

Negotiating Atmospheric Threats and Racial Assaults in Predominantly White Educational Institutions

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Critical Race Theory provides the framework in this theoretical analysis of how high-achieving black students in secondary and post-secondary learning environments experience and respond to stereotype threat and racial microaggressions in predominantly white institutions. Specifically, the authors highlight various behavioral responses that students can employ to overcome stereotype threat and racial microaggressions and identify a range of pedagogical practices that educators can use to reduce the negative effects of these two phenomena in school contexts. This article also presents implications for enhancing educational research, practice, and policies for the academic advancement of all black students.

Under what conditions do the tasks of learning and achieving academically become racialized for African American students? A growing body of literature spanning secondary and post-secondary learning environments in predominantly white institutions gives rise to this complex question (Carter 2005; O'Connor 1997; Sanders 1997; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Steele 1999). Such research has emphasized the academic (and social) experiences of black students in predominantly white educational institutions (PWI) as a way to understand how race operates in the classroom to affect these students' ability to productively navigate these contexts.¹ Black students who identified race as being instrumental to their education reported feelings such as racial isolation and alienation, invisibility and/or hypervisibility (Brayboy 2004; Franklin

¹ For the purposes of this article, we use the terms *African American* and *black* interchangeably to refer to individuals of African descent through slavery in the United States.

1999). These feelings often resulted from environmental conditions and individual and/or institutional actions that students perceived as racist toward them, such as lack of culturally diverse curricula, biased teacher and professor attitudes, and teachers' and peers' negative stereotypical beliefs (Nieto 2003). These actions, and/or the existence of learning environments where these actions are likely to occur, often racialize learning and achieving in negative ways for African American students, making it difficult for them to maintain high academic performance in PWIs.

This article provides a theoretical analysis of how high-achieving black students in secondary and post-secondary learning environments experience and respond to stereotype threat and racial microaggressions. Critical Race Theory (CRT) informs this analysis of how students' experiences with these phenomena highlight the perpetuation of dominant and hegemonic ideologies and practices in PWIs, which elevate whiteness and white students above non-whites in the learning process. While this analysis of stereotype threat and racial microaggressions is primarily theoretical, we draw on examples from our own research on black high achievers in PWIs to underscore the impact of these two concepts on African American students' academic performance. First, we provide a brief overview of stereotype threat and racial microaggressions. Next, we describe how these constructs manifest themselves in the classroom. We also highlight various responses that black students use to negotiate these negative experiences. We then identify pedagogical practices that educators can enact to counter the development of racially hostile learning environments and reduce the negative effects of experiencing racism. Finally, we discuss both the limitations of employing such practices and the policy implications of enhancing black students' academic advancement.

Critical Race Theory

Several scholars have used CRT as an analytical framework for examining educational inequity (Ladson-Billings 1999; Lynn 1999; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Tate 1997). Critical race theory attacks racism as normative in American society by drawing on the experiences of people of color to deconstruct and challenge dominant discourses and paradigms on race, gender, and class. CRT also examines how these social constructs interact to affect the lives of people of color. It is a theoretical perspective that highlights social justice as an outcome for which humanity should strive (see Ladson-Billings 1999; Lynn 1999; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Tate 1997). CRT is an appropriate framework for examining the experiences of black achievers in PWIs because it furthers our understanding of how race and racism interact to shape the social context in which these black students must learn and the subsequent school behaviors they employ to maintain high academic performance. It also helps us understand the pedagogy and practice educators should use to help these students attain and maintain academic success in racially challenging school contexts.

Stereotype Threat and Racial Microaggressions

Research suggests that the educational experiences of black students in predominantly white learning environments are uniquely affected by the social-psychological threat that arises when they are engaging in academic activities for which a negative stereotype about their racial group may apply (Steele 1997a, 1999). This phenomenon, which Claude Steele (1997a) called *stereotype threat*, presents a predicament for some black

students threatened by the possibility that they may be judged or treated stereotypically by their teachers and peers and facing the prospect that their academic performance may confirm the negative stereotype. Building on Steele's work, Taylor and Antony (2000) defined stereotype threat as the social and psychological sense of peril resulting from the possibility of negative racial stereotypes being unfairly applied to students solely because of their skin color. This threat of racial stereotyping produces a climate of intimidation and anxiety (Tuitt 2003a), which can hamper academic performance in situations such as testing (Steele and Aronson 1995), class presentations (Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev 2000), class discussions (Carter 2005), or where token status is evident (Kanter 1977).

