Documenting the racialized experiences of Health Behavior graduate students

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Executive Summary

Background: A growing body of literature indicates that students of color experience racism and marginalization during their graduate training, resulting in feelings of isolation, tokenization, frustration, anger and neglect by their departments. Extensive research indicates that self-reported racism is associated with negative mental and physical health outcomes, and unhealthy behaviors. The purpose of this study was to explore the racialized experiences of students of color within the Department of Health Behavior (HB) at the Gillings School of Global Public Health. Developing a better understanding of students' racialized experiences will help the department identify approaches to address diverse student needs.

Methods: The research team conducted 14 in-depth interviews (IDI) and two focus group discussions (FGD) with current and former HB masters (MPH) and doctoral (PhD) students who self-identified as a person of color or underrepresented minority, and who had completed at least one semester of training between 2012-2018. Participants were recruited via word of mouth, email listservs, and flyers, and were offered $20 cash compensation for participation. IDIs and FGDs were transcribed verbatim through a transcription service. Researchers wrote analytic memos summarizing key concepts from IDIs and FGDs, and developed matrices that covered three apriori topic areas: classroom experiences, faculty relationships, and resources (social and financial support). The researchers met and discussed analytic memos during several meetings to arrive at common themes within and across interviews, and developed recommendations for this report. Member-checking was conducted by sending a draft of the report to participants and soliciting feedback on interpretations and priority recommendations.

Results: Participants felt their experiences in the classroom were shaped by the whiteness of the faculty and curriculum. They reported that there was little to no acknowledgement that people with lived experiences were in the room when discussing racism, health disparities and inequities, contributing to strain between students of color and white classmates. In terms of relationships with faculty, participants discussed different expectations and support from faculty; students of color were seen as exceptional when they performed well, and were more often denied support when they experienced challenges compared to their white peers. White faculty did not understand the lived experiences of students of color, and efforts to include discussions on race and racism were seen as superficial. Faculty were defensive when confronted with issues, and relied on students of color to educate them, further replicating unequal power structures. In terms of support, participants described inequities in the distribution of financial support and challenges making ends meet on student stipends. They found social support among students with shared identities and various offices on campus. Some students found it difficult to find a community within the department.

Recommendations: Recommendations were developed based on participant suggestions, interpretations of recurring themes, and member-checking. Classroom recommendations include: creating norms around acknowledging race and racism, meaningfully incorporating theories and frameworks developed by and with people of color into class discussions and assignments, and investing in higher levels of accountability for both faculty and students about racialized experiences. Faculty recommendations include: incentivizing faculty to engage in enrichment opportunities focused on race and racism, recruiting diverse faculty, improving mentorship, and encouraging faculty to seek out guest speakers for conversations outside of their comfort zone. Financial equity recommendations include: increasing transparency in hiring

practices for research/teaching assistantships and how financial resources are distributed and prioritizing funding for students of color. Support service recommendations include promoting available services, creating an alumni network of people of color, and developing resources to help students of color navigate being members of the community they are studying/working with.

Background

There is a growing body of literature which indicates that students of color experience racism and marginalization during their graduate training (Gay, 2004; Truong & Museus, 2012; Trong, Museus, & McGuire, 2016; Hubain, Allen, Harris, & Linder, 2016). Students of color report feeling isolated, tokenized, angry, frustrated, fatigued, and neglected by their departments (Gay, 2004; Hubain, Allen, Harris, & Linder, 2016). Furthermore, students describe the pervasiveness of targeted and vicarious racism, microaggressions, and trauma (Truong & Museus, 2012; Trong, Museus, & McGuire, 2016).

Experiencing racism can have severe impacts on the psychological and physical well-being of students of color attending historically white colleges and universities. Extensive research indicates that self-reported racism is associated with negative mental health outcomes (i.e. depression, anxiety, stress, emotional distress), negative physical health outcomes (premature births, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension), and unhealthy behaviors (i.e. smoking, alcohol misuse, substance misuse) (Pardies, 2006). Additionally, experiences of racism can impact the educational experiences and training opportunities available to students during their education, which can limit their professional opportunities upon graduation (Gay, 2004; Trong, Museus, & McGuire, 2016) resulting in the underrepresentation of people of color in the public health workforce (Grumbach & Mendoza, 2008).

