Microaggressions: Black students' experiences of racism on campus

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Abstract

This thesis is based on three different focus groups held in the summer of 2018 with a total of twelve Black students. It examines a group of Black students' experiences of racist microaggressions on the campus of a large comprehensive Canadian university situated in an urban setting.

Using Critical Race Theory it analyzes how seemingly neutral comments, slights, snubs or representations by white students and professors contributes to a culture of anti-Black racism on this campus. Key to this analysis is the shift from traditional forms of racism to more subtle forms of racism in contemporary society, and the role that institutions play in reproducing racism. Microaggressions thus characterise the subtle way in which racism is perpetuated in contemporary society.

The experiences described by the twelve students in this research study demonstrate the prevalence of microaggressions in the lives of Black students in this Canadian university. Furthermore, the four broad themes emerge from the focus group discussions: the lack of diversity in the student population and faculty, the invalidation of Black experiences, stereotypical representations of Black people and cultures, and gendered racism, give further nuance to the types of messages that Black students are exposed to at this university. This analysis produces a deeper understanding of how these micro-level interactions contribute to the broader culture of racism on campuses.

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Introduction

  Race is one of the more prominent social categories in modern society due to its visual nature and the way the impact of its political interpretations often intersects with many other aspects of human social life. In North America particularly, many institutions have played an active role in not only constructing but reinforcing race – within their confines at the very least. As centres of knowledge production, universities in particular face specific scrutiny for their role in the reproduction and subsequent transmission of ideas, knowledge and biases on campus into broader society. Canada's commitment to multiculturalism has emboldened critics who claim that the official policy of multiculturalism has biased its institutions towards a leftist ideology and helped further a 'progressive' agenda. In reality, this depiction as a multicultural utopia has somewhat precluded universities from taking responsibility for the racism happening on their campuses. This becomes more pertinent as we notice a shift in the demographics of students that access universities. Most modern universities located in urban spaces have an increasingly diverse student body and this is underscored by the fact that Canada has one of the largest percentages of foreign-born residents in the world (Wong and Guo 2015, Henry 2017). According to Statistics Canada, almost 21% of the Canadian population is born outside of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016)[1]. With a changing student population from an increasingly more diverse array of backgrounds, interests, languages and cultural practices, it is becoming more evident that Canada's educators will need to pay specific attention to the peculiarities of their students' sensitivities to minimize their exclusion from the general learning experience.

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[1] Figure 1.1 Statistics Canada, National Household Survey 2011

Due to its dynamic nature, racism as it was understood 50 years ago cannot be used to accurately capture the realities of racialized people in Canada today. Canada has a long history of receiving immigrants to its shores and this has come with a change in the forms of discrimination faced by its racialized inhabitants. Despite the tremendous impact of anti-discrimination policies in many spheres, there is still a fairly rigid conceptualisation of racism as an overt and explicit incident, usually caused by an isolated individual as opposed to a process of socialization (Crenshaw et al. 1996, Henry et al. 2017). In fact, only the most egregious acts of racism usually receive any attention from law enforcement or the widespread public. More subtle, insidious and often times just as impactful forms of racism do not receive sufficient attention in public discourse and this makes them much harder to eradicate. This seemingly collective damnation of overt and explicit racism has created the illusion that racism is an individual problem, not a social one, and that institutions and states are not biased in their enforcement of potentially exclusionary policies (Zamudio and Rios 2006, Crenshaw et al., 1996). This is an effect that is especially pronounced in Canada due to the federal policy of multiculturalism which masks the institutional barriers faced by many racialized people in Canada (Henry et al., 2017). In order to combat these issues which have arisen from its own unique combination of political, social and geographical factors, Canada must develop its own base of anti-racist work that investigates the subtleties of racism that may not always be covered by large-scale policy. These narratives and theories contribute to a richer understanding of what it is like to be racialized in Canada and further expose the reality of racism in Canada. More microaggressions are a form of racism that encapsulate the subtle and insidious way that racialized people are subordinated in contemporary society.

The aim of this study is to connect the primarily American discourse surrounding racial microaggressions with the experience of a group of Black students in Canada. Rather than simply using an essentialist understanding of race and racism, this study uses microaggressions as a conceptual tool to frame these students' experiences of racism on campus and employs a critical race theory approach to understanding how these experiences connect with the broader culture of racism on campus. Complaints of racial discrimination by racialized students in Canada's universities and the increasing diversity within the general Canadian population only accelerate the need to better understand just how racism is perpetuated and reproduced on Canadian university campuses. These observations serve as a counternarrative to the somewhat utopian image of ethnic diversity that Canada is often painted with globally. That is not to say that, the Canadian identity is by any means inherently exclusive of particular races or that these counternarratives have not always existed, rather that an obsessive romanticization of multiculturalism in Canada has led to the erasure of the realities of discrimination that Canada's students face. The federal government of Canada itself has leaned into this image of diversity by enacting several laws and policies such as the 1971 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, the 1982 Canadian Constitution, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Official Languages Policy to name but a few (Brown 2008, Henry et al. 2017, Godley 2018, Houshmand, Spanierman and Tafarodi 2014). In order to uncover these valuable counternarratives this research asks: (i) <u>Do Black students feel that they have been subjected to racial microaggressions on campus? (iii) If so, what are some of the specific racist messages/stereotypes they are exposed to and iii) how do these contribute to the culture of racism on campus.</u>

The first part of the research question looks to examine if Black students had been exposed to racial microaggressions on campus. Research shows that there has been a shift in the

way that racism is perpetuated on a day to day basis (Zamudio and Rios 2006, Sue, 2007). Racial microaggressions are an aspect of contemporary racism used to perpetuate the dominance of the white hegemony (Sue, 2007). This research hopes to illustrate the prevalence of microaggressions in Black students' lives. The second part of the research question looks to investigate specifically what kinds of messages are used to perpetuate white hegemonic domination. As we will see, racism, although an inescapable and prominent phenomenon for most racialized individuals in North America, is largely context-specific and it relies on the social relations and institutions around it to validate it. This means that the types of racist messages that may be prominent and impactful in one social context may be insignificant or completely missing in another. The last part of the question investigates the connection between students' micro-level experiences of racism with the structural racism that exists on university campuses. This ties back to the premise of the first question which suggests that subtle racism reflects a shift in the way that racism operates in contemporary society. Despite its ambiguous nature, contemporary racism is an insidious and impactful force in the lives of racialized people. At this point, it is crucial to remember that this study was heavily grounded in the experiences of Black students in a large Canadian university. The aim of this study is not to investigate the probability of microaggressions occurring, or even to assess their representativeness of an objective 'reality'. Rather, it is to illuminate the experiences of this sample of Black students in an urban Canadian university setting, highlight instances of microaggression within their recollections, and discuss how these findings can be understood in the context of discussions about how racism currently operates within Canadian universities. To guide this research, CRT will be a used as a theoretical lens to understand how racism operates in it's current subtler form – a manifestation of which is microaggressions.

In order to properly investigate racist microaggressions in a Canadian university context, the next chapter will provide a brief overview of the concept of microaggressions and discuss the main subcategories that are connected to it. This will then be refined further to discuss relevant research on microaggressions in university contexts and in broader society. Key to this discussion is how microaggressions fit into the broader issue of contemporary forms of racism. Chapter 2 will outline the theoretical framework for this research. It will explore how despite its ties to physical traits, racism is socially constructed. The social nature of the way that racism is perpetuated means that this notion is reinforced by social actors such as individuals in one's immediate geographic surrounding and peer group, as well as institutional and state actors. The works of CRT theorists and writers such as Frantz Fanon, Kimberlee Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda and Peter Wade will help this research develop a deeper understanding of how racism is socially constructed and reproduced by institutions. This discussion will outline how racism is not a rigid and static concept that travels from place to place in society, rather it is reified and reproduced in different ways dependent on the social context it exists in. I will then narrow the research scope to the case of racism in university contexts – specifically Canadian universities. Following that, Chapter 3 will then introduce the justification and structure of my own research methodology and provide considerations for conducting this study in a Canadian Context. After presenting the key themes that emerged from the research in Chapter 4, I will then discuss how these findings fit into the wider discussion about racism in Canadian university culture in Chapter 5. Through these discussions and activities, this research aims to demonstrate the subtle ways that racism currently permeates Canadian universities. It is contended that students experience numerous microaggressions on both an institutional and interpersonal level.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Microaggressions

Microaggressions as a concept were initially devised in the pioneering work of psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1969, but most modern research on microaggressions draws heavily on the work of psychologist and CRT researcher Derald Sue (2007) who defined racial microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (p.273). To put it simply, microaggressions can most easily be explained as racist micro-level interactions, comments or behaviours. Sue et al (2007) outlined three different forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults can be defined as subtle but direct and explicit verbal or nonverbal attack on a specific group identity (Sue et al. 2007). An example could be the display of racist symbols or flags, and the use of epithets such as 'oriental' or 'negro' that are commonly known to offend marginalized groups. Microassaults can be considered as being similar to the 'traditional' racism in that they are much more obvious. Microinsults however are far more subtle verbal, nonverbal or environmental communications that subordinate and demean an individual's identity or heritage (Sue et al. 2007). An example of this is when immigrants are asked 'do they have [this] in your country?' or when ascriptions of traits like intelligence, criminality or sexuality are made. Here it is the subtlety and insensitivity that most clearly characterises this type of microaggression. Lastly, microinvalidations can be seen as any attempt to nullify or negate the experiences of marginalized groups by members of the mainstream hegemony (Sue et al. 2007). This means that members of marginalized groups are made to feel invisible and like their experiences either don't matter or are invalid. Some

examples of this are when marginalized groups are told 'I don't see colour' and the contemporary debate surrounding the 'All lives matter' response to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States of America. By denying that there is an issue of racism in North America, anti-racism advocates and proponents are painted as self-interested, divisive and stuck in the past (Smith et al. 2016). Comments such as these invalidate and delegitimize the struggles, efforts and realities of Black people historically and contemporaneously.

Currently, the overwhelming majority of research on microaggression is centered around race (McCabe 2009; Sue et al. 2007). It is important to note that in the original conceptualization of microaggressions there was a clear use of historical understandings of U.S race relations to construct its subconcepts. Sue's (2007) influential work on microaggressions pointed to how an understanding of race dynamics plays an integral role in understanding the nature of microaggressions. However, numerous authors have noted how microaggresssions tend to intersect with other social categories such as gender, class and occupation. For example, Lewis et al (2013) conducted research on the intersection of race and gender in the lives of female Black students. In their study, they highlighted the specifically gendered nature of the microaggressive acts they suffered and how their coping strategies were also connected with their self-identity. Additionally, Shelton and Delgado-Romero's (2011) study, which looked at the experiences of sexual-orientation microaggressions in therapy, found that lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) individuals were also subject to the same taxonomy of microaggressions, namely microaggressions, microinsults and microinvalidations as outlined by Sue. Their qualitative study involved 16 participants who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ). Respondents reported similar experiences found in research on racial microaggressions such as isolation, frustration and anger as found in research on racial microaggression. For the

researchers, their study demonstrated how broader level 'traditional' discriminatory attitudes have transformed and now manifest themselves in more sinister and covert ways.

Also of key note is the subtle nature of microaggressions. As detailed by Sue (2007), racism "(a) is more likely than ever to be disguised and covert and, (b) has evolved from the 'old fashioned' form, in which overt racial hatred and bigotry is consciously and publicly displayed, to a more ambiguous and nebulous form that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge" (p.273). Indeed, the notion that these social interactions are usually subtle and may even go unnoticed by both the offender and the victim. Despite Sue et al's (2007) description of microassaults as a direct form of microaggressions and microinvalidations and microinsults as indirect forms, this distinction does not always hold up to reality - as like all cases of social interaction, there are contextual factors that determine whether an incident falls into one category or the other. There is a lot of overlap across all three microaggression subcategories and they should not be understood as being mutually exclusive. The changing dynamics of how microaggressions are both perpetrated and perceived in contemporary society has reshaped the discussion about the distinction between these categories. For example, the increasing prominence of social media has led to an increase in racist attacks online in the daily lives of marginalized groups under the guise of 'anonymity'(Minikel-Lacocque 2013). Contemporary racialized students operate in a social media climate that is not only racially charged, but often times teemed with unfiltered and offensive racist images and messaging. An average racialized student can be subjected to several types of microaggressions by simply viewing the comment section of any online news article that deals with race – even tangentially. Furthermore, microaggressions do not always have an immediate impact and often times the recipient of the microaggression can leave the interaction wondering if they had even experienced a

microaggression at all. Therefore, it is important to note that it is not always clear whether a specific microaggression was directly or indirectly perpetrated, or indeed whether it was intentional or unintentional.

1.2 Sue's Taxonomy of Microaggressions

As well as the ways in which microaggressions occur, another dimension of microaggressions to consider is the content of these interactions. Microaggressions tend to rely on wider social themes, ideologies and stereotypes in order to gain legitimacy and ensure their subtlety. In his initial conceptualization of racial microaggressions, Sue et al., (2007) provide a taxonomy outlining nine common themes present in microaggressions. These themes will be used as a reference point in future analysis of focus group responses. They are:

(a) Being an alien in one's land: A microaggression in which minority individuals are made to feel like they do not belong because of the colour of their skin.

(b) An ascription of intelligence: Tendency for people's intellectual capabilities to be based on the colour of their skin.

(c) Colour blindness: A microaggression used to negate or supress minority counter-narratives.

(d) An Ascription of criminality: Depending on the location, some races are more likely to be treated like criminals because of the colour of their skin. This can also manifest itself in the perception that certain groups need to be feared.

(e) A denial of individual racism by members of the white majority

(f) The myth of meritocracy: The belief that all people, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic background, having the same chances for success; or in other words that success is 'earned' as opposed to being influenced by social position.

(g) Pathologizing cultural values and communication styles: The notion that the dominant culture's methods of communication, traditions and values are the most ideal and those of others are inferior.

(h) Second-class microaggressions refer to when members of a racial majority are given preferential treatment over racial minorities

(i) Environmental invalidations are said to be more macro level microaggressions that are more apparent on a systemic or environmental level. For example, a University named after a slave-owner. (Sue et al., 2007)

1.3 Microaggression Research

Many CRT authors have noted that racism is more commonly perpetrated in the form of microaggressions in contemporary society (Sue, 2007, Crenshaw et al.,1996, Minikel-Lacocque 2013). There has been numerous qualitative studies which use microaggressions as a framework to study racism on campus (Nadal et al 2014, Minikel-lacoque 2013, Gomez et al 2011, Houshmand et al 2014. Microaggressions not only demonstrate the prominence of racism in contemporary society, they also give an insight into some of the racist messages and social/institutional barriers that racialized people experience. Research surrounding racial minority students' experiences of microaggressions shows that there is still a clearly racialized climate in college campuses. University campuses are often framed as open, tolerant, meritocratic places to learn, yet research has shown that racialized students and teachers are

frequently exposed to racist images and messages (McCabe 2009; Young, Anderson, and Stewart 2015; Sue et al. 2007). For example, Janice McCabe (2009) conducted a study at a mid-level American University which examined the racial and gendered ways that microaggressions manifest themselves on college campuses. Her study found that students lived under the fear of pervasive stereotypes about their ethnicity and heritage. These stereotypes included students believing that Black men were more threatening than other races and that Latina women were more sexually available or exotic. These experiences led to these marginalized student groups reporting feelings of isolation on campus. Daniel Solorzano's (2000) study on racial microaggressions on college campuses not only confirmed the existence and prevalence or racial microaggressions in the lives of marginalized students, but also identified two separate ways that racism is experienced by them. He claims that racial microaggressions occur both within academic and social spaces; which ends up having an impact on the academic and social lives of students. He stressed that students experience microaggressions in academic spaces from both their peers and their professors. Research shows that Black students report feeling like they face harsher punishments for school infractions and that they are targeted more often by school officials (Ballard and Cintrón 2010; Grier - Reed 2010; Hier and Walby 2006; Kinsler 2011; Welch and Payne 2010).

