.

For Warren, the student in high school that was not allowed to take or test for AP courses by a White, female counselor, a class taught by an African/Black male professor changed the way he thought about education. Jay’s experience with a Black faculty member furthered his learning, “I think he was a good instructor for me. And he introduced me to certain concepts that helped further my own learning outside of school.” Jay expressed that faculty hold a lot of influence with students. The lack of Black faculty made an impression upon him because it also led to a lack of divergent thinking:

I wish there were more. So, having only two Black men that I had as professors, they’re kinda on the same page ideologically and I don’t necessarily [not that I have to or we have to agree], but I didn’t agree with them on a lot of points…

Jay’s comment illuminates that the absence of more Black faculty made him feel like he missed out on multiple viewpoints and teaching styles; he added:

Only having one professor that was a Black woman definitely has an effect on both the way I see my education moving forward or approach my education, but then also on social and political consciousness.

Having one or two Black faculty was as problematic for him as having mainly White faculty or faculty of color that are not Black. Jay continued by noting:
And having mainly White professors or non-Black professors, 'cause there's been other professors that I had that were people of color, but most people tend to stay away, unless they're Black, they tend to stay away from Black issues and that kind of thing. So, that being a lot of what I'm interested in discussing and I guess that's the relationship of that to the whole society, is definitely lacking in a lot of ways when it came to that. Yeah. And a lot of times when they do discuss it, it's just very distanced, I guess. And so, they'll go over something, but it'll just be the facts and not a greater conversation about how that works.

Jay’s comment highlights a gap in teaching and learning on multiples levels. First, a few Black faculty limit a students’ learning because they are not exposed to different ideologies. And, second, White faculty or non-Black faculty of color tend to avoid Black-centered topics and if they engage them it is not in an in-depth fashion. King (1991) noted that Black faculty tend to be more willing to engage topics related to racism. Also, Black faculty are more likely to validate Black students’ lived experiences, culture and ways of speaking (Hollins, 1982). These forms of acceptance increase students’ confidence, safety, and make them more likely to participate and take risks in the classroom (Hollins, 1982).

Critical Race Theorists Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) noted that race and racism are topics people avoid in their daily lives and in education. Participants described benefiting from learning and building relationships with their Black faculty. However, access to “only a few” Black faculty limited the breadth and depth of learning Jay sought. Participants’ reactions and responses to microaggressions are explored in the next section.

**We’re born into our survival stories: Reactions, Resilience and Responses to Racial Microaggressions.** Two key components of understanding racial microaggressions are (1) the
impacts of microaggressions build up over time and frequency and (2) microaggressions focus on the perception of the victim, not the intent of the perpetrator (Pierce, 1995; Sue et al., 2009). Sue (2010) referred to perception as “the participant’s belief about whether an incident was racially motivated and that the process of naming an event as a bias or racially motivated incident is an “internal struggle that is often energy depleting” (p. 72).

Microaggressions literature stresses that microaggressions may seem trivial or harmless, but their impacts are not (Sue, 2010). Sue (2010) described recipients’ responses to a microaggressive incident as a process that includes different stages or phases. Phase one is the actual incident. Phase two involves perception and questioning of the event. Phase three is the reaction process. And, phase four is when the recipient interprets and makes meaning of the incident (Sue, 2010). Participants shared experiences in and out of the classroom that illustrated how they viewed and responded to microaggressions. Examples ranged from the verbal and non-verbal comments or actions to explicit and overt experiences on campus. Jack described daily microaggressive experiences:

There's a lot going on beneath the surface I should say. Because I was walking around, I'm very aware. Unless I got my cell phone in my face. If my phone is in my face, I try to be aware where people’s walking, and people’s actions. And I can notice people’s little side eyes or gestures, or you know how people maneuver or especially older White people, they might have a tendency to grab their purse or something or move away. Like what, your breath stinks or something?

He described these as frequent experiences:

Often. All kinds of little stuff or even walking outside, you might hear someone lock their door when you're close. I lock my door when White people get close.
Jay described an experience in class when his professor used the phrase “nigger fit”:

…he said he was gonna throw a fit if every student didn't get an A on the test. And then one of the students asked what kind of fit. And the professor said, “Well, you know what kind of fit.” And the student was like, “I don't know what kind of fit. What kind of fit?” And so the professor was like, “A nigger fit.” And he's a person of color but he's not Black. And so, I had a problem with that. And so, I sent him an email explaining why I had a problem with it and if he was willing to explain to me why he decided that that would be okay. I felt like a physical shift when he made the joke and then I just didn't feel all right about it for the rest of the day.

Jay followed up with the professor because he felt that he had a good relationship with him and he always enjoyed his classes with him. The professor shared that it was a joke and an experiment to gauge students’ reactions to the use of the word “nigger” in class. The professor agreed not to run the experiment until the next quarter when Jay was no longer in the class:

And it definitely had that impact on me, because again, he was ... I really appreciated the way that he does teach his course and the way that he tries to get you the information.

And it was a lot of good information that went beyond what you would expect from the course.

Jay felt good about challenging the professor but was disappointed with the outcome. He felt that a teachable moment for White students bore a significant cost to students of color.

Further, his relationship with that professor was negatively impacted and changed their interactions. According to Sue, et al.’s (2009) study on difficult dialogues in the classroom, the most harmful racial microaggressions occur between teacher and student because of the inherent power faculty hold over students. Because of the power faculty hold, Jay took a risk by
questioning his professor. Sue (2010) noted that recipients of microaggressions often question if, when, or how they should respond to an incident for many different reasons. During the questioning phase, recipients weigh out many factors to determine the appropriate response. Internal questions often include: What is the relationship to the perpetrator? Has the recipient encountered similar experiences? What type of microaggression is it? (Sue, 2010). These thoughts and questions often go through the recipients’ mind and are processed very quickly.

**Catch-22.** As mentioned in Chapter Two, Black students commonly feel caught in a catch-22 dilemma, “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation when confronted with a racial microaggression (Sue, 2001 p. 279). Reactions vary depending upon the context of the situation. Jack’s recollection of his experience in the tutoring center reveals his questioning process:

...one of the bigger Asian guys, he's one of the tutors, and I'm waiting there and he comes and looks at the clipboard, he's like, “Oh I don't do calculus,” because I was trying to get help with calculus or trig, whatever I was trying to get help with. He's like, “Oh I don't do that, I'm gonna go back to help this girl.” I wait another 10, 15 minutes and then this other White lady comes to help me, and she helped me and she gets stuck and she's like, "Hold on.” And she goes and asks the guy that just said he don't do that, “Hey is this this and this?” And he goes, “Oh no this is that and that and that.” And she goes back to helping me. And I was thinking to myself, “You're a bitch.”

When Jack realized the tutor could have helped him but instead deceived him, he felt angry:

It made me feel like why is this guy intimidated by me? And I'd be like, “Oh he don't want to see me succeed or something?” It makes me think about his socialization, like his background, like did he have a girlfriend and she was taken from him by a Black guy?
Did he get beat up by some Black guy? Or did he do sports and he always got beat by a Black guy? Or if it's some type of subconscious thing.

When asked if he said anything to the tutor, Jack was caught in a catch-22, “No. Because one, I didn't want to be that angry Black guy, the proverbial one that media puts out there.” He emphasized he wasn’t scared of the tutor. He knew he could beat him up. In fact, what disturbed him more was he would not have treated the tutor in the same fashion. Further, because of that experience, he has not returned to the center again. Jack’s experience mirrored the findings in the literature on Black males in college and their experiences with racism and racial microaggressions. An expression of anger is not an innocuous response for them. It could result in a student conduct report, call to public safety, or lead to an interaction with police (Smith et al., 2011). Because Jack was previously incarcerated and has a criminal record, he is extremely vulnerable.