Steele asserted that for an individual to be susceptible to a stereotype in a particular domain, he or she must consider the domain important for his or her self-identification. In this way, high-achieving black students are at greater risk than white students of being affected by negative racial stereotypes in learning environments, because they have a stronger identification with schooling (Steele 1997a). Our own work with high school student and graduate black achievers indicates that these students have strong academic self-concepts; thus, performing well academically in school is very important to them (see Carter 2005; Tuitt 2003a). The threat of being perceived as intellectually inferior by teachers and peers based on a negative racial stereotype is very real to them and racializes achievement in a harmful way.

While stereotype threat focuses on perceptions of negative learning environment conditions, racial microaggressions speak more to the racist behaviors and actions of white individuals towards non-white students. In relation to black students, racial microaggressions have been defined as subtle but stunning verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual assaults (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, and Wills 1978; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000) that "stem from unconscious attitudes of White superiority and constitute a verification of Black inferiority" (Davis 1989, 1576).² The "stunning" nature of these experiences illustrates the emotional and/or psychological effects of these acts on many blacks who are the recipients of such offenses. Several empirical studies have reported the costly effects of black students' experiences with racial microaggressions in relation to their academic performance (Solórzano et al. 2000). Although the literature tends to treat stereotype threat and racial microaggressions as two separate constructs, we believe that they represent two related forms of racism that collectively work to impede the academic performance of many black students in PWIs. In theory, the combination of black students' fear that they will be judged based on a negative stereotype *and* having those fears confirmed through white individuals' actions creates a racially hostile learning environment. Thus, racial microaggressions can be understood as subtle and not-so-subtle racial assaults that confirm and/or reinforce the threats that black students anticipate in PWIs. In the next section, we examine black achievers' experiences with such fears and assaults.

² This article explores how racial microaggressions affect black students; however, other research has indicated that racial microaggressions also affect members of other racial groups in learning environments (see Solórzano 1998).

Experiencing Stereotype Threat and Racial Microaggressions

Stereotype threat can take many forms in an educational environment; however, here we examine two atmospheric threats that high-achieving black students in our research identified as affecting their performance in PWIs. Students most commonly noted the fear of being perceived as intellectually inferior by white peers and instructors *and* actually confirming this negative stereotype in their academic performance. In Carter's research (2005) with black achievers at a predominantly white high school, several expressed an awareness of the myth of black intellectual inferiority and were concerned about being perceived as less intelligent in the classroom. In the following interview, a black female discusses her experiences:

Student: I don't talk much in class. I think it's because I don't wanna have the wrong answer if I answer the question. I don't wanna say the wrong answer.

Carter: Do you think any of that is related to race?

Student: In a way cuz black people are considered not as smart as, like, white people—by a lotta people.

Carter: Do you think your white peers think that also?

Student: Some of them (Carter 2005, 164)

This student expressed her uncertainty about being more vocal in class because of her awareness of a negative climate-centered racial stereotype that she perceived some of her white peers espoused regarding her intellect. Her self-doubt related to answering questions posed in the classroom stemmed from anticipating her peers' automatic assumption that she would provide an incorrect response. In Tuitt's (2003a) study at an elite Ivy League graduate school of education (ILGSE), the fear of being perceived as intellectually inferior presented itself as some black graduate students questioning whether or not they belonged at the institution. For example, one student stated, "I still have a feeling that they made a mistake. While they were printing envelopes for acceptances, my name got slipped in" (167). The unwelcoming nature of the educational environment led this student to doubt her personal merit for being there. The classroom climate reaffirmed her sense of not belonging through the presentation of course concepts. For instance, in reference to a class in which this student perceived others had a better grasp of the material than she, she stated "I must be real dumb because this class is over my head. That's one reason I rarely speak, because I feel I'm not going to know what I'm talking about" (171). In both educational settings, these students' self-doubt regarding their intelligence and earned rights to be in their institutions emanated from anticipating an environment in which the threat that they were inferior, unworthy, and unfit loomed.