Owen, Ta, Imel, Wampold, and Rodolfa (2014) conducted a study involving students who sought counselling at their university counselling centre. In their study, they found that 53% of students from a racial and ethnic minority background perceived themselves to be the victims of microaggressions from their therapists. They make the excellent point that these acts of microaggressions can be seen as ruptures in the therapeutic relationship as they run counter to the narrative of therapists as open and non-judgemental. Additionally, they found that

respondents who perceived they had been the victims of therapist microaggressions subsequently reported lower alliance and trust with their therapist - a key factor in the effectiveness of therapy.

Julie Minikel-Lacocque's (2013) study at a Midwestern American university looked to evaluate the experiences of racial microaggressions by Latin-American students. In her case study, she interviewed six Latin-American students about their experiences of racism in both the academic spaces such as classrooms lunch halls, and student groups, but also in social spaces such as dorms, public transit and online forums. She then organized and analysed their responses according to the taxonomy of microaggressions initially developed by Sue (2007). She found that there was an overwhelming amount of evidence to suggest that Latino students in her study faced daily instances of racial microaggressions. This ranged from getting ignored at the bus stop by angry bus drivers to receiving hateful racist messages on an online school forum. In her study, she points to a lack of research focusing on the aftermath of microaggressions, or more specifically, how students cope with these acts of racism.

In their 2017 study, Ong, Cerrada, Williams and Lee found that racial microaggressions play a significant impact in the mental health of Asian Americans. Their multi-dimensional study evaluated how the experience of racial microaggressions and their 'stigma consciousness' or awareness of negative stereotypes affected their sleep patterns. They found that their sample of 152 Asian-American college freshmen reported an incident of microaggressions occurring on average once a week. The results of the study also showed that respondents reported poorer sleep quality after instances of microaggressions. Additionally, there was a correlation between participant's conception of their stigmas, their perception of microaggressions committed against them, and their subsequent sleep quality. This suggests that one's consciousness of racial stigmas may play a role in both the perception and the impact of microaggressions. They also found that

respondents reported that microinvalidations and microinsults to be the most harmful types of microaggressions.

Morales' 2010 study looked at how Black students at an American university encountered racist notions of exoticism, hypersexuality and aggressiveness about low-income and working-class Black women and men. The 62 respondents in the study answered questionnaires about their experiences of racial microaggressions and their self-reported socioeconomic background and their responses were interpreted and analysed. Of key note in this study was the intersection of race, class and gender in the types of microaggressions received by the respondent. Morales found that males in this study were commonly stereotyped as athletes, sexual predators and physically aggressive. Black women were stereotyped as being 'exotic', sexually promiscuous and overly opinionated or aggressive (Morales 2014). The respondents in this study reported that these events negatively impacted their educational experience and they believed that it limited their social mobility and opportunity.

In The Equity Myth, Henry et al (2016) outline 12 of the unconscious biases they believed were present in Canadian universities. In their list, the authors make specific reference to some common microaggressions faced by students and faculty such as being asked where they come from, classroom dynamics and wording in letters of reference. For the authors, these biases served to maintain the reproduction of the white culture of academia - one which often silences and marginalizes racialized voices. For example, the authors note a hierarchy of accents in Canada, one that subordinates certain groups, especially when most of the faculty is white. They write that:

> *"*In a multilingual country such as Canada, with an official policy of bilingualism and distinctive provincial accents, there is a distinct social hierarchy of accents and dialects. This hierarchy is especially evident with unfamiliar or foreign-

sounding accents…. Students and professors alike have greater affinity for accents similar to their own. The often-unconscious bias in favour of in-group accents may impact university hiring, teaching evaluations and tenure and promotion assessments." (p.286)

Houshman, Spanierman and Tafarodi (2014) conducted a qualitative study exploring a group of East and South Asian international students' experiences of racial microaggressions at a Canadian university. In their study students identified six racial microaggressions themes: a) feeling excluded and avoided, b) having their accent ridiculed c) being rendered invisible, d) having their cultural values and needs disregarded, e) ascription of intelligence, and f) environmental microaggressions in the form of structural barriers on campus). The authors also note that students coped with these microaggressions by a) engaging with their own racial and cultural groups, (b) withdrawing from academic spheres, and (c) seeking comfort in the surrounding multicultural milieu.

1.4 Effects of Microaggressions

Another important aspect of microaggressions to consider is the impact these interactions have on their victims. Research on the topic indicates that people of colour are consistently exposed to microaggressions as it serves to further perpetuate societal inequalities (Minikel-Lacocque 2013; Smith et al. 2016; Sue et al. 2007; Yearwood 2013). This can have numerous negative implications for the victims of microaggressions such as psychological harm, social isolation, and physiological effects. Ong et al's (2017) study showed that students who were the victims of microaggressions reported poorer sleep quality. Additionally, repeated exposure to microaggressions has been shown to lower individuals' self-esteem (Yearwood, 2013), which means that those who fall on the lowest rung of the microaggressive hierarchy will be more exposed to daily verbal and non-verbal assaults. Microaggressions can also have an impact on the inner dialogue that is racial identity formation (Jones and Galliher 2015; A. Smith and

Lalonde 2003). For racialized minorities, racial identity formation occurs in an arena of competing rhetoric surrounding their racial identity. On the one hand, there are what group members say are key identifiers of their racial identity and on the other hand are mainstream stereotypes that devalue, generalize or misappropriate these identifiers such as customs, rituals and traditions. Viewed through a CRT standpoint, microaggressions can be seen to contribute to the limitation of opportunities and social mobility for racialized individuals.

A major dimension of microaggressions is that their daily repetition causes continuous stress. The compounding nature of microaggressions makes it difficult for individuals to effectively deal with them and can be a source of increased stress levels (Anderson & Finch, 2017; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013). Finch and Anderson's study reported that repeated exposure to microaggressions can be a major source of stress for people of colour. They make the point that the key to this phenomenon is the individual's perception of the microaggression; that is to say, those who are more aware of the racial stratification in the US are more likely to perceive microaggressions and thus more likely to experience stress as a result of this. Lewis et al. (2013) studied how Black women coped with microaggressions in the context of an American university. They found that the compounding nature of microaggressions led to high stress levels amongst group members. Their research found that there are two different ways to cope with the stress caused by racism. Students can either cope with racism individually or collectively. They criticized contemporary research on coping that did not consider the impacts of social factors such as race and gender. They also stressed certain mechanisms such as coping through social support are dependent on the situation. In their research, they found that most Black women found it most helpful to be able to communicate their frustrations about

microaggressions without fear of being invalidated or belittled. The issue arises when there are not enough safe spaces or social support networks for students to achieve this.

Similarly, Weber et al's (2018) study on subtle and severe microaggressions investigated how microaggressions played a role in the intersection of race, gender and sexual identities of people. Their study found that racialized participants reported multiple psychological health effects that could lead to long term damage such as anger, depression, fatigue, emotional and physical withdrawal and physical safety concerns (Weber, Collins, Robinson-Wood, Zeko-Underwood, & Poindexter, 2018). In their research 7 major microaggression themes emerged: (1) discomfort/disapproval of with LGBT experience, (2) assumption of universal experience, (3) traditional gender role stereotyping, (4) exoticization, (5) ascription of intelligence, (6) assumption of criminality, and (7) denial of personal privacy (586). Specifically, their research found that women of colour were the only group that reported having their intelligence questioned. They noted that individuals who possess multiple stigmatized identities seem to have increased vulnerability to chronic stress.

This ties into the theme of frustration and anger as a response to racial microaggressions as developed by other research on microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007; Shelton and Delgado-Romero 2011). Lewis et al's (2016) study on the experiences of Black faculty members in predominantly white research universities pointed to four common themes in participants' responses namely: that microaggressions are common occurrences, the futility of addressing microaggressions, higher levels of stress, and their resilience in the face of white-dominated institutions. Similarly, Smith et al (2016) details African American university students' propensity to grow what they called 'Racial battle fatigue' in the face of a hostile campus environment. According to Smith et al (2016):

As a result of chronic racial microaggressions, many people of color perceive the campus environment as extremely stressful, exhausting, and diminishing to their sense of control, comfort, and meaning while eliciting feelings of loss, ambiguity, strain, frustration, and injustice (p.616) .

This is a sentiment echoed in his earlier research which showed that repeated exposure to these racial microaggressions on campus has a negative impact on the lives of racialized students (Smith, Franklin and Hung 2011, Franklin, Smith and Hung 2014).

1.5 Conclusion

Despite being a relatively new concept, there have been numerous studies investigating the nature of microaggressions and how they intersect with socially constructed identity categories. Microaggressions can be most simply defined as subtle put downs, slights, and insults which inferiorize the recipient based on their membership to a specific identity group. Generally, microaggressions fall into three groups: micro assaults, microinvalidations and microinsults. These groups are not mutually exclusive, and their applicability can vary depending on the content and context of the microaggression. Microaggressions can occur to anyone with a stigmatized identity and the possession of multiple stigmatized identities is said to increase one's perception (and reception) of them. Although initially developed to further evidence claims of racial inequality and racism, the concept of microaggressions has transcended into studies on sexuality, gender, age and class. Reflective of the switch from traditional racism to 'modern' racism, microaggressions are said to be insidious, hard to identify, and can be overwhelming for recipients. The repeated nature of microaggressions combined with the perceived futility of addressing these transgressions with colleagues and supervisors can create a hostile and marginalized environment for racial minorities. This causes higher levels of stress which can

lead to physiological effects such as poorer quality sleep, psychological effects such as lower self esteem, racial battle fatigue and chronic stress and more social effects such as the loss of trust in colleagues, peers and institutional officials.

Of particular interest to this study is the context-specificity of microaggressions. How does the content of microaggression change depending on the context? Do members of the white majority feel more comfortable committing microaggressions in certain environments? When it comes to universities, who commits microaggressions? Peers, academic or administrative staff? What are the different microaggressions committed by each group and how does all of this contribute to the Furthermore, there has not been enough research investigating individuals' responses to microaggressions and their coping strategies. These questions indicate that despite the evolution of the concept of microaggressions over the last few decades there is still work to be done to better understand its many dimensions. The next chapter will outline the role that institutions play in creating the structural relations that perpetuate and legitimize racist microaggressions in society. This exploration will help to frame the discussions by participants in this study which address the research questions.

2. Theoretical Framework

Academic George Dei (2014) notes that it is impossible to talk about racism without talking about race and vice versa. Race, the arbitrary categorization of people according to certain physical and cultural characteristics, is a complex social and historical process that has led to real socioeconomic inequalities for racialized individuals. Generally, there are two schools of thought as to how race should be conceptualized: essentialist definitions of race, and constructionist definitions. Amongst most authors discussing race, including geneticists and biologists, there is a general consensus that race is a socially constructed phenomenon (Andreasen, 1999). If it holds that there is no clearly defined biological basis to racial categories, yet somehow individuals have historically and contemporarily been categorized based on these subjective characteristics, it stands to reason that 'racism' itself is as much a process as it is an abstract 'thing'. As noted by many critical theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Kimberlee Crenshaw, race and by extension racism are an inescapable reality for racialized individuals. Fanon (1952) notes that attempts at intellectualizing away the existence of not only racial categories but the social effects and historical processes that accompany them, do nothing to improve racialized individuals' lives. To put it succinctly, racialized individuals do not realize their race through expression of an essential quality in their genetic makeup; rather they often are reminded of their difference through racist interactions in their social environments, as well as the experience of being 'categorized'. However, this should not invalidate the agency that racialized individuals have in choosing to express their identities. Despite having comparatively less political power in North American society, racialized individuals have historically rejected faulty institutional conceptions and challenged systems of oppressions in ways that do not

necessarily conform to their environment. Critical race theory (CRT) is a vestige of this anti-colonial/anti-oppressive sentiment and serves as the theoretical framework for this research.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) conceptualizes racism as a social construct that is constantly reproducing itself based on the various social definitions, policies, interactions and attitudes of individuals within a certain society (Crenshaw, 1996). This theoretical perspective also posits that institutional actors play an active role in the creation and perpetuation of inequalities between races through their practices, policies and administration. This is not to downplay the importance or 'reality' of the biological or physiological dimensions of race, rather, it is an acknowledgement that much of the knowledge on race and racism we have is not only socially constructed but often context-specific. Racism, although a global phenomenon due to the wide reaching impacts of western colonialism, often depends on the peculiarities of the environment it is situated in for its effect. Put simply, racism looks very different in different places and manifests itself in a number of ways. This is an important notion to retain as we continue with our discussion of how racism operates in Canadian society, as racism manifests itself in a number of ways.

The following section will provide an exploration of critiques on the way racism has been intentionally constructed and perpetuated by powerful institutional actors in North American society. It narrows the scope of the discussion to identify some of the ways that universities specifically have perpetuated racism within their campuses. This research will draw primarily from the work of Critical Race Theorists who show how that racism is both a result and an accompanying aspect of the intentional categorization and exclusion of racialized people by powerful socio-political actors. Through this exploration, this section will demonstrate how institutional actors, particularly States and universities, participate in a delicate dance of

constructing, reproducing and redefining racism in society. After this, the section will detail the shift in the way racism operates in contemporary western society. This transition from overt, violent and explicit forms of racism to more subtle, insidious and coercive forms is significant when juxtaposed with the values of liberalism, neutrality and progressiveness espoused by most Canadian Universities. This section will conclude with a discussion of how institutions, in this case Canadian universities, serve as sites for exploring how racism is alive and well in contemporary society. Employing a CRT perspective will enable a critical analysis of the facade of a 'post-racial' society used to silence racialized students in academic spaces.

2.1 Critical race theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a school of thought that emerged from anti-racist counter-narratives by prominent 'coloured' legal scholars in the United States in the 1970s - although some argue that its theoretical traditions date back even earlier to the early-nineteenth century in the use of counter narratives by Black abolitionists (Crenshaw et al., 1996, Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison 2017; Johnson 2015). Clay (2010) notes that although CRT initially arose out of an attempt to connect critical theory with experiences of racial discrimination in America, it almost immediately transcended into other fields such as ethnicity, gender, film, psychology and others. This is due to its ability to uncover intersectionalities between different social categories. The theory initially gained popularity during the mid 1970s with the work of Dennis Bell and Alan Freeman as a response to a perceived standstill in racial reform; though numerous other authors such as Kimberly Crenshaw, George Dei, Mari Matsuda and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have also used CRT as a framework for their discussions. The central premise of CRT is that the laws and institutions in most societies contain an element of implicit 'whiteness', or even more specifically, 'anti-Blackness'. CRT uses race as a lens to view the world and posits that

seemingly neutral laws, policies and institutions are biased towards non-white individuals in both their drafting and enforcement (Ballard and Cintrón 2010; Minikel-Lacocque 2013). This means that institutions play an active role in the reproduction of racism in society insofar as they reflect the attitudes of the dominant hegemony. This is an important notion in CRT in that this 'whiteness' is not conceptualized as a passive or inactive force but rather a complex, violent and oppressive one (Crenshaw et al. 1996). Essential to the understanding of CRT is the notion that the majority White population America would only support and fight for minority rights if they too benefit from it (Crenshaw 1996, Ballard and Cintrón 2010;). This is not to say that white people actively seek to oppress racial minorities per se, merely that they exhibit apathy to all but the most extreme cases of racial injustice. This apathy thus becomes a powerful tool in the state's maintenance of racial inequality in that it provides the framework for the exclusion and subordination of certain populations (Crenshaw, 1996). Therefore, while actions, laws or policies may be viewed as justifiable or legal through a certain framework, when the history and politics of race is factored in, these same seemingly neutral actions can indeed be viewed as racist. This is especially important to remember within the context of this study as it focuses specifically on subtle and insidious racist microaggressions that may seem neutral on a surface level but are indeed racist when contextualized with CRT (Sue et al. 2007; Lewis et al. 2013). As we will see, racism isn't always an overt act of violence and subjugation; it also manifests in more subtle ways.

2.2 How Institutions Construct Racism

Of key note in CRT, is the role that institutions play in the construction and perpetuation of racial inequality. In his article, *Rethinking Racism: Towards a structural interpretation*, Critical Race theorist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997) details specific historical events and actions

that led to the formation of the 'racialized society' that is the United States. According to Bonilla-Silva (1997), the state allocates unequal economic, political, social rewards to each 'racial group'. This then creates a dynamic of superiority and subordination amongst different races. The ideology that accompanies social formation along these unequal racial lines is racism. For Bonilla-Silva (1997), racism is the logical outcome of a society organized around race relations. He believed that structural racism could be understood as the reason for the difference in life outcomes and 'realities' for different races. Importantly, he notes that racism, and the attitudes and stereotypes that accompany it, should not be understood as simply a reflection of the racial relations in a society. Rather, racism as a social phenomenon, takes up a life of its own and participates in the process of ensuring the entrenchment of certain power dynamics within a society. Bonilla-Silva (1997) argues that racist ideologies act as "guides" for racial actors, and thusly become as 'real' as the individuals in the society. This is a notion also expanded upon by Mari Matsuda in her article *Looking to the Bottom*. In it, she provides an excellent analysis of how specific and intentional institutional actions have shaped the lives of racialized individuals. For example, in her work she provides details of how the US government's internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII and the destruction of Hawaiian sovereignty were clear examples of how "the hierarchical relationship that places white people over people of colour [is] promoted by the specific wrongs of the past." (Crenshaw et al., 1996, p.70). Matsuda believed that racialized individuals in contemporary society lacked comparatively significant amounts of material wealth or political power in North American society due to instances such as this. Indeed, this lack of economic and political power has the real effect of marginalizing individuals in society that have interests which are counter to the dominant hegemony over time. This effect becomes even more pronounced when we consider the broader context of legal, political, and

economic decisions grounded in white supremacy. To put it simply, the consistent favouring of one group of people in a variety of social spheres will create hierarchical inequality. More importantly, it is in the interest of institutions to maintain this inequality, and they do so in both intentional and unintentional ways.

In order to gain access to the political and economic power to improve their social conditions, many racialized people resort to actively participating in the very systems that subordinate them. To better understand the effects of this dynamic, the work of Frantz Fanon can help provide an insight. In his work *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon (1952) posits that colonized, and by extension racialized, individuals are kept under control in contemporary society through appeals to 'legitimate' concepts such as rights, freedom and equality. For Fanon, this discourse only served to hide the real purpose of the State, to maintain the colonial relationship between white 'elites' and racialized peoples. Fanon (1952) argued that racialized individuals who sought to eschew the issue of racism altogether failed to acknowledge the reality of the historically racist society that every individual is born into. Fanon believed that this form of thinking represented the shift in the way colonial states sought to ensure the political domination of the white majority. He argued that colonial states used this discourse as a means of ensuring the psychological enslavement of racialized populations. For example, by encouraging racialized individuals to do everything they can to avoid being perceived as the lazy and uneducated negro, the colonial state ensures that racialized individuals internalize the legitimacy of this negative stereotype. Fanon's underlying argument is that whether acknowledged or not, racialized individuals appeal to the very systems that further their subordination. Racialized individuals in former colonial states are taught to adopt the language, the education, and the currency of those who have systematically subordinated them. This is a viewpoint echoed in Fanon's (1967) later

work *Towards the African Revolution* in which he sets up a critique of the way culture and ideology have been used to legitimize and entrench racism in colonial societies. He notes that rather than the previously overt acts of violence used by colonial regimes of the past, contemporary colonial domination is maintained through the mummification and subordination of racialized societies. He writes:

> *The establishment of colonial rule does not result in the death of the indigenous culture. On the contrary, historical observation shows that the aim pursued is more a continued agony than a total disappearance of the pre-existing culture. This culture, otherwise alive and open to the future, is closed, frozen in colonial status, caught in the shackles of oppression. At once present and mummified, she testifies against her members. It defines them indeed without appeal. Cultural mummification leads to a mummification of individual thought. The so universally reported apathy of the colonial peoples is only the logical consequence of this operation. (Fanon 1967, p.34)*

For Fanon, this process was essential in maintaining the illusion of a society which is justified in its subordination of racialized people. Indeed (1967), Fanon notes that racialized individuals are not passive in the system of oppression that is racism. They also incorporate and adopt the language of their 'colonizers' in attempts to gain some of the political power that they have been starved of. However, in using these terms, individuals who consider themselves as proof of the exceptionality of racialized peoples end up affirming the existence of these racist stereotypes and entrenching the systems of oppression. Fanon argued that states intentionally create the image of the 'barbaric native' to steer racialized individuals from understanding themselves in a way that is outside the realms of the master-slave dialectic. Awad Ibrahim (2003) speaks about this process of 'becoming black' in his study of a group francophone African youths in a high school in south-western Ontario. When they arrived in Canada these youths relied on media depictions of African Americans and African American cultures and languages to learn about their 'blackness'. Furthermore, Ibrahim (2005) found that foreignness is assumed for racialized individuals. Therefore, in this context to 'be black' means that an individual must

also 'act black' and experience being the marginalized other. It is under these conditions that African migrants learn to be black through the media portrayals and cultural perceptions of their 'blackness' – rather than an expression of their 'inherent qualities'. By encouraging their racialized subjects to idealize 'whiteness', colonial states ensure that their colonial subjects remain under their control, even though their physical chains have been removed. This is a sentiment explored by CRT author Wade (2009) in his exploration of the concept of Blackness in Colombia. In his article, he detailed how despite the lack of explicit racial categorization in Colombian law, there were still economic disparities amongst the different populations and ethnic groups that resided there. According to Wade, there existed communities that were virtually entirely descended from African slaves, but people in these communities considered themselves "libre" which roughly translated to free people, rather than "negro" which had more negative connotations (Wade 2009). Along with different 'indigenous' populations these communities were far worse off than the lighter-skinned 'Mestiza' ruling class. According to Wade (2009), the state's first official attempt at formalizing racial categorization in Colombia was in the implementation of Law 70 which saw to address the issue of Land rights in 'Communidad Negras'. These 'Communidad Negras' were geographically concentrated ethnic groups that traced their ancestry to Africans brought to Colombia during slavery. Wade argues that for the first time in Colombian history, race was recognized as a legitimate point of social organization for collective rights. These Communidad Negras for the first time represented a Colombia-specific 'Blackness' in the eyes of the Colombian government (Wade, 2009).

The issue with this conception of Black people in Colombia was that Communidad Negras as interpreted by the state referred to a specific population – the largely rural populations that inhabited Colombia's pacific coastal region. This narrow and constraining definition of

Blackness became evident to the Colombian Government during its 1993 Census. In the census, the question asking if individuals belonged to one of these Communidad Negras had an absurdly low response rate of 1.6% causing the government to create their own estimates which fell more in the 16% to 25% range (Wade, 2009). The issue with this conceptualisation of Blackness was that it was too narrow to encompass what was now a diverse population which was not necessarily geographically constrained but also had different access to material and economic resources. Therefore, when asked if they identified as Communidad Negras, it only made sense for a large percentage of the population to refuse to identify as such. In 2005, the Colombian government undermined its own previously narrow categorisation by developing a self-identification question that was more inclusive of different ethnic identities. However, the effect continues as even modern conceptions of Afro-colombianness do not necessarily resonate with many Colombians. Wade writes "I think the « afro » element of these designations is becoming increasingly distant from Africa itself and from ideas about « real » Africanisms. Instead, « afro » now invites people to identify with a globalised, mass-mediated culture of Blackness, associated with certain images and styles of music, bodily comportment, dress and realised to a great degree through practices of consumption" (Wade, 2009, p.175).

Wade's central argument was that the question of who defines and reifies race is a complex one because there are a number of actors that participate in the processes. He argues that institutional actors such as governments create and use rigid racial categories to organize people based on their political goals, even though these categories don't match up to the social 'reality' of their inhabitants. At the same time, activists and academics both appropriate and reject these narrow definitions and categories as a means of gaining political rights in their society (Wade, 2009). Wade's work shows how both social and institutional actors who

participate in the construction of race, racism and anti-racism in society, both undermine and appeal to the existing system of racial categorization in their attempt to gain 'legitimacy'. The effects of racism are pronounced in a variety of ways that include access to material wealth, political representation and control of the means of cultural reproduction. Further, racism itself should not be understood as just the total result of historical institutional policies which have sought to put the interests of the white majority first; it is also an ideology that is perpetuated in modern society through the use of 'legitimate' systems of domination.

2.3 Racism: From overt to subtle

As with modern conceptions about race, our understanding of 'racism' has also changed over the years. In a move away from essentialist projects to define racism as specific acts or ideas, more and more race research is paying attention to the different forms of racism. There are two common conceptions of racism: traditional racism which places an emphasis on obvious and egregious acts, and 'contemporary' or 'liberal' racism which is a subtler form of racial categorization, discrimination and exclusion (Zamudio & Rios, 2006). These two conceptions, separate yet not discrete, have contributed to a deeper understanding of racism in modern society. Traditional racism is conceptualized as explicit and obvious acts intended to inferiorize an individual or group based on skin colour (Zamudio & Rios, 2006). The idea behind this perspective is that racism refers to acts that were generally accepted as 'racist' by the majority of society. According to Zamudio and Rios (2006), underlying this form of racism is an arrogance or pride in one's bigotry. Zamudio and Rios (2006) argue that traditional racism emerged as an ideology to reinforce white supremacy, colonialism and slavery. They argue that this form of racism is exemplified by intentionally discriminatory race projects, such as Jim Crow and segregation, which sought to ensure that racialized individuals remained subjugated in America.

Key to this type of racism is the use of force to maintain the subordination of racialized people; whether in the form of the state sanctioned violence under the guise of law enforcement, or with the use of war and other violent means to exploit racialized societies under the guise of 'civilization'. The issue with conceptions of traditional racism is that the word 'traditional' feeds into a narrative that implies that these acts don't happen often in contemporary society. On the contrary, research shows that racialized individuals are still subjected to daily exposure of racist messages and imagery in contemporary society– some of which are explicit and blatant. Additionally, there is no general consensus on what exactly a 'racist' action or comment is as there is no objective scale of racism. Racism is a relational phenomenon and depends on the sociopolitical interpretations of race around it for its effectiveness. Those who claim that traditional racism goes against social norms today must remember that seemingly neutral and objective social norms can contain within them racist attitudes, ideologies and effects (Zamudio and Rios 2006, Crenshaw et al. 1996). Therefore, it is not enough to suggest that traditional racism is a thing of the past that goes against the social norms of most contemporary societies. Rather, it is important to retain an understanding of racism a previously violent and oppressive force that has transformed into a more insidious one embedded in the interactions and institutions that constitute contemporary societies. However, this does not mean that instances of explicitly violent racism do not exist in contemporary society – as is the case with police brutality in some racialized communities in the US and Canada.

'Contemporary' racism refers to the more subtle and nonviolent ways that racialized people are categorized and subordinated. Psychologist Derald Sue (2007), notes that contemporary racism: "(a) is more likely than ever to be disguised and covert and (b) has evolved from the "old fashioned" form, in which overt racial hatred and bigotry is consciously

and publicly displayed, to a more ambiguous and nebulous form that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge." (p.272) This manifests in a number of ways. Firstly, as CRT theorists such as Fanon (1952) and Crenshaw (1996) have demonstrated in their work, institutional actors such as governments, policy makers and academics play an active role in the marginalization and inferiorization of racialized people in society. The development of laws or policies which disenfranchise certain populations, and the unequal distribution of social rewards to members of the dominant hegemony, are both insidious forms of contemporary institutional racism. Connected to these are micro-level interactions which help create a culture of racism. It is important to differentiate these interactions as a separate form of racism as they may not be perpetrated by specific institutional actors per se, but their content is heavily informed by the structural relations around them. The repetition of these interactions creates a culture which is ultimately racist in that it legitimizes the structural subordination of racialized individuals.

To articulate the insidious way that institutional racism operates in contemporary society, the work of CRT authors such as Kimberlee Crenshaw (1996) is a source of good insight. In her article, *Race, Reform and Re-entrenchment*, Crenshaw constructs a critique of the political rhetoric against the civil rights movement in the 1980s. Crenshaw notes how institutional actors, such as the Reagan administration specifically, sought to maintain their hegemonic domination through the adoption of a "colour-blind" narrative. According to Crenshaw, the right wing "think-tanks" at the time saw the work of the civil rights movement as done because they believed that racism and the barriers of success had been eradicated by law; meaning there was no more need for any anti-discrimination policies. Crenshaw (1996) conceptualizes how restrictive interpretations of antidiscrimination policies such as this weigh the innocence of contemporary whites more than the past wrongdoings of whites or the current conditions of

Black people in the US. According to Crenshaw, this view considers racism to be perpetrated by individuals rather than social policy. This alleviates the pressure from the federal government to institute group-specific policies that address the problem of inequality. In reality, the State's 'neutral' role in this process is actually an active one, in that it supports the continuation of the historical process of racial subordination in America (Crenshaw et al., 1996). It also erases the government's past of social policies designed to specifically subordinate, inferiorize and exclude minorities in the interest of the white hegemony. The examples of these are plentiful: Jim Crow, the 'one-drop' rule, voting rights, etc.

CRT author Allan David Freeman explores this sentiment and develops a critique of the 'perpetrator perspective' that anti-discrimination law in the US has employed. He argues that the perpetrator perspective presupposes a world comprised of atomistic individuals whose actions are ahistorical and apolitical. From this perspective, he writes, "the law reviews racial discrimination not as a social phenomenon but merely as the misguided conduct of particular actors" (cited in Crenshaw et al., 1996, p.30). According to Freeman, central to the perpetrator perspective is the notion of fault and causation. The fault idea assumes that the task of anti-discrimination law is to separate blameworthy people from the mass that share the cultural norm – that norm being colour-blindness. The fault idea promotes the notion that only intentional discrimination violates anti-discrimination as most people in society don't even see race. As we will see in the sections that follow, this becomes dangerous because one can evade responsibility for blatantly discriminatory behaviour by showing that their action was for a good reason or for no unintentional. The causation principle also speaks to this in that it suggests that some instances of discrimination are accidents or caused by ancestral demons that cant possibly be punished today. This absolves states and institutions from the responsibility of redressing the

problem of social inequality and ignores their role in creating the social conditions that created this inequality.

Crenshaw (1996) also details how the colour-blind narrative of antidiscrimination law and the equal opportunity narrative of employment law are interconnected. Each downplays either the social conditions that cause racism or the real effects of racism. For Crenshaw, 'equal opportunity' was an overused and empty phrase in that it pays no attention to the real results of anti-racism policies. By assuming that everyone would be viewed the same simply because it is written as such in the law, institutions furthered the marginalization of African-Americans in the US. Crenshaw explores the de-segregation of high schools in Atlanta as a case study for her argument. She notes that in that case, the removal of formal barriers, although symbolically important to Black people in the US, did little to alter the hierarchy of racial domination in society (Crenshaw et al., 1996). In reality, de-segregation ended up being an appeal to the legitimacy of white institutions. Once the clear division between races was removed from the law, it became apparent to most critical Black legal scholars at the time that the conditions of Black people in the US had not significantly improved (Crenshaw et al., 1996). However, it is important to note that Black people in the U.S were also able to use the same maligned civil rights narrative to gain political power. This is perhaps best evidenced by the successes of the civil rights movement which appealed to the legitimacy of the US constitution. Nonetheless, Crenshaw's exploration of how these two narratives are used by powerful institutions to undermine both the key victories of the civil rights movement and the role the state plays in perpetuating racism in American society.