**Coping.** The participants’ coping strategies varied from avoidance to confronting the perpetrator. Sue (2010) described the decision to address a microaggression or not as an adaptive response that occurs in phase three. According to Sue, healthy paranoia or cultural mistrust occurs before, during and after a microaggressive incident (Sue, 2010). Because microaggressions are daily, common, subtle and often covert occurrences that accumulate over time, marginalized groups often anticipate that they will experience prejudice or discrimination (Sue, 2010). Tony described an exhibit he attended at a nearby university. He described the experience as common:

…it was unsettling. Every time we would go to an exhibit, it was me and one of the other [Black] guys from the BSU. Every time we would go to an exhibit, there would be groups
of people lined [up] just watching the video or whatever ...they would walk away within three minutes of us standing there.

He went on to describe his thought process:

In my mind, I'm registering. I'm understanding. I'm not saying anything. But that was really weird. So, situations like that, if I have a pretense of it's gonna be like that, I'm good. When I was younger, living and going to the school I went [to], obviously, I'm the only Black kid, that's draining to somebody's soul to be sitting there like, "Why don't you accept me?" I'm not doing that anymore. I'm getting too old.

Tony’s reflection illustrated how cumulative racial microaggressions can lead to racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2011). As aforementioned, racial battle fatigue is one outcome of coping with racial stressors. A good example is students’ perceptions that they are seen as dumb and not intellectuals. All participants shared a common perception that as Black male students they’re seen as unintelligent in many of their classes. For example, Jack described several experiences where he answered a question in class and his answer was not acknowledged or accepted, he stated, “I’ll say, I think this is it and this is why. Then someone will be like ‘why?’ Then someone else will give the answer and they will be like ‘ok.’ I swear it’s just what I said. No one ever believed the Black guy.”

It is important to understand that anyone can experience something once in a while. However, when it is your daily, lived, experience it can reinforce “cultural mistrust” of multiple environments (Sue, 2010). Several participants described a frustrating acceptance of their college going experience. The next section discusses how their perceptions and experiences of microaggressions could negatively impact their retention, persistence and college completion.
Research Question Two: In what ways can perceptions and experiences of racial microaggressions be linked to retention, persistence and completion rates of African American males attending a community college?

During the interviews, participants were asked to share where or whom they sought on campus when they experienced barriers or challenges and to describe their relationships with faculty and staff. Table 2 outlines the four key themes that emerged across the interviews.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes from Participants in Response to the Second Research Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m not big on institutional support: Avoid services designed to help students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The roles of race and gender in help seeking behaviors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small but mighty: Bonds with Faculty and Staff.</td>
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I’m not big on institutional support: Avoid services designed to help students. The term “Blackmaleness” describes how Black male students are often negatively perceived by faculty and how those negative perceptions can impact their academic success. Blackmaleness captures the intersectionality of race and gender and how those identities shape one’s college experience (Brooms, 2017). Bush and Bush’s (2010) study on non-institutional variables that impact African America male students’ engagement found that students disengaged from the institution because they did not feel supported by the college or felt as if they mattered. Further, absent a relationship with a faculty member, staff person or peer, participants felt further marginalized by the institution. As a result, they were less likely to access student support services such as tutoring, counseling, and academic advisement designed to retain students.

In this study participants’ experiences varied in terms of accessibility and use of student support services and resources. All the participants indicated an awareness of services. For
example, Warren acknowledged that he has problems that impact his academic achievement but does not really address them:

I really should start addressing my problems, but I don't. I don't cover them up in the sense I suppress them, but I fill that space with better things…. I don't know. It's just more institutional stuff, which institutionalization is my problem in the first place. I don't want to go to institutions for solutions for my institutionalized problems. I've only trusted a few institutions in my life, and it's been basically Seattle Central and Metro Transit.

Warren trusts the college in a general way but is reluctant to utilize the services designed to help. Warren described a key staff member in Student Leadership as the person he goes to when he’s having problems:

Dr. X is not a psychologist, so he probably can't talk to me through my military to civilian transitioning troubles, but he's really good at teaching me the history of hip hop, which is interesting.

For Warren the relationship with the staff member is a type of support even though the staff member cannot help him with a specific college related issue. Similarly, Jay, the student veteran that served two tours in Afghanistan, described a distrust of institutions from his experiences in the military that continue to shape his level of engagement at the college:

I avoid veterans for the most part. A lot of veterans get out of the military and then I mean this country worships the military in a lot of ways. And so, they get out of the military and they feel like they're this great mighty being because they're a veteran and the way that it affects their relationships to people who they view as civilians or just college students.
Jay wants to distance himself from his military experience and therefore avoids Veteran’s Support Services. Services that could aid his academics by providing help with counseling, tutoring, and housing services.

Scholars described student engagement as nuanced, meaning student engagement can vary (Harris III & Harper, 2008; Wood, 2014). Wood (2014) described nuanced engagement as “apprehension to engagement” (p. 787). He noted that a student may be disengaged but it does not mean they are not invested in their education (Wood, 2014; Harper, 2009). An examination of student engagement should include consideration of race and gender and the ways that men in general, and men of color are socialized to perceive asking for or seeking help (Wood, 2014).

**Role of race and gender in help seeking behaviors.** Numerous studies (Harper, 2008; Harris III & Harper, 2008; Gardenshire Crooks, Caollado, Martin, & Castro, 2010; Wood, 2014) on male students of color, including Black male students, found that men of color avoid seeking help because that behavior is in conflict with how they were socialized to be men. Often, they are socialized by other men (fathers) to view school as a feminine domain (Wood, 2014). Further, seeking help contradicts with their racial and gender identities, in which men are self-reliant and autonomous (Wood, 2014). Participants described a similar pattern of nuanced engagement at Seattle Central depending on their level of engagement and their relationships with faculty, staff and students.

As aforementioned, all participants were involved in clubs or student organizations at various levels from attendance to one or two events, such as Fellas Fridays, to consistent involvement in clubs and councils, such as the Black Student Union, Prison Education/Re-Entry Advisory Committee, Veterans club, and student government. Interestingly, all participants did not consistently utilize student services such as advising, counseling, and tutoring unless it was
germane to their enrollment, funding resources, or specific to an identity group. For example, three of the participants are Veterans and used the G.I. Bill for educational expenses.

When asked where he goes for help, Jack described his support system as the staff in the Prison Education/Re-Entry office, and other students he shared a similar background with:

The whole student support programs office is amazing…They've been a major support system. It was about six other people all in various stages of entering their dealings with the DOC [Department of Corrections], working on classwork, laughing, joking, eating food. It was just really good to see so many people that society had written off to being successful and thriving and enjoying what they're doing, being outside the norms.

He went on to describe his experiences hanging out in the department:

Yeah, some of the dynamics of being a group. Similar experiences, similar goals, a mutual understanding. We’ve all been through some extremely traumatizing times, and to see people coming out of that not only broken, which it [incarceration] do to most people, but to come out strong and able to be successful or start making progress of being successful…but being able to say, “You know what? I’m about to go out and give this a try. And I might fall. That’s absolutely a possibility, but I’d rather go and give it shot and see what happens than wonder.”

Eli expressed an awareness of services but admitted he rarely used them. Instead he highlighted the relationship with a faculty member and a staff member. When asked how they help him, he shared, “I haven’t reached out to them yet. My relationship with them is very good.” It is the relationship that mattered most because based on that relationship, Eli knew they would help him if he needed it.
Wood’s (2014) study on Black males and factors that promoted or discouraged academic engagement found that one reason students may be apprehensive to engage with faculty or peers is a protective measure or coping strategy to mitigate for negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypical views shaped student’s willingness to access supports such as tutoring, even when students were struggling academically (Wood, 2014). He argued that in order to cope with stereotypes and racism, coupled with societal and internalized notions of Black masculinity, students avoided situations where they may experience discrimination or poor treatment (Wood, 2014). Racial microaggressions are closely related to racial and gender stereotypes and one-way racism manifests. Tony succinctly stated it this way when asked how he deals with microaggressions:

Tony: I have like a poker face, and I don't really put myself in situations that often.

YH: Do you feel like you're kind of going through the school motions a little bit?

Tony: Somewhat. Honestly, I really am and it's more about survival for real. I know, for myself, I think I learn ... how I prefer to learn is really taking my time with stuff. I don't like not being able to absorb something. Like when I read a book, I'll sit there and re-read chapters and stuff like, "Did that just happen?" That's what I do, but I don't think that's good for if you're taking like three to four classes or five classes.