Good, Aronson, and Inzlicht, (2003) argued that "being evaluated in a stereotyped domain is sufficient to trigger the trademark responses associated with stereotype threat, such as a lack of enjoyment of the educational process, increased anxiety and stress, and ultimately, underperformance" (647). These 'trademark responses' can contribute to black students' underperformance when their academic profiles suggest the potential for otherwise. For example, Steele (1997b) found that when gifted black students sat down to take a difficult exam, "the extra apprehension they feel in comparison with whites is less about their own ability than it is about having to

perform on a test and in a situation that may be primed to treat them stereotypically” (52). This suggests that talented black students who perceive their learning environment to be racialized may not perform up to their ability. This potential underperformance appears to be rooted less in black students’ self-doubt than in their social mistrust of the learning environment (Steele 1999). Based on the above examples, some black achievers read their learning environments as conveying the message—either subtly or overtly—that there are certain ways of knowing, thinking, and demonstrating academic behaviors that are acceptable (i.e., those that mirror mainstream epistemologies regarding how learning should be practiced and achievement demonstrated). As a result, these students experience feelings of situational anxiety and self-doubt regarding their academic intelligence, which potentially hamper their optimal academic performance in PWIs.

The threat of confirming the negative racial stereotype that one is intellectually inferior is enhanced in the classroom by a related situational threat in which some black students fear being positioned as the racial spokesperson. bell hooks (1994) identified this role as that of the “native informant.” This positioning of black students requires them to provide an expert opinion on topics related to their racial group that arise in the classroom. In PWIs, it is not uncommon for a high-achieving black student to be one of few people of color or the only one in the classroom. Therefore, the native informant status can often result from teachers and/or peers positioning high-achieving black students as the racial representative. For example, one high school student feared being considered the racial spokesperson in history class during discussions of U.S. slavery and European colonialism. She stated, “For most of my classes, I’m the only black person in the room, and it feels like there’s a lotta pressure or attention on me and...if there were more black people in my classes, I guess it would just take a lotta pressure off me. Like when we talk about...racial issues and, like, talk about blacks and whites, like, I’m expected to know, like, everything... I guess they [white peers] assume just cuz we’ black that we know everything about Africa, what went on in Africa” (Carter 2005, 163). In another interview, a black graduate student related similar experiences:

Student: We may be talking about an issue that is race or ethnicity conscious and for me to give a comment and then the professor kind of sees that from okay here’s the black perspective, or the black female perspective.

Tuitt: How do you feel about that?

Student: I’m not the know-all, be-all for my race. So, I know that they may be thinking that even before I answer, but I just go ahead and answer anyway. (Tuitt 2003a, 164)

In both instances, these students discussed the fear of being racially objectified by white teachers and peers. These black students feared being rendered part of the classroom discussion content, as well as having to educate others in the class simply because the material focused on members of their racial group. The anticipation of a race-related negative classroom experience in which students perceive they are being judged or treated in terms of a negative racial stereotype creates what Cross (1991) called *spotlight anxiety*. According to Kanter (1998) students who feel like tokens or are made to feel like representatives of their race are constantly in the spotlight and ultimately feel like they are living in a glass house where all eyes are on them (Carter 2005; Tuitt

2003a). Often, being one of few or the only black student in a classroom can increase the likelihood that a student will be viewed as a native informant (Saenz 1994). In both of the examples above, the students feared having unwarranted attention placed on them to clarify racial confusion that their white peers and/or instructor might be experiencing. In the moment, these students fear the burden and pressure of being held accountable to potentially explain an entire race of people's experiences that are not fully their own experience.

The fear of being perceived as intellectually inferior and positioned as the native informant is often confirmed for black achievers in various ways in predominantly white classrooms. Several of the students we interviewed reported being treated as race representatives by white instructors. At the graduate level, a black female described a situation where an instructor's sincere attempt to bring her into the learning environment backfired:

I brought up an issue/challenge and she said, 'You know you'll be the barometer for race in the classroom.' I said wow, I mean how am I going to be a barometer, and was surprised that she said that. I think she is really struggling to find some balance between the unique contributions that any student brings and dealing with her own stuff about how she's not interacting much with a person of color, someone different from herself... I mean it's either you're invisible, not taken very seriously...or you can be glorified, but in a very objectifying way. I feel like those really are the two experiences, invisible or objectified. (Tuitt 2003a, 163)

Likewise, at the high school level, a black male described an incident in which a white teacher positioned him as the racial spokesperson in the classroom:

Student: We had this discussion about race and racial issues that had been going on. Like, our teacher mentioned that—an incident that had happened in [another high school] with an African American student and kinda like racial profiling and something similar to that nature, and she just asked me, like, how I—how I felt about living in Lenox.

Carter: In front of the class?

Student: Yeah. So I mean that felt kinda weird...

Carter: And were you able to respond or...?

Student: Yeah, I was able to respond, but her question was kinda weird. (Carter 2005, 170)

For both students, the issue of high visibility (Ellison 1980) was personified. By being expected to be "the barometer for race in the classroom," one student was negatively "glorified" based on her race. This glorification was unwelcome and had the potential to objectify this student instead of affirming her physical presence and voice in the classroom. In the second example, the assumption that the student's own life experiences would be connected to the racial profiling of another black male in a different school positioned him as visible in a way that he did not initiate. The added pressure to provide an "expert" opinion on racial issues that are part of the curriculum or

arise during class discussions placed these students in very awkward positions and resulted in feelings of discomfort in the learning space. These examples illustrate the ways in which learning and achieving become negatively racialized for many black students in predominantly white classrooms.

Ellison's conception of high visibility—what we call *hypervisibility*—suggests that efforts to create exposure for students can lead to more *invisibility* if instructors are not careful. Attempts to create visibility for students can reinforce invisibility if it leaves the potential for students to interpret the interventions as racially motivated. In both instances, students are made to feel hypervisible in ways that result in their wanting to self-actualize invisibility. In this manner, hypervisibility backfires, reassuring black students that negative stereotypes they perceive as potentially affecting their learning in the classroom will actually do so: The threat of being positioned as the native informant comes alive as a direct assault on these students by their white instructors.

In addition to being made hypervisible as native informants in the classroom, black students also described being rendered invisible in the classroom based on perceived racial assumptions—another form of a racial microaggression often experienced in PWIs. For example, in a history class in which he was the only black student, a high school male described an experience in which he perceived a white male teacher as not valuing his ideas during a discussion. The student wanted the teacher to write his response about the topic being discussed on the whiteboard along with everyone else's response, but the teacher did not solicit an answer from him. The student stated to the teacher, “‘What up? How come you don't want my stuff written on the board? Write mine on the board.’ They'll [the teacher] be like, ‘Okay, fine.’ It does make a difference, you know? Even that little thing proves something to me, you know?” (Carter 2005, 184).

Consequently, this student perceived that the teacher, whether intentionally or not, deemed him unworthy of providing anything valuable to the class discussion because the student is black. When he wanted to be visible in the learning context, this student perceived that his white male teacher rendered him invisible.

At the graduate school level, a student spoke at length about how she felt invisible in the classroom. When pushed to explain what exactly made her feel invisible, she responded,

I think it's set by the professor, and I like this professor. I'm learning some stuff, but for him to just acknowledge my presence. And I'm not saying to call on me and say, ‘Okay, you black person over there, represent everyone else.’ But I do think that there's an environment that is created. The discourse is very white. And I'm not sure how I feel about that because on the one hand majority of people are white in this class, and he's white. So I don't know how much of that's a part of my internal impressions. (Tuitt 2003a, 164)

Both of these students expressed resentment at being treated as invisible in the learning environment. When instructors fail to see black students as real human beings capable of making substantive contributions to the educational process, they create the potential for these students to feel that their personal identities and abilities are undermined by prejudice and racism (Franklin 1999). According to Franklin (1999), invisibility fosters an inner conflict that causes individuals to question whether their

talents, abilities, personalities, and worth are undervalued or unrecognized because of prejudice and racism. Applying Franklin's definition to the educational context in PWIs, black students may feel invisible based on their perceptions that their instructors prejudge them based on their skin color and fail to accurately see their "real" talents, abilities, and personalities. For some students, feeling invisible can have a paralyzing effect; for others, it can cause them to employ counter measures that center them in the learning process.

Responses to Experiencing Stereotype Threat and Racial Microaggressions

In this section, we discuss four responses that students expressed for negotiating their experiences with stereotype threat and racial microaggressions in their learning environments. These responses are (1) self-censorship, (2) proving them wrong, (3) reframing what it means to be an intellectual, and (4) challenging.