On a more micro-level, racialized individuals are exposed to repeated racist messages and behaviour in their daily experiences. (Sue 2007, Minikel-lacocque 2013, Louis et al. 2016,

Godley 2018). Derald Sue (2007) describes racial microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (p.273). He notes that racial microaggressions impair the physical and mental health of racialized individuals in that they increase stress levels and are prone to being ignored by authorities. As the literature review demonstrated, numerous researchers have evidenced the prevalence of racial microaggressions in the lives of racialized people in a variety of environments. For this section, the prevalence of these experiences serves to debunk the myth that racism is a thing of the past in North American society. Through their work, CRT scholars have shown that the narratives of racialized people must not be overlooked or downplayed as that furthers the myth of a 'colour-blind' society to thrive. CRT authors see these instances of racism as a part of a wider social process of subordination and proof that formal equality, in a legal sense has not proved sufficient in eliminating racism from the past or the present.

So far, this chapter has demonstrated how racism occurs on different dimensions. This is to say that racism is a multi-faceted phenomenon that shapes individual's social and physical reality. Racism can be overt and violent as is the case with 'traditional racism' but it can also be subtle as is the case with microaggressions and institutional racism. Racism can happen on an interpersonal level, such as with explicitly racist comments from one individual to another, and also on a structural or institutional level, such as with discriminatory policies, practices and ideology. Racism can both be instrumental, i.e subjugating a group in order to achieve a specific goal; but also symbolic in that structural domination of racialized individuals is reflected in the major social institutions (governments, schools, banks, etc.). Institutions cannot be viewed as 'neutral' actors as they too participate in the reproduction of racist culture and ideology. Having

previously been intentionally and overtly discriminatory towards racialized people through explicitly anti-Black policies, laws and ideology, institutions now perpetuate racism in more subtle and covert ways. This is congruent with the arguments of CRT authors like Fanon (1952, 1967) who suggest that institutions have employed new tactics to ensure colonial subjects are psychologically enslaved. The effects of racism are as diverse as the number of people, institutions and societies it operates in. A deep analysis of racism in any context requires a perspective which understands all social actors as potential participants in the reproduction of racism. The next section will further outline some of the core themes stated above and further narrow the scope of this research project. Using universities as a site for exploring racism, the section will outline some of the ways that racism is reproduced by the institution on a systemic level. Key to this analysis is the attempt to put these concepts in a Canadian context as the dynamics of racism are often heavily influenced by the society around it.

2.4 Policy, Racism and Canadian Universities

There have been numerous academic accounts of the prevalence of racism in Canadian universities yet the stereotype of Canada as a multicultural utopia persists (Bailey 2016, Houshmand et al. 2016, Godley, 2018). *The Equity Myth* by Henry et al. (2017) provides a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the ways that Canadian universities have participated in the construction and reproduction of racism. Within The Equity Myth is a multifaceted analysis of the equity offices/practices and procedures of all forty-nine English-speaking, publicly funded degree granting universities accredited by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). Although the authors acknowledge that almost all Canadian universities have at least some form of anti-racism policy and activism, but they are critical about the way these have emerged and their current effectiveness in dealing with the issue of racism. Although

several key policies bolstered anti-discrimination and anti-racism efforts within Canada universities such as: the Human rights code, Canadian Multiculturalism act, The Official Languages act, The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Employment Equity Act (EEA), critical race theorists are highly critical about the pervasiveness of these policies in the lives of Canadian university students, administrators and teachers. Krebs (2010) notes, for example, that Canada's depiction as a 'multicultural' and 'progressive' nation since the fairly recent wave of anti-discrimination policy fails to acknowledge the troubled, violent and oppressive long-term relationship between the Canadian government and its Indigenous communities. As demonstrated below, the notion that institutional policies and practices are underscored by racism and the silencing of minority voices is one that is common to CRT.

Although racialized people have lived in Canada for centuries, it wasn't until the 1960s that significant numbers of migrants coming from Asia, Africa and other continents arrived in Canada each year. According to Godley (2018), the emergence of human rights legislation in Canada coincided with the laxing of immigration policies during the 60s and 70s. Before that, immigration of Africans and other ethnicities deemed to be unsuitable was largely discouraged and controlled in Canada (Brown, 2008). Tim Stanley (2016) notes that even before its confederacy in 1867, the Canadian government historically excluded and discriminated against indigenous populations, Chinese migrants, Black people, and others. Through what he dubs as the racist state formation, he points to specific policies and legislation in which the Canadian government has fought to ensure that the Canadian society remained characteristically European/White. Stanley (2016) and Brown (2008) note that the English and French lawmakers at the time of confederation had no intention of allowing their descendants of former slaves or the Indigenous people of Canada to become citizens and actively sought to prevent them from

gaining these rights. Indeed, for the first hundred years of its confederacy, most of Canada's immigrants where decidedly white. For example, Statistics Canada notes that in the 1871 census, 83% of foreign born population was from the British isles, 10.4% were from Germany and 4.1% were from the United States (Statistics Canada, 2016).

With a more inclusive immigration policy and a change in the political climate, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was introduced in 1971 to much international acclaim (Bailey 2016, Godley 2018). By the 1980s, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* had established anti-discrimination policy both provincially and federally. Of particular importance to Canadian universities is the EEA which was introduced by the Federal Cabinet in 1986 and "mandates the gathering and reporting of statistics on representation of four designated groups and the formation of equity plans" from all publicly funded organizations – which most Canadian universities are (Henry et al., 2017, p.175). The EEA impacted Canadian discourse on racism because not only did it explicitly require Canadian institutions to think beyond solely gender when drafting their anti-discrimination policy, but it also raised questions of representation, fairness and removal of institutional barriers faced by racial minorities. Henry et al (2017) note that the employment of an equity framework was a response to dissatisfaction with the human rights framework. The authors argue that in the previously dominant human rights frameworks, racism was conceptualised as individual acts of discrimination and harassment, which consequently caused a focus on developing remedies for these individual instances. This explains the inability of many human rights policies to address the issue of institutional racism. Although, as Godley (2018) notes, the states' conception of 'discrimination' is continuously evolving, many have criticized the way that human rights framework ignores all but the most egregious forms of racial discrimination (Henry et al. 2017, Crenshaw et al., 1996).

This is connected Freeman's theory on how the state purports a 'perpetrator' perspective in anti-discrimination law which removes blame from the structural relations that make the reproduction of racism in a society possible and places it solely on offending individuals (cited in Crenshaw et al., 1996). Further, changes to the FCP means that employers no longer have an obligation to collect data on representation - meaning there is less incentive to have effective equity programs (Henry et al., 2017). Henry et al (2017) note that:

> *Anti-racism policies often lack support from senior administration, preventing their effective implementation. Gatekeepers, intervene to protect members of their departments, hiring, tenure, and promotion committees, departmental chairs, deans and human resources departments. While anti-racism policies are presented as a mechanism to shift academic culture and discourage harassment and discrimination, their presence may also have the consequence of preventing complaints and constraining the development of more effective models. (p.206 - 207)*

2.5 The Decolonization of Racist Epistemologies

Crucial to this process of racial subordination is the prioritization of certain kinds of knowledge or ways of understanding over other racialized forms. Much like with Fanon's (1952, 1967) theory of how colonial States ensure the continuing subordination of racialized people, the underlying premise of this standpoint is that institutions indoctrinate their students with 'knowledge' that furthers the dominant hegemony's agenda of total political control. Over time, racialized individuals come to accept their inferior position in society and seek legitimacy and political power in their society by appealing to the very epistemologies and institutions that entrenched their subordination in the first place. Racialized individuals are effectively 'forced' to incorporate white epistemologies in their daily lives in order to survive. This has the effect of the privileging of the 'white' experience over the 'racialized' experience. The institution thusly undertakes the perspective of the dominant hegemony and furthers the marginalization of the minority. Henry et al (2017) write that:

Canonical scholarship in most disciplines in the social sciences has not changed much from the colonial era, and draws almost exclusively on scholars, scholarship and journals from five or six countries in Western Europe and the United States. Consequently, many of the hegemonic paradigms within the disciplines stubbornly reproduce in teaching and research the colonial histories knowledge and narratives (p. 241).

This creates the effect of marginalizing racialized students and affirming their inferior position within the social structure. Krebs (2010) expands on this by identifying how Canadian institutions tacitly reproduce race through what is called the 'whitestream'. Krebs notes that the whitestream allows for the appearance of racial ambiguity yet remains defined by certain core tenets: whiteness, masculinity, English-speaking and the middle-class. According to Krebs (2010), the maintenance of these core principles is the primary means of colonialism in Canada, reaching beyond the relationship between the State, Indigenous communities, and inter-relations with racialized immigrants.

In the constitution of specific scholars and texts as 'canonical', university programs end up perpetuating numerous racist myths and ideologies, and equipping some individuals with the tools they need to further racism in external society; as the authors point out "Many political science students can graduate from a degree program and never grapple with issues of diversity and decolonization." (Henry et al., 2017, 261). This is not to say that white professors and students cannot produce critical knowledge about race, but perhaps a particularly damming effect of this dynamic is that racialized students do not see themselves reflected in their faculties or their curriculums. This is especially prevalent in the social sciences where issues such as inequality, discrimination and the construction of identity are integral to the course material (Henry et al., 2017). Therefore, when a racialized student is being taught Hegel's Master-Slave identity formation theory, for example, it makes sense for the student to either 'tune out' or even more dangerously, accept and reproduce it. The racialized student is inundated with

environmental cues about their status as an 'other'. This also begs the question: how many racialized students are ever exposed to the works of Fanon, Crenshaw or Dei, to name a few Critical Race theorists. How many students learn to be critical of the legitimacy of the systems which further their domination, subordination and humiliation? How many students are given the opportunity to be critical about their environment in which they are situated in? Using CRT as a framework, it becomes evident that contemporary Canadian universities are still not equipping racialized students with the tools to break from the shackles of institutional racism. Rather, they are further entrenching students in a culture of discrimination by coercing them into using 'white' epistemologies to gain legitimacy in society.

Therefore, central to this research is a theoretical perspective informed by CRT which views universities as sites of decolonization. Authors such as Dei (2014), Henry (1993), and Givens (2016) have noted how there are direct links between Canada's education system and its history of colonization. This means that racialized students in contemporary society often operate in academic spaces with the impression that their history is one of an inferior status (Dei 2014, Ong et al, 2017). Bhattacharya (2016) speaks to this point in her excellent account of racialized academics and their struggle to decolonialize academic spaces. In her work she details how students, academic journals, faculties and higher education institutions privilege white epistemologies over racialized ones. This means that racialized researchers are expected to continuously create their own spaces where they know their knowledge can be valued, validated and reproduced. For Bhattcharya (2016), racialized individuals in higher education institutions navigated their environment by both incorporating and rejecting epistemological hierarchies. She writes that:

> *Given the intersection between colonizing worldviews and microaggression,*
> *people of colour in higher education must often negotiate co-existence with the*

oppressor without drawing so much attention to themselves that they become targets of further marginalization or disciplining. In nonformal spaces, colonizing, microaggressive actions lead to rendering a target group as outsiders—as Them. This positions the group on the wrong side of the binary, designating them unacceptable or not-yet-acceptable, until their worldview has been civilized through Western (read: Anglo) sensibilities. (p.315)

For CRT authors such as Bhattacharya, Henry and Givens, the act of creating counternarratives is important in ensuring the destruction of the epistemological hierarchies which places the white experience as central and superior. Key to the rejection of these epistemological hierarchies is the process of "Making visible the ways in which Western notions of rationalism and objectivism are predicated on the elevation of an absolute and singular truth, at the expense of other knowledge systems, paves the way to opening up pedagogical space for counter-knowledges to emerge." (Dei, 2014, 243). Racialized individuals are encouraged to use these counternarratives to emphasize the importance of positionality when interpreting social frameworks, policies, theories and literature. Many theoretical traditions, schools of thought and social frameworks are not only historically exclusionary of racialized people, but also ignorant of the realities that they face. Counternarratives are needed to not only redress these historical inequalities but also provide a platform for racialized people to express their current frustrations with both structural and interpersonal racism.

Givens (2016) provides a brief exposition of this when he talks about the way that the Western education system has historically misrecognized, mislabelled and inferiorized African cultures. He notes that prior to the advent of 'New-age' African writers such as Chinua Achebe in the 1960s, Black people and cultures where overwhelmingly negatively portrayed in academic literature. These portrayals often viewed African cultures or people as sub-human and viewed the world from an European perspective. According to Givens (2016), the new-age African writers sought to awaken the self-consciousness of African readers who aspired to wrestle their self-

definition from their colonial masters. The important contribution that writers such as Achebe made was that they shifted the perspective of the reader to one that is specifically African. This afro-centric standpoint was crucial in establishing a counter-narrative for Africans who did not see themselves reflected in the literature they were exposed to (Givens 2016). Further, Annette Henry's (1993) notes that Black bodies in majority white academic spaces should be understood as sites of racialized epistemologies. Henry (1993) posits that numerous psychological and sociological frameworks have been used to perpetuate and justify racist myths in the Canadian Education system. She argues that the particular standpoint of racialized individuals in an environment designed to further marginalization, exclusion and inferiorization. For Henry (1993), Black researchers cannot remain value free in their work considering that they exist in a framework which has historically valued the epistemologies of white researchers and theorists. Therefore, Black researchers must conduct their research with the knowledge that they are speaking to a fairly limited audience – at least in Canada. However, Henry (2003) stresses that these previously silenced ways of understanding must be revealed in the changing face of education in Canada. More and more Black parents, educators and students would like to see themselves and their cultures properly represented in the curriculum and the faculty.

It is in this spirit that this study emerges. Essential to this research is a CRT perspective which views universities as potential sites of decolonization. Authors such as Dei (2014), Henry (2003), and Givens (2016) have noted how there are direct links between Canada's education system and its history of colonization. This means that racialized students in contemporary society often operate in academic spaces with the knowledge of their historically inferior status (Dei 2014, Ong et al. 2017). A deep analysis of racism in the lives of racialized people cannot simply be theorized, rather it must draw directly from the real experiences of racialized people.

This is why concepts like Matsuda's *looking to the bottom*, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, CRT and other standpoint theories are important tools to racialized people in North America. These methodological approaches allow the creation of powerful counternarratives to the dominant epistemologies. There is no need for these counternarratives to be grounded in quantitative statistics as they are validated by other research focused on racialized people's experience of racism in their environment. The participants in this study revealed their vulnerable counternarratives of microaggressions in their university with the knowledge that they exist in a space which seeks to invalidate and render invisible their experiences. The focus groups therefore served as a space to construct a critique of the dominant hegemony. Furthermore, the participants espoused that they interpreted this study as an act of defiance/protest to racism and a means through which they could ensure their voices could be heard. For the students who participated in this study, a lot of the conversations in the focus groups were centered around topics that they did not regularly get to reflect on, and the process of revealing their experience of racism on campus was seen as a cathartic one. This allowed for a fairly lively discussion in all three focus groups as the participants were excited at the chance to tell their side of the story. Students relished the opportunity to be active participants in a critical discussion of the discrimination that exists in their immediate environment.

2.6 Conclusion

Despite commendable steps to combat systemic discrimination, there are still some real challenges to discussing racism that Canadian universities need to face. The insidious nature of racism in contemporary Canada makes it that much harder to eradicate (Sue, 2007). The existing anti-discrimination policies in most Canadian universities have proven to be generally ineffective at completely removing instances of racism from universities. On a structural level, despite the

introduction of numerous anti-discrimination policies over the years, most Canadian university faculties still remain overwhelmingly white, with representation of minorities dwindling the higher up the administration you go (Henry et al., 2017). Additionally, university curriculums still predominantly use white authors and theorists as their canonical literatures (Henry et al., 2017). This creates an alienating environment for racialized students who do not see representation in their faculty, curriculum, and even their classmates. It is in environments like these where racist messages are likely to go unchecked. This is not to say that white teachers, students and other administrators cannot participate in the construction of knowledge about racialized people but as Mari Matsuda notes, the "technique of imagining one-self Black and poor in some hypothetical world is less effective than studying the actual experience of Black poverty and listening to those who have done so."(Crenshaw et al., 1996, 63). This section has outlined some of the ways that Canadian universities have participated in the construction and re-entrenchment of racism. What is clear, is that despite their image as beacons of a free-thinking and liberal democracy, Canadian universities have historically excluded and silenced the voices of racialized minorities. Contemporary analyses of Canadian universities must take into consideration their diverse populations' perspectives and opinions if they are to truly understand how racism operates in Canada. A CRT perspective provides a theoretical framework that positions the issue of racism is real and impactful. CRT allows race researchers to expose the implicit 'whiteness' that surrounds them and investigate the role that institutional, social and political actors play in the reproduction of racism in society.

3. Methodology

To be able to investigate students' experiences of microaggressions, there are a few methodological considerations to consider. Quantitative data can often fail to accurately reflect the context of a social phenomenon and lacks the thick description often found in qualitative research. Thick description facilitates more contextualized understanding of the social phenomena being studied (Morley, 2018). Most research on microaggression uses qualitative data collection techniques such as interviews, personal narratives or focus groups, as their primary method of retrieving data due to it's suitability for obtaining information about interpersonal phenomenon (Sue 2007, Minikel-Lacoque 2013, Louis et al. 2018, Lewis et al. 2013). Furthermore, this research question will use a CRT perspective to analyse the Black students' experiences of microaggressions and the terms they use to describe them. An important aspect of this research is that the respondents in it are active co-creators of the concepts and definitions in use. A quantitative analysis would only further obfuscate terms and decontextualize students' responses.

As such the chief data collection method was through semi-structured focus groups and interviews. Focus groups were initially introduced by researcher Robert Merton as 'focused interviews' as a method of finding out about consumer behaviour but they have proven to be an effective qualitative data collection method that focuses on analysing the interactions that occur within a group and identifying how it builds consensus on a topic (Morgan 1996). This can mean the verbal content of discussions by the respondents, as well as the nonverbal group dynamics that are present in all group interactions. Focus groups can often be useful in finding out how respondents speak about internalized social stressors to their peers, what role group dynamics and the flow of the conversation have to do with this, and how consensus is built (Morgan 1996).

This group dynamic was essential in establishing the level of trust and validation necessary for participants to disclose potentially sensitive information in the focus group. As mentioned earlier, racialized individuals are often isolated and feel invalidated in their attempts to address microaggressions, so it was important to ensure there was a safe, inviting and respectful environment for participants to talk about their experiences. The racial identity of the researcher helped to facilitate a more open, honest and natural responses to questions from the researcher.

For this study, three separate focus groups with identical questions were conducted. These questions were designed to elicit the different themes found present in other microaggression research; such as covert vs overt racism and the stereotypes that the students experienced. Each focus group consisted of 3-5 people which allowed for a wide variety of experiences and opinions to come to the fore. The total number of people to participate in this study was 12. The focus group sessions were designed to last roughly 45 minutes to an hour but ended but ended up lasting 90-180 minutes. Participants were encouraged to give long descriptive responses in a semi-structured manner. This is a common practice of qualitative research in which participants are co-creators of concepts and content (Louis et al. 2018). On this note, it is important to mention that the majority of participants in this study were female and this had an impact on the themes discussed.

3.1 Participants

The sampling and recruitment of participants for the focus groups was another important methodological consideration in that this study aimed to investigate experiences of a specific demographic, namely, Black university students. As the conceptualization of race as a social construct was central to this project, no limits on who could be considered 'Black' were placed. Instead, individuals simply had to self-identify as Black - whether partially or completely. This

was an important consideration as an essentialist understanding of what it means to be 'Black' may have prevented respondents of mixed race from participating. Also, no distinction was made between Canadian born respondents and non-Canadian born respondents. Research has shown that international students face their own set of challenges in the education system in Canada (Adamuti‑Trache, Anisef, and Sweet 2013; Anisef et al. 2010; Taylor and Krahn 2013; Houshmand, Spanierman and Tafarodi 2014). However, the fact that such discussions fall outside the scope of this study does not mean that elements of these challenges cannot be contextualized within a framework of microaggressions.

The students who participated in this study fell between the age range of 18-25 and were fairly representative of the university's undergraduate age range. It is important to note that the demographic of university students was intentionally chosen as they were fairly easy to access due to the researcher's own status as a Black student. These students may not necessarily be representative of the true variation in ethnicities, educational backgrounds, opinions and attitudes present within the 'Black student community' as a whole. Nevertheless, university campuses are often the perfect breeding grounds for political debate in that they acclimatize individuals into wanting to learn about the world around them (Henry et al., 2017). Furthermore a central premise of this research is CRT, which posits that racism is an inescapable reality for all racialized individuals (Fanon 1952, Crenshaw et al., 1996). This notion is important as this study asked Black students to partake in the sociological process of taking a step back from their environment and analysing a complex issue with their own experiences. Despite this, not all participants in the focus groups were familiar with the concept of microaggressions, so it was important that the researcher de-essentialized some concepts that emerged in the discussions and sought to properly collaboratively define concepts participants introduced to the study.

Because this research was conducted during the summer months when most students are not on campus, this study used a snowball sampling method to recruit participants through their existing social networks. As well as increasing the number of people that attended the focus groups, this method of sampling helped facilitate discussion in the focus groups as individuals were in some cases surrounded by people with they knew or shared a similar racial identity with. This made it easier for people to divulge personal experiences of racism without the fear they would be chastised for doing so. The researcher also made announcements in lectures and posted recruitment flyers around the campus. Due to numerous constraints such as time, funding, and labour power, this research was a small-scale study. Regardless of these limitations, qualitative studies such as this can be valuable as it allows researchers to pinpoint minute social phenomena and subject them to the process of thick description. Large-scale studies have the ability to generalize their findings but that is not the intended purpose of this study. This research project's primary goal was to examine the current and existing problem of racial microaggressions and give participants a space to express the personal narratives that are an important element of "thick description" and can play an important role in the production reconstitutive knowledge (Crenshaw et al., 1996).

To protect their privacy, the names of all the research participants have been anonymized. As an ethical social research project it is imperative to ensure that this research in no way harms the safety, dignity or privacy of the participants. However it is important to note that an environment of anonymity can have several effects on the research experience. This research relied on participants to be comfortable enough to disclose sensitive information about themselves and an environment of anonymity can help facilitate that (Vainio 2013). Considering this research involved students who may still currently be enrolled at the universities their experiences are set

in, it was essential to protect both the respondents and the individuals that they spoke about by redacting all names and places not immediately pertinent to the research topic that could lead to the identification of a participant. Therefore, this study endeavours to accurately present pertinent student responses without jeopardizing either the anonymity of the participants or the integrity of the research.

3.2 Focus Group Questions

The focus group questions (attached in Appendix A) asked respondents about their recollections of specific events as well as their opinions and thoughts on a variety of topics concerning racial microaggression in educational settings. Participants were initially asked broader questions such as 'what does Blackness mean to you' and these questions was then followed up with probing questions that sought to directly relate their responses to the research topic. Follow up questions would include "Can you think of a university -specific example were you were unfairly treated by someone else due to the colour of your skin?", "was it a student or a teacher", "how did it make you feel", "how did you respond" and "did you feel supported when you told your friends".

By focusing on specific events the researcher was able to get concrete examples of microaggressions to analyse. These questions also prompted participants to convey their general attitude about the climate of microaggressions on campus. This enabled the researcher to get a sense of how participants perceived their interactions with their peers and teachers as a whole – separate from specific experiences of microaggressions. Thirdly, by getting respondents to speak on their own both internalized and externalized coping strategies when faced with microaggressions, the questions shed light on some of the effects of microaggressions and how students deal with them. Key to the last point is the notion of institutional response and how the

student resolved the situation – either with or without institutional support. Lastly, it is important to note that any recollection of an event is subject to the bias of the respondent and what they choose to reveal at that moment – whether intentional or unintentional. The researcher played a minimized role in the conversation by acting only as a subtle prompt to keep the conversation moving and ensure everyone in the group had a chance to speak. This is a common aspect of focus groups as the group dynamic should not be one in which the researcher has absolute power, but rather one where everyone is recognised as co-participants (Givens 2014).

3.3 Data Analysis

The three focus groups that comprised this research were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded by hand to highlight consistent themes and specific experiences of microaggressions in a Canadian university setting. As mentioned above, the focus groups lasted 90-180 minutes on average, with conversations spanning a variety of topics that fall outside of this research. Students spoke at length about what 'Blackness' and 'whiteness' meant to them, social expectations from their white peers and teachers- but also their Black family members and friends - and how these things have impacted their overall attitude towards education. Special attention was paid to experiences which contained microaggressions in an academic context, but there were a number of experiences that occurred at participants' homes, workplaces and in their previous educational experiences (kindergaarten, grade school, high school, etc).

The microaggressions that emerged in this research were grouped and analysed using two different lenses. Firstly, responses were analysed according to the way that the microaggression was perpetrated. This is also referred to as the forms of microaggressions which fall into three main categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue, 2007). The second lens used to analyse student experiences of microaggressions was their content. Sue (2007)

highlighted nine common themes in microaggressions, namely (a) Being an alien in one's land, (b) an ascription of intelligence (c) Colour blindness (d) Ascription of criminality (e) A denial of individual racism (f) The myth of meritocracy (g) Pathologizing cultural values and communication styles (h) Second-class microaggressions and (i) Environmental invalidations. These nine themes were used to interpret and organize student's responses. A number of the responses provided by students fell into multiple categories and there were instances were certain categories were sparsely populated - perhaps due to the relatively small size of this study. Additionally, Sue in his conception of microaggressions did not focus on the experiences of racialized women and how specifically gendered the microaggressions they are exposed to can be. During the focus groups, numerous female respondents spoke about how they were subjected to derogatory or offensive comments about their physical appearance. Responses that reflected these gendered racial microaggressions were organized into their own category.

4. Findings

As indicated by CRT, race and racism are an inescapable reality for racialized people (Fanon 1952, Crenshaw et al. 1996). This means that it is impossible for racialized people to participate in a 'colour-blind' society as so much of their lives – their interactions, their family, their identity – is influenced by social understandings of race. Racist comments or actions do not exist in a vacuum as they reflect a much larger and ongoing process that seeks to intentionally subordinate racial minorities. Black people in this study did not experience racist microaggressions through a process of intellectualization that weighed the history of Black people with the racial diversity of today's society; rather, it is through their everyday experiences that they became informed of the various racist comments, stereotypes and behaviours that demean their background or sense of self. The repetition of these experiences helps them construct the analytical framework necessary to at least identify the insidiously racist sentiments in microaggressions. Furthermore these experiences dispel the myth of a 'colour-blind' society in Canada, as they show that racism is very much alive in contemporary campus culture and it has become well cloaked in an attempt to maintain the status quo. However, as these narratives will show, Black students are not only aware of their position within the hegemonic structure that is a university campus but also recognize the connection between the racism they face on a day-to-day basis and the structural racism that makes this possible.

Microaggressions as a concept are closely connected to the notion of structural and institutional racism in contemporary society outlined by CRT theorists like Crenshaw. According to these theorists, contemporary racism operates on a structural level and is reinforced by the interpersonal interactions within that society. This is to say that although interactions may seem banal or neutral on a surface level, the history of exclusion and discrimination in many

institutions within that society exacerbates the impact of these micro level transgressions and must be considered in the interpretation of the specific incident. As detailed by Crenshaw (1996), the idea that incidents of racism are isolated and the result of the erroneous actions of a few radical individuals is a common narrative used to distract against the very real history of racial subordination and discrimination in western society. CRT posits that states and institutions have actively participated in this process through the use of violence, inadequate or explicitly discriminatory laws and polices, and the unequal distribution of social rewards to the dominant hegemony (Crenshaw et al. 1996). Based on the narratives disclosed in the focus groups it is evident that hegemonic domination still exists in contemporary society and is perpetuated through a narrative of 'neutrality' and 'ambiguity' that supports the erasure of minority experiences. Racism may be explicitly shunned in policy and in the mainstream public sphere, but it is also regularly implicitly reproduced in certain ideologies that shape interpersonal interactions in contemporary Canadian society. Whether it be the exclusion of certain racial minorities from positions of power, the witch-hunt against certain cultural practices, the need to categorise and stereotype people from certain racial backgrounds, these sentiments only serve to further the agenda of white supremacy – which is to ensure the subordination of racial minorities. The content of these microaggressions gives us an insight into some of the common ways that racialized people are kept under control in contemporary society– as intimated by Fanon (1952). These microaggressions contain within them insidious messages that serve to undermine, insult, or invalidate racialized people. Part of this process is the lack of opportunity for racialized people to challenge the offensive nature of racist comments or actions or representations. These microaggressions are usually framed in a way that makes the recipient seem to be overreacting or overthinking the situation. In reality, the recipient is usually aware of the broader level

stereotypes that inform certain racist behaviours and comments in society. As a result, what may seem like a harmless mistake or coincidence, is in fact seen to represent the structural domination that racialized people experience on a daily basis.

Key to the analysis of these experiences is the notion that the comments and actions of non-racialized professors, institutional officials and students contribute to the development of a racist campus culture. Although some interactions may fall outside of their university classrooms, the structural nature of certain microaggressions that occur on campus, and the fact that they involve individuals associated with the university, contributes to the overall perception of the university as a site of racism. That this research focuses specifically on microaggressions within the university does not negate the effect that the external society has on the lives of students or limit their experience of racism to just the classroom. Students attending universities in large urban cities come from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences that shape their understanding of the interactions they face today. It is also important to note that although these students all have a similar racial identity, and for the most part a similar level of education, their other identity categories also play a factor in the types of microaggressions they are exposed to. For the students in his study, it is not just that they are Black, but rather that they are Black as well as being male or female, citizens or non-citizens, STEM students, art students, social science students, etc. that shapes the content of the microaggressions they are exposed to. The data shows that students' other identity categories heavily intersect with their experiences of racism within the university, as they feel that they are culturally inferiorized, invalidated and/or dismissed due to the way their race intersects with their category as a student. Moreover, students' awareness of the microaggressions they have experienced adds to the offense taken when these experiences are framed with broader level discussions of structural racism. Through

these instances of microaggressions we get a glimpse at how students and professors participate in the reproduction of racist ideology on campus.

In the three semi-structured focus group discussions in this study, the student participants reported experiencing a number of microaggressions congruent with Sue's (2007) nine microaggression categories. Although these responses were originally recorded, transcribed and organized according to Sue's categories, some themes were discussed more prominently than others. For example, there was little reference to ascriptions of criminality. Additionally, many of the microaggressions reported were interconnected and fell into multiple categories. For example, being called to speak on Black issues in class can be understood as an ascription of intelligence to Black students in white-majority classrooms but can also be interpreted an attempt to remind the student of their 'otherness'. As such, these themes have been reorganized and re-coded into four major themes that emerged from the focus group discussions: a lack of diversity in classrooms and the faculty, the invalidation of Black experiences, stereotypical representations of Black people and cultures, and gendered racism. Each category contains quotes that are examples of the various microaggressions that student's reported experiencing. Although there is much overlap between the categories, these were the four most salient themes to emerge from the three focus group discussions and represent just one way of presenting the various types of racist messages experienced by the students in this research study.