Although Tony is struggling in classes, he struggles alone. At the end of our interview he asked if they were any study clubs or groups he could join for support. Unfortunately, there are not general student study clubs at the college.

Solórzano (1998) and Howard (2008) asserted the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling is a useful way to reveal racial microaggressions that impact students of color. When participants felt as if they had a relationship with a faculty, staff or students, they were more willing to engage in
opportunities beyond the classroom. Relationships surfaced as an important theme throughout all the interviews. The next section examines the second theme that emerged in the interviews—the bonds participants held with faculty and staff at the college.

**Small but mighty: Bonds with faculty and staff.** As stated earlier and discussed throughout the research and this study, Black males are not a monolithic or homogenous student population. Their experiences in and out of the classroom vary. Similarly, participants described challenges navigating Seattle Central, they also discussed spaces of refuge or counterspaces such as clubs, Student Services departments, and relationships they developed with faculty, staff and peers. Several participants shared how they enrolled in classes taught by a faculty member they felt connected to even though the class was not in their majors. Eli described his experience in two psychology courses taught by a Black faculty member;

Eli: Yeah it was great. That was why I took two classes with him. I liked him a lot. The psychology class, it was kind of diverse. There was a little bit of everyone. With the African-American psychology class, it was all Black kids except for maybe one or two White kids in that class.

YH: What was that like?

Eli: That was crazy, yeah. Being around everyone who looked like you. Everyone kind of have the same experience. You could really relate in that class.

Eli enrolled in a second course with the same professor because the first course was a positive experience. He used descriptors such as “relaxing,” “more welcoming,” and “comfortable” and “more vocal” to describe how he felt in a classroom with people that looked like him and curriculum that he related to as a person of color. Eli described another experience with a Black
faculty member when she asked him to serve as a T.A. (teaching assistant) the next quarter. These bonds and positive experiences mitigated for microaggressive experiences in other classes:

I’m in a Japanese class and I’m one of only two Black kids in that class. Maybe in that class, they might not know what I’m doing in there. Of course, they don’t say it to my face. They might think I don’t know what’s going on. They might just think that I’m not the smartest kid or what not. I don’t really get that vibe from a lot of people. Can’t read people’s minds.

Diablo described an experience in a music class taught by a Black faculty member, a course that was not in his major, but he wanted to attend the class because of the relationship with the professor:

My music teacher was a middle-aged Black dude, so he would be more quick to come and help me out. There were three or four Black people in that class. It was ... I don’t know. It felt just more ... I don’t know about natural, but it just felt like, you know ... It was something that I didn't think about so much.

Diablo was more engaged in his courses because he felt as if his professor cared for him and he did not want to disappoint him because the relationship with the faculty was important to him. He described ways he demonstrated his commitment in all of his classes:

In class I always try to sit in the front. I always try to ask a question or two, so I try to from a relationship with the teacher, so I have that running for me. I always feel like I’m treated pretty well in class.

It’s worth noting that off the six students interviewed, Diablo and Eli were the only ones from the local area and only participants who attended high schools in the region. They also
demonstrated the highest level of comfort at the college because they knew faculty, administrators, and other students prior to enrolling at Seattle Central.

Jay described the relationships he developed with faculty and students at the college as his “two life lines”:

I mean, those are really I guess my two life lines in regard to college, ’cause I'm not a good student for the most ... I love learning but I hate being in the classroom for the most part.

Jay struggles with PTSD and social anxiety. He sees faculty as a resource but revealed that for him the classroom structure does not facilitate a space for students to reach out when they are struggling. However, because of the experience in class with a White faculty member, he sought his support later:

Not while I was in their class, but one of those professors who I maintained a friendship with, I'll still go to their office from time and time and check in with them. Since then, I've been able to speak a little bit more openly. I think that the classroom dynamic also makes it hard for me to be more open or vulnerable with professors even if I admire the way that they teach.

Overall, all the participants described meaningful relationships they developed with faculty, staff and students and the ways those bonds positively impacted their educational and social experiences at the college. However, all of them spoke about the same two, three or four Black, White or other faculty of color. They named the same handful of people, that as an administrator at the college, I’m aware of their reputation as faculty that are excellent professors because their ability to foster meaningful relationships with Black students especially, and students in general. From an institutional lens, this is not systemic nor a sustainable strategy to
retain Black students. What if those faculty leave the college? What about the hundreds of other Black students that never enroll in their Music, English or Sociology courses?

Prior research has shown that stereotypes and microaggressive behaviors do lower student performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Sue, 2001; Wood, 2014). Further, the “build it and they will come” approach many colleges and universities employ regarding student supports and faculty-student engagement increases Black male students’ feelings of marginalization (Wood, 2014). The third question in this study examined Black male experiences at a college with predominately White faculty.

**Research Question Three: What are the experiences of African American male participants with racial microaggressions within a community college with predominately White faculty and how do they make sense of these experiences with respect to their academic and social achievement?**

During the interviews four key themes emerged related to the men’s experiences with White faculty. The themes that emerged are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Themes from Participants in Response to the Third Research Question*

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<th>Theme</th>
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<td>We’re used to it: My teachers have always been mostly White.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(In)visibility.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Attitudes and Approach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Convenience Factor: Community college works for my life.</td>
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As mentioned in Chapter Three, Seattle Central serves a student population of 61% students of color and 39% White students (Washington State Community and Technical College, 2016). Black students are 14% of the student population at the college. A 2014
personnel report revealed that 3% of faculty at Seattle Central identified as African American. Microaggression literature would define this data snapshot as an example of an institutional microaggression (Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2010). This data sets the broader context for the revealing comments participants shared about their experiences in a college with a diverse student body and predominately White faculty.

**We’re used to it: My teachers have always been mostly White.** Although participants Jay, Tony and Warren chose to move from other states to live in a racially diverse city, they chose Seattle Central because of its history of social justice, diversity, and location. None of the participants expressed surprise that the majority of their faculty were White, or non-Black faculty of color. In fact, Warren described his experience at the college as similar an HBCU (Historically Black College or University):

I don't know if there are any historically Black publicly-funded community colleges, but if there are Seattle Central would be one. It is very ethnic here. In a way that's very good, because I feel like a normal student. But in a way I feel invisible, which is also good but can be bad. I'm in a space where my Blackness isn't first and foremost most prominent, except for with the exception of a few sociological classes around students who may be ... Or social science classes, who may be new to that concept, and whenever they mention something about the Black experience the whole class will turn and look at me.... He expressed a “this is just how it is” acceptance of a mostly White campus environment:

This is how that operates. I've learned to shake it, but outside of that it's me being able to blend in as a Black person, instead of being like, “You're the Black person.”
Seattle Central exceeded Warren’s expectations in part because prior to coming to Seattle Central all of his teachers were White. For him, the sight of a mere few Black teachers made him feel like a “regular” college student;

I think because it's a community college I think the best way I feel connected is the fact that sometimes I feel just like a basic college student. There's not a lot of alarm raised about when I do something or is not much concern. Not concern as in we don't care but concern as in, we don't have to monitor that closely when you do it. I actually think I feel also a part of the fixture of the college. I just feel like a college student, which is pretty rare, because even in high school I didn't feel like a high school student. I felt like a liability. I felt like you're here, and we have to deal with you, so might as well learn something. If you mess up, here's detention.

(In)visibility. Warren’s statements are complex and multi-faceted. As Sue (2010) noted, “invisibility takes many forms” (p 80). In a previous section, Jack described feeling invisible when his contribution to discussion was not acknowledged during group work in class. For Jack, the treatment he experienced was feeling marginalized by other students. Thus, rendered invisible. Here, Warren likens invisibility to normalcy and being viewed as a normal college student. For him, being invisible meant, he is not hyper-visible in terms of hyper surveillance or policing. He is simply treated like everyone else. Warren also described feeling visible in a negative way, when a Black related topic was raised in class:

Just whenever they mention something that’s so obviously egregious against the Black community, the whole class will turn and look at me. I’m like, can you not? Yeah, some of this stuff has happened, but I feel like you’re gonna make me talk for the whole Black community, and I really don’t want to. Just teach it.
However, Warren also expressed that he has been guilty of doing the same thing when a topic is raised about another racial group:

But now I’m giving to understand that in some cases that’s a cultural thing. I’ve been guilty of doing it myself. Whenever they talk about Japanese internment camps, I look at the only kid I know in the class who’s Japanese.

