

Black Doctoral Women “Walkin’ on Eggshells”: Gendered Racial Microaggressions in Agricultural and Life Science Departments

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Abstract

This study examines Black doctoral women’s experiences with gendered racial microaggressions in agricultural science departments at Historically White Institutions. Gendered racial microaggressions are subtle everyday expressions of oppression due to one’s race and gender, and have been used to subordinate Black women in society. Further, they have been linked to increased psychological distress, increased depressive symptoms, and lowered self-esteem. This study uses Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism as theoretical lenses and critical narrative inquiry as methodology. Findings show that Black women experienced assumptions in communication style and beauty, the Angry Black Woman stereotype, and silencing and marginalization to avoid gendered racial microaggressions. Participants’ coping strategies, study implications, and directions for future research are discussed.

Introduction

Black women have experienced decades of socio-historical challenges that have impeded their success in graduate programs, such as isolation and exclusion from white peers. Black women are often presumed incompetent, routinely underestimated, and must be considered extraordinarily qualified to receive the same treatment and/or opportunities as their white peers (Essed, 1994; Gartner, 2021; Grant & Cleaver Simmons, 2008). Further, Black women The overrepresentation of whiteness, along with the underrepresentation of Blackness, reinforces the norm that Black women do not belong (Anderson, 2015). As a result, Black women have reported the lack of Black women graduate students and Black women faculty as a deterrent from enrolling in a graduate program, continuing in a graduate program, or pursuing a career in academia (Croom & Patton, 2011).

There is a need to address the dearth of exploration of experiences of Black women in Agricultural and Life Science (AgLS) doctoral programs. Given our troubled history with agriculture, it is important to encourage policies and practice that contribute to Black women’s sense of belonging, persistence to graduation, and inclusion in our discipline. By openly discussing and addressing how white supremacy has influenced and continues to shape agricultural curriculum, policy, and practice, we can move towards solutions that contribute to Black women’s success in agricultural doctoral programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine Black doctoral women’s experiences of gendered racial microaggressions in agricultural sciences at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Through the lens of critical race theory and critical race feminism, this study will further research on Black women in doctoral studies, AgLS, and gendered racial microaggressions.

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Literature Review

Microaggressions & Gendered Racism

Microaggressions are the brief, commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental messages, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate “hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults” to a specific person or group (Sue, 2010, p. 5). The term “racial microaggression” was defined by Black psychiatrist Chester Pierce and colleagues (1977) as subtle and stunning racial slights aimed at Black Americans. That definition was later expanded by Sue et al. (2007) as the “commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). Similarly, gendered microaggressions have been defined as the commonplace daily verbal and behavioral interactions that communicate sexist messages towards women (Nadal, 2010).

Originally coined by Essed (1991), gendered racism describes the everyday, concurrent experience of both racism and sexism experienced by Black women based on racist perceptions and perceptions of gender roles. Essed asserted that Black women’s experiences of gendered and classed forms of racism are based on stereotypes of Black women. Adapted from Sue and colleagues’ definition of racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), gendered microaggressions (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008), and gendered racism (Essed, 1991), Capodilupo et al. (2010) and Lewis et al. (2010) extended scholarship on microaggressions to address the intersection of racial and gendered microaggressions.

Gendered Racial Microaggressions

Archetypes and Stereotypes

Gendered racial microaggressions are often expressions of stereotypes that stem from archetypes developed over time. An archetype is a set of images, behaviors, and characteristics ascribed to a specific group of people and persists in a collective unconscious embedded in culture (Judith, 2004; Kidd, 2016; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Many archetypes are grounded in the dehumanization of Black women (Anderson et al., 2018). The Jezebel archetype depicts Black women as overly sexual, promiscuous, and animal like (Leath et al., 2021). The Mammy archetype depicts Black women as compliant, nurturing, and self-sacrificing and is a direct contrast from the Sapphire (Donovan & West, 2015). The Sapphire archetype depicts Black women as loud, aggressive, animalistic, and domineering (Donovan & West, 2015). Comparisons to animals denies Black women human attributes and for oppressors, justifies harsh treatment (Dubuisson & Schuller, 2022; Judd, 2019). Over time, expression of the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire archetypes have shifted and often manifest as assumptions of communication style and beauty, the Angry Black Woman, and the Strong Black Woman stereotypes.

Stereotypes are socially constructed preconceptions that reduce a group of people to a singular profile based on a combination of historical events, negative media representations, and interpersonal interactions (Blumenfield & Raymond, 2000; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Sue & Sue, 2008). Though there are sexist stereotypes about all women, Thomas et al. (2004) argue that “due to the legacy of slavery, particularly the requirements for heavy labor and sexual victimization, societal images of African American women differ from White women” (p. 428).

Gendered Racial Microaggressions’ Manifestation of Stereotypes

Lewis et al. (2013) defined gendered racial microaggressions as the “subtle and everyday nonverbal, verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression due to one’s race and gender” (p. 51). Gendered racial microaggressions have been used to other and subordinate Black women in society and subsequently, higher education. They often manifest in four major themes: 1) assumptions of communication styles and beauty, 2) Strong Black Woman stereotype, 3) Angry Black Woman stereotype, and 4) silenced and marginalized (Lewis & Neville, 2015).

Gendered racial microaggressions can be seen in assumptions and expectations in the ways Black women culturally express themselves verbally and physically, and has contributed to the discrimination of Black women due to their communication styles, physical appearance, and body type (Lewis et al., 2017). Rooted in the archetype of the Jezebel is the assumption Black women are sexually “loose” and have a specific body type, resulting in receiving negative comments regarding the size of their breasts, hips and other body parts, causing Black women to feel exoticized and objectified (Collins, 1991; Lewis et al., 2013; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2008). These messages critique and suppress Black women’s self-expression and conveys to Black women that to be accepted they must adhere to white, middle-class standards of beauty and communication.