Self-censorship

Steele (2001) suggested that black students in desegregated environments experience race-related situational cues that can trigger particularly anxiety-arousing moments. Specifically, Steele argued that there is an "inherent risk stemming from an internalized inferiority anxiety and from a myth of inferiority pervading integrated settings, of being judged inferior or of confirming one's own feared inferiority" (341). When experiencing stereotype threat and racial microaggressions in PWIs, black achievers respond in a variety of ways. In our research, self-censorship represented one response resulting from the fear of confirming the black intellectual inferiority myth. Students at the secondary and graduate levels expressed not talking as much as their peers in class, not raising their hands, or toning down their responses. In response to fearing and confirming the intellectual inferiority stereotype and being treated as a native informant, a black female high school student indicated, "I don't talk much in class" (Carter 2005, 164). Similarly, a black female graduate student chose to withhold her voice to avoid being seen as potentially unintelligent by her peers. She expanded upon the sentiment of the high school student in her response to the same threats and racial assaults: "Sometimes I do censure myself and I don't say what I want to say. I hold back because I don't know what their reaction will be. And then sometimes I kind of pick my words wisely, or I go down an octave. These are conscious decisions that I make" (Tuit 2003a, 172).

The self-doubt inherent in the fear of being wrong or perceived as less intelligent leads to limited verbal participation in the classroom context or shifting the tone of one's remarks so as to reduce the chances of confirming a negative stereotype. When some black students believe that their instructors and peers view and/or treat them in stereotypical ways, they may seek refuge by disengaging from the learning environment—hoping not to be seen, heard, noticed, or detected. The advanced preparation needed to anticipate these racialized classroom moments can cause black students to be constantly on alert of not only the material to be learned but also the environmental conditions under which they are expected to learn it. When faced with an atmospheric threat or the racist actions of individuals who hold negative stereotypes, some black students consciously choose to engage in self-censorship and, thus, do not perform to maximum capacity in the classroom. While self-censorship may appear to be a maladaptive behavioral response to experiencing threats and racial microaggressions in

the learning context, some black achievers employ psychological responses that can be seen as adaptive for academic success. *Proving them wrong* represents one such response.

Proving Them Wrong

Under the existence of the myth of intellectual inferiority, some black achievers develop an attitude of taking it upon themselves to disprove any such stereotypes existing in their classroom environments. Because they care about how their peers construct negative racialized perceptions of their intellectual abilities, some black students choose to dispel the myth by maintaining high academic performance. We particularly noted this *proving them wrong* response toward schooling in the predominantly white high school. A black female student there stated, “I think I have to try hard, to, like, prove myself kinda. Because...I know that, like stereotypically, a black student would not do as well as, like, a white student or an Asian student or Hispanic students or whatever, you know? And I find that, like, I’m sort of proving myself and...trying to, like, change that stereotype about black people when I do well in my classes” (Carter 2005, 196).

While the impetus to prove oneself may seem noble, it represents a psychological response to a subtle form of racism—the threat of confirming the black intellectual inferiority stereotype. For this student and others in our research, the task of achieving became racialized due to the existence of this threat in their learning environments. Carter (2005) found that several high school black achievers in her study enacted *proving them wrong* as a psychological resistance strategy for countering a negative racial intellectual stereotype threat in the classroom. Instead of floundering under the myth of black intellectual inferiority, the myth served as a motivational tool to help these students strive for academic excellence in their classes. Sanders (1997) found similar attitudes among black achievers in high school. In her research, black students viewed the negative intellectual stereotype as a positive challenge and were propelled to prove it wrong.