Racialized experiences are instances in which the recipient is made aware of differential treatment according to their race and can include microaggressions, experiences of overt racism, and an awareness of oppressive racial power dynamics that may have a cumulative effect over time. Examining the racialized experiences of individuals within a given organization can provide insight into cultural and institutional practices and norms that can be changed to provide welcoming and inclusive places of work and study for all.

Study Overview

In the fall of 2015, the Department of Health Behavior (HB) at the Gillings School of Global Public Health launched a diversity and inclusion initiative in response to reports of challenges students of color experience inside and outside of the classroom related to racism and marginalization. The purpose of this study is to help the department develop a better understanding of students' racialized experiences and identify strategies to address diverse student needs. The objectives of the research study include the following:

    a. Describe the racialized experiences of current and former students of color in the HB department
    b. Describe students' experiences of oppression in the classroom and other HB department environments
    c. Describe the structural and social resources that students of color draw upon for support

The intention of this report is to present evidence that will inform the development and improvement of supportive resources for students of color, and point to areas where the department can intervene to prevent instances of marginalization and oppression.

Methods

A study coordinator who was not affiliated with the HB department was hired to conduct 14 individual interviews and to facilitate two focus groups with current and former HB graduate students. Participants included Master of Public Health (MPH) students and alumni, and doctoral (PhD) students and alumni. To participate, students had to self-identify as a person of color or underrepresented minority and have completed at least one semester of graduate training within the HB department between 2012-2018. Current students and local alumni were recruited for focus groups.

All participants were offered $20 cash as compensation for their participation. Participants who took part in in-person interviews or focus groups were given the incentive after completing the interview. Participants who conducted phone/Zoom interviews were asked for their address so that the money could be mailed to them. Two participants waived compensation.

Recruitment procedures

Participants were recruited via word of mouth, email listservs, and flyers. Participants interested in the study sent an email to an account managed by the study coordinator and research team. When a participant indicated interest, the study coordinator responded to the email to confirm that they met the inclusion criteria and scheduled them for a focus group or individual interview. For both interviews and focus groups, participants were provided consent forms before beginning, and encouraged to review and ask questions. Signed consent forms were returned in person or via email.

Focus groups

The study coordinator facilitated two focus groups. The first focus group included three current master's students and one alumnus of the master's program. The second focus group included three current doctoral students. Both focus groups lasted two hours and were held in a private room.

Individual Interviews

Eight alumni and six current students participated in one hour individual interviews, either in person or on Zoom, a video conferencing platform. All individual interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. Participants who participated in the in-depth interviews were not eligible to participate in focus groups.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a transcription service and quality checked by the researcher team, who also read the transcripts and wrote analytic memos summarizing key concepts from each interview (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Analytic memos were used to develop matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that covered three main topical areas: classroom experiences, faculty relationships, and resources (social and financial support). The research team met and discussed analytic memos during several meetings to arrive at common themes within and across interviews. Member-checking (Krefting, 1991) was conducted by sending a

draft of the report to participants and soliciting feedback on interpretations and priority recommendations.

Results

Classroom Experiences

Participants had a variety of experiences in their respective Health Behavior programs. In reference to the overall program design, participants felt the Health Behavior department maintains a "white gaze" in program structure and is grounded in white supremacy culture. Participants reported feeling that they had to perform whiteness to succeed in the program. They also described a number of interrelated experiences around the themes of racial discussions in class, classroom interactions with faculty and classmates, and the challenges of working in public health as people of color. Many participants felt that faculty approached discussions of race and health in a "dry, academic manner" rather than engaging deeply in how to undo the history of racism in public health. They felt these issues were relayed to students as the result of objective disparities in health outcomes that are inherently tied to racial identities, rather than as products of racism and white supremacy. Structural factors and community strengths and assets were usually overlooked when discussing population health.