The matriarch or Mammy archetype (Collins, 1991) has shifted in recent years to the Strong Black Woman stereotype – the independent Black woman that can take care of herself (Harris-Perry, 2011). This stereotype communicates to Black women they are often “too independent” and “too assertive.” Being “strong” is a stereotype unique to Black women and is often used in contrast to white women. As a result, Black women are described as “less feminine and ladylike” in comparison to white women (Collins, 1991). The Jezebel and Mammy archetypes originated during slavery to justify Black women’s mistreatment as domestic servants and sexual objects (Collins, 1991; Donovan, 2011).

Stemming from the Sapphire archetype (Collins, 1991), the Angry Black Woman is a stereotype that Black women are always angry, confrontational, loud, and difficult to work with (Domingue, 2015; Lewis et al., 2017). This stereotype is perpetuated when Black women attempt to address situations where they feel they have been stereotyped or discriminated against. In an attempt to avoid the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman, many Black women choose not to address microaggressive remarks, continuing the vicious cycle of invisibility and silencing (Domingue, 2015; Jones, 2023; Lewis & Neville, 2015). Many Black women have reported feeling silenced and marginalized in higher education settings, stating they feel unheard in classes and meetings, and struggle to gain respect from peers and advisors (Domingue, 2015; Lewis & Neville, 2015).

Scholars have examined how gendered racial microaggressions shape Black women’s experiences in education and society. For example, Lewis et al.’s (2013) focus group study revealed Black women in higher education are at risk of experiencing gendered racial microaggressions in their social and collegiate relationships, the academic environment, and in the classroom. Gendered racial microaggressions have been linked to increased psychological distress, increased depressive symptoms, and lowered self-esteem (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016), and cause difficulty in forging relationships with faculty, staff, and potential mentors (Nair & Good, 2021). Similarly, Essed (1991) found that Black women’s everyday experiences with gendered racism manifest and maintained in three major ways: 1) marginalization of Black women’s experiences, 2) suppression of internal reactions to oppression, and 3) problematization and legitimization of oppression. She goes on to assert that Black women’s experiences of gendered and classed forms of racism are based on stereotypes of Black women. Her research is supported by later research from Lewis and colleagues (Lewis et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2016; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Moody & Lewis, 2019) on gendered racial microaggressions, a collection of research from Jones (2021, 2022, 2023) on Black collegiate women and microaggressions, and scholars examining gendered racial microaggressions in other contexts (Briscoe et al., 2024; Elbert, 2024; Erving et al., 2022; Gartner, 2021; Kilgore et al., 2020; Newton, 2023; Ofoegbu, 2023; Palmer, 2021).

Consequences of Gendered Racial Microaggressions

Research (Briscoe et al., 2024; Jones, 2022; Lewis et al., 2013; Lewis & Neville, 2015) suggests that Black women in higher education experience gendered racial microaggressions in their social and collegiate relationships, the academic environment, and in the classroom. Further, gendered racial microaggressions have a cumulative effect on their psychological distress (Briscoe et al., 2024; Lewis & Neville, 2015), greater depressive symptoms (Carr et al., 2014), increase in post-traumatic stress symptoms

(Woods et al., 2009), and lower self-esteem (King, 2003). These symptoms are stressors that can potentially influence the psychological stress response, which can impact health outcomes (Briscoe et al., 2024; Clark et al., 1999). The lack of research exploring the effects of gendered racial microaggressions has resulted in a lack of effective strategies and resources to help Black women navigate gendered racial microaggressions such as mentors, which could lead to avoidance and negative coping strategies (Charles, 2010). In fact, Lewis et al. (2013) found that Black women who experience gendered racial microaggressions engaged in four types of coping strategies: 1) active engagement strategies use cognitive and behavioral efforts to deal with a situation, 2) social support and interconnectedness strategies seek support from friends and family, 3) religion and spirituality strategies include prayer and/or ritual-centered strategies, and 4) disengagement and avoidance strategies include not doing anything to address the situation and denial (Everett et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2013; Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

An important area in which gendered racial microaggressions have proven to be prevalent is within higher education. Previous research on microaggressions found that racially minoritized students experience microaggressions in the classroom, university housing, and the general campus environment (Harwood et al., 2012; Mills, 2020; Morales, 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000). Microaggressions contribute to feelings of isolation, inferiority, imposter syndrome, poor classroom performance, and mental health issues. In addition to the inherent stresses of doctoral education, microaggressions in doctoral education are detrimental to minoritized students' success.

Anti-Black Racism from Non-Black People of Color

Microaggressions, racism, and discrimination exists outside of the Black/white binary. Scholars have discussed how non-Black people of color display internalized racism in an attempt to socially locate closer to whiteness. Internalized racism can be described as the process by which people of color absorb racially prejudiced messages and it shapes how they think of themselves and other racially marginalized groups (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014; Pyke & Dang, 2003). When the oppressed accept and internalize mainstream racist values (or sincere fictions), they often unconsciously justify the oppression of their group, believe in their own inferiority, and maintain ideologies that undergird the dominant group's power (Baker, 1983; Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014). In assimilating to and maintaining white western culture, non-Black people of color may distance themselves from their own culture or from Blackness to seek acceptance by white people (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Pirtle et al., 2024). However, no matter how close a person of color becomes to whiteness, they are not free from racial oppression (Lueck, 2017; Tuan, 1998).

Post-Secondary Agricultural and Life Science Education

Due to the direct link between STEM disciplines and agricultural life science (AgLS) disciplines (e.g., food science) (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2015), the lack of minoritized students in AgLS disciplines is similar to the lack of minoritized students in STEM disciplines (Esters & Knobloch, 2012). Despite a more diverse postsecondary agricultural student population (Talbert & Edwin, 2007; Tindell et al., 2016), the norms, culture, and values of AgLS are rooted in those of rural white males, and continue to be dominated by their traditional, conservative views (Hains et al., 2017). These cultural structures influence the professional culture of agriculture, which could result in professional dissonance and serve as a barrier to recruiting and retaining Black women graduate students in AgLS. For example, Black students in AgLS have reported difficulty in connecting with faculty, peers, and programs, and have experienced isolation and exclusion (Cropps, 2023; Jordan, 2011; Martin et al., 2019).

The "white space" of many AgLS departments creates and perpetuates a vicious cycle of whiteness: Black students view their lack of representation as a deterrent to enrolling or staying enrolled in an AgLS discipline. Simply, Black students do not and cannot see themselves as a part of the college of agriculture; as a result, many do not continue in their AgLS program. Many of these students do not go on to pursue graduate AgLS programs, contributing to the lack of Black faculty representation. For Black women who do pursue doctoral programs in AgLS, we find ourselves desperately in search of community and other

Black people or people with similar backgrounds who we can lean on for support outside of the classroom and/or department (Cropps, 2023).

The busted pipeline of Black doctoral women from doctoral programs into the AgLS professoriate contributes to the lack of Black faculty representation. A department of majority white faculty does not serve well in developing or showcasing a culture of inclusivity. Further, many white faculty are ill-equipped to work well with diverse populations (Elbert, 2024; Talbert & Edwin, 2007). Swortzel (1998) found that a faculty dominated by white males significantly decreases the likelihood of future Black faculty representation due to accounting for less than 10% of doctoral students.

Black Americans have a complicated history with agriculture. Our troubled history, coupled with the white male-centered culture of AgLS, serves as a barrier to Black students' engagement in AgLS disciplines. Many Black Americans' beginnings in the U.S. were rooted in the enslavement of Black people and continued in sharecropping (Moon, 2007). Though less than 1% of AgLS involves farming, the perception of agriculture remains as such (Environmental Protection Agency, 2015). Consequently, the perception of agriculture is that of unwelcome, oppression, low wages (Beck & Swanson, 2003), and farm and production related occupations (Brown, 1993).

Purpose of the Study

This study is from a larger narrative study which examined how intersecting oppressed identities shape the experiences of Black women doctoral candidates in Agricultural and Life Science disciplines at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) and how those experiences shape their journey into or away from the academy. In this current study, I focused specifically on the participants' experiences with gendered racial microaggressions. The purpose of this study was to examine Black doctoral women's experiences of gendered racial microaggressions in agricultural sciences at an HWI. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What were Black doctoral women's experiences of gendered racial microaggressions in agricultural sciences at an HWI?
2. What coping strategies did they use to deal with gendered racial microaggressions?

Theoretical Frameworks

I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Feminism (CRF) to inform this study. CRT is an explanatory framework and tool used to acknowledge and examine the impacts of race and racism (Perez-Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Ladson-Billings (2000) described it as a way to acknowledge that race is socially constructed, embedded within all of society, and as central to everyday life. The tenets of CRT used in this study are: 1) racism is permanent in society, 2) experiential knowledge and storytelling, 3) interdisciplinary analysis, 4) critique of liberalism, and 5) commitment to social justice (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Yosso et al., 2009). First, racism is permanent to and embedded in all institutions of society. It is so ingrained within society that it is often unrecognizable to many (Ladson-Billings, 2013). The invisibility of everyday racism can lead people to believe that a) it no longer exists or occurs only in isolated events (Bell, 1992) or b) it is to be expected (Jones, 2021). Second, the centrality of experiential knowledge and storytelling recognizes the voices of people of color (in this study, Black women) as valuable, legitimate, and crucial in understanding race and racism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Third, an interdisciplinary lens of analysis is needed to examine Black women's experiences. I consider the sociological, psychological, and political factors that play a role on Black women's experiences (Jones, 2021). Agricultural frameworks that have only been used with majority white student populations are inappropriate for this study and others like it. Fourth, the critique of liberalism (myth of meritocracy) challenges the ideas of individualism, objectivity, meritocracy, incremental change, and color evasiveness

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Byars Winston (2014) suggests that the myth of meritocracy is prevalent in STEM disciplines. However, there is evidence demonstrating that educational opportunities in STEM are “socially constructed and unevenly distributed” (Byars Winston, 2014, p. 345). Last is CRT’s commitment to social justice. It is my goal that this research is used to enact positive change in agricultural and STEM departments that contributes to the academic success and well-being of Black women.

CRF was also used to inform this study. Stemming from CRT, CRF is a framework and movement that helps elucidate the impacts of gender, race, class, and sexuality on the experiences of Black women (Floyd, 2010). Wing (2003) explained the concept of “multiplicative identity,” which suggest that when multiplied together, the multiple marginalized identities of women of color become a holistic one. To explain these experiences, Crenshaw (1989, 1991) coined the term intersectionality. Intersectionality emerged as a critique from women of color recognizing how most gendered studies examined the experiences of middle-class white women (Crenshaw, 1989). The tenets that guide intersectionality are 1) social identities are not additive, but intertwined, 2) no social identity is a monolith, 3) individuals can simultaneously possess oppressed and privileged identities, 4) social identities are historically and contextually situated, and 5) social identities are influenced by power structures (Crenshaw, 1989).

Methods

Critical Narrative Inquiry

Critical narrative inquiry was the methodology for this study. Narrative inquiry is the study of descriptive experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which allows the researcher to determine the nature and extent of social change (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Narrative experiences are used as a way to understand one’s and others’ actions, connecting the consequences of actions and events over time (Chase, 2011). The goal of narrative inquiry is to make sense of the participants’ personal experiences in relation to the researcher’s research question(s) which are derived from the researcher’s theoretical framework. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) state that narrative inquiry is a way to understand and inquire about experience through a collaboration between the researcher and their participants over time, in a place (or places), and in interaction with their environment. Narrative inquiry in identity research “makes audible the voices and stories marginalized or silenced in more conventional modes of inquiry” (Bowman, 2006, p.14).

Critical research methodologies encompass the ideas of unmasking beliefs and practices that contribute to limiting human freedom, justice, and democracy, while simultaneously having a commitment to social change (Usher, 1996). Critical narrative inquiry questions how narratives intersect with power, and their positionality (Allen & Hardin, 2001). Ladson-Billings (1999) asserts that critical narrative research confronts the dominant theories and concepts that govern our disciplines and restrict our thinking in an effort to reveal the ongoing inequities that shape our society. Further, critical narrative inquiry resists colonial traditions of inquiry and is concerned with uncovering the subtleties, complexities, and biases that come with representing culture (Clair, 2003). Connecting narrative inquiry with a critical approach strengthens the ability of the researcher to identify and critique the social and cultural character of personal narratives (Squire, 2008; Usher, 1996).

Research Setting & Participants

All four study participants were enrolled at Very High Research Activity (also known as R1s), Historically White 1862 Land-grant Universities. Four institutions were represented. At the time of data collection, there were no more than 40 Black women doctoral students in each institution’s college of agriculture. At all the institutions, white students comprised the largest category of students, and international students comprised the second largest category of students. I did not give specific institutional information as to not reveal who my participants were and what institution they attended. As a note, Historically White Institution is used in my study instead of Predominantly White Institution (PWI) to acknowledge that the percentage of white people on campus has less to do with actual numbers and more

to do with the “historical and contemporary racial infrastructure that is in place, the current campus racial culture and ecology, and how these modern-day institutions still benefit Whites at the expense of Black communities and other communities of Color” (Smith et al., 2006, p. 322).

Participants were full-time, domestic students; reached candidacy status; and self-identified as a Black woman. I used purposeful and snowball sampling to identify participants (Gilchrist & Williams, 1999; Patton, 2015). Following IRB approval, I contacted each student to explain the purpose of the study and invited her to participate. Due to the significantly small numbers of Black doctoral women AgLS disciplines, anonymity was important. I gave each participant a pseudonym and did not disclose the discipline of the women, or any other identifying information. Additionally, though participants were of different generations of college students, they were all first-generation doctoral students. I chose doctoral candidates for this study because they would be able to speak on experiences from entry into their doctoral studies and experiences in the classroom, at conferences, and with their advisor. Because they had reached candidacy status, they also had an understanding of campus and departmental climates and norms.

Data Collection & Analysis

There were two main data points for this study: interviews and personal narratives. Each participant completed a personal narrative responding to two prompts: (1) Tell me about your decision to pursue a PhD and (2) What three to four experiences have stuck out to you thus far? Following completion of the personal narratives, I scheduled interviews with participants. I conducted three 60-90-minute semi-structured interviews with each participant on Zoom. Each interview was audio and video recorded and transcribed via a third-party transcription service. After interview transcription, I checked for accuracy and then sent the transcripts to the participant to check for accuracy.

I conducted two cycles of coding. During the first cycle, I used initial, simultaneous, and narrative coding techniques. During initial coding, I read interview transcripts line by line for familiarity with the data. Simultaneous coding allowed me to assign multiple codes to content that may have more than one meaning (Saldaña, 2013). Narrative coding allowed me to explore intra- and interpersonal participant experiences and actions to better understand their lived experiences. During the second cycle of coding, I used focused coding to organize the data around the most salient categories (Saldaña, 2013), then used those categories and codes to develop themes for a written narrative about the participants. The written narratives were reviewed and compared to other narratives (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) to create a co-narration of meanings, themes, and descriptions with the participants. To meet the criteria for trustworthiness, I used member checking to check for accuracy, engaged in prolonged engagement with my participants, established an audit trail, and obtained rich descriptions from participants to allow for second decision span generalizing (Patton, 2015; Creswell, 2007; Kennedy, 1979).

Positionality

As a Black woman scholar, I bring with me and acknowledge the privilege of my past experiences of growing up in a diverse city; having many Black women teachers/instructors in K-20 education, undergraduate, and graduate education; attending a Historically Black College/University (HBCU); and having a good relationship with my doctoral advisor at my HWI. I also acknowledge the privilege I have experienced in having mentors to help me through the doctoral process and working in a student-driven, majority-minoritized research group. However, I also recognize the challenges I have experienced, like my participants, that were rooted in white supremacy. Understanding our shared but different experiences forced me to make careful decisions regarding the research process including building rapport with participants, how I analyzed and interpreted the data, and *how* and *when* I presented this research to the public. Consequently, I continue to interrogate my own research decisions regarding theory, methods, and analysis to make sure I am not (re)producing oppression in my research.

Findings

I organized this section by first presenting a cross-case theme analysis of the participants' narratives. I organized each theme according to the stereotype experienced. Then, in keeping with critical race methods, I further centered my participants' voices by creating a composite counterstory called *If* in the form of poetry.