Reframing What It Means to Be an Intellectual

In addition to wanting to prove wrong the myth of intellectual inferiority, we found that students at the graduate level adjusted their conception of what it meant to be smart as a response to stereotype threat in their learning environment. For example, a black female at an ILGSE in Tuitt’s study (2003a) reported that her self-doubt about being at the institution emerged whenever someone criticized her work. She stated, “When people criticize me I always wonder where they’re coming from. And then I think about, oh I shouldn’t be at [ILGSE], I’m not smart enough” (167). However, instead of giving in to this insecurity, this student responded in a different manner:

When I first came in here I was a little insecure. It was not that I shouldn’t be [at ILGSE], but could I compete with all these brains that are here. And this is going to sound awful, but very quickly in my courses I found out that these people weren’t brilliant, like I would put myself down and say they are better writers than me, they’ve read more books than I had. But when it came down to concrete understanding of immigrant children, or children that are in urban areas, or rural areas, something was missing, and I was like, this is why I’m here, this is my intellect. And so I had to start to kind of reshape what an

intellectual means to me, what [ILGSE] means to me, because I was playing on a stereotype too. (168)

In this instance, the student resisted the negative stereotype by adjusting her thinking to be more positive about her own abilities.

Challenging

Another response that some black students choose to employ when experiencing overt racism in the classroom is to be *challenging*—choosing to confront the individual(s) who committed the racist act against them. For example, in the earlier case of the black male student who felt like the teacher would not acknowledge his raised hand based on his skin color, the student chose to verbally confront the teacher in front of his classmates. This student did not allow the teacher's behavior to continue. He responded to this microaggression by positioning himself as highly visible when he verbally confronted the teacher in front of other class members. For this student, this response represented an act of resistance against the microaggression (Carter 2005). He was unwilling to accept his instructor's perceived attempt to ignore his presence in the classroom.

What this and other research illuminates is that experiences with stereotype threat and racial microaggressions have varying outcomes for black achievers. Some black students turn what appears to be a negative learning experience into a motivating factor for academic success, while others may decide that, as a tactic for identity preservation, self-censorship is a better option. Still other black achievers choose to challenge their white instructors and/or peers when confronted with racist behavior and actions. Even more complicated is that students' responses do not consistently hold in every classroom situation. Where some black students espoused the *proving them wrong* psychological approach, their classroom behaviors did not always match their beliefs. For fear of confirming a negative racial stereotype, students sometimes chose not to volunteer answers in classroom discussions. Similarly, at the graduate level, even in reframing what it means to be an intellectual, it was an initial experience with self-doubt that helped a student arrive at this response. For these achievers, situational self-doubt might have hampered their progress momentarily, but in the long run they were able to persevere academically (Tuitt 2003a). At the secondary and post-secondary levels, students such as these mentally prepare themselves for the negative stereotypes they may encounter in the classroom by construing them in a positive way, while still accepting the reality of their presence. All of these examples underscore the complicated nature of experiencing stereotype threat and racial microaggressions, even for high-achieving black students. The mental preparation, however, is not enough to overcome the situational anxiety that often results in underperformance in the classroom. Even high-achieving black students are not immune to stereotype threat in the learning environment. They need the assistance of courageous instructors who are willing to do whatever it takes to counter and alleviate black students' experiences with stereotype threat and racial microaggressions in predominantly white institutions.

Removing the Threats in the Air

While a significant amount has been written about the impact of stereotype threat and racial microaggressions on black students, very little has been written about what can be

done to lift the emotional, psychological and sometimes physical tax levied upon stigmatized students (Good, Aronson, and Inzlicht 2003). Identifying pedagogical practices and learning conditions that can potentially reduce the impact of these two phenomena is vitally important if we are to create teaching and learning environments where all students have a chance to reach their maximum academic potential. Accordingly, the next section offers some strategies for educators. While the focus is on specific strategies for educators, however, there are steps that also must be taken at the institutional level to de-racialize the learning context and maximize the quality of educational experiences for black students in PWIs.

Strategies for Creating Identity-Safe Learning Environments

Attempting to eliminate all potentially threatening cues from the learning environment would be a futile exercise, but it may be possible to create environments that effectively reduce the risk of experiencing racism and stereotype threat (Davies, Spencer, and Steele 2005). Taylor and Antony (2000) suggested that students' academic performance can be improved through instructional strategies that reduce stereotype threat and assure students that they will not be cast in the shadow of negative stereotypes. Essentially, educators have the responsibility of creating identity-safe learning environments where their students' sense of the institution is not a barrier to their academic success. Identity-safe environments challenge the validity, relevance, or acceptance of negative stereotypes linked to stigmatized social identities (Davis, Spencer, and Steele 2005). These environments remove potential threats in the air, allowing stigmatized individuals to enter previously threatening situations without the risk of confirming a negative stereotype targeting their social identity (Markus, Steele and Steele 2002). What follows are some strategies that instructors can employ to create identity-safe learning environments and combat black students' experiences with stereotype threat and racial microaggressions in the classroom.

Make Explicit the Expectations for the Learning Environment

Instructors at all levels of the education spectrum should make explicit their expectations for the learning environment. When professors are transparent about their expectations, they provide black students with a clear sense of what is required and make plain the criteria upon which they will be evaluated. In situations where this transparency exists, black students are better able to focus their energy on achieving the academic requirements and at the same time are relieved of the burden of worrying about whether they are being evaluated because of their skin color.

Have High Expectations

In addition to making expectations for the learning process explicit, in identify-safe educational environments instructors should hold black students to high standards. Taylor and Antony (2000) argued that providing students with "challenging, rather than remedial expectations and academic work, which builds on promise and potential, not failure" can eliminate potential threats in the air. For example, Cohen, Steele, and Ross (1999) observed that giving challenging work and critical feedback to students demonstrates a respect for their potential and "shows that they are not regarded through an ability-demeaning stereotype" (Steele 1997b, 349). When instructors maintain high standards for

all students, they communicate to black students that their work is assessed based on effort and merit, not skin color. This response is preferable to the common practice of rewarding black students with high grades for mediocre performance, which signals to these students that average-level work is the best that can be expected from them. For this strategy to work, however, it is imperative that instructors embrace the principle that, with support and effort, all students can achieve at their highest level, and that they communicate this notion to students.

The strategy of high expectations is related to stressing intelligence as dynamic, not fixed. In theory, highlighting the expandability of intelligence lets students know that skills can be learned and extended through education and experience (Taylor and Anthony 2000). Aronson (2004) suggested that when instructors teach students to reconsider the nature of intelligence, to view their minds as muscles that get stronger and smarter with hard work, black students' negative responses to stereotype threat are diminished. Understanding that their academic performance anxiety results from a common response to negative stereotyping helps students interpret their struggles in a less pejorative and anxiety-producing way and results in higher achievement (Aronson and Williams 2004; Schmader and Johns 2003).

Value and Utilize Diverse Content and Perspectives

Instructors can also cultivate the development of identity-safe learning environments in PWIs by valuing and utilizing diverse content and perspectives. This signals to black students that their perspectives are welcomed and valued, especially if the content aligns with their interests. According to Steele (1997b), concerns that students may have about whether or not they will be assessed stereotypically can be addressed through instructors explicitly valuing multiple perspectives. In other words, "[m]aking such a value public tells stereotyped-threatened students that this is an environment in which the stereotype is less likely to be used" (Steele 1997b, 351). When instructors value and include diverse content and perspectives in their curriculum, they relieve black students of the burden of always having to supply non-Eurocentric examples as supplemental class material. The challenge in utilizing diverse content is that instructors must diligently balance examples of racial group struggles with racial group accomplishments so that all students, but black students in particular, see more than just negative images of their racial group represented in course content.

De-racialize Learning Content

While many of the strategies offered thus far focus on reducing stereotype threat, instructors can also create identity-safe learning environments by working to minimize experiences with overt racism in the classroom. Educators must anticipate and plan for how their content and instructional methods may position black students. Some questions to ask include: How does the content of my lesson plan potentially racialize black students? At what moments in the learning process am I treating black students as *black* students or black *students*, and why? (Carter 2008). Instructors must ensure that the strategies they employ do not further marginalize the very students they are trying to serve.

Engage Students in Setting Class Rules and Norms

Finally, instructors can create identity-safe learning environments by having students engage in setting ground rules and norms for class interaction. This strategy helps build a trusting learning environment and creates opportunities for students to interact with each other in authentic and meaningful ways. By engaging in this exercise, students are more likely to appreciate the significance of valuing diverse voices and less likely to hold negative stereotypes about each other. This is just one strategy associated with engaging students in cooperative learning. The more instructors can build learning environments rooted in cooperation (not competition), fairness, high expectations, and trust, the more likely these settings will be inclusive and safe for students. Research has shown that creating cooperative classroom structures in which students work interdependently can produce immediate and dramatic gains in minority students' grades, test scores, and engagement, because such environments reduce competition, distrust, and stereotyping among students (Aronson and Patnoe 1997; Marx, Brown, and Steele 1999).