Classes in the HB Department are overwhelmingly white, and participants reported little to no acknowledgement of the presence of students of the same identity of the populations being discussed. They also reported minimal support for students of color after charged conversations such as violence against people of color, police brutality, and other topics that disproportionately affect communities of color:

> *That class was incredibly emotional for me, beyond just being an emotional person. It talked about gun violence, it talked about communities that … I grew up in, the setting that they were talking about, and I was visibly emotional, to the point where my face was red, my eyes were puffy, I'm crying in class. Not a single one of my instructors came up after to make sure that I was okay. - MPH participant*

Discussions of race and racism in the classroom contribute to strain between students of color and their white classmates. Participants felt heavily burdened with leading these discussions and having to educate their classmates, while simultaneously being denied opportunities for their own growth:

> *So I just think it becomes unfortunate because I think as a student of color, one, my experience becomes a learning tool for other people and then two, I don't feel challenged. Because there's this whole thing of, we've got to help white students and non-students of color to get to where all the students of color are. - MPH participant*

Overall, participants expressed that they were not supported to handle the emotionally taxing nature of discussing racism and health disparities, both in the classroom and when they were out into the field during or after their programs. For many participants, it was impossible to separate this work from their own communities and personal identities. Participants wished to see more resources intentionally integrated into their programs, specifically to help them develop healthy ways to deal with this reality. Even the repetitive expounding of the harms of racism on health outcomes can be experienced by students of color as secondary trauma, and

participants voiced a need for support in processing these conversations which may touch on violence and oppression in their own communities, families, and selves.

Faculty

Relationships with faculty and advisors are an important aspect to masters and doctoral degree programs. However, many students of color in the HB department found their experience with faculty lacking emotional and instrumental support. Participants felt that they were offered less support and access to resources than white students, especially when they were struggling outside of school. Participants experienced a difference in faculty expectations between themselves and their white classmates, including the pressure of speaking on behalf of their identities, the expectation of being an exceptional representative of their identities, and the dismissal of concerns or criticisms.

Within the classroom, participants expressed the constant anxiety of simultaneously being singled out as a representative and spokesperson for their race while also being regularly confused for other students of the same race. As representatives of their identities, participants were constantly exposed to stereotypes of racial identities expressed by faculty. For instance, at times faculty acted surprised at the success of students of color in class. Participants expressed that they attributed their own successes to their assimilation into white norms. The following quote illuminates one student's experience feeling pressure to assimilate:

> *It makes me feel maybe a little hesitant to … be as open about my identity and … my experiences and how that shaped my identity. Um, to really, again, like receive that mentorship because I don't want to … be open about myself and ... my experiences and not, I don't know, for it to not be recognized, I guess.* - MPH participant

Additionally, some participants added extra weight to relationships with same-race faculty members. These relationships were especially meaningful for students, leading some to seek out relationships with other faculty members who were not their advisors, and who could provide understanding and shared experiences with the participants.

> *Having that shared racial identity definitely added to like a more positive and like strengthened experience and relationship.* - MPH participant

Participants expressed a lack of support from faculty when they were struggling with their coursework or personal issues. When participants asked for support, the departmental response elicited a sense of guilt and judgmental regard; students felt like obstacles were their fault and the onus was on them to find a solution:

> *All around, I would ask, you know like, "What can I do to be able to succeed on this?" And the response to me was basically like, "you need to figure out what you need to do" and people have already offered, you've already taken [their] classes... nobody has to spend the extra time with you to do this, it's really on you to figure out what you need.* - PhD participant

Participants reflected on the obstacles they encountered in contrast to resources and support that white students were able to glean from the department, their advisors, and mentoring faculty. Participants felt they were often on their own to solve any challenges they

encountered. In several cases, students shared experiences of faculty being antagonistic and reluctant to provide advising.

> *In my experience, there wasn't very much faculty that were really going to go to bat for you. I had an experience where I really felt like, and other people outside of the department that knew my situation, felt like ... they were responding to me in a very racist way, in a very unsupportive way.* - PhD participant

Resources
Financial Support

Participants expressed confusion about funding opportunities, including scholarships, research assistantships (RA) and teaching assistantships (TA). Some participants received messaging from the department that they had to find their own funding, and expressed a lack of support from the department.

Participants talked about resources being distributed based on luck or who you know. They felt that resource distribution was unstructured and based on relationships, reporting that often the same handful of classmates were receiving numerous awards or positions. This was primarily reported by Masters students who felt like there was already limited financial resources for them.

> *There is a perception that there is like 10 people that get everything, whether it's a TA-ship or a fellowship or just funding or positions or anything like that.*- MPH participant

Participants spoke about frustration with the payroll system, and delays in getting paid. They mentioned that the emergency funds available for students were minimal, and not everyone was aware of them. One participant felt they were perceived as more financially stable than they were, and found it difficult to navigate funding. Participants spoke about feeling like there was an assumption from the department that students are from middle-class backgrounds:

> *I definitely think, in general, [the department] acts like you're from a privileged middle class and that you just have to rough it a little bit for grad school. I was like, "Well, no, I roughed it my first 18 years." I need to have some type of structure.* - PhD participant

One participant, who identified as a first generation graduate student, expressed how difficult it was to find funding resources. They felt that there was a lack of understanding from the department about how difficult it is to live off a PhD stipend:

> *...it's hard. Like I work - currently and almost throughout the entire time I've been in the PhD program - three jobs. Just a stipend here is not gonna cut it. You got to work multiple jobs. Yes. And it delayed my ability to finish my dissertation, but like I got to eat…* - PhD participant

Social Support

A resounding theme among participants was the connection with peers within their cohorts. Most spoke about connecting with students who shared their racial identity or were also people of color. These students provided social support and mentoring to help navigate finding additional support services (i.e. funding).

And so that was nice to have kind of a smaller kind of support system. I don't think we were all necessarily best of friends and people are definitely friends with people outside of the group, like with white classmates that they were closer to. But it was a space of understanding. - MPH participant

Several participants mentioned finding racial affinity groups within Gillings and across campus, as well as seeking out virtual communities (Facebook). Two specific institutional support systems were mentioned, the Institute of Minority Excellence (IME), an initiative from The Graduate School's Diversity and Student Success program, and the Office of Student Affairs**.** IME offers Writing Wednesday and other programming that provides positive spaces and helps connect students with similar backgrounds.

I love a lot of the programming they do at IME of the grad school. It's just been a nice way to connect with people outside our department who have shared experiences. - PhD participant

...the Office of Student Affairs, and that's predominantly people of color in that office. It's one of the places where I don't think there's ever been a time where I walk in there and I don't walk out feeling affirmed and happier. - PhD participant

Some participants discussed difficulties finding community and support within the department, feeling isolated and unable to find resources specific to their needs as students of color. This experience was particularly strong among participants with academic and personal challenges. Participants reported that relying on peers was not always an appropriate coping mechanism, leaving them struggling with who to turn to in stressful times:

I don't feel like I have a straight support network here, and then I don't always want to have to turn to students of color because you know, I mean, yeah, we're students of color, but we don't all have the same issues that we're dealing with. - MPH participant

Recommendations

Findings from participants suggest that significant changes should be made in the HB department in order to make a more equitable and inclusive environment for students of color. Recommendations included in this report are both direct suggestions from participants, as well as interpretations based on common themes. Recommendations fall into the broad categories of classroom culture and departmental norms around race and racism, faculty, equity and transparency around distribution of funding, and support resources. While these recommendations were developed prior to the publication of the Gillings' Inclusive Excellence Action Plan (IEAP) on the school's website, our findings support several of the IEAP recommendations. Where appropriate, we have noted the specific IEAP recommendations that are reflected in the recommendations in this report.

Classroom Culture & Departmental Norms Around Race and Racism
1. **Recommendation:** Create norms around acknowledging the role of race and racism in institutions and in public health.

       a. Set explicit norms around talking about race. This may be incorporated into orientation, or pre-arrival preparation materials, and should be revisited frequently.

       b. Provide decompression sessions following classes with potentially triggering topics with mental health professionals who are not faculty or students in the department. Provide group and one-on-one options for students and faculty to process their experience and trauma.

Intended benefit: Developing these norms will reduce the burden on students of color to teach their peers and reduce the incidence of microaggressions.

IEAP Recommendation 2: Require social justice and racial equity training at orientation, as part of the curriculum and in the classroom.

2. **Recommendation:** Meaningfully incorporate theories and frameworks developed by people of color and with marginalized communities into classroom discussions and assignments throughout the training.

       a. Include theories such as: Critical Race Theory, Black pessimism, Black optimism, decolonizing methodologies, queer theory, necropolitical theory, crip theory, intersectionality (specifically that which originates from Black legal and feminist studies), and others that go beyond the standard psychosocial theories.

Intended benefit: Inclusion of these theories will improve the caliber of research and practice produced by the department.

3. **Recommendation:** Invest in higher levels of accountability for both faculty and students around racialized experiences.

       a. Improve mechanisms through which students experiencing aggressions or oppression can safely and anonymously report.

       b. Make perpetrators of bias aware they are not meeting departmental expectations and hold them accountable for their actions in a manner commensurate with the impact of infractions.

Intended benefit: Developing these mechanisms will ensure that people who have been harmed feel heard and may reduce further incidents.

Faculty

1. **Recommendation**: Restructure faculty departmental service requirements to ensure faculty engage in enrichment opportunities focused on racism and racial equity.

       a. Develop enrichment opportunities for faculty to engage in learning skills on how to: facilitate conversations about race in the classroom, create a supportive culture for all students in the classroom, and learn how to build trust with students in order to skillfully handle conversations around racism.

Intended benefit: These enrichment opportunities are in line with the CEPH #6 requirement ("Discuss the means by which structural bias, social inequities, and racism undermine health and create challenges to achieving health equity at organizational, community, and societal levels"). Having well-equipped faculty will improve classroom experiences for all students.

IEAP Recommendation 1: Require inclusive excellence training, including a strong antiracist training component, for faculty, staff and TAs.

2. **Recommendation**: Increase faculty diversity in the department to be more reflective of U.S. demographics.

       a. Recruit faculty of color to apply to the departmental openings by advertising in targeted job posts, going beyond existing social networks, being more

transparent on the requirements for consideration, and expanding the research areas typically hired in the department.

b. Prioritize hiring faculty of color.

c. Enrich the environment for current faculty of color to increase the rate of retention. For example, being cognizant of the disproportionate number of "asks" faculty of color have to be on diversity committees, search committees, and general service requests.

d. Hire additional faculty who specialize in research and practice around racism and health to help build out this line of research within the department and better support students interested in this area of study.

Intended benefit: More faculty of color will provide greater diversity of experiences and perspectives necessary to do equitable public health practice and research. Additionally, a diverse faculty attracts a more diverse cohort of high-caliber students.

IEAP Recommendation 5: Improve recruitment and retention of Gillings faculty, staff, and students from diverse backgrounds.

3. **Recommendation:** Improve efforts in mentorship and investment in students.

a. Set clear expectations for faculty advisor engagement with students to improve communication and transparency between faculty and students.

b. Develop concise and concrete steps to connect students to accurate and appropriate resources, interests, and career assistance during the program

c. Create accountability measures and consequences for faculty and instructors who do not fulfill their advisor/mentor requirements.

Intended benefit: Improving faculty-student mentoring relationships will improve student outcomes during their training at Gillings and improve professional prospects after graduation.

4. **Recommendation:** Invite guest speakers for topical conversations outside of faculty members' comfort zone.

a. Develop a priori criteria or specific questions to thoughtfully determine the appropriate member of the teaching team (faculty or TA) or guest lecturer (other faculty, staff, professional) to facilitate or co-facilitate conversations on race and racism.

Intended benefit: Inviting guest speakers to facilitate these conversations will ensure that discussions will be moderated appropriately.