4.1 Diversity

By far the most salient theme to emerge from the focus groups was students' feelings about the lack of racial diversity in their faculty and peers on campus. This theme was reported by multiple students across different social sciences, arts and STEM programs. As one student noted, Black people are *"super underrepresented at the academic level with professors. Like,*

I've never had a Black professor, I don't think I've ever had a Black teacher…I think I've only had one Arab teacher and this is actually my second [degree]….".

Multiple students who had spent their entire lives in Canada bemoaned the fact that they had never had a Black teacher. Similarly, international students noted that the reason they had expected to face racism from their professors before arriving in Canada was due to their perception of Canadian universities as predominantly 'white'. Almost all of the participants in the focus groups were highly critical of relatively low number of Black professors in their faculty, with one participant describing her STEM program as "hella white." Another student echoed this sentiment when she revealed her frustration while taking an African Literature class taught by a white professor. She noted that regardless of how well the professor taught the material, she felt that this was an opportunity for the university to put a Black person in control of the representation of African culture in such a space. The students in the focus groups were extremely vocal about their wish to see more Black professors, T.A's and graduate students in their faculties as they saw these individuals motivation and encouragement for aspiring Black students. In the focus groups, students reported being demotivated and demoralized by the lack of Black role models around them.

> *You go to….certain...seminars or certain functions and you see you don't see a lot of Black people and therefore you wonder oh, why? Ok...why don't I see my people kind of like in this positions and therefore sometimes i feel like that in itself also becomes sort of like a, blockade in of itself, because you know, no one has gotten that far, you don't see people and you say like how many Black people have gotten PHDs and stuff and I mean if none has been there how am I gonna get there? you know what i mean? so that becomes a mentality*

> *Some of those professors they're white but they at least like they get it, and they're trying to educate their students to see the world differently, but there are some professors that just really do not understand and they're very ignorant to the fact that they may be seen differently*

As the quotes above intimate, the students in the focus groups saw the presence of racialized professors as a step towards decolonization and racial equality on campus. This sentiment was an important one as students consistently stressed the importance of education in their upbringing. This pressure to succeed and avert the stereotype of the "underachieving Black" came not only from white professors but also Black professors and members of their family and community. A number of students talked about how members of their community viewed education as a legitimate way of gaining power and respect in society. One student reported that her father had told her *"a Black man without a degree is nothing"*. Some students also pointed to Black professors who had furthered this sentiment. One student in the focus groups noted that:

> *[I've had] had two professors, two Black professors tell me since you're one of the only Black women in where I work, I work as a researcher, you know, I have to be a hyper-aware of the things that I do and how I act because you know, it will reflect on a person, but not me but like the whole [Black population]….*

A number of students also spoke of a pressure to represent other Black people in their classrooms. They pointed to specific experiences where the professor would fixate on them when discussing a topic such as race or Africa, or where a professor would isolate them from the class by intentionally focusing on how their upbringing differed from the rest of the class. This was reported to be an isolating experience that only further entrenched the 'difference' between Black students and the norm. The students reported that they felt that this kind of pressure did not necessarily exist for their non-racialized peers. For example one student describes her classroom experience as such:

> *I notice in my classes, I feel the pressure, because of this whole definition of Blackness, of representing other Black people when im the only Black person in class, and I have to try to be really smart, like we're not dumb people, we can answer questions in class and if I do something stupid its gonna reflect on the rest of the people…then the professor says something in class that concerns Africa everyone just like [looks].*

The students in the focus groups indicated that they also received both direct and indirect encouragement from Black professors to be hyperaware of their behaviour in academic spaces as their behaviour reflects on other Black students and faculty members. What was clear in the conversations that occurred in the focus groups was that Black students felt alienated from the mainstream student experience as they felt that there existed a difference in experiences between them and their non-racialized professors. Although some white professors may 'get it', there still exists significant amount of professors who do not seek to include racialized experiences in their lectures and curriculum. The perceived whiteness of their peers and professors only furthers the narrative that Black students do not see their identities or experiences represented at the faculty level.

> *I think there is a barrier because a lot of the professors are not Black, which they*
> *don't have to be, but a lot of the time they don't kind of afford that any thought.*

4.2 Invalidation of Black experiences

Another important theme to emerge from the focus group discussions is the notion that Black students feel like their knowledge and experiences are invalidated in academic spaces. As well as a lack of representation in their faculties and the general student body, students in the focus group felt that their experiences fell outside of the mainstream student experience due to the perception of Canada as a post-racial nirvana. To use Sue's terminology, the students in this study reported experiences of being made to feel like an outsider at their university. Race becomes an obvious point of marginalization, or at least differentiation, as it is it is a way that the students in this study 'stand out' from the rest of the student population. Despite many of the students in this study reporting that they had lived in Canada their entire lives, students reported being repeatedly asked "where are you from". For students, comments like these were microaggressions because they essentially asked 'where are your parents from', or as one student

put it *'why are you Black?'*. Questions like these reinforce racialized students feelings that they are perceived differently than their white classmates who do not have to face the same question regularly. Students in one of the discussion groups noted that a luxury of being white was never having to explain your background upon first appearances. However, when a Black student walks into an academic space they are not only likely to stand out from the rest of the people in that space, but they are also aware that they are being categorized by the people around them. As discussed in the section above, students were keenly aware of their "difference" from their peers. As one student noted: *"I think that when you actually get to the crux of it, like I believe to people the first thing they see is colour, that's what I think."*

The students in the focus groups reported the futility of confronting racism, citing the fact that they did not want to conform to the stereotype of the "angry Black student". A number of students reported that constantly looking for instances of racism to confront was exhausting and self-defeating. They said that they were essentially forced to pick and choose when they would confront racism on campus. Even when students did choose to confront racism, students reported a lack of institutional and social support to properly address the issue. Multiple students reported being told they were over-thinking things or that they were overreacting upon trying to confront somebody for a racist remark or depiction. This is an important part of the microaggression process as it compounds the emotions of the previous racist experience. Students reported that attempts to shutdown conversations or perspectives including race invalidated their experience and added to their frustrations with their university experience. Black students in these kind of academic settings know that should they be exposed to a microaggression and choose to confront it, people are likely to challenge their perspective or invalidate the emotions that arise as a result of the microaggression. Furthermore, students felt that any sort of objection to an offensive

remark or snub only further fueled the sentiment that Black students are outsiders in academic spaces, and are seeking to 'play the victim/race card'.

> *I think Canada has like, the indigenous experience in Canada is comparable to the African-American experience in terms of oppression and terribleness, so I think that changes things a little bit for Canada, cause I hear people say things like 'it's not that bad', 'Canada is way better than the states' and that almost like shuts people up in terms of speaking about their experience.*

Students spoke about their experiences of both university officials and their fellow students making assumptions that they are undeserving of their accomplishments and titles because of the myth that racialized students receive preferential treatment when it comes to admission into programs. There were a number examples of this microaggression throughout the focus group discussions. For example, one student identified how *"it does happen those microaggressions, like assuming like I don't know something or assuming that I'm not qualified for something has happened sometimes"*. This student felt that this assumption was solely due to her race and commented that upon first meeting her, people assumed she lacked the knowledge and skills to perform well in her role. Another student mentioned how her peers assumed her acceptance into her graduate program was due to her identity as a Black woman. She said:

> *I remember when I got into [her program] somebody asked me, or said to me, didn't ask me, said to me, 'wow you're Black and a woman? Of course, you got in!' … and its condescending it completely disregards all of your hard work, and all of your accomplishments as a human being*

She felt that when minority successes are celebrated as exceptional it can come across as condescending. Additionally, when race is used as the reason someone has achieved what they have achieved, it disregards all of the hard work that the individual has put in to get where they are. This is a dehumanizing experience, as students once again feel that they as people are reduced to just their skin colour.

4.3 Stereotypical representations of Black people and cultures

Importantly, students also felt that the lack of diversity in the professorship created an environment where racism could be allowed to develop unchecked in classrooms. Multiple students indicated that they were constantly reminded of their status as 'minorities' in academic spaces. Students in the focus groups were critical of the way that white professors negatively portrayed Black cultures and identities in their lectures. They pointed to specific examples in their classroom experiences where they felt directly insulted and invalidated by their professors. The quotes below provide some clear examples of how racism can insidiously become part of the classroom experience and curriculum:

We are in class, and the [professor] is giving a course on [redacted] and the class is getting kind of rowdy and he's making jokes and people are making noise and he's like calm down, calm down this isn't Africa.

I think, cause I took like [redacted class] right, and i actually was mentioning it to her a little bit earlier that a lot of the time I felt that classes were very euro-centric in their teaching of things and I personally like hated classes about African tribes because to me I just felt like it was always kind of presented through this like western lens and we're talking about these ancient tribes and their like…Savages

I have a similar experience to what you said in that African history class, and he was putting up images, I think he really tried to be progressive, trying to say people don't live in jungles anymore, and put up some pictures of thee Black people in east Kenya wearing their traditional clothes, and he was like people don't dress like this anymore, they are obviously more civilized and I'm like who's to say this is not civilized, do you know how warm it is there?

I took a [redacted] class and we watched a birth of a nation, do you guys know that, so I was like the only Black person in the class, and I was sitting off to the side, and the scene were they're envisioning Black people in power and in the courts, has everyone seen it?.....its a scene where there's actors in Blackface and they have their leg up on the desk and their eating chicken and their just being rowdy and it was not funny but a lot of white students were laughing, first of all, beyond it being offensive, the scene was just not funny so its like why are you laughing

I've lived here all my life and throughout my whole life there's an erasure of Black people, like Black voices in writing…how many hundred of years has there been

Black students been in postsecondary student, like I took [redacted] course and just like the way the professor, first of all the prof wrote the textbook and its like about contemporary issues and its more moral perspective and the way he talks about Africa like the continent...First of all he'll pick out two countries in Latin America, two countries in Europe, two countries in Asia, two countries in the middle east and then say Africa, like Columbia, Peru, Venice, Russia, Korea and Japan and be like Africa. No honestly though, but you know what there's levels because they'll name an Asian country or like Latin country and they'll specifically go into detail about London

Additionally, over-eager attempts to familiarize oneself with a Black student's culture were also interpreted as microaggressions. Sometimes, professors could be too quick to prove they are not racist by making insensitive assumptions and remarks in order to ingratiate themselves with the racialized student. This has the effect of making the student in question feel uncomfortable and insulted. For example, while discussing an assignment with her professor, one student in the study reported that the professor remarked "'*oh, you know Obama's kid was in my class?*" According to the student, this comment added no value to the conversation and was only made because of the student's racial identity. Another specific example that came up in the focus group was when a professor was trying to relate to a student by asking the class to share their names and heritage in an icebreaking activity. The quote below describes this experience:

My professor who is supposed to know better, takes one look at me and then looks at everybody in class and I'm obviously the only Black person in the class and she looks at me and is like okay everybody state where you're from and blah blah blah and everybody goes…they already know and when it gets to my turn I'm like I'm from Nigeria, she's like oh...my dad died there…..and I was like where exactly? She said Addis Ababa.

The student pointed out this scenario was demeaning because 1) she is Nigerian not Ethiopian; 2) She is far too young to have known of the relative during the time they had lived there; and 3) This comment made the assumption that a major African city like Addis Ababa has such close community ties that everyone in the city more or less knows each other. These types

of microaggressions only further reinforce Black students' frustrations that they are not truly understood by their peers and professors.

Perhaps the most unique microaggressions identified in the focus group discussions is the tendency for Black students to be stereotyped as French-speakers. Due to the high populations of French-speakers at the university, Black students are generally stereotyped as coming from French-speaking countries such as Congo, Haiti, Rwanada, etc. This has an effect on the type of messages and questions that Black students are exposed to. In all of the focus groups, numerous students highlighted an experience where someone on campus had assumed they spoke French. A few students even claimed that upon revealing that they did not in fact speak French, the person they were speaking to would continue speaking to them in French, as if to imply that the student was only pretending that they don't speak the language. This microaggression had numerous implications and dimensions to it but one consistent effect was that English-speaking students felt offended by the repetition of this microaggression. Anglophone students in the study felt that the stereotype of Black students on campus as French speakers was so prominent that anglophone students were isolated on campus– even by their Black Francophone peers. There were multiple accounts of students receiving what they deemed less-than-adequate treatment at the university offices due to the fact that they were unable to converse in French. A number of anglophone students reported that they believed that francophone students received preferential treatment due to the university's official bilingualism policy and that the language barrier was only further exacerbated by their status as racialized students.

> R1: you know, when I was in first year when I went to the cafeteria, people start speaking French to me.
>
> R2: Yes! Yes! everybody thinks I'm francophone, when I'm alone people think I'm francophone.

R1: I'd get offended because like in French, there's a guy who used to hang out with me for like two years right, then I told him I didn't speak French he thought I wasn't trying to speak French.

When I go to [the university's coffee shop] or whatever, they immediately think I'm French, when anyone speaks to me they always speak to me in French and like they'll speak to the next person in line in English, but they'll speak to me in French but I just feel like when I first moved here I was like haha, woo! they probably just think I'm bilingual a lot of people here are bilingual. But the longer I was here...

4.4 Gendered Racism

Another consistent theme to emerge in the focus group discussions was that Black female students felt that their gender played a significant factor in their experiences of racist microaggressions on campus. One specific example of this was a student who had attended a graduate school Halloween party wearing a Black dress and bear ears. Upon arriving to the party in her costume, partygoers asked her if she was meant to be dressed as Michelle Obama, despite the fact she (a mixed race woman) bore no clear resemblance to her. The student describes the subsequent events that followed:

I wore a Black dress and bear ears and everyone else is wearing costumes, so I show up and someone's like are you supposed to be Michelle Obama?...so I was like obviously not, so somebody said obviously 'she's not Michelle Obama, she's not dressed like a monkey', I kid you not. I went and cried in the bathroom for twenty minutes.

The quote above shows the brazen nature in which some racist messages are transmitted on campus. Despite this incident occurring outside of the classroom, that she was the only person of colour at the party and this was a party filled with people from her faculty, made the racialized student feel all the more isolated and vulnerable after the racist comment. Similarly, the majority students in this research, who were overwhelmingly female in their composition, spoke of receiving overtly offensive comments that denigrated their physical appearance. Female students

must navigate spaces that feature predominately white males and are subject to messaging which devalues their identity as racialized women. As already discussed, the lack of representation in the faculty and in university classrooms is disheartening for many racialized female students, but also has an effect on the kinds of racist messages they are exposed to. For example, multiple female students in this study complained about particularly racialized catcalling and flirting from white males such as *"you're cute for a dark-skinned girl"* or *"I bet you're a dominatrix."*

Usually, these microaggressions would be delivered in a way that seems like the offender meant to compliment the student by saying things like '*Oh you're not that Black'* or *'You speak so well….'*. However, these comments are heavily connected to negative stereotypes of Black identities and contain within them racist messages that devalue the recipient and Black people as a whole. For example, despite looking like compliments, being "cute for a dark-skinned girl" contains within it the assumption that darker skin is less aesthetically pleasing. It reproduces a beauty standard that devalues racialized women and furthers white supremacy. Similarly, assuming that all Black women are sexually dominant feeds into the hyper-sexualization and exoticization of Black women. It also relies on the "othering" of Black women and the objectification of their bodies. Female students spoke at length in the focus group about the pressures of living with a white-washed standard of beauty on campus. Female students in the focus groups indicated that they frequently received comments about their hair, complexion, clothes and body features. They expressed that they felt that non-white women were perceived as more sexually available and experienced by their peers. Darker skinned female students in this study felt that females with less pigmentation were perceived as more beautiful and they felt pressured to appear more refined. Even when they received compliments about their appearance they felt they were constantly being compared to a white-washed standard of beauty. Lighter-

skinned women in this study complained that they felt constantly fetishized and objectified on campus. They felt that their status as lighter-skinned Black women or mixed-race women gave people the courage to say offensive things around them. As one student put it, white people feel they are able to say these things to her because they feel she's 'not that Black...'. One student described her experience as a mixed race woman as such:

> *For me, the drop of whiteness that I have completely changes my everyday experiences and people say things to me like, I would love to have babies with your skin colour and like grab my hair and tell me you're complexion is so perfect and all that kind of crap…..*

As detailed above, Black female students in this study did point to specific experiences that could be categorized as microaggressions. Even though certain comments may have been framed as compliments or positive remarks, these overtly racist statements have the (intended or unintended) effect of devaluing not only the recipient but also other Black people. These kind of statements may appear positive on a surface level but they end up having a negative impact on the recipient. Black women in Canadian universities must find ways to navigate the academic space without allowing the negative messages that they are consistently exposed to affect their self-esteem. As one student noted:

> *That's why Black women have created their own space, like we've created our own entire sorority for Black women because there's no other spaces for us, its so strange to me there are so many of us and we are so accomplished but were still facing so many struggles and i think that's why we're so accomplished because no matter where we go, somebody is shutting the door in our face, or somebody is putting the barrier in front of us, and I feel like that's why Black women have to be so strong because we have to be everything and were still not considered enough.*

Although discussions about masculinity were limited due to the composition of the study sample, one male participant spoke of his experience with having his masculinity questioned

when he dyed his hair blonde the previous year. The student reported that he was called names

by other students and that it made him engage in some self-discovery. He said:

> *Yeah, I dyed my hair to blonde, everywhere was blonde and now people were still wondering shook, I actually questioned some people, some people were really confused about it, what I was doing, and then some people really praised what I did because it was just really expressing myself as a person. So I felt like when I dyed my hair it actually kind of helped me realise who i actually am, I'm very scarce and I just wanted to let people know okay we're here, and people like me, we're here, we're not all Black people because we go to university so that means we're smart or we read books or we study. Just because were Black doesn't mean that..*

4.5 Conclusion

This section has detailed the microaggressions that were discussed by students who

participated in this research study. The students were vocal about the prevalence of

microaggressions on campus. Although they may not experience directly racist attacks on a daily

basis, there is an overarching sentiment of whiteness that Black students cannot easily escape.

Through their interactions with their peers, professors, administrators and environment, student

face repeated reminders that they are not only different, but that have historically felt been

othered, subordinated and oppressed. To this end, this research has organized the students'

discussions into four broad themes: a lack of diversity and representation on campus, the

invalidation of Black experiences, the prevalence of racist stereotypes and gendered racism.

Rather than being formal and rigid, these categories are simply a way to frame students

experiences and give us a glimpse into the various manifestations of racist microaggressions on

campus.

There are some notable limitations to these focus group findings that must be

acknowledged. Firstly, there was a relatively low number of males who participated in the focus

groups (4 males to 8 Females). This may have had an impact in the types of microaggression

experiences revealed and the way certain microaggressions manifest. For example, there was

very little discussion about how racism interferes with male participant's self-perception of their masculinity or sexual identity. Conversely, female participants were more willing to discuss how these issues impacted themselves, therefore the research findings reflect this. Also, the intersection between race and religion did not come up in discussions. There were no questions that were specifically designed to elicit this topic but the close interconnectedness of these two concepts in Canada was enough to expect at least some sort of discussion about it. In truth, further research investigating these types of intersectional microaggressions on campus is needed to further understand how Islamophobia is spread and legitimized in some parts of society.

Despite these limitations, there are some notable points to emerge from this research. Firstly, as already discussed, campuses cannot be viewed as suspended from the reality of what is occurring in external society. Simply put, microaggressions do occur on campus and they are perpetrated by professors and students alike. Furthermore, the idea that Canada's historical focus on diversity and multiculturalism has led to the elimination of racism, especially in its metropolises, is false. The experiences reported by these students speak to this in that they show that universities are also susceptible to issues of racism on two levels: interpersonally through interactions between individuals and also structurally through a culture of racism on campus. The next chapter will provide a deeper exploration of this dynamic and link it to further research. Lastly, this research shows that not only are Black students aware of the racist stereotypes and microaggressions that exist in their immediate environment, but they operate and interact with this culture in a way that is personal and political.

5. Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to examine the phenomenon of racist microaggressions in a large comprehensive Canadian university campus. Similar research on this issue has shown that not only is racism alive and well on university campuses, but it is an insidious force that is still deeply embedded in the interactions and power relations that constitute the university culture (Henry et al. 2017, Minikel-Lacoque 2013, Bhattacharya 2016, Bailey 2016, Dei 2014). The majority of students in this the focus groups were able to point to at least one experience which could be considered a racist microaggression. The narratives in the focus groups showed that Black students do experience racism on campus albeit in different ways and at different frequencies. To analyse the data provided by the students, the work of Psychologist and CRT researcher Derald Sue was a useful roadmap to decoding the hidden messages in certain microaggressions. Sue's work on microaggressions provides a strong framework which categorizes common microaggressions into three broad categories: microinsults, microassaults and microinvalidations. Microassaults are essentially explicit and direct racist attacks. According to Sue (2007) Microassaults are the category of microaggressions which resemble more 'traditional' forms of racism the most. These direct and overt racist statements are not only often the easiest microaggressions to recognize but they are also the most likely to be intentionally perpetrated by the offender (Sue, 2007). Conversely, microinsults, which are more subtle and indirect comments slights or snubs target at racialized people, and microinvalidations, which are acts or comments that negate or nullify the experience of racialized people, are the two categories that reflect the more insidious and subtle way that racism operates in modern society. Within these categories are nine interconnected subcategories that distinguish the content of each type of microaggression: (a) Being an alien in one's land, (b)

An ascription of intelligence (c) Colour blindness (d) ascription of criminality (e) denial of individual racism by members of the white majority, (f) The myth of meritocracy, (g) Pathologizing cultural values and communication styles, (h) Second-class microaggressions, and (i) Environmental invalidations (Sue 2007). In the focus groups, the participants reported experiences that were consistent with Sue's nine microaggression categories and other research on microaggressions. Taking into consideration the small sample size for this study, the nine content themes outlined by Sue were spoken about at varying frequencies. For example, the assumption that Black students are criminals was not prominent in the discussions. This may have been due the relatively low number of males in this study as opposed to females or the setting of the study. However, that some microaggressions were spoken about more than others, highlights the importance that the context in which the study takes place influences the themes that emerge.

What was evident from the focus group discussions was that despite their perception as 'progressive' and multicultural spaces, microaggressions do occur on Canadian campuses. The prevalence of microaggressions on campus runs counter to the modern narrative of multiculturalism and pluralism which posits racism as a thing of the past and deemphasizes the role that universities play in perpetuating racism on campus. The ambivalence of many university administrators on the issue of how students, faculty, and the institution as a whole help promotea racist 'white' culture on campus has eliminated the hunger to understand their campuses as potential sites of racism. Once this is acknowledged, only then can we begin to make meaningful steps towards redressing some of the inequalities that contribute to this racist campus culture. Microaggressions are similar to old forms of racist domination in that they rely on the existing white hegemony to validate their ambiguity (Sue, 2007). The guise of neutrality,

ambiguity and subtlety is a powerful one used to both perpetuate racist ideologies and negate the experiences of racialized people (Crenshaw et al., 1996). The accounts in the focus groups show two clear manifestations of this: a) the prevalence of insidious and subtle forms of racism on an interpersonal level and b) a culture of racism which devalues and demeans racialized identities on campus on an institutional level and below is a deeper analysis of the various themes that were discussed by students and a discussion of some of the implications of these themes.

5.1 Interpersonal Racisms

According to the students who participated in this study, experiences of overt, direct and explicit racism were generally rare on campus. Although there were some students in the focus groups who gave clear examples of times where they felt directly attacked because of their race, accounts detailing microinsults and microinvalidations were far more prevalent in the students' focus group responses. This is consistent with the work of many CRT authors who note that modern racisms has shifted from its previous form as an overt and explicit force, to a more covert and insidious one which is much harder to identify and address (Sue, 2007, Zamudio and Rios 2006, Crenshaw 1996). Zamudio and Rios (2006), note that this shift from overt, Jim Crowe style racism serves to obscure the connection between public and private discussions of race. This shift also erases the history of race projects by appealing to a liberal ideology which ignores the historical wrongdoings done of whites in North America (Crenshaw, 1996). Zamudio and Rios (20006) point to the common use of sentiments such as a 'colour-blind society' 'equal opportunity' and the 'myth of meritocracy' to perpetuate racist systems of domination in modern liberal society. The students in the focus groups spoke at some length about not only their awareness of these sentiments but also the way that their white peers and professors used these concepts to invalidate their opinions and experiences on campus. The

students' experiences in this study were consistent with other research on racial microaggressions which suggests that racialized people are exposed to racist messages on campus on a frequent basis (Bailey 2016, Minkel- Lacoque 2013, Bhattacharya 2016). According to Sue (2007), repeated exposure to microaggressions has a negative impact on racialized individuals self worth. Students reported feeling demoralized by their environment ant these interactions over time.

The discussions in the focus groups indicated that students were aware of the subtle racism that exists in some of their interactions with their peers and faculty. A CRT standpoint sees racism as an inescapable reality for racialized individuals in contemporary society due to racist social norms and ideologies that reinforce the inferiorization of racialized people (Fanon 1952, Crenshaw, 1996). This ties in with the concept of 'stigma consciousness' that has been covered by some race researchers in North America. Within the context of this study, Black students are not only indirectly and directly ascribed racist stereotypes but are also keenly aware of this ascription. Students used their experiences and understanding of racism to properly identify 'hidden' racist sentiments in their interactions. This is consistent with other research on racist microaggressions which found that consciousness of racism increases students' perception of racist acts in their environment (Ong et al, 2017, Finch and Anderson, 2017). CRT posits that racialized bodies in white academic spaces represent a source of racialized knowledge in that racialized students become equipped with the skills to identify these racist sentiments through their interactions with their non-racialized peers (Dei 2014, Bhattacharya 2016).

As with most other research on racial microaggressions, the students' experiences of racism were not limited to academic spaces. Solorzano (2000) notes that racial microaggressions occur in both academic and social spaces; which ends up having an impact on the academic and

social lives of students. He stressed that students experience microaggressions in academic spaces from both their peers and their professors. This is a trend that was prevalent in the responses provided by students in this research project. Students reported experiencing microaggressions from both their peers and teachers with some participants remarking that they felt that professors should 'know better'. Students felt that although their white professors might 'get it', they often reproduced racist ideologies in their classrooms by either failing to treat 'foreign' cultures and civilizations with respect, or trying too hard to familiarize themselves with racialized students in the class (i.e., singling them out to speak on 'Black issues', making ignorant comments about Africa). These interactions, though individual in nature, have a compounding effect over time. Furthermore, the prevalence of these attitudes, As noted by Sue (2007), the environmental context in which a microaggression occurs plays a major factor in its effectiveness and saliency. As Sue notes, people are most likely to commit a microaggression when they (a) lose control or (b) feel relatively safe to engage in a microassault".

Put simply, people become more emboldened to commit microaggressions when they think they can get away with it or they are supported. One such example is that of a student who wore a bear costume at unofficial faculty Halloween party. In that example, two students compared the student in the bear costume to Michelle Obama and then to a monkey. While it is easy to characterize these remarks as 'just a joke', the perpetrators who made these remarks did so either not knowing the offensiveness of the joke or not caring about the ramifications of offending the racialized student. Furthermore, the student's response, which was to run to the bathroom and cry, is further evidence that she felt that she could not rely on those around her to comfort her. This shows that the impact of racism is as much a personal one as it is a symbolic and societal one. Krebs (2010) notes that humour is commonly used as a way to reproduce

racism on a micro-political level. According to Krebs, the ambivalence of the individuals in the environment to racist humor, or their support in the form of laughter, should be understood as an active part of the reproduction of racism.

5.2 A Culture of Microaggressions

These findings are consistent with other CRT research on Canadian universities. Despite the fact that racialized minorities are the fastest growing demographic in Canada, they are still heavily underrepresented in most Canadian university faculties - especially at the graduate level (Henry et al., 2017). The overwhelming whiteness of the faculty is not only perpetuated by the physical bodies which occupy the professor positions, but also by the overrepresentation in the number of white males used as canonical theorists (Henry et al., 2017). The lack of representation in the curriculum not only overlooks the important contributions of racialized theorists but also perpetuates the domination of specifically white epistemologies. This process commonly known as 'whitestreaming' (Krebs, 2010), has the effect of marginalizing knowledge created by racialized theorists and forcing them into academic ghettos (Henry, 1993). Put simply, racialized students operate in academic spaces which purport to value knowledge created by whites more than knowledge created by racialized theorists (Dei 2004). Furthermore, academia itself has intentionally sought to demean and dehumanize racialized people and their cultures (Givens, 2010). This creates an alienating effect for most students who are faced with the inescapable reality of racism in majority white spaces.

Many students in the focus groups reported that they felt they lacked the power to effectively challenge or confront racism in academic spaces. They felt that they are always outnumbered by members of the dominant hegemony in these spaces, and must pick their battles in order to survive. This is similar to William Smith's work on racial battle fatigue which

investigates how Black students in universities often experience alienation and frustration on campus (Smith et al. 2016, Smith, Franklin and Hung 2011, Franklin, Smith and Hung 2014). His research shows that repeated exposure to these racial microaggressions on campus has a negative impact on the lives of racialized students in a variety of ways. When attempting to report instances of racism, Black students must be prepared to be exposed to even more microaggressions in the form of invalidations or disbelief. Being repeatedly exposed to the racist viewpoints of white professors, teachers and peers – no matter how minor the interaction- can be a frustrating and exhausting experience (Sue 2007, Smith et al. 2016). Therefore, Black students are forced to be resilient to microaggressions in order to survive their time at the university (Lewis et al., 2016). In a sense they have no choice but to remember that they are an 'other' in these spaces and often possess the viewpoint of an outsider to the 'campus experience'. This is to say that the Black students experience of 'campus culture' is different from their white peers.

The lack of racial diversity in the faculty and curriculum serves as a symbolic representation of the external society. Universities are often depicted as training houses for the 'elites' of tomorrow (Henry et al, 2017). The significant change in the demographic make-up of the student body, combined with more and more racialized graduates, academics and professionals, has not yet spread to the 'elite' population that is the Canadian university faculty. These 'elites' who still comprise the majority of positions of authority still remain overwhelmingly white (Henry et al, 2017). This dynamic is especially compounded by the 'colour-blind' narrative that many institutions employ - including universities (Zamudio Rios 2006, Crenshaw 1996). Take for example the student whose white professor literally wrote the textbook for the course she was in. As a student, the power dynamic of the knowledge production in the class is such that she is unable to challenge the negative and racist depictions of

Black cultures that she perceives. This again speaks to the feeling of powerlessness that can come with experiencing microaggressions; Black students are rarely in the position to challenge their white professors. There has been a litany of research which suggests that the same is not necessarily true for racialized professors (Bhattacharya 2016, McCabe 2009, Lewis et al. 2013, Young et al. 2015, Henry et al. 2017). The colour-blind narrative purports what is known as the myth of meritocracy which implies that race does not play a significant role in everyday life (Sue 2007). This contradicts the reality of pretty much all racialized individuals – and in the context of this study, Black students. As CRT has shown, the current social order is a result of historical processes that have enslaved, excluded and oppressed racialized people in favour of furthering the interests and wellbeing of the dominant white hegemony (Fanon 1952, Crenshaw 1996). The Black students who participated in this research reported being hyperaware of their presence as a minority in classrooms. Once again, when an individual knows they are minority in an environment and has experienced discrimination, prejudice and humiliation because of this, they become conscious of the stigmas, stereotypes and labels associated with their identity acts (Ong et al, 2017, Finch and Anderson, 2017). Therefore, when these students interact with members of the dominant hegemony, it is very easy for them to be more attuned to the hidden sentiments behind certain comments, phrases or ideologies.

The prevalence of microaggressions in these students' responses shows that despite the depiction of modern Canadian universities as liberal, tolerant and diverse spaces, racialized students do experience various types of microaggressions in academic spaces. These racist comments, interactions and behaviors, combined with a curriculum that is bereft of racialized epistemologies and people, help create a culture of racism on campus. Indeed, out of context, some of the microaggressions reported by students may seem harmless, but interpreting them as

such only further perpetuates the 'colour-blind' narrative which seeks to erase collective memory

of the historical and social processes which have created the unequal distribution of resources

and power in contemporary society (Crenshaw, 1996). For racialized people, this myth of a

colour-blind society where racism does not exist serves as a powerful counterforce to efforts to

improve themselves. Many students in this study, spoke of the importance that education has in

their immediate families, communities and Black people in general. As alluded to earlier, if

universities are training the future 'elites' it only makes sense that racialized people seek to gain

an education in hopes of gaining an advantage in the job market. However, the dominant culture

of the university is still overwhelmingly white (Henry et al, 2017). Even though there are some

racialized professors at the university, their distribution within the faculty is sparse and they are

often not given full-time positions. For racialized students, this confirms the fact that for all their

bluster about 'merit', universities are reflections of their external society and contain within them

the same unequal social relations and interactions that exist off-campus. This has numerous

implications as Black and other racialized students thusly feel they are unable to fully identify

with the mainstream student experience. For example, one student described her perception of

Black professors at her faculty as such:

> *In school, almost invisible, I did my B.A and I'm in grad school right now, usually*
> *you'll find either Black people or people of colour being part-timers and when*
> *you look at the full time staff, like one Black professor and one woman who's a*
> *minority, so I think that…yeah its very…they're invisible.*

The students in the focus groups' experiences of microaggressions serve as

counternarratives to the idea that explicit forms of racism are a thing of the past on university

campuses. As racial minorities on campus, they are faced with numerous verbal, nonverbal and

environmental reminders that their experiences, appearance and opinions fall outside of the

'norm'. Student's were able to point to specific examples of racism both inside and outside of

their classrooms. As previously discussed, that some racist interactions occur outside of the classroom setting does not negate the fact that they take place on university grounds and involve members of the student community. The responses captured in this study were limited to experiences that fulfilled at least one of those criteria. It is still important to take into consideration all of the external and structural influences that also shape the negative perceptions, depictions and microaggressions that Black students and other racialized people on campus are exposed to. The responses provided by the students in this study are consistent with other research on racism and microaggressions in the university. This shows that there is a real problem that needs to be addressed.

6. Conclusion

This research study asked i) if Black students feel that they have been exposed to racial microaggressions on campus, ii) if so, what are some of the specific racist messages and stereotypes they are exposed to and iii) how do these contributes to the culture of racism on campus. We have seen through the narratives of the participants in this study that racist microaggressions did occur in the contemporary Canadian university that was the backdrop for these discussions. The sentiments conveyed by the participants shows that these racist microaggressions have a negative impact on the university experience of Black students on campus. This is consistent with CRT literature which posits that racism is an inescapable reality for racialized people in majority white spaces. That the students in this research gave numerous examples of microaggressions perpetrated by professors, administrators and students alike, shows that Black students on campus are repeatedly subjected to racism in the form of microaggressions, and these are perpetrated in various ways. The microaggressions reported by the students in this focus group fell into 4 broad categories: The lack of diversity in the university faculty and curriculum, the invalidation of Black experiences, racist stereotypes and imagery and gendered racism.

Firstly, the students in this research felt that the lack of diversity amongst their peers and in their professorship was a microaggression in that that it served as a reminder of their second-class status. Students were frustrated with a seeming lack of diversity and saw the overwhelmingly white professorship as a symbol of this. This is connected with the second category to emerge from the students' responses, the invalidation and devaluation of Black experiences on campus, which posits that university campuses operate using specifically white epistemologies. Henry et al. (2017) note that Canadian universities still heavily rely on canonical

theorists who are overwhelmingly white. Racialized knowledge in the university is often reduced to 'culture; or 'tradition'. This perpetuates the depiction of white systems of knowledge as the only truly legitimate systems. This is a commonly known as 'whitestreaming' (Krebs, 2010). According to Krebs, despite Canada's institutions' tendency to purport an image of diversity and multiculturalism, there is still a decidedly white, masculine, and heteronormative trajectory to the process of knowledge production in Canada (ibid.).

Furthermore, the lack of diversity on campus gives room for certain microaggressions to occur without sufficient avenues for students to report them. Although students may seek to challenge and confront these microaggressions, they feel disheartened and disempowered by the lack of institutional and social support around them. The subtle nature of microaggressions, combined with the awareness of the implications of making accusations of racism (social exclusion, denial of racism, colour blindness, etc) makes students hesitant to report these incidents. Canadian Universities' anti-discrimination and equity policies may cover explicitly offensive 'hate speech', but there are no protections against verbal and nonverbal microaggressions that fall much closer to the line of neutrality. The ambiguity of microaggressions makes them all the more difficult to eradicate. Krebs (2010) notes that the ambivalence of the white majority is a major aspect of the reproduction of racism in a society.

Microaggressions subconsciously reinforce negative stereotypes and racist sentiments and are considered to be reflective of the switch from overt and violent forms of racism to more subtle, covert and insidious forms in contemporary society (Sue, 2007). The examples of racist stereotypes and gendered racism reported by participants in this study demonstrate the insidious and ambiguous nature of microaggressions. In the focus groups, students reported that they were regularly exposed to racist comments and depictions of Black cultures in their classrooms.

Additionally, female participants reported that they were exposed to racialized catcalling on campus. As well as being offensive, these types of gendered microaggression add to the experience of 'othering'. Females who participated in this study also felt that they were both exoticized and subordinated due to a white beauty standard on campus. To the Black students in this research, these microaggressions serve as a reminder that they are outsiders to the mainstream university experience.

The responses provided by the participants in this study demonstrate that the issue of racism on campus is real and pressing one. Black students on campus are exposed to racist messages, behaviours and imagery by a number of social actors including: students, professors and university officials. The multifaceted way in which racism is perpetuated on campus speaks to a general culture of racism on campus. Universities may be hesitant to develop policies that seek to address these microaggressions in order to uphold their depiction of bastions of 'free-thinking'. Furthermore, through the literature, we have seen that policy alone is not an effect way of defining and addressing the problem of racism in society. Clearly, there must be an 'education' of sorts that changes the way people interact and communicate with racialized students. Canada's history with race is distinct from its American counterparts so its solutions must be different. There needs to be more research on the prevalence of racism in contemporary Canada, and how it impacts the lives of Canada's increasingly racialized population. Rather than uncritically accepting the narrative of Canada as a multicultural utopia, academics, students and policymakers must be hyper-vigilant of the subtle forms of racism that operate in Canadian society.

There are some limitations to this research. Firstly, this study used a relative small sample-size. There needs to be more research on this topic with larger samples of Black students

telling their experiences. Indeed, a central premise of qualitative research is the context-specificity of many of the concepts, trends and issues discussed in the focus groups. Any further research on this topic should allow participants the opportunity to define what they interpret to be microaggressions and focus on the themes and messages they experience. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of microaggressions in Canadian universities, there must be more research in other Canadian universities. It is only through these context-specific counternarratives, a more coherent depiction of what racism looks like in Canadian universities will emerge.

Furthermore, that this study uses microaggressions as a framework does not negate the fact that explicitly racist incidents occur on campus. Incidents that can be described as overt or even violent do still happen on campus today and it is important not to confuse them with subtler forms of racism such as microaggressions. Although the concept of explicit racism is somewhat encapsulated in this research by the category of 'microassaults' as opposed to 'microinsults' and 'microinvalidations', we must be careful not to minimize instances of explicitly violent racism such as police brutality or violent protests. Additionally, it is important not to conceptualize microaggression subcategories as mutually exclusive or different in their impact on their recipient. However, as discussed by Minikel-lacoque (2013), the word 'micro' can have a deleterious effect when interpreting the impact of racial microaggressions. Microaggressions are not always minor and sometimes they can have a severe effect on their recipient. Microaggressions are also subjective in that their analysis relies on a socio-historical understanding of racism in that specific context. As mentioned earlier, what may be an example of overt racism to one person, may not be a microaggression to another. However, this should not preclude them from investigation. As we have seen, what makes microaggressions so

effective and effusive is their ability to operate under the guise of ambiguity and neutrality. More research microaggressions is needed to identify some of the common themes and sentiments used to subordinate racialized people in Canada. By uncovering some of the covert messages that racialized people are exposed to frequently, we can build a more comprehensive understanding of what racism currently looks like in Canada.

Despite these challenges, there is some hope in the fight against racism in contemporary society. As one student put it, there is more diversity in the student population at this moment in time than ever before. More and more people are becoming educated about other cultures and their sensitivities. Far from being liberal wonderlands, universities allow students the opportunity to experience ideas, cliques, communities and cultures that they may have not been exposed to previously. Contemporary universities have the opportunity to encourage a campus culture that acknowledges the racist stereotypes that exist in external society and mobilize young people to critically evaluate the kinds of biases they possess. Rather than focusing solely on a few white canonical theorists or the same key individuals in the American civil rights movement, universities can embolden their professors and students alike to speak openly about the issue of racism in Canada using non-white epistemologies. As previously noted, contemporary Canadian universities must empower students to uncover the hidden elements of colonialism in their everyday lives (Dei, 2014). Furthermore, universities must address the lack of diversity in the professorship and amongst administrators as this creates a demoralizing effect for students. Although most public Canadian universities conform to the Employment Equity Act, the majority of faculties and departments in Canada are still overwhelmingly white (Henry et al. 2017). More diversity in the professorship and curriculum not only eliminates the severe power

dichotomy that frustrates racialized students but also fosters the emergence of an anti-racist campus culture, that seeks to redress the historical inequalities that still permeate today's society.

Microaggressions, although gaining more prominence in the public consciousness, are still a fairly crudely conceptualized phenomenon in the social sciences. A deeper understanding of how these micro-level interactions contribute to the broader process of structural and institutional racism in Canada will only help to further the cause of anti-racism in Canada. Moving forward, there needs to be more research on what microaggressions look like and how microaggressions both transcend and intersect different identity categories. As well as giving us a glimpse into the way that racism operates in society, microaggressions can also provide the evidence needed to convince even the staunchest white liberal that they too participate in the perpetuation of racism. Importantly, understanding how racialized people cope with microaggressions today can help us as a society develop a more robust understanding of racism and equip us with the perspective necessary to begin effectively engaging in the decolonization of all Canadian institutions.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Guide

Opening Focus Group Questions

How would you describe the relationship between you, your race, your professors and your peers?

Have you ever learned about 'Blackness' or 'Black issues' in your university career?

If you did, where (which class) and how did you learn this?

How would you describe your satisfaction with the representation of 'Blackness' in your curriculum?

How do you recognise instances of racism on campus?

Would you say you experience racism frequently or infrequently in class? Why?

How have these experiences affected your overall attitude towards higher education?

Category Specific Questions (Microaggression themes in brackets)

Has anyone in your university education ever said 'I don't see colour' to you, or some variation of that phrase? (Colour blindness)

Has anyone ever made you feel like you were less intelligent than your peers because of your race? (Ascription of intelligence)

Have you ever been made to feel like a criminal at school? (Ascription of criminality)

Have you been made to feel like your ethnic or family traditions are culturally inferior? (Pathologizing cultural values and communication styles)

 Have you ever been made to feel like an alien/outsider? (Being an alien in one's land)

Have you ever witnessed your white peers receive preferential treatment by a professor or another peer? (Second-class citizen)

Do you feel that your learning environment ever directly or indirectly invalidated your experience as a Black student? (Environmental invalidations)

Probing Questions

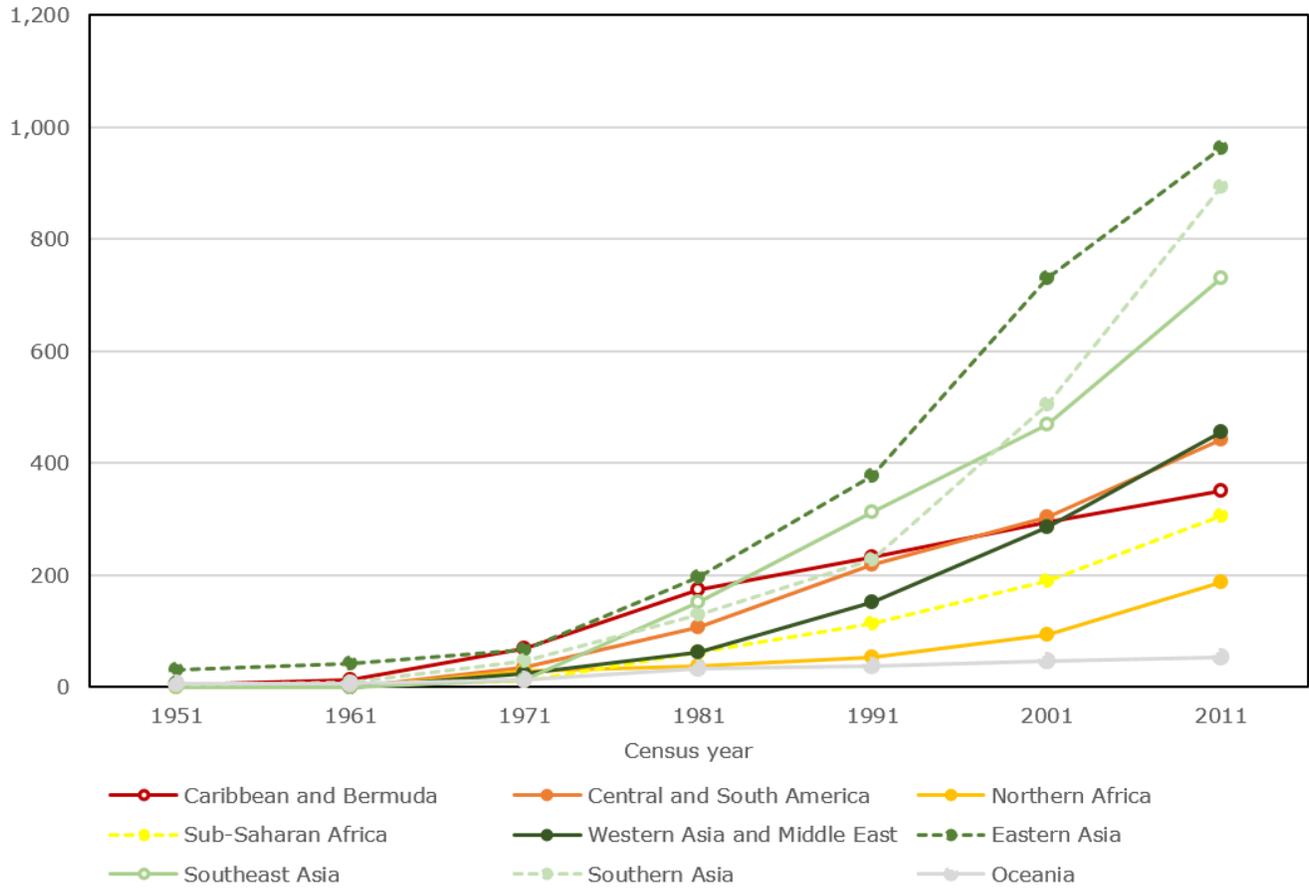How did it make you feel?

How did you respond?

How did you cope with this experience?

How would you describe the response when you reported the incident to your friends, peers, or institutional officials?

Foreign-born population in Canada, by selected regions of birth, 1951 to 2011

Population (in thousands)

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1951 to 2001. National Household Survey, 2011.