Racial microaggressions also can occur between person of color to person of color. Warren is right, people of color commit racial microaggressions towards others too, including White people, but that is not the same thing as racism (Sue, 2010). Otherwise, when a White related topic is discussed in class, people would turn to look at the White student(s), or task White students with speaking for their entire race. Participants described mixed experiences with White faculty. In other words, it depended upon which White faculty member’s class they were in. Warren described trepidation when he learned his Anthropology course was taught by a White instructor:

I was very nervous at first to have a White lady teach my Cultural Anthropology class, but she based it off of her travels. The way she talked about cultures and participating and engaging in them was really awesome…she talked about the possibility of using VR headsets in the classroom so we could be in Palestine trying to walk to school. We could be in Ghana and get that feeling. That’s really cool.

All students may experience nervousness at the beginning of a new quarter, however, it is critical to understand that accumulation of microaggressions is a key factor in understanding their impacts and how they affect victims long-term. Because Warren had cumulative negative experiences with White teachers, and so few Black teachers, overall, his experiences with White
teachers are magnified and normalized. His educational trajectory was impacted by a White counselor’s decision to not place him into AP classes in high school.

**Faculty attitudes and approach.** Costner, Daniels & Clark’s (2010) study on attitudes faculty held about African American students found faculty were willing to teach Black students but were less willing to incorporate African-American focused curricula into their classroom. Additionally, White participants described unfavorable views and attitudes about teaching Black students and held low expectations for Black students (Costner et al., 2010).

For community college students, the classroom is often the sole space of engagement because community colleges are largely non-residential, therefore, students spend the majority of their time on campus in class (Maxwell et al., 2003). Consequently, intentional ways to engage Black male students outside of the classroom are important to their retention and persistence (Wood, 2014). Wood and Turner (2011) found that faculty must be proactive in their approach to Black male students to support their academic and social engagement in the classroom. They recommended that faculty begin with setting up a classroom climate by demonstrating they care about students, listening to students and providing on-going encouragement (Wood & Turner, 2011). The critical role faculty play in Black male students’ persistence and retention was articulated by study participants’ experiences at Seattle Central.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, community and technical colleges serve the largest population of Black male students in post-secondary settings (Chenowith, 1998; Wood, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Further, Black males attending community colleges differ from their four-year colleges/university peers as they tend to be older students, parents, less academically prepared, and come from a lower socioeconomic background (Flowers, 2006; Strayhorn, 2012). The next theme explored why participants chose to attend Seattle Central College.
The convenience factor: community college works for my life. All participants indicated that they chose to attend Seattle Central College because of its central location in the city. Eli and Diablo knew students and employees that worked at the college. Jack was exposed to the college when he took college courses while he was incarcerated and decided to continue attending upon his release. Warren, Jay, and Tony researched the college prior to enrolling because they were also seeking a college that was diverse and valued social justice and activism. Jay described how the college’s history of involvement in civil rights influenced his decision to enroll:

I heard that Seattle Central was influenced by the ... Well, that the Black Panthers had a large influence in creating the community college. And so, I thought that it would reflect a lot of those values and they were also values that I was trying to put into practice in my own life. So, I thought that it would be a good place for me to get an education and meet people who I guess were trying to practice some of the values and that kind of thing.

When asked what success looked like to them, participants described a desire to give back and be of service to their communities, to make their families proud of them and to achieve financial stability via a stable career. Participants viewed Seattle Central as a path towards achieving their broader goals. Jack articulated his drive to make money and was also conflicted about it:

To be completely honest with you, that's the only reason I'm here is I see it as an opportunity to make more money. I think I don't know if I have the power to obtain success. And when I say success, I mean in terms of success for me is being able to have a major impact on the world that improves it for the lives of everyone and try to break down some of the disproportion that is seen throughout the world…. Even though I know
I'm working to have money, I realize money is a part of the world, and currently how I live and how the world is set up, that is needed to survive. But I feel it greatly dehumanizes people. So yeah. Just dehumanizing people is something I think is a problem that happens with capitalism when dollar is put above people.

As the researcher, I was struck by the breadth and depth of the participants’ comments and the ways that they described their desire to serve others and their communities. Their experiences navigating the college environment, addressing and coping with racial tensions as well as racial and gendered stereotypes, and ability to find counterspaces speaks to their resiliency and persistency. Their ability to return to their college keenly aware of how they are or will be perceived based on their race, gender, size and sexual orientation revealed their ability to pursue their educations in the face of significant odds. The counter-stories highlighted how much is unknown about their experiences as college students, and how what is known is often a one-dimensional understanding of a student population rooted in racial and gendered stereotypes.

Brooms (2017) noted that “focusing solely on how Black males are problematized limits our scope and undervalues their persistence” (p. 120). He suggested integrated resiliency strategies that provide Black male students space to tell their counter-stories (Brooms, 2017). How we continue to “see” Black male students and judge their abilities or inabilities is a problem of the institution, not the students.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to hear Black male students describe their experiences and perceptions of racial microaggressions at Seattle Central College. This chapter presented the findings of this study. Findings drawn from the data analysis were comprised into themes. The research questions posed in this study were answered through the voices and lived
experiences of the six study participants. Those findings were presented within a Critical Race Theory and racial microaggressions frameworks. This chapter also outlined the methodology used for the study. The fifth chapter discusses key findings, situate findings within CRT and extant literature, and outlines implications for future practice and research.
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how six African-American/Black male students experience, make meaning of, and interpret racial microaggressions at a community college. The theoretical framework used for this study was Critical Race Theory.

The three research questions guiding this investigation were as follows:

1. How do African American males attending a community college perceive and interpret individual and institutional forms of racial microaggressions?

2. In what ways can perceptions and experiences of racial microaggressions be linked to retention, persistence and completion rates of African American males attending a community college?

3. What are the experiences of African American male participants with racial microaggressions within a community college with predominately White faculty and how do they make sense of these experiences with respect to their academic and social achievement?

The study utilized an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to structure and code the data collected from study participants. IPA is an interpretative process that focuses on the subjects’ lived experiences and how they make meaning of and draw understanding from their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Findings presented are drawn from participants’ perceptions of their experiences in order to better understand how they make sense of them. IPA methodology also aligns with the theoretical framework, Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory was utilized as the theoretical framework in order to capture and analyze participants’ stories and experiences. CRT also lends itself as a model to highlight institutional forms of racial microaggressions and to identify gaps within education that
negatively impact academic success for students of color. As referenced in Chapter One, Solórzano (1998) identified five themes as the basis for CRT in education as: (1) centrality of race and racism to educational theory and practice; (2) critique of dominant ideology and deficit frameworks; (3) centralize experiential knowledge; (4) commitment to social justice and the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty; and (5) an interdisciplinary framework that includes a historical and contemporary analysis of race and racism.

This study focused on the centrality of race and racism in education and the centralizing of experiential knowledge, by centering the subject’s own voice and experiences via personal narratives. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), it is through personal narratives that counter-stories emerge to counter dominant narratives that frame understandings of race and racism in dominant society. Counter-storytelling is a powerful way to capture stories from marginalized and underserved groups, and as Delgado and Stefanic (2001) emphasized, “the hope is that well-told stories describing the reality of Black and Brown lives can help readers bridge the gap between their worlds and the worlds of others” (p. 41). Counter-stories centralized participants’ lived experiences and gave voice to their racial and gendered experiences at Seattle Central College.

In CRT, voices are the personal narratives and stories that provide evidence to challenge dominant racial narratives (Dixon & Rosseau, 2005). Capturing the voice of people of color is the first step in CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Next, CRT calls for action and a deep analysis focused on improving the educational experiences for people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT was the ideal theoretical framework for this study because of its focus on an intersectional approach to race which includes other social identities, such as gender, class and sexual orientation.
Research findings connected to the five CRT tenets, particularly the centrality of race and racism, counter storytelling, voice and intersectionality. Findings also supported current literature regarding Black male students’ experiences navigating two and four-year colleges and universities, dominant stereotypes attributed to Black males on college campus, and the racial microaggressive incidents they experience. These findings contribute to the body of contemporary and emerging research on this student population. Further, findings contribute to the limited studies on Black males that attend community and technical colleges.

**Discussion of the Major Findings**

After a thorough review of the data and an analysis of the interviews described in Chapter Four, three major findings emerged. They are as follows:

- Stereotypes of a Black male misunderstood (and it’s still all good) – The force of Racial Microaggressions
- Counterspaces: People, Places, and Programs.
- We can build it, but they may not come: Intentional and integrated supports for Black males

These three Key Findings are presented and discussed below.

"**Stereotypes of a Black male misunderstood (and it’s still all good);”** The force of **Racial Microaggressions.** To begin, in discussing the ways in which Black males are projected and seen, I draw upon the lyrics from the Notorious B.I.G/Biggie’s 1994 debut album Ready to Die and gold single, “Juicy” to illustrate the first key finding. The track “Juicy” describes Notorious B.I.G.’s youth growing up in poverty and his dreams to become a hip-hop artist. The introduction to Juicy begins with his dedication:
Yeah, this album is dedicated to all the teachers that told me
I'd never amount to nothin', to all the people that lived above the
buildings that I was hustlin' in front of that called the police on
me when I was just tryin' to make some money to feed my daughter,
and all the niggas in the struggle, you know what I'm sayin'?
Uh-ha, it's all good baby bay-bee, uh. (Wallace, 1994)

In the song he describes his struggles to actualize his dreams to achieve financial stability
in order to provide for his family and friends. Throughout the song, Biggie repeats the line “and
it’s still all good” reiterating to the listener how he achieved his goals despite significant barriers,
such as failures of teachers and the school system, being a high school drop-out, incarceration
and parenthood at a young age. The lyrics summarize much of what I heard as I listened to
Diablo’s, Warren’s, Jack’s, Jay’s, Tony’s and Eli’s stories about their lives, educational
experiences, and goals. All of the men struggled to navigate educational environments and they
all experienced varying levels of academic success. They shared with me their goals and dreams
to serve their communities and to positively change the world for others. Like Biggie, they were
acutely aware of the negative stereotypes applied to Black men as dumb, uneducated, criminal,
violent and aggressive. Like Biggie, the men voiced disruptive experiences with teachers and
school systems. Tony recalled his experiences in high school and the discipline he received for
unclear reasons. Jack carries the lifetime mark of a criminal record, and yet, he focuses on
helping other students transitioning out of incarceration into the college. Warren and Jay are
prolific readers. They described their idea of a good time is to discuss religion, Sociology and
politics over a glass of wine. These images and stories about Black men counter the dominant
discourse on Black men in society as not college material or positive and contributing members of society

**The force of racial microaggressions.**

“[I’m viewed] as way more of a physical threat than an intellectual threat.”

--Jack

In Chapter Four, I described the participants as having a frustrated acceptance of their experiences at Seattle Central. They did not express surprise that they were viewed in stereotypical ways by some faculty, staff and students. They understood that the normal experience for Black men is to expect poor or discriminatory treatment, and constantly having to prove themselves to disprove negative stereotypes on and off campus. They understood that the institution was not designed for them. It was as if they entered college prepared to be disappointed and were optimistic about their futures. Participants expressed enthusiasm for learning and community. This was expressed through their engagement activities and relationships they built with faculty, staff and students.

As aforementioned, the impacts of racial microaggressions accumulate over time (Sue, 2010). They are “layered assaults” based on race that also intersect with gender, class, sexual orientation, and other forms of identity (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2014, p. 6). Warren’s descriptions of navigating predominately White LGBTQ spaces and predominately heterosexual and heterosexist Black spaces highlighted the ways that Black male identities intersect.

Even though participants articulated an understanding of race, racism, and an acceptance of the ways that their Blackness and maleness is perceived in society, it was not a passive acceptance of the conditions or race, racism and discrimination. Participants shared ways they
responded to and confronted racial microaggressions that demonstrated their resilience and persistency.

**Resilience.** Participants shared myriad ways they responded to racial microaggressions that highlighted their resiliency and coping strategies. Responses aligned with common response strategies in the literature including, humor, confrontation, inaction, and avoidance (Sue, 2010). For example, Diablo shared how he used humor to respond to the frequent assumption he played basketball for the college. Jack decided not to access tutoring services because of the negative experience he had in the center. Tony described how he purposely avoided places where he thinks he will receive poor treatment. And Jay confronted the faculty member that used the N-word in class. Participants built their resiliency through relationships and bonds with faculty, staff and students. Relationships formed in informal and formal spaces on and off campus. For example, even though Jay avoided the Veteran’s Center, he talked about his collaboration with a White faculty member on a Veteran’s blog. This project was not tied to his academic work or class assignments. All of the participants identified people or places that served as their safe spaces, or counterspaces. The next section examines ways that counterspaces manifested for participants through friendships, engagement programs and services.

**Counterspaces: people, places and programs.** Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) defined counterspaces, “as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p. 70). Counterspaces serve multiple purposes. They are places of resistance and group empowerment where students of color experience validation, safety and support to make sense of their experiences on campus. (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). Counterspaces surfaced as a key theme across all of the interviews. Participants discussed how relationships developed with
faculty, staff and students in formal and informal ways. Relationships developed with faculty in the classroom and often extended outside of class. They grew during work-study jobs and internships students held at the college. And the developed when participants got involved in formal activities such as clubs, student government and student support groups.

**People.** As stated in Chapter Four, relationships with faculty, staff and students provided support to participants. Participants described positive relationships with faculty and staff, especially Black faculty and staff. For Diablo, the relationships he had with Black faculty and administrators served as a source of encouragement for him. He described his relationship with a Black senior administrator, “she’s a Black woman, and she’s been, I’d probably say, my most powerful resource.” He went on to describe a Black faculty member that taught his English class and the bond they developed over a class assignment;

We spent a lot of time together, just because I was sort of involved in class a lot, and I wrote an essay about how America has institutionalized the Black race. We spent a lot of class time together that might not have been spent if I wasn’t a Black male writing about that.

These relationships were pivotal to his sense of comfort and made him feel as if he belonged at the college. Eli felt so comfortable in his Psychology class, taught by a Black faculty member, that he was more vocal in class, felt more welcomed, and even took an additional course with the same instructor. He also described his relationship with a Black staff member, a director in the Student Leadership office. He described their bond as brotherly because they are both Black men. He shared that he views the director as someone he can talk to about marriage and fatherhood, milestones that Eli has yet to experience. Student Services departments such as
Student Leadership, Prison Education/Re-Entry office, and the Veteran’s Center surfaced as safe spaces participants sought out between classes, places to study and to hang out.

**Places and programs.** Participants’ stories illustrated the ways that some student support programs help retain students by creating and cultivating spaces of belonging for students. All participants were currently involved in or had attended Fella’s Fridays and the Black Student Union. Participation levels varied from once in a while to weekly, however; it was clear that clubs and programs helped students find a community. During the interview, Jack’s energy shifted and his eyes brightened when he talked about the Prison Education and Re-entry office. It was clear to me that the staff and students in that space served as his oasis on campus. Often when I’m walking around the college, I stop in that office and usually Jack is there talking and studying with other students. If he is not there people always know where his is, if he’s in class or gone for the day. Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) suggested the growth of "spaces of resistance” for African American students as one strategy to combat racial microaggressions.

Although counterspaces are spaces of resistance, safety and student validation, there are other services and resources that students need to successfully navigate college. As mentioned in Chapter Four, participants described a reluctance to utilize services and resources designed to help them unless they were specific to funding, such as financial aid, or intentionally designed for students they identified with, such as Black Student Union and Fella’s Fridays.

**We can build it, but they may not come: intentional and integrated supports for Black males.** As aforementioned, Tinto’s (1975, 1998) seminal research on student departure theory indicated that students leave an institution when they are underprepared academically, have undefined goals, and they were not integrated into the college environment. Conversely, students are retained and persist when they are integrated into curricular and extra-curricular
spaces and activities and connected to peers (Tinto, 1975, 1998). However, understanding factors that influence Black male student retention or attrition is complex. This group does not fit neatly into Tinto’s model because Black males are not a monolithic group. According to the literature, Black males attending community college differ from traditional aged students attending four-year colleges and university in many ways—age, economic background, less prepared than their peer at four-year colleges and universities (Bush & Bush, 2010). Similarly, study participants were very diverse. However, a common trait they shared was a reluctance to seek out support and resources designed to aid them.

**Factors that influenced disengagement.** When I asked whom or where do participants go when they have a problem or issue, participants tended to address their challenges alone or preferred to talk to other students or avoid seeking help. Several participants shared a general distrust of institutions such as the United States Armed Forces, Department of Justice (DOJ), schools and colleges based on their backgrounds and experiences within those systems. This was troubling because several of the participants were experiencing significant challenges such as homelessness, unstable housing, and PTSD. This was puzzling to me, in part, because the men were connected to faculty and staff, key resources to help them. Prior research indicated that one reason Black men avoid asking for help is because of the ways they are socialized as Black men to be self-reliant (Wood, 2014). Another factor that contributed to their reluctance to seek help is because students tend to avoid situations where they may be mistreated, racial profiled or discriminated against (Sue, 2010; Wood, 2014). A third factor that can influence disengagement because they are aware that faculty and staff may view them as academically inferior and not college material (Howard III, 2008; Harper, 2012; Wood, 2014; Brooms, 2017). All three factors surfaced in the interviews as reasons the men did not always ask for help when they needed it.
Warren and Jay described that they avoid asking for help for different reasons. Warren acknowledged issues that impact his academics, but he preferred to ignore them. Jay, the veteran with PTSD, avoided Veteran’s Support Services based on his prior experience in the military, not based on negative experiences in the Vet’s Center. Tony purposefully avoided spaces where he thinks he may experience mistreatment.

**Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Framework**

Perez Huber and Solórzano's (2014) analysis of racial microaggressions from a CRT lens articulated the forms of structured racism that operate in everyday acts of racism. They argued that racial microaggressions are a form of racism used to keep people of color marginalized and perpetuate a larger system of racism (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2014). In other words, racial microaggressions cannot flourish without structural racism. Racial microaggressions are symptoms of White supremacy, a macroaggression (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2014). CRT is a useful theoretical model to apply to racial microaggressions because it expands an understanding of racial microaggressions beyond the individual acts to larger systemic acts of racial dominance rooted in White supremacy. Findings supported CRT tenets reviewed in the following sections. They are the permanence of race and racism, counter-storytelling and voice, and intersectionality.

**Permanence of Race and Racism.** Howard (2008) contended that CRT forces us to consider and include the permanence of race and racism in education. Racial microaggressions served as a lens to understand how the men experienced different types of racism and the ways in which racism manifest on individual and institutional levels. Individually, participants described frequent interactions with others that were subtle, covert, verbal and non-verbal comments or actions that communicated to them they were a threat, dangerous and unwelcomed. Jack
described how he could tell how he was perceived as dangerous as he walked the halls by the way people avoided eye contact with him or pulled the purses closer to themselves as they walked by him. Participants named institutional microaggressions such as lack of Black faculty and culturally relevant core curriculum. CRT provides an avenue to identify and analyze the full spectrum of racism from contemporary form of overt racisms to the ways it has evolved into subtle, ambiguous forms of everyday racism (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Rowe, 1990; Sue, 2010; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo & Rivera, 2009; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw & Okazaki, 2014; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal & Torino, 2009). Participants did not describe overt acts, such as being called the N-word, on campus. Rather, the N-word was communicated through such acts as polite exclusion from in-class study groups, lack of acknowledgment of their in-class contribution, and body language. The implicit bias they encountered and racial microaggressions directed towards participants shed light on structural racism at the college. The patterns and behaviors described by participants are directly linked to the history of racism in the United States. Harvey (1994) contended that the historical legacy of racism is revealed via individual and institutional actions:

    The historical legacy of racial discrimination continues to make its presence felt in American society and the manifestations of this insidious practice, in both overt and covert ways can be seen in both individual and institutional patterns of behavior in action. (p. 19).

Howard (2008) contended that scholars are less likely to interrogate the role race and racism play in Black male students’ academic and social success. This underscores the importance of theoretical models such as CRT to ensure that race and racism are explicitly named as factors that impact academic achievement for students of color (Harper, 2012).
Intersectionality. The experiences shared by participants affirmed the findings in CRT literature on the importance of intersectional analysis of Black males. Lack of an intersectional approach can perpetuate bias towards a group based on a singular social identity and result in oversimplifying Black males (Howard, 2013). He contends that researchers must understand that people hold multiple identities simultaneously (Howard, 2013). As mentioned, participants were dissimilar in many ways and identified with multiple identities. Warren and Tony’s experience as Black, gay, men navigating the college environment differed from Eli, Jay, Diablo, and Jack’s because the experienced discrimination and bias as Black, gay men which differed from their experience as heterosexual men. Warren’s description of navigating LGBTQ and Black student spaces illustrated how he anticipated and experienced prejudice in both groups.

Counter-storytelling and voice. As mentioned in previous chapters, African American males are understudied in the literature (Wood & Turner, 2010). One of the glaring absences of much of the research associated with African American males is the absence of their voice speaking to their experiences (Flowers, 2006; Howard, 2013). Tilman (2002) calls for more accounts from Black males that highlight how they view race and racism and how it shapes their educational experiences. Findings supported the CRT tenet of voice and counter-storytelling as both a way to empower marginalized groups and give voice to their experiences. Counter-storytelling is especially an effective to reveal racial microaggressions and analyze the college campus climate (Solórzano, 1998; Howard, 2008; Hiraldo, 2016).

The analysis of participants’ stories, or voice, revealed the ways that the men make sense of their experiences as diverse, Black male students at Seattle Central. Each dealt with racial microaggressions differently. For some participants, it was easy to tap into, identify and recall microaggressions and others struggled to recount specific instances. For example, Eli expressed a
high awareness of the stereotypes associated with Black males, but struggled to recount specific incidents he experienced personally at the college:

I don’t have any personal issues with other teachers or faculty… I almost don’t feel like a minority. I think it’s just like any other school. You might not always notice maybe if someone were to look at you differently. For me, I just come to school and I just want to get the job done.

Interestingly, Eli described his status as college student as one way he combats negative stereotypes associated with Black males:

I think that being in a college setting almost diminishes those [negative stereotypes].

That’s a step in the right direction. If you’re in the classroom, you can be in the classroom. That’s better than being on the streets or whatever.

Conversely, other participants indicated a high awareness of stereotypes associated with their group and specific race, gender and sexual orientation related incidents they experienced. Jay shared an experience in class when he brought up race during a discussion about a book about a man that leaves corporate life to live in a bus in Alaska:

There’s been times where if I say something in class that relates to race, like if it’s a class that isn’t explicitly about culture or race and ethnicity, I think it’s called 128 Hours or something… So the professor asks us what comes to mind about reading the passage. And I told him that I think it’s a uniquely White story of heroism in a sense… but for a lot of Black people we’re trapped in our own kind of wilderness and we’re born into our own survival stories. And so, the professor gave me a scowl.

The participants’ voices captured how heterogenous Black male students are. Although Eli and Jay are aware of racism and racial microaggressions, they do not identify them or
interpret them in the same ways. Eli was almost apologetic because he could not think of a specific example during the interview. For Jay, it’s a common and easily identifiable experience to racial microaggressive incidents. This is not uncommon in racial microaggressive literature that people from the same race interpret racial incidents differently (Sue, 2010). Further, as previously mentioned, the accumulation of racial microaggressions is key to understanding their impacts (Sue, 2010). Jay may have had more race related experiences than Eli, and therefore it was easier for him to identify incidents and discuss them. By capturing their voice, both men provided an insider’s perspective on their unique experiences at the college.