Equity and Transparency in Distribution of Funding

1. **Recommendation:** Increase transparency in hiring practices for research/teaching assistantships and how financial resources are distributed.

a. Create more systemized ways of broadcasting funding opportunities, and ways to apply, in the department. This includes emailing opportunities to listservs as they are available, adding an RA section on the weekly department email, and/or developing a jobs board on the Health Behavior website.

b. Post more explicit information about the criteria used to select who receives awards.

c. Hold information sessions throughout the calendar year about School-Based Tuition (SBT) opportunities. Ensure SBT positions are available for different research skills (i.e. inclusion of opportunities for qualitative and community-based research).

   d. Ensure tuition sessions and materials are developed to demystify the language presented in posts so that students can better interpret opportunities and understand that full funding may not cover all fees and tuition.

  Intended benefit: Making these changes will ensure that all students are aware and have an equal opportunity to apply for positions.

  IEAP Recommendation 4: Advocate on behalf of students for living wages, fairness in hiring practices, and greater transparency regarding employment opportunities.

 2. **Recommendation**: Prioritize and increase funding for students of color.

   a. Allocate resources for grants and scholarships for students of color.

   b. Prioritize students of color for fully-funded positions and non-service awards.

   c. Increase salaries for positions to living wage standards.

  Intended benefit: These changes will decrease financial stress among current students and improve recruitment and retention of students of color.

Support Resources

 1. **Recommendation:** Develop and promote support services for students of color.

   a. Establish a robust alumni network of students of color, so that incoming and current students can ask questions related to the program and build a social network of professionals.

   b. Invite members from IME and the Office of Student Affairs to speak at the beginning of the year to make students aware of the resources they provide. In addition, develop comprehensive resource lists that students have access to.

   c. Seek consultants with expertise to develop resources for students of color to help them navigate complex relationships with and membership within communities they are studying/working with.

  Intended benefit: Developing these resources and making them available to students of color will improve mental health and feelings of isolation in the department.

Conclusion

  This report is the result of extensive student organizing and capacity-building in order to conduct research that systematically documents experiences that are common and recognizable to many students. While these experiences are often discussed among peers, the power dynamics that exist within higher education institutions make it challenging for students to effectively bring these experiences to the attention of faculty and administrators. In conducting this research study and developing the above recommendations, we hope to honor the experiences of past, current, and future students who may identify with the findings described in this report. We have heard countless times that students do not simply want to share their experiences. They want real, systemic change that will improve the culture and environment in the HB department so it is a nurturing and enriching learning environment for all.

  The study has several notable strengths, including the training and background of the study coordinator who conducted the interviews and focus groups. We extend our gratitude to this person for the skill and thoughtfulness they brought to the role, which resulted in a rich and nuanced dataset. By limiting the study population to HB students and alumni, we were able to delve deeply into the specific nature of life in the HB department as a person of color or underrepresented minority. The trustworthiness of the study findings was enhanced through the process of member-checking, in which each participant was given the opportunity to read drafts

of the report and verify that the description of the results accurately portrayed their experiences, and that quotations were framed appropriately.

We would also like to note some limitations. The analysis conducted for this report was primarily descriptive, guided by the main topics from the interviews and focus groups that were defined a priori. This allowed the research team to gain a big-picture view of the important themes related to each topic area. Future research with this dataset should involve a more in-depth, inductive analytic process to identify more nuanced patterns and themes in the data. Focusing on the HB department means that the results reported here may not be generalizable to the experiences of students in other departments within Gillings and UNC. Future research should examine the racialized experiences of students in other departments across the School and University. Finally, our results do not speak to the specific experiences of various racial identity groups within the department. Anti-Black racism is pervasive in educational institutions and further marginalizes Black students compared to other racial and ethnic minorities. We were unable to capture important differences in Black students' experiences compared to the experiences of Asian American students or students of color who may "pass" as white. Future research should examine the variability in student experiences across racial identity groups.

We are grateful to the HB department for providing the funding for this study. The funds were allocated to research activities including participant incentives and transcription. With the exception of the study coordinator, all members of the research team contributed to this study and the development of the report on a volunteer basis. We note this because while we hope this work can be continued in future research endeavors, we recognize that students of color are often called on to lead equity-related work within universities. When students of color are uncompensated for their labor, there is a risk of compounding racial disparities in student experiences within university settings.

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