CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND THE IMPACT OF OPPRESSION NARRATIVES ON THE IDENTITY, RESILIENCE, AND WELLNESS OF STUDENTS OF COLOR

by

GerDonna J. Ellis

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Communication

Boise State University

May 2020

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS

of the thesis submitted by

GerDonna J. Ellis

Thesis Title: Critical Race Theory and the Impact of Oppression Narratives on the Identity, Resilience, and Wellness of Students of Color

Date of Final Oral Examination: 19 March 2020

The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by GerDonna J. Ellis, and they evaluated their presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

Kelly Rossetto, Ph.D.	Chair, Supervisory Committee
John McClellan, Ph.D.	Member, Supervisory Committee
Christina Ivey, Ph.D.	Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Kelly Rossetto, Ph.D., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved by the Graduate College.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother and father who never let-up in instilling in me a love for reading and history. You both stoked the fire in my heart to pursue truth at all costs. Thank you for the constant encouragement when I feared failure and felt like giving up.

ACKNOWLEGMENTS

Romans 8:37—*Yet in all these things we are **more than conquerors** through Him who loved us.*

There are so many people who come to mind that I want to thank for helping me through this process. First, I want to thank my amazing advisor, Dr. Kelly Rossetto, who let me vent, challenged my ideas, helped me organize my thoughts, and reassured me that this was good work. Thank you for being the best advisor. I could not have done this without you! I also want to thank my committee members John and Christina for challenging my worldview and broadening my perspectives. I didn't know how much I cared about the stories we tell and identity until I took classes with both of you. Thank you! I would be remiss if I didn't thank my cohort throughout this process. It has been so special to go through the program and share thesis memes with you all! Specifically, Blake, thank you for letting me talk through my ideas and always cheering me on.

Ray and Angel thank you for your constant prayers, check-ins, and advice as I bounced my ideas off of you and picked your brain. And Brynn, thank you, my sister. Our coffee dates where we interrogated some of these ideas together and you prayed with and encouraged me to keep going meant the world to me. All those who are a part of my Nampa Christian family who prayed for me and with me during this journey. Thank you.

Finally, thank you to all of the wonderful people who participated in this study and were graciously willing to share your stories and perspectives. This thesis would not be what it is without you!

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I explore the different stories students of color draw from and internalize to understand their identities in relation to oppression and resilience. Through reviewing critical race theory (CRT) and critical whiteness literature, I identify what I call the "oppression narrative", in which students of color are often discussed as being oppressed and disadvantaged. Stories are powerful, and in many ways the stories we hear and believe about ourselves make us who we are. Eight narrative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who attended a predominately white institution (PWI) and identified as black or Latinx. Seven themes emerged as influential in how these students chose to identify themselves, and how their stories reflected oppression and/or processes of resiliency in making sense of and navigating their world: *external/internal identity tension, not leading with challenges, claiming privilege or support, denying a deficit, identity as an anchor, using community,* and *reframing circumstance and highlighting victories*. These eight students' stories rejected the oppression narrative and their narratives reveal the many ways in which they engage in processes of resiliency through difficult circumstance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRT	Critical Race Theory
PWI	Predominately White Institutions
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"I have begun everything with the idea that I could succeed, and I never had much patience with the multitudes of people who are always ready to explain why one cannot succeed."

— Booker T. Washington, Up from Slavery

Former slave and founder of Tuskegee Institute

Rationale

Critical race theory (CRT)—the movement—has gained attention in the mainstream world over the last several years. Early in 2019 the Southern Baptist Convention met in Birmingham, Alabama and received criticism for passing a resolution to allow the use of CRT and intersectionality as analytical tools to address issues of race within the church (Southern Baptist Convention, 2019). In another instance, in the October 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*, Jemele Hill, an American sports journalist and former ESPN commentator, wrote a piece calling for black athletes to leave PWIs (predominately white institutions) and attend HBCUs (historically black colleges). Hill (2019) claimed, from a CRT-informed perspective, that this would encourage a resurrection in the status of HBCUs, highlighting that PWIs often take advantage of unpaid black athletes.

