

Black Students Existing is an Act of Defiance

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**Black Students Existing is an Act of Defiance: Racial-Microaggressions, Racial Battle
Fatigue and Surviving White Schools**

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Racial microaggressions (RMA) are subtle---racist communications, actions, and overtures towards individuals traditionally classified as non-White. Racial microaggressions represent a permissible subset of behaviors within a racist/White supremacist context. Individuals classified as White can enact non-physical violence onto “othered” people, typically without consequence or retribution. Whereas overt and explicit racist behaviors are met with certain forms of social consequence (e.g., social ostracization, reputation damage, even job loss), covert microaggressions are dismissed as unconscious and unintentional incidents by White individuals of the dominant society. These terroristic behaviors typically go unpunished and are misconstrued as “teachable moments” that can be eradicated if the transgressor is “educated” and “trained out” of their racist behavior ([Dodge, 2019](#)). None of these strategies have empirically demonstrated the ability to consistently reduce, let alone eliminate, racist microaggressions from occurring and recurring ([Pan, 2020](#)). Since the problem of racist microaggression has not been solved, the constant exposure to these assaults produces physical and mental afflictions onto the bodies of individuals, especially Black individuals, who routinely encounter these furtive attacks. This physical and psychological toll can manifest in the form of high blood pressure, poor academic performance, delayed access to prenatal care from medical professionals, and even a shortened life span ([McKenna et al., 2021](#); [Paradies, 2015](#); [Slaughter-Acey et al., 2019](#)). Scholars have described the aggregate result of this suffering as Racial Battle Fatigue (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2011).

This paper continues the discussion on the linkage between racial microaggressions and the development of Racial Battle Fatigue. Moreover, this paper centers on the collective impact of these transgressions on the academic development of Black students within K-12 and

collegiate settings and challenges acceptable strategies for addressing racial microaggressions. I posit against centering strategies that require White individuals to change their behavior and argue for allocating resources to develop *strategies of resistance* by Black students towards racist agitators. I conclude this paper by providing students, parents, and educational practitioners with Black student-centered strategies for responding against racist micro-aggressive attacks.

What Are Racial Microaggressions?

Extant literature has identified and examined the impact of racial microaggressions (RMA) on almost every aspect of human activity (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, and health) that involves Black life. Clinical psychologist Chester Pierce first codified the term racial microaggression to describe the everyday, subtle, cumulative, mini assaults experienced by Black individuals (Pierce, 1974). These assaults can be verbal or non-verbal and can be represented in the forms of hyper-surveillance, racial stigmatization, racial signifying, subtle insults, personal threats of police involvement, or non-physical attacks (Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, Curry, & Allen, 2016). Since these behaviors are not exhaustive, [Sue et al. \(2007\)](#) developed a taxonomy to categorize the breadth of racial-microaggressive behaviors. According to [Sue et al. \(2007\)](#), racial microaggressions are expressed within the following three central domains:

- Micro-assaults (explicit racist derogation {e.g., racist name-calling, symbols, innuendo, or gestures} intended to injure an individual consciously).
- Micro-insults (refined racist comments/actions that belittle a person's racial identity and masked as backhanded compliments (e.g., you speak so well).

- Microinvalidation (dismissal of the racial/racist experiences of non-White individuals {I don't see color, systemic racism does not exist, Black people just have to try hard to succeed, he should have just complied with the police}).

Racial Microaggressions & Black Educational Experiences

The events below present real-life examples of what literature has described as racist microaggressions ([Williams, 2020](#)). These extreme, yet habitual occurrences of racism-White supremacy by White teachers and White students, towards Black students and Black parents, are not isolated incidents

<p>A 16-year-old Black boy is barred from his high school graduation by White school administrators because he refused to cut off his locs (Griffith, 2020).</p>	<p>A 16-year-old Black girl is charged with a felony and expelled from her high school after a failed science experiment, where she mixed aluminum foil with toilet bowl cleaner in a bottle, resulted in a small explosion in the classroom (Munzenrieder, 2013).</p>	<p>A Black boy is forced by his White classmates to drink urine (Burke, 2021).</p>
<p>Four 12-year-old Black girls were accused of acting “giddy” and were subsequently stripped searched for drugs by White administrators. No drugs were found (Griffith, 2019).</p>	<p>A White teacher took a picture of her stepping on the neck (similar to Derek Chauvin’s murder of George Floyd) of a 10-year-old Black boy because he was “misbehaving.” The White teacher claimed it was a joke (Germain, 2021).</p>	<p>A White female teacher called the police on a 4’11”, 10-year-old Black boy for allegedly threatening to ‘beat her up’.</p>
<p>A White female kindergarten teacher made a 5-year-old Black boy use his hands to unclog a toilet that was filled with toilet paper and feces (Cushman, 2021).</p>	<p>A White, female, science teacher was recorded on a Zoom teleconference making disparaging and racist comments about one of her Black students and their family members (Haskell, 2021).</p>	<p>A White, male, teacher in an advanced-placement (AP) government class was recorded making racist and ahistorical comments regarding slavery and racist epithets (Chheda, 2019).</p>
<p>Another White male teacher was placed on leave after being photographed wearing Blackface makeup to school while imitating rapper/actor/activist Common in the classroom (Griffith, 2019).</p>	<p>Two White male students were photographed displaying racist ‘promposals’ that read, <i>“If I Was Black, I’d Be Picking Cotton, But I’m White So I’m Picking You. Prom?”</i> (Pineda, 2021).</p>	<p>A White woman teacher is placed on administrative leave after she is recorded calling a Black male parent a <i>nigger</i> after a minor car accident occurred in the school’s parking lot (Kent, 2019).</p>

What the Literature Reveals. Emerging research has begun to investigate how racial microaggressions occur and affect Black students in K-12 settings. Previous educational research has primarily examined the impact of racial microaggressions on the academic experiences and outcomes of Black students in the post-secondary, collegiate setting ([Burt et al., 2019](#); [Jones, 2020](#); Smith, Franklin, & Hung, 2020). There exists a need for additional research that builds upon the current literature at the primary and secondary level that examines Black students' encounters with racial microaggressions. Moreover, regardless of the setting (K-12 or collegiate), the one consistent finding that scholars have revealed is that racial microaggressions create stressful and unsafe educational environments for Black students ([Ogunyemi et al., 2020](#)).

Constant exposure to racial microaggressions affects the physical and mental health of Black students, which directly impacts their academic experiences and outcomes. Racist microaggressions inform teachers' (mis) perceptions regarding Black student behavior and academic achievement. Classroom-based microaggressions specifically impair the academic development of Black students by (a) creating assumptions of racialized aggressive behavior, (b) developing unhealthy Black identities, (c) influencing the onset of students' depressive symptoms, and (d) lowering grade point averages (GPAs) ([Keels et al. \(2017\)](#)). Some of the more researched classroom-based microaggressions include (1) teacher (mis) perceptions of Black student behavior ([Glass; 2014](#)), (2) racist dispositions regarding Black student academic capabilities ([Annamma, 2014](#)), (3) stereotypical expectations of Black student aggression ([Taylor et al., 2019](#)), (4) hyper surveillance of Black student movements ([Annamma, 2017](#)), and (5) denial of racialized systemic disparities ([Simon, 2020](#)).

When examining the intersections of racial microaggressions with race and gender among K-12 settings, research indicates that Black boys are labeled by White teachers and

administrators as more deviant, intentionally sinister, and criminal when compared to their non-Black male peers (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Black boys' acumen for demonstrating academic proficiency is viewed through a deficit lens by their White teachers. Black boys are viewed as less capable of managing the academic rigorousness of Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or honors coursework. Black boys are also hyper-surveilled for talking out during instructional time, hair/dress code violations, and being tardy for class by White teachers and administrators.

The caricature of Black male deviance and criminality based upon White teachers' racist (mis) perception of Black behavior and their microaggressive attitudes towards Black male student behavior is well established in the literature ([Bryan, 2018](#); [Hotchkins, 2016](#)). White teachers and administrators' criminalization of Black male behavior within K-12 systems is based on the racist expectation of Black male deviance and the need to preemptively cull Black male student (mis)behavior ([Curry, 2017](#); [Ladson-Billings, 2011](#)). [Wilson \(1990, p. 8\)](#) expands upon this notion. He argues that there is no Black male innocence within a White-dominant society-- only Black males have yet to be detected, apprehended, and convicted (due to their inherent criminality). Schools operate using a similar context. There are no innocent Black boys. There only exists Black boys who are waiting to be identified as criminals, then detained, suspended, expelled, or even arrested due to their so-called (mis)behavior. [Ferguson \(2000\)](#) described the racist assumption of Black male criminality in her book *Bad Boys*:

African American boys are not accorded the masculine dispensation of being 'naturally.' naughty [like other boys]. Instead, the school reads their expression and display of masculine naughtiness as signs of an inherent vicious, insubordinate nature that must be controlled as a threat to order. (p. 86)

Black girls also experience specific, gendered, and racialized microaggressions in K-12 settings, generally in the form of expectation of lower academic ability compared to their non-Black female counterparts, physical objectification based on skin complexion, hairstyle/ texture, and other aesthetics traditionally ascribed to Black girls, and morally deficient ([Awad et al., 2015](#); [Essien & Wood, 2020](#); [Thompson and McDonald, 2016](#)). Racist microaggressions stereotype Black girls into archetypal depictions of Black femininity (i.e., ratchet, confrontational, and aggressive). Black girls have reported experiencing gender-based racial microaggressions describing their behavior as loud, outspoken, indignant, and hypersexualized, violating classroom decorum. [Blake et al. \(2015\)](#) posited that Black girls experience disproportionate disciplinary rates in suspensions and expulsions because their behavior is perceived to deviate from hegemonic, White middle-class gender norms and expectations of femininity. White-middle class expectations of femininity include female invisibility (silence), diffidence, and modesty in appearance ([Joseph et al., 2016](#)). Scholars have demonstrated that Black girls possess specific behavior characteristics for survival (assertiveness, independence, and emotional resiliency) which allows them to actualize certain levels of academic success ([Blake et al., 2017](#); [Morris 2007](#)). However, these same characteristics are used against Black girls by White teachers as justification for regulating their behavior, evidenced by student referrals, suspensions, and expulsions that negatively impact their self-confidence ([Lewis et al., 2016](#)). Research on the impact of racial microaggressions and the K-12 academic experiences of Black girls is emerging. Nevertheless, there is a need for more empirical studies since scant scholarship exists regarding this area of inquiry.

Collectively, Black girls and Black boys encounter gendered and racialized-based microaggressions that manifest in similar and dissimilar ways. The racist hyper-surveilling of

Black student behavior helps justify the disproportionate suspension rates of Black students. This hyper-surveilling contributes to racist educational policies that: (a) reinforce the pushout of Black students from attending school, (b) foster academic unpreparedness for post-secondary education or future employment, and (c) help to sustain racial disparities throughout K-12 settings. Furthermore, when Black students are consistently exposed to racial microaggressions, Black students can develop physical and psychological ailments while coping with these traumatic events. Existing scholarship has identified Racial Battle Fatigue as one of these physical responses ([Smith, 2008](#)).

Racial Microaggressions & Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) is a theoretical framework developed by Dr. William A. Smith (Smith et al., 2007) that describes the cumulative socio-emotional, physiological, and psychological burden Black individuals carry, who constantly experience racist micro and *macroaggressions*. *Racial microaggressions* are large-scale, system-related, racialized stressors (e.g., racialized police murder, resident dislocation, inequitable funding of schools) that are prevalent within racist-White supremacist systems and structures, such as judicial, public health, or local education agencies ([Huber & Solorzano, 2015](#); Sue et al., 2009).

When microaggressions occur, aggrieved individuals experience a biological weathering response to racist microaggressive encounters ([Geronimus et al., 2006](#)). RBF is a form of weathering caused by constant redirection of mental/physical resources towards racist situations. Smith et al. (2011) described this physical and psychological attention as redirected energy that is used for psychological reasons, as a method to deal with race-related stress. Since the redirection of energy is used to address race-related stress (i.e., micro/macro aggressions), aggrieved individuals tend to deplete mental and physical resources that are requisite for optimal

performance in other critical areas of life activity. These activities can include work or school-related responsibilities, parental obligations, and interpersonal relationships. Concomitantly, stress hormones are negatively impacted due to the onset of RBF. When an aggrieved individual encounters racist microaggressions, stress hormones begin to function in a perpetual state of threat assessment and guardedness ([American Psychological Association, 2018](#)). RBF can also cause other physiological stress responses such as headaches, a pounding heart, high blood pressure, higher cortisol levels that cause uncontrolled weight gain, and sleep deprivation ([Franklin, 2014](#); [Richman & Jonassaint, 2016](#)).

The summative toll of enduring racist microaggressions and RBF directly bears the physical and mental health of Black people. This toll also influences the educational outcomes of Black K-12 and postsecondary students ([Hotchkins, 2016](#); [Smith et al., 2011](#)). Recent research has indicated an association between racialized chronic stress and low academic persistence, performance, and graduation rates ([Levy et al., 2016](#); [West-Olatunji, 2020](#)). Additional academic responses to the onset of RBF can include academic disidentification (the extent to which academic goals form the basis of an individual's self-esteem) and stereotype threat (fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's social group) ([Cokley et al., 2012](#); [Steele & Aronson, 1995](#)). As a result of the cumulative effects of racist microaggressions and its causation of RBF, strategies have emerged to address the social, emotional, and academic consequences on the lives of aggrieved individuals.

Accepted Strategies

Most racial remedies, however, when measured by their actual potential, will prove of more symbolic than substantive value to Blacks (Bell, 1992, p. 46).

Previous strategies that addressed racist microaggressions and RBF among K-12 and collegiate settings have centered on the disruption of Whiteness as a method to change racist, White behavior ([Anderson & Bicester, 2021](#); [DiAngelo, 2018](#); [Marx, 2004](#); [McIntosh, 1989/2010](#)). Whiteness is typically associated with the ability to access positions of power within a racist-White supremacist framework or system and wield said power and authority onto the lives of non-White people. The reliance on White actors to relinquish their access freely and deliberately to power for the betterment of non-White people is highly suspect.

Current examples of this theoretical solution include [privilege recognition conferences](#), [diversity/inclusion seminars](#), [enchantment theory courses](#), [implicit bias](#), and [anti-racist training](#). [Patton \(2018\)](#) refers to these strategies as a kind of “window dressing” that provides the illusion that White-run organizations are making an effort to address racism. Moreover, these strategies have failed to empirically demonstrate the power to reduce, change, or eliminate racist microaggressions by White men, women, and children ([Fitzgerald et al., 2019](#); [Kulik et al., 2007](#)). Reviews of similar training have determined that these solutions are ill-suited in providing actionable, evidence-based recommendations for reducing prejudice ([Paluck et al., 2021](#)). Concurring research has also demonstrated that anti-bias training doesn’t reduce bias, alter behavior, or change the work/school environment, and in certain instances, can worsen White-racist microaggressive behavior ([Chang et al., 2019](#); [Dobbin & Kavlev, 2018](#)). Scientific analyses regarding the efficacy of anti-bias training date back to the 1930s, and the cumulative results are resoundingly conclusive ([Applebaum, 2019](#)). Some scholars have suggested that anti-bias training is largely ineffective.

Counterstrategies for Black Resistance

“The ability to define is the ability to say what is real and what is not real...definition brings about reality” (Wilson, 1994).

It is crucial to delineate and highlight Black student experiences separate from other *non-White groups*. Black students are not just people of color or part of some fragmented BIPOC acronym. The experiences and outcomes of Black students in the United States are unique and unlike other non-White groups; therefore, unique counterstrategies are required for redressing any attacks against Blackness within K-12 and collegiate settings. In providing counterstrategies of resistance towards White supremacy in the form of racist microaggressions, the author argues for reconceptualizing the term “*racial microaggressions*” into a more precise context. This context utilizes what [Hines and Wilmot \(2018\)](#) described as *Anti-Black aggression* to reframe assaults towards Black students.

Within Hines and Wilmot’s framework of anti-Black aggression exist three levels: (1) anti-Black microaggression; (2) anti-Black institutionalized racism; (3) anti-Black macroaggression; and they define anti-Black aggression as “conscious and subconscious forms of anti-Blackness and anti-Black racism that are expressed through verbal, nonverbal, interpersonal, and environmental violence directed at Black individuals to degrade, dehumanize, and to create racially toxic conditions for Black persons” (pp. 65-66). This reframing is more precise than the term “racial micro-aggressions” because it accurately describes the specific academic violence visited upon Black students.

When this reframing is applied to a White teacher that decides the most effective method to teach European enslavement of kidnap Africans, is to hold a “[mock slave auction](#),” where White students can bid on purchasing their Black classmates; instead of describing this

humiliating behavior as a ‘racial microaggression’ reframing this act of violence as anti-Black aggression, provides a more accurate description regarding the racist behavior demonstrated by the White teacher. Furthermore, in building upon this example, Hines and Wilmot (2018 p.7) argue against framing anti-Black aggression within the safe confines of ‘unconscious behavior.’ Referring to racist attacks as microaggressions fails to explain the gravity of anti-Black aggression, holds the aggressor accountable for their actions, and promotes the “innocence” of Whites theory regarding their failure to recognize racist behavior.

Black Student Healing & Community Transformation

Racism-White supremacy is foundational to public education. It is imperative to remind adults that Black students are typically under social dominance once they enter any public school or collegiate setting ([Wilson, 2017](#)). Because of this, strategies of resistance towards anti-Black aggression (racist-microaggression) such as direct confrontation (Sue et al., 2009) or dispositional forgiveness ([Ogunyemi et al., 2020](#)) may be ineffective. They possibly could further injure Black students if exercised. Recent scholarship has revealed the need for Black students to develop self and communal definition tactics as an empowerment stratagem to heal from anti-Black aggression (racist-microaggressions) and attacks within school walls ([Cerezo et al., 2018](#); [Obiakor & Beachum, 2005](#); [Okello et al., 2020](#)).

Access to Black affirming counseling and therapy should be provided to heal the murdered spirits of Black students who encounter anti-Black aggression (racist-microaggressions) ([Boutte & Bryan, 2019](#); Hines & Wilmot, 2018). These models can manifest in motherhood and sisterhood networks rooted in the curriculum principles of the [Sisters of Nia](#) curriculum. Nia is the Swahili term for purpose. This program is designed to assist Black girls in developing a healthy racial identity of critical consciousness to establish a more positive self-

image, esteem, and ethnic pride (Belgrave et al., 2008; [Jones et al., 2017](#)). This development is warranted due to the debilitating effects anti-Black aggression (racist-microaggression) can have on the racial identity development of Black girls, which is needed to endure anti-Black aggression ([Bailey-Fakhoury & Mitchell, 2018](#); [Cross, 1991](#)). Black boys need to be afforded spaces for reflection and healing after encountering anti-Black aggression (racist-microaggressions). Black boys can engage in critical examinations of anti-Blackness and develop strategies of resistance when provided opportunities to process their trauma.

Future Direction: A Call for Action

In this paper, I reviewed recent literature on racial micro-aggressions, Racial Battle Fatigue, and its collective impact on the academic experiences/outcomes of K-12 and Black collegiate students. I call for action among individuals, specifically Black parents and community members, who are concerned for the well-being of Black children and students. A transition of thought regarding the accepted methods of addressing anti-Black aggression (racial-microaggressions) is required. I presented several counterstrategies for Black student empowerment to replace popular yet ineffective solutions. Continued research, support, and funding are necessary to develop and sustain these counterstrategies in the future and warrant further investigation.

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