**Findings in Relationship to the Literature**

Although the men identified and responded to racial microaggressions differently, research findings supported current literature regarding racial microaggressions, Black males and students of color in Higher Education in three primary ways. First, findings support other research that found that microaggressive experiences are common occurrences on college campuses (Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009; Yosso, Smith & Ceja, 2009; Sue, 2010; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Secondly, findings support research that Black males experience a racialized and gendered forms of racism (Harper, 2007; Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007 Bush & Bush, 2010; Wood, 2014; Franklin, 2016; Brooms, 2017). Thirdly, findings also support research that counterspaces provide Black male students, peoples, or places of refuge and serve as sites of resistance (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano, 2009; Torres, Arminio, & Pope, 2012).

**Racial microaggressions.** Findings supported prior research on racial microaggressions and Black males. Participants described common incidents such as being treated as less
intelligent than other students, being tasked with speaking for their race, assumed that they were athletes, feelings of isolation and invisibility on campus (Pierce, 1995; Allen, 1992; Smith, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2002; Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2009; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Wood, 2014; Brooms, 2017). All of the participants described feeling as if they were viewed as less intelligent than other students by faculty and students. This is significant because it reveals the insidious nature of implicit bias. Implicit bias occurs when a person does not think they are racist yet unconsciously holds negative views and racist views, often subconsciously (Sue, 2010). Jack’s statement, “no one every believed the Black guy,” when his answers and class contributions are not acknowledged is good example of ways that implicit bias shows up in the classroom. Implicit bias is not harmless. Negative stereotypes about Black males are a barrier to their educational and academic achievements (Harper, 2005). Further, frequent racial microaggressions impact Black male students’ levels of engagement with the college.

One of the research questions posed for this study asked in what ways can racial microaggressions impact Black male student retention, attrition and completion. Sue (2010) found that there is a correlation between race related stressors and academic performance. He argued the cumulative stress of always being on guard can lead students to distrust the institution and make them feel that they are treated unfairly (Sue, 2010). This can result in hopelessness, fatigue and disinterest in accesses campus resources for help (Sue, 2010). An analysis of the participants’ stories supported prior research on Black male engagement and factors the contributed to their disengagement (Sue, 2010; Harper, 2005, 2006; Wood, 2014).

**Black misandry.** Racial microaggressions directed towards Black men are described in the literature as Black misandry, defined as a form of anti-Black, male oppression (Smith et al., 2011). Additionally, research specific to Black male students includes ways that their
“Blackmaleness” is perceived on college campuses (Brooms, 2017). Both concepts illustrate the intersectionality of race and gender and how Black males are treated differently than other groups. Blackmaleness is useful to help us understand their masculine and racial identities as complex and layered (Brooms, 2017). During several interviews I observed a reluctance from participants to open up when I asked certain questions. For example, when I asked Jack if I could ask him questions about being incarcerated it was clear to me that the topic was off limits:

Jack: ….then I got into trouble, and did that.

YH: You say you got into trouble. Is that when you were incarcerated?

Jack: Mm-hmm

YH: Can I ask you a couple of questions about that?

Jack: Depending on what the questions are.

Jack seemed only comfortable sharing with me how long he was incarcerated and when he was released. I did not press on with that line of questioning because I observed his body language as stiff, he leaned away from me and looked elsewhere. Conversely, Jay was more open about his PTSD and social anxiety and how they impact him:

I do have PTSD. I wasn’t able to develop relationships and wasn’t able to have conversations with people about the things I was interested in. So, that in part influenced why I decided to go to college….to be of greater service.

Again, the men’s stories reveal how there is not a monolithic Black male experience or one Black male voice.

Counterspaces. Counter spaces, also referred to as social counter spaces (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano, 2009), and safe spaces (Torres, Arminio, & Pope, 2012) surface in the literature as a survival strategy employed by students of color and marginalized groups to combat
oppression on campuses. Findings in this study supported their research and the role of
counterspaces. The men described people, places or programs that served as their counterspaces.

Research has shown that positive interactions with faculty lead to positive outcomes for
Black males (Harper, 2005, 2006; Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Davis, 1994; Wood &
Ireland, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011; Wood & Palmer, 2013; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010;
Brooms, 2017; Brooms & Davis, 2017). The relationships with faculty, staff and peers were
significant for all participants, especially bonds the men held with other Black males and people
of color. As noted in Chapter Two, the strength and quality of institutional match is a critical
factor that influences student retention (Tinto, 1987). Participants described challenges at the
college but also shared stories that revealed the ways that the college was a fit for them. For
example, Warren described a friendship that developed with a gay, White male student he met in
class:

He sits next to me in my race and ethnic studies class. Yeah, just started randomly talking
to him. He was really cool. He’s also in an interracial relationship. I’ve been to his place
where we studied a few times. He’s been to my place. Now him and his partner and me
and my partner do brunch every week….I’ve definitely found my community here.

This friendship and positive relationships with faculty and staff helped Warren feel he
had people to vent to, study with, and attend campus events. Participants shared many stories of
relationships they formed with faculty, staff and students at the college. This was clearly a factor
in their retention and abilities to demonstrate resiliency when faced with academic barrier and
life challenges.
Significance of Study

This research study focused on six Black male students at Seattle Central College and the ways that racial microaggressions they experienced impacted them. This study is significant in three significant areas. First, the study is significant because it contributes to educational research through study of a student population understudied in the literature—Black males within the community college context. Secondly, the study is significant because it took place at a community college. Most studies on Black males in higher education are conducted at four-year colleges and universities. With the exception of a few scholars (e.g., Wood, 2014), studies conducted at community colleges tend to be by researchers who work in four-year colleges and universities. Third, this study is significant because Black males spoke about their experiences in their own voices.

Black males, racism and racial microaggressions. Given that Black males attend community colleges at higher rates than Black males in four-year colleges and universities, this study contributed to the dearth of research on this population. Research on Black males in the two- and four-year colleges and universities tends to focus on non-cognitive factors that impact academic success, such as test scores and grade point averages (Bush & Bush, 2010; Wood, 2014). Further, most studies on Black males omit calling out and calling in issues of race and racism as factors that impact Black males’ academic achievement (Howard, 2008; Harper, 2012). Failure to include racism as a contributing factor to achievement gaps and equity gaps among student groups perpetuates deficit thinking about Black males (Howard, 2008). One can imagine how discussions about Black male students could expand if more research explicitly named racism as a factor that perpetuates inequitable educational outcomes for Black males. Findings in this study revealed that the participants were adept at finding counterspaces through
relationships, student activities and programs. However, as an eighteen-year community college educator and administrator, our institutional data shows that the college loses more Black males students than we retain to completion.

**Community colleges.** As mentioned in Chapter One, there are over 1200 community and technical colleges across the United States (Cox, 2009). More studies should include community colleges as research sites and areas of focus given that they serve the majority of Black students in higher education, especially Black males. Failure to include community colleges in the post-secondary research space further marginalizes this student population by combining their experiences with Black males at four-year colleges and universities (Flowers, 2006, Bush & Bush, 2010). Given that the majority of Black males start at community colleges, it is critical for scholars to include community colleges in their discussions on Black males in Higher Education.

**Black male voices.** Black males on college campuses are subject to stereotypical and mostly negative messages about their race, gender and intellectual abilities and inabilities (Harper, 2007; Flowers, 2006; Brooms, 2017). Warren, Diablo, Jay, Jack, Eli and Tony described similar experiences of deficit-based notions about their intellect. Their stories demonstrated that identifying factors that influence Black male attrition and retention are complex because there is not a universal Black male experience, but rather many experiences. Further, race-related experiences were different for the men depending upon their intersectionality and lived experiences. In order to better understand their range of experiences, it is critical that Black male voices are centered and included prior to designing and implementing institutional measures designed to support them.
Implications for Practice

Findings revealed that academic success for Black male students at Seattle Central College occurs in pockets but is not systemic. Services designed to support this student group are missing. Fellas Fridays and the Black Student Union are vibrant student spaces, but they are inadequate for meeting the needs of a sizable student group at the college. The college should continue to invest in initiatives that intentionally target Black males and include information about BSU and Fella’s Fridays into new student orientations, as well as outreach to area high schools and community-based organizations that provide services to Black males. For example, Fellas Fridays invites academic advisors to present to the group of men about selecting courses, important registration and enrollment dates and transfer events. This has resulted in those students seeking out the advising and transfer center outside of group meetings. Continued support for counterspaces is important but cannot be the only actions the college takes to engage Black men. Interventions should target institutional practices that maintain and produce oppressive spaces as opposed to interventions that focus on helping students "cope” within those environments.

Seattle Central College is part of Seattle Colleges comprised of three community colleges and multiple locations spread across the Puget Sound region. Seattle Colleges are well positioned to expand initiatives designed for Black males. Currently, Seattle Central is engaged in the development of direct articulation agreements with HBCUs. This partnership is one example of an institutional approach to address barriers to college completion for Black students and towards establishing intentional educational pathways for Black students. The college should move forward with its plan to identify Black males as a priority in college and districtwide initiatives such as Seattle Promise and Guided Pathways. If we, as a college community, are
serious about addressing and dismantling institutional racism, we have to share the quantitative and qualitative narrative about Black males’ successes and challenges in and out of the classroom. Given that the men named key faculty and staff that were critical to their academic and social integration, it is clear we have the institutional agents to lead us and to learn from. They have demonstrated their ability to connect with Black men and to problematize the negative stereotypes and damaging dominant narratives applied to them.

Given that Black males attend community colleges at higher percentages than four-year colleges and universities, community colleges have an opportunity to positivity impact their lives. We have to be sticky and make it difficult for them to leave. This study revealed many sticky points for the men; however, they are not integrated across academic units and programs. They mostly occurred in a few Student Services departments and relationships the men formed with a few faculty. This model is not systemic. Over reliance on faculty of color/Black faculty leads to burnout and leaves White faculty off the hook. Previous studies found that the same faculty of color are expected or called about to serve students of color and Black students beyond their role as faculty. This can lead to burnout for faculty of color and impact their academic careers since this type of “work” is usually not captured in tenure or post-tenure review as valuable to the institution.

Future Studies

The failure of higher education to study and seek to understand the unique psychological and social challenges experienced by African American males renders them invisible and continues to blame African American male students for lack of academic achievement, thus leaving the institutions unaccountable and not responsible for creating campus conditions where all students can thrive socially and academically. Absent a systemic analysis of the ways that
racism can manifest via microaggressions, community colleges and four-year colleges and universities are “off the hook” and are not responsible for intentionally creating campus conditions where African American male students can thrive socially and academically. Failure to explicitly name systemic and institutional forms of racism as possible factors that contribute to disparities in African American male achievement perpetuates the notion that discrimination and prejudice are the result of individual actions, not institutional policies or practices (Harper, 2012). It is not enough for practitioners, faculty, staff and administrators and students to develop an awareness of racial microaggressions and racial bias. As Perez Huber and Solórzano (2014) noted, “racism is a symptom of White supremacy. Therefore, deconstruction of racism must include a detachment from White supremacist ideologies” (p. 19).

Wood (2011) noted that between 1971-2009—a span of thirty-eight years—there were only eight peer-reviewed articles and four book chapters published on Black males in community colleges. It is encouraging that this area of research has grown in the last ten years, however, academia has a long way to go and should continue to research and study Black males attending community colleges. Today, leading scholars continue to call for new models, theories and more research to understand the unique experiences and needs of Black men in community colleges (Wood, 2014; Flowers, 2006).

In addition, future studies should explore how African American male and female faculty and staff perceive and experience racial microaggressions and examine the intersections between race and gender. Including African American women’s experiences of racial microaggressions can help illuminate the different ways racial microaggressions are perceived and experienced by men and women. Emerging research suggests that by identifying African American males as more oppressed than African American women and thus omitting Black women from targeted
initiatives feeds a patriarchal discourse that positions African American women as less important than African American men and obscures the real barriers of sexism and racism for African American women (Butler, 2013).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand African American/Black male students’ perceptions and experiences of racial microaggressions at Seattle Central College. Findings in this study aligned with much of the previous research on Black males in colleges and universities. However, it also indicated that there is still much to learn about their experiences, especially in the community college context. Participants in this study were unique. They were involved in campus clubs and organizations. They had bonds with people on campus that tethered them to the college. Overall, they described an overall positive experience navigating the college environment. As the researcher, I entered the interviews with my own preconceived ideas on the state of Black males at Seattle Central College. I was surprised that participants did not have more negatives incidents to illustrate their experiences on campus. This bias I held was informed in part from the literature on Black males, which often frames their existence on college campuses as dire, desperate, and dismal. It was also shaped by role at the college as Vice President for Student Services, the Behavior Intervention Team (BIT) leader, and back-up student conduct officer. In those realms I tend to interact with students during their worse possible moments at the college where I am the institutional agent charged with enforcing college policy.

Two years ago, I expelled a Black male student and trespassed him from the college for threatening and disruptive behavior. It was a difficult and heartbreaking action for me to take, given my identity as a Black woman, my background in equity and what I know about how
racism, power, privilege and oppression function to serve the status quo. For the student, I was another person with power that disrespected him and removed him from his learning environment. Sitting with Jay, Eli, Warren, Diablo, Jack and Tony during the interviews, follow-ups and listening to their voice via the recordings and transcripts left me with mixed emotions. I feel encouraged, saddened and motivated to continue to use my agency and abilities to improve the college for Black male students. The grace, respect, time and generosity they demonstrated to me was truly amazing. A good example of their humility was at the end of every interview when I went to pay them the $25, all of them refused it and told me they did not want the money. It took a lot of convincing from me to force them to accept the compensation for their time.

Although the participants were well integrated into some college programs, and demonstrated their abilities to cultivate bonds with faculty, staff and peers, these are not enough to sustain students. Seattle Central has an obligation to live up to our reputation as a progressive and forward-thinking institution and to honor our history as a place for social justice and equity.
References


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Appendix A

Interview Guide
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Part I: Background Questions (5-10 minutes)

- Can you please begin by telling me about yourself?
  - Where did you grow up?
  - What is your family make-up?
- Did your parents/caretakers/guardians attend college?
  - If yes, did they attend a university or community college?
  - If yes, did they complete a degree or earn a certificate?

Transitional Questions (20-25 minutes)

Introduction: I would like to hear about your experience starting college. I’ll start with asking about why you decided to enroll in college.

- Why did you decide to enroll in college?
- Why did you choose to attend this college?
- What barriers or challenges did you anticipate as you transitioned to college?
- Once you started college, how would you describe the climate on campus?

Part II: Campus Experience (30-45 minutes)

Introduction: I am going to shift a little and ask you questions about your experiences on campus.

- What is it like to be a Black/African American male at your school?
- What assumptions do people make about you because you’re Black/African American and male?
- Can you share a time where you feel like you were stereotyped based on your race and/or gender?
- Did you feel like you “fit in” on campus?
- Can you tell me about a time you felt as if you fit in?
  - Did it occur during class or outside of class?
  - Thinking back on this experience, what were the factors that made you feel like you fit in?
- Can you tell me about a time you felt as if you didn’t fit in?
  - Did it occur during class or outside of class?
  - If it occurred during class, was the instructor present? If so, what did they do in the situation?
- When you experienced challenges, where do you go for help or support?
  - How did they help you?
- What campus resources have been helpful to you?
  - Are you or have you been involved in student clubs or campus related
organizations?

Those are my questions for today. Is there anything that you want to share that we did not get a chance to discuss?

Thank you for participating in this study.
Appendix B
Participant Questionnaire
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Personal Information

Today’s date:

Full name:

Pseudonym:

Date of birth:

Where did you grow up?

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

How do you racially identify? Please select from the following list. If none apply, please write in
your preferred racial identification in the space provided.

___Black/African American

___ Bi-racial (identify your races): ____________________________

___ Other: ____________________________

Academic Background

What type of degree (AA, AS or AAS, or B.A.) are you pursuing? ______________________

How many quarters have you attended this college? ______________________

Why did you decide to attend this college?

____________________________________________________________________________
How many credits have you earned? ______ Grade Point Average__________

Are you currently employed? ____________ If so, how many hours do you work per week?