While its origin was in jurisprudence, over the last 20 years CRT has made a firm migration into education, with a clear presence in higher education (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a). This passage of CRT into education, and this theory being understood

by society at large, displays the increased acceptance that this movement has gained. CRT has prompted much needed discussion on college campuses in regard to discrimination and equality. Like most theories that deal with sensitive or even controversial topics, there has been pushback from scholars outside of CRT as well as critiques from critical race theorists about how the theory is utilized, some of which will be reviewed in the pages that follow (see Baber, 2017; Subotnik, 1998; Subotnik, 2017; Zorn, 2018).

In spite of criticisms, critical race theory is a theoretical framework that understands the power at play in narrative, particularly in the dynamic between dominant narratives and those that are suppressed (Bryson, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a). The stories we tell have reality creating potential (Delgado, 1989). Critical race theorists put a great emphasis on counter-stories and the lived experiences of people of Color as valid and legitimate sources to understand the impacts racism and oppression have on racial minorities (Bryson, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a). Solórzano & Yosso (2002) define counter-story, also known as counter-narrative, as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)" (p. 32). In this spirit, I will begin with a story.

Being a racial minority in a predominately white institution, I have often found myself in situations where I am the only black person in the room. I have grown up surrounded by white faces and have never felt inferior, largely due to the values my parents instilled in me at a young age. Yet, I can remember being in the last year of my undergraduate degree and engaging in debates with a professor on the state of my

oppression. I would often claim, “I am not oppressed.” My white professor would continue to bring up issues of privilege and oppression and reiterate that I *am* oppressed. A few years later I found myself in a similar conversation with another white professor. I claimed again, “I am not oppressed.” The professor proceeded to inform me that while I may not feel oppressed, there are systems in place that keep me oppressed and limit possibilities. On yet another occasion I had a white professor say that they had more privilege than me because of their gender and skin tone.

In response to racial unrest, more universities and professors have utilized the tenets and extended theories of CRT (e.g., critical whiteness studies) in their approaches to students and discussions regarding racism and racial identity. In effect, issues of white privilege, Whiteness, and oppression dominate classroom discussion (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hiraldo, 2010). In dealing with issues directly related to the identity of students, it is in educators’ best interest to be aware of the many personal crises that students may be facing. Simultaneously, it is worthwhile for instructors and school leaders to seek to understand how identity and wellness work together in the resiliency of students; specifically, students of color.

There is a perceivable wellness and identity crisis taking place among students in higher education. Liu et al. (2018) surveyed over 67,000 college students about their experience with mental health issues (e.g. eating disorders, addictions, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, etc.), and reported that college students are under more stress than is typically recognized. One in five students had suicidal thoughts, and students who identified as a sexual minority had even higher rates of mental health difficulties and suicidal thoughts. College is a time where students are often living in a new environment, experiencing

challenges, and beginning to explore possibilities and perspectives in regard to their sexual identity, racial/ethnic identity, and gender, which can increase experiences of stress and affect students' mental health and wellness (Brown, 2018; Liu et al., 2018; Soet & Sevig, 2006; Woodford et al., 2014). Because of this, scholars, educators, and school leaders need to think critically about the ways they are addressing and teaching issues related to identity and the effect that it may have on student wellness and success.

As CRT informed educational frameworks seek to illuminate the experiences of students of color and scrutinize whiteness, the assumption is often held that a minority identity is an oppressed identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998). With this message being perpetuated regarding students of color, it brings rise to questions regarding how identifying as oppressed may influence one's overall wellness and identity formation as they journey through their educational careers.

Scholars have found that students' abilities to be resilient through life circumstance have greatly declined due to an overemphasis on the self-esteem movement (Arvan, 2015; Field, 2016; Gray, 2015). What students believe about themselves can "predict achievement over time, particularly in difficult courses and across difficult transitions" (Dweck, 2015, p. 243). This concept places great weight on the stories that students believe to be true about themselves and how they negotiate circumstance to succeed through difficulty. As research suggests that an over-emphasis on self-esteem can produce a lack of resiliency, there may also be reason to believe that the constant reiteration of oppression and disadvantage may also have detrimental effects on a student's self-perception and resiliency. Subtonik (2017) argues that the emphasis on

identity (whether a perceived privileged or disadvantaged one) hinders productive conversations from taking place about race and has emboldened many of the issues students are facing today.