While there are numerous pedagogical practices that can work to reduce stereotype threat and experiences with racism in predominantly white classrooms, the strategies offered here have been shown to result in immediate classroom change. We consider these practices part of a larger set of *inclusive pedagogical practices* (Tuitt 2003b). Through inclusive pedagogical practices, instructors signal to their students that they are willing to engage all students, regardless of their racial background, in the learning process. According to Steele (1997b) negative-ability stereotypes raise the threat that one does not belong in the learning environment because “[t]hey cast doubt on the extent of one’s abilities, on how well one will be accepted, on one’s social compatibility with the domain, and so on” (351). The more instructors can provide direct affirmation of students’ belonging—that is, assuring individuals that they are welcomed, supported, and valued (Davies, Spencer, and Steele 2005) in the classroom—the more effective they will be in removing the threat in air. This affirmation has to be genuine because, as Steele warns, it is important to base it on the students’ intellectual potential. We consider the inclusive pedagogical practices that we offer here as responding both to Steele’s call to reduce stereotype threat and our own observations and experiences in PWIs. We believe that if instructors can create identity-safe learning environments and opportunities for their students to represent themselves in authentic and meaningful ways, black students may be more likely to trust that their academic efforts will be judged by merit and not a negative stereotypic impression. Additionally, both the instructor and the students may be less likely to engage in racist behavior towards black students.

Conclusion

This article has examined how stereotype threat and racial microaggressions work together to create racist learning environments that hinder the ability of high-achieving black students to maintain optimal performance. In response to this dilemma, we propose that educators seek to create identity-safe learning environments where black students can engage in academic activities free of racial bias. While it is virtually impossible to completely eliminate all of the potentially threatening cues and negative experiences that black students might encounter in the classroom, instructors have the responsibility of creating learning environments where their students’ racialized sense of the institution is not a barrier to their academic success (Davies, Spencer, and Steele 2005). The strategies

provided here locate responsibility for intervention at the classroom level where instructors and students interact; however, we recognize that the problem is much bigger than that and has implications for policy and practice at the macro level. Accordingly, educators, researchers, and policymakers may find it helpful to view stereotype threat and racial microaggressions in a manner similar to environmental racism (Bullard 1999; Chavis 1994). While environmental racism is typically used in a geographic context, it is not a far leap from that to considering stereotype threat and racial microaggressions as toxins (i.e., poisons and pollutants) that prevent black students at all educational levels from participating in a healthy learning environment. In this regard, identifying immediate remedies or even an overall cure for racist learning environments requires a comprehensive approach.

Researchers and policymakers need to develop and set national and state standards that require all institutions that train future educators to provide rigorous anti-racist education. Teacher preparation programs need better measures for assessing pre-service teachers' readiness to establish anti-racist learning environments. Institutions and their partners (researchers, practitioners) need to hold teacher preparation programs accountable through careful analysis of curricula. At all levels (K-21) educational programs should audit their curricula to ascertain how they support the goal of preparing anti-racist educators.

While training and professional development speak to the preparation of future educators, institutions also need to hold current instructors accountable for the role they play in creating racist learning environments. Accordingly, institutions must develop more assessment protocols for K-12 in-service teachers that highlight their potentially racist classroom practices.

At the graduate level, institutions also need to pay more attention to preparing doctoral candidates for post-secondary teaching. Programs should ensure that there are a variety of opportunities for aspiring professors to develop anti-racist teaching skills prior to arriving in their first college classroom. This may be accomplished through offering professional development sessions for graduate teaching assistants related to inclusive pedagogy or adding courses to the doctoral curriculum that allow students to engage in critical discourse about anti-racist pedagogical practices. Colleges and universities should, at a minimum, provide anti-racist/inclusive pedagogical training for all new professors in instructor orientation programs, and make ongoing training available for existing faculty. Additionally, annual reviews should assess instructors' culturally biased pedagogy and practices.

Finally, more research is needed on the impact of stereotype threat and racial microaggressions, and the instructional interventions that counter their negative impact. Existing research has primarily focused on black students' experiences with these two phenomena and their impact on academic achievement while providing few specific strategies for how instructors can create anti-racist learning environments where all students have the chance to succeed.

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