As a note, Errica and Ebony experience gendered racial microaggressions at a much higher rate than their peers in this study. Therefore, there will be more data representation from them in the cross-case analysis.

Cross-Case Analysis

Following data analysis, I identified three ways gendered racial microaggressions manifest for my participants: Assumptions of Communication Style and Beauty, Expectation of the Angry Black Woman, and Silenced and Marginalized. These stereotypes were projected upon my participants, gendered racial microaggressions occurred, and subsequently, my participants were silenced and marginalized.

Manifestation 1: Assumptions of Communication Style and Beauty

Assumption of Communication Style. Assumptions about Black women's communication styles can often cause feelings of isolation and inferiority. Perpetuated by the media, assumptions about communication style include speaking loudly, neck and eye rolling, and hand waving (Lewis et al., 2016). Errica described an instance in which she experienced an assumption of communication style:

Someone was repeating what I said one day and was mimicking me and what I said in a neck rolling kind of way. A white person [student]. I was like, 'First of all, I know I didn't do all that and even if I did that's not for you to imitate. That's not appropriate.' Being a Black woman, people see you as sassy, or mad, angry, or whatever. All the things.

Similarly, Ebony described an instance in which she also experienced an assumption of a certain communication style:

There was this one particular person [white woman]. They are gone now and it's [department climate] is much better. We were just talking, getting to know each other. And this student starts talking junk about Black people, telling me that Black folks don't speak English. I told her we have dialects, but we definitely speak English.

Errica and Ebony's experiences are problematic for a couple reasons. First, their experiences communicate to Black women that their style of communication is inappropriate and needs to change to make white people feel more comfortable or to be considered educated. Second, though both Errica and Ebony spoke up, many Black women are not in a position where they feel they can express their concerns without repercussions. It is one thing to express to another student that they have offended you, but the situation escalates when tasked with the decision to inform a supervisor or instructor of their offense.

Assumption of Beauty. Assumptions of beauty and aesthetics include comments made about Black women's hair styles, body size, and facial features. At one of the agricultural conferences, Ebony was microaggressed by a white woman: "This [white] lady walks up to me – I had faux locs in at the time – she walks up to me, picks up my hair, and goes, 'Oh my god; it's so clean!'" Errica, in discussing her relationships with departmental faculty, described how though she did not have any negative experiences with white women in the department, a non-Black faculty of color commonly and inappropriately discussed

and commented on Black women's hair. Whether consciously, subconsciously, or a combination thereof, the non-Black faculty of color frequently adopted the racist dominant culture as the beauty standard:

...she identifies with white agricultural culture. She has many times made just comments about to Black girls' hair...it was raining one day, and this faculty member said, "You don't even have to worry about not having an umbrella, you got your wig on." Just stuff like that. It just happened way too frequently. It's always with Black girls though, it's always with Black girls and it's about hair.

Acceptance and assimilation of white beauty standards gives those who feel they have honorary whiteness the false entitlement to comment on Black women's bodies, hair, and beauty choices. These occurrences may seem small at first glance but serve as an example of everyday life and ongoing oppressive experiences for these Black women. Further, non-Black people of color may distance themselves from marginalized identities by disparaging Black women's hair, bodies, and beauty choices. Errica's experience calls for further discussion on how anti-Blackness, internalized racism, and white supremacy extends beyond the Black/white binary.

Manifestation 2: Expectation of the Angry Black Woman

The expectation of the Angry Black Woman worked to silence and marginalize Errica and Ebony. Black women find themselves "shifting," or changing their posture, voice, or attitudes in order to avoid the Angry Black Woman stereotype. Black women are often accused of being aggressive, angry, and complaining when expressing dissent. Conversely, if a white person were to express dissent, they may be seen as standing up for themselves (Davis & Brown, 2017). Davis (2018) explained, "Even though code-switching and role flexing are vital in the workplace, both strategies can signify that the perceived essence of Black womanhood is antithetical to 'professionalism.'" (p. 308). Being portrayed as the Angry Black Woman is something that all participants were very conscious of. Ebony described a situation where her advisor left the university abruptly and told her he was leaving over the phone. She felt that because of her speaking out against injustices in the past, he presumed she would be angry and was afraid to confront her in person. Karla described a situation in which she received poor marks on her assistantship evaluation:

So when they did my evaluation, they pretty much gave me like 1's and 0's in some places and they told me they felt like I was always on edge and all this stuff and I was like, "Where is this coming from?...I've been very open with what has happened in my life and my [parent] passing and you all say things like, 'Well, we just felt like you were really being short in the email or you're on edge'. It's almost like they were trying to make me the angry Black woman. I went to my department head I said, "I can't work for them anymore."

Jayeri discussed in our interviews how she tried to "stay under the radar" and seem "non-threatening" when interacting with departmental faculty. Errica, Ebony, Karla, and Jayei all reported feeling like they were constantly walking on eggshells within their department and that they needed to minimize themselves. To that point, Ebony shared:

I definitely think I probably let some things slide because in the moment when your emotions are high, you may not know how to appropriately address it, or you may not have the capacity to address it depending on whatever that situation is... Because even though a white woman or a white man would react in anger, which would be the appropriate response for that situation, me reacting in anger could be seen as so much worse. It's almost as if as a Black woman you don't have the right to be angry.

Utilizing non-threatening assimilation techniques to fit in (e.g., smiling when they don't feel like it), being overly friendly in emails, fading into the background, and avoiding negative reactions feeds into stereotypes that uphold white supremacy and oppression. Conversely, not conforming to white patriarchal standards can cause Black women to be the victim of microaggressions, negatively impacting sense of belonging and perceived departmental climate.

Manifestation 3: Silenced and Marginalized

Errica and Ebony discussed how they would avoid addressing offenses; essentially silencing themselves, which contributes to the vicious cycle of microaggressive behavior. Essed (1991) found that some of Black women's everyday experiences of racism manifested in the suppression of internal reactions to oppression. For example, Ebony mentioned how she has to be careful of what she says to not upset white women. Similarly, Errica discussed being "very conscious" of being portrayed as the Angry Black Woman:

I have been trying to be very conscious about not being portrayed as the Angry Black Woman. That is complicated because it's like, in my mind I'm kind of like, well, so am I?...when I'm upset about something, or aggravated or annoyed or just not happy about something I had to just check myself first and make sure I'm not coming across as angry...it seems like if you don't have like a smile on your face or you are not acting all chipper and happy, then it's like people will automatically assume that you're upset about something or not doing well. That's very annoying because it's just like you have to act like it's like this performative thing that you have to do to make other people feel comfortable.

Matias (2016) argues that any attempt to suppress one's emotions is an example of how whiteness maintains power. Having to constantly exist where one cannot be themselves, cannot speak up without risk of repercussions, or have to worry about being microaggressed can negatively impact mental health. Increased psychological stress responses negatively impact mental health outcomes and have been found to be associated with experiencing microaggressions (Lewis et al., 2013). For example, Ebony shared her experience of going to the doctor's office to seek assistance for a family member. The support dog trained to seek out those who have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder walked past her family member and went to her, indicating she was the one in psychological need.

Coping Strategies

Earlier I outlined Black women's coping strategies used to combat gendered racial microaggressions, which include active engagements, social support and interconnectedness, religion and spirituality, and disengagement and avoidance (Everett et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2013; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Errica, Ebony, Jayei, and Karla expressed utilizing all of these coping techniques. However, though they attempted to engage in their departments, they experienced marginal success due to microaggressive behavior from their departments. These negative experiences caused them to disengage from the department and seek out other support systems, such as their institution's Black graduate organization and church. Specifically, Jayei described seeking social support from her family and close friends and disengaging and avoidance with faculty in the department. Ebony discussed leaning on her family, who she described as her "team." She also mentioned support from other Black graduate students recalling: "If I'm having a long day...or see me getting ready to have a breakdown, they will pull me aside like 'I know you're working. Finish that sentence [and] we're going to [take] a break because you need one right now.'" When asked how she managed to stay the course, Karla shared:

I'm still trying to ask myself the same question. God, my faith. People praying for me... And I had to keep my why in the forefront like why am I doing this, why is it important, what impact is this going to make? And I knew, not that I needed a PhD to do what I wanted to do because I would have been fine with my [master's], but I knew because not only am

I woman but I'm a Black woman, right? That I had to have those letters for somebody to listen to me in the spaces that I wanted to move in.

Counterstory

As previously mentioned, I created a composite counterstory called *If* in the form of poetry. Poetry is a storytelling tradition used by literary greats like Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou (Jones, 2023). There are three kinds of counterstories: personal autobiographical, biographical, and composite (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As a methodology, counterstorytelling aims to cast doubt on the validity of dominant premises, myths, and narratives, especially those held by the majority (Deldado & Stefancic, 2001). This counterstory was created using mostly data collected from the study with many lines directly from interview data. The counterstory was also developed by pulling from my own experiences in an AgLS doctoral program and the literature on Black women and gendered racial microaggressions.

If.

If there were more Black faculty and students
in agricultural programs at HWIs, maybe I wouldn't
have felt like I had to code switch.

*I changed what I wore, my hair, and
how I talked to shrink myself
to minimize myself
to fit in.*

I tried my best not to be
assumed sassy or
threatening or
angry.

*I found myself
shifting, but
I don't do that
anymore.*

If I did not have to deal with anti-Black racism,
I would not have to explain my hair or
be questioned about wearing wigs.

*Why are people so concerned
with Black girls' hair?*

And when I get annoyed
at their antics, I have to
mute myself. Otherwise,
they'll say I'm an
angry Black woman.

If I didn't have to deal with Karens,
I would not have to worry about
them neck-rolling when they talk to me
and mimicking the way I talk.

*As if that's not enough, then they tell me
that Black people don't speak English.*

But when I clap back,
they're suddenly afraid
of me. Now other people think
I'm angry and scary.

If I didn't have to deal with Beckys,
white women faculty would have
actually spoken to me in the hallway.

*Instead, I would speak to them
and sometimes they wouldn't
even look at me.*

And when they did interact with me,
they were phony. So often they were
dismissive of me and assumed
me incompetent. They offered
no respect.

If my advisor had treated me right,
he wouldn't have dropped me
right before my preliminary exams.

*On top of that, I found out
he was presenting my work
when I saw him at a conference.*

I felt so isolated,
like I had a scarlet letter on my chest
after everything went down.
It was so painful.
But I had to let it slide.

If I was a white man,
I wouldn't have had to
let it slide.

*It's like Black women
don't have the right
to be angry.*

I feel like at
the rawest level,
we don't even have
the right to be
human.

If I didn't have to deal with
racism, sexism,
and gendered racism,
I would have been
one of the best students
in that department.

*I wouldn't have had
to work twice as hard
as my white peers.*

I would have
received recognition
for my work,
spent more time at
department activities
and functions.

*Instead, I just needed
to finish as soon
as possible—I couldn't wait
until I got back home.*

If I hadn't already invested
so much
money,
time,
and energy
into my doc program,
I would have left.

*My family was
so excited that I
was getting my PhD.*

I couldn't
let them down.
I couldn't
make my granny
look bad.

If I didn't have to make white folks
feel comfortable,
I wouldn't have to walk around smiling
when on the inside I'm actually
sad, isolated, and tired.

*For a long time, I held in
how I really felt
in order to keep the peace,*

*but now I say
what I need to say.*

I'm done
holding things
in—if they think
I'm angry,
that's their problem,
their biases
being projected
onto me.

If I didn't have God on my side,
I would have dropped
from the program.

*But giving up
on myself
is giving up
on God.*

He didn't bring me here
to leave me—it is purpose
on my life. I am thankful
and grateful; He's brought
me out winning. God got me.

If I didn't have community,
I would have given up.

*My daddy is my cheerleader.
My mom would drive up and
help me clean my house.
My whole family is my team.*

The Black graduate students
would stay late with me
in the office. But they would
also make me take a break.

*The church ladies
been looking out.
They poured into
me.*

This is a
community
degree.

This counterstory calls attention to the ways Black women have been affected by gendered racial microaggressions. They felt isolated, dismissed, disrespected, were presumed incompetent, and had been

made out to be angry and threatening. It also shows the different strategies that Black women use to cope with gendered racial microaggressions at their HWIs. Moreover, this poem highlights the reasons *why* Black women may feel angry and unsettled in white spaces. They are not angry for no reason. Black doctoral women are trying to navigate hostile learning environments which negatively affect their psychological states (Jones, 2023).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine Black doctoral women's experiences of gendered racial microaggressions in agricultural sciences at a Historically White Institution using Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism as analytic lenses. Gendered racial microaggressions manifest for study participants in three major ways: 1) Assumptions of Communication Style and Beauty, 2) Expectation of the Angry Black Woman, and 3) Silenced and Marginalized. These findings highlight the forms of gendered racial microaggressions that Black women experience in AgLS departments.

First, the theme Assumptions of Communication Style and Beauty describes a challenge Black women doctoral students face in higher education from students and faculty. Participants reported negative messaging from white peers regarding their communication style, with one participant reporting being mimicked by a faculty member. This finding supports previous research on gendered racial microaggressions (Lewis et al., 2016), which found that Black women were being reduced to their communication style. The projection of negative stereotypes and views from the majority regarding Black culture and ways of communication as a racial microaggression has been reported in previous literature (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Lewis et al. (2016) used the example that Black people are often assumed as loud and/or speaking using Ebonics. My findings extend this research and build on previous research, highlighting the nuances of the assumption of communication style at the intersection of race and gender.

Additionally, Errica described a situation in which a faculty member in her department made a comment about her wig. She also noted that this faculty often made comments about Black women's hair. This finding on the assumption of beauty regarding hair and physical appearance is also supported by previous research (Domingue, 2015; Lewis et al., 2016; Newton, 2023). Assumptions of communication style and beauty have been reported as stressful with a negative impact on Black women's well-being (Lewis et al., 2013). Moreover, Errica mentioned feeling the need to "shift," or code switch/role flex and change her clothes, the way she talked, and the way she wore her hair. Code switching/role flexing occurs out of a need or desire to fit in with whiteness often to survive an inhospitable climate (Davis, 2018). The assumption of communication style and beauty communicates to Black women that our hair, bodies, and dialect are not acceptable or professional (Davis, 2018).

Next, all women discussed being described as or the perception of being the Angry Black Woman. Attempting to avoid the Angry Black Woman stereotype resulted in the minimization of self and the feeling of "walking on eggshells." These findings are supported by previous literature on gendered racial microaggressions and stereotypes (Collins, 1990; Lewis et al., 2017; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Newton, 2023). Utilizing non-threatening assimilation techniques in order to fit in serve to uphold white supremacy and oppression. Further, participants mentioned they would sometimes not speak up for themselves, contributing to the vicious cycle of microaggressive behavior. These findings align with research (Essed, 1991; Jones, 2021; Lewis et al., 2013; Newton, 2023; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008) on the silencing of Black women as a result of gendered racial microaggressions.

Earlier I outlined coping strategies Black women often use to combat gendered racial microaggressions. Ebony, Errica, Jayei, and Karla all expressed utilizing these techniques. However, after not getting the desired results engaging in their department, they disengaged from departmental activities. They then sought out other support systems, such as their Black graduate organization or the refuge of

church. Jayei described attempting to engage when she first joined the program, and soon chose to disengage due to her interactions with students and faculty. She found support with her close friends and family.

This study supports research on Black women in doctoral programs and departmental climate. Research (Cropps, 2023; Loyola & Grebing, 2022) has shown that microaggressions are linked to negative departmental climate. Interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators contribute to students' perceived departmental climate. Participants in this study reported poor interactions with faculty and students, which can lead to feelings of frustration and isolation. Isolation in the doctoral program has been cited as one of the biggest challenges for students (Gardner, 2009). As such, Black women may experience structural isolation as the only Black person or Black woman in the department, isolation from struggling to find community outside of the department/university, the isolation of conducting independent research, and potential isolation from being the only or one of the few conducting diversity, equity, and inclusion research (Cropps, 2023). Departmental climate contributes to students' sense of belonging within a department and relatedly, their discipline (Archibeque-Engle, 2015; Perez et al., 2019). To that point, these findings support work from Loyola and Grebing (2022), who found that women of color graduate students reported lower career commitment than other groups when asked if their graduate program had solidified their career choice. Errica and Karla decided not to pursue faculty positions post-graduation largely due to their experiences.

This study used CRT/CRF as a lens of understanding participants' experiences. CRT and CRF help to center and highlight the identity-based experiences Black women experience in graduate education and in AgLS departments. While graduate women in AgLS departments may have similar gendered experiences, their experiences at the intersection of race demonstrate that these are not raceless experiences (Ofogebu, 2023). This supports Delgado's (2003) explanation that the woman of color's experience "is unique; it is not a combination of the two worlds of Black men and white women, A plus B equals C" (p. xiv). The use of CRT/CRF and counterstorytelling presented these women's stories in a way that allows others to better understand the unique experiences of Black women through deliberate, conscious listening (Bernal, 2002; Jones, 2023). A CRT/CRF analysis at the departmental level would force consideration of race and gender and the role they may play in (re)producing inequitable policies and practices.

Recommendations

This study makes an important contribution to practice and research regarding Black doctoral women's experiences in AgLS disciplines. Recommendations for faculty, administrators, and research help promote anti-racist practices that contribute to inclusive learning environments for all.

First, faculty, staff, students, and administration should commit to learning and understanding what microaggressions are and how they affect Black women (Elbert, 2024; Jones, 2023). Many have said some version of "when you know better, you do better." Self-education and cultural trainings could help keep people from committing microaggressions, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and would give Black women the ability to recognize and name what is happening to them. Education may also help others to challenge deficit narratives, stereotypes, and negative biases about Black women's capabilities and possibilities (Powell et al., 2020). Moreover, education may help promote a culture of bystander intervention where white faculty and non-Black faculty of color can recognize microaggressions against Black women and are prepared to intervene when their peers or students commit them (Banks et al., 2022). To that point, research has shown that bystander education and training is an effective strategy to prevent a number of problematic behaviors in higher education (Haynes-Baratz et al., 2021). It is important to also note that research has found that white perpetrators of microaggressions are more likely to consider the gravity of their words and actions when the bystander who intervened was white (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010).

Second, administration and faculty should be more intentional about creating and supporting spaces where Black women feel safe physically, mentally, and emotionally (Jones, 2021; Hunter et al., 2016; Tichavakunda, 2021). Love (2019) suggests that joy “provides a type of nourishment that is needed to be dark and fully alive in white spaces” (p. 120). Black women should be supported in their visions for what sites of Black joy could look like in a department and/or college of agriculture and provided the resources to bring it to fruition.

Third, decentering whiteness within AgLS departments is needed to create inclusive, anti-racist educational spaces (Archibeque-Engel, 2015; Cropps & Esters, 2021). The overrepresentation of whiteness has been considered by some (Anderson, 2015; Sue & Capodulipo, 2008) as a microaggression itself. Research has linked the normalization of whiteness to diminished sense of belonging, poor departmental climate, and fewer socialization and mentoring experiences for Black students (Cropps, 2023; Cabrera et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2019). Moreover, faculty and administration should challenge white supremacist and essentialist narratives by (re)assessing and questioning the foundations departmental practices were built on and clearly communicate, stick to, and follow through on anti-racist values and success strategies for Black women (Powell et al., 2020).

Fourth, increasing the numbers of Black faculty and students would help Black doctoral women in AgLS to see what they can be and what is possible for them (Cropps & Esters, 2021; Elbert, 2024; Kricorian et al., 2020). Often, because of similar and shared background experiences, Black women students seek out Black women faculty to help them navigate challenges within the department and institution. The small numbers of Black women faculty in AgLS means Black women students must seek out cross-race and cross-gender mentors and advisors. When Black women faculty are available, the additional mentoring often results in increased invisible service and unpaid service load, which is not rewarded at the same level as research productivity (Croom & Patton, 2011). Similarly, non-Black students also need (and many want) to see Black women in leadership positions and to interact with students of different backgrounds (Cropps & Esters, 2021). Having Black faculty in the classroom provides representation that contributes to positive messaging and images of Black people (Harris, 2007). Many students can matriculate through an agricultural program with little to no meaningful interactions with Black students or faculty. This can result in unchecked assumptions (e.g., Black women doctoral students are incompetent) which can lead to microaggressions (Anderson, 2015; Matias, 2015).

Future research should continue to amplify Black women’s voices in colleges of agriculture by using critical social theories to examine marginalized experiences and challenge white supremacy. I also recommend examining the experiences of Black women faculty in colleges of agriculture. Aside from very recent research from Elbert (2024), there are very few studies exploring Black faculty experiences in agriculture. Future research should also consider exploring how racialized emotions (e.g., Black joy and anger) are cultivated (Bonilla-Silva, 2019) and Black placemaking approaches (Hunter et al., 2016) within agricultural disciplines. Finally, I recommend future mixed methods research, using critical quantitative methodologies, including quantitative measures (e.g., Gendered Racial Microaggression Scale (Lewis & Neville, 2015)), and qualitative methods to gain a more holistic view of the gendered racism Black women experience.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine Black doctoral women’s experiences with gendered racial microaggressions in AgLS departments at HWIs. Using CRF/CRT and counterstorytelling, I centered four Black women’s experiences and found that they were microaggressed regarding their communication styles and the way they aesthetically presented themselves, the projection of the Angry Black Woman stereotype, and were consequently silenced and marginalized. In an attempt to navigate gendered racial

microaggressions, all four participants engaged in each type of coping strategy, had marginal success, and eventually disengaged from the department to seek outside support.

In a time when efforts to promote inclusive, anti-racist practices are under attack (Palmer, 2024), these stories, implications, and recommendations are especially significant. These stories need to be told. Black women have the right to be joyful. Black women have the right to be angry. Black women have the right to be human.

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