Central to CRT is the sharing of stories of strength, resilience, racism, identity, power, oppression and privilege. Through reviewing literature, I have found that a narrative of oppression is present throughout. This narrative seems to limit the ways in which students of color are discussed and positioned. With critical race theory being influential in higher education and as universities continue to become more diverse and seek racial equality, it is worthwhile to examine the varied experiences that may fall in or out of line with the assumptions of CRT. For example, it is possible the oppression narrative present within CRT may perpetuate a deficit approach that does not allow students of color to self-label, thus limiting them to identify and be identified in relation to the hardship they may face. The purpose of this study is to explore how minority students' experiences relate to or differ from the assumptions within CRT and to better understand what informs the ways in which minority students identify (or do not identify) as oppressed. Furthermore, I seek to complicate the assumptions made by CRT and explore how the narratives that inform identities may hinder or enable students' processes of resiliency and wellness.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critical Race Theory

The following sections serve to give a foundational understanding of CRT, tracing its development in critical legal studies to its adoption into higher education. The various tenets of CRT are pervasive, present in many disciplines, and provide lenses that are utilized in American life, both in popular culture and higher education.

From Law to Education

Critical race theory (CRT) is often referred to as a movement made up of scholars and activists who focus on how race, racism, and power in society and institutions negatively impact people of Color and privilege Whites and Whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Bryson, 2017; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Matsuda, 1991). In the mid-1970s lawyers and legal scholars (e.g., Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado) began a movement in critical legal studies in response to the perceived deceleration of the results of the Civil Rights Movement. They sought to reform the legal and civil systems that claimed to be race neutral; and in so doing, claimed that they were in fact the very systems that enabled white supremacy to thrive and persist in the oppression of marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Matsuda, 1991; Zorn, 2018).

In 1989, early writers from the critical legal studies movement were joined by scholars and activists to hold the first conference dedicated to critical race theory which gave CRT greater interdisciplinary attention, and, in the early 90s, began the theories turn

toward education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Zorn, 2018).

Among critical legal theorists, a popular thought surrounding decisions regarding civil rights legislation is that laws that were intended to encourage equality and equal opportunity for people of color have never fulfilled the promises of equity (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). For instance, according to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), while *Brown vs The Board of Education* was intended to lead to desegregation and equality, they argue that it led to students of color being more segregated than prior to the civil rights decision. They credit this segregation to increased white flight[1], poor quality teaching, and lack of improved educational options and opportunities; ultimately, arguing that civil rights legislation has led to educational institutions that perpetuate discrimination against people of color. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) were among the first scholars to clearly suggest that race has not been sufficiently theorized in education, and that the disparities that were observed in other parts of society were just as present in higher education and needed to be examined. Rooted in and extending the analyses of critical legal theorists, CRT emerged from the conference and broadened its scope to address the disparities and achievement gaps between minorities and whites in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Succinctly put, Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2017a) express their urgency for reform in higher education as they describe the academy as being "an icon of white privilege and supremacy" (p. 6).

[1] According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2019), white flight is "the departure of whites from places (such as urban neighborhoods or schools) increasingly or predominantly populated by minorities".

Fundamentally, CRT is an analytical, action-based framework used to expose the subtle and systemic forms of racism that exist in law and education, the latter being a sphere that critical race theorists claim has historically served white males and underserved and oppressed racial minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Acknowledging CRT as an action-based framework highlights praxis as a primary focus of the theory; therefore, many critical race theorists commit both to scholarship and social action (Bryson, 2017; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a). The grassroots and community action that takes place is to be committed "towards liberation and the end of oppression," calling scholars of CRT to "utilize their insight and knowledge to work on the ground to resist and disrupt" oppression through protesting policies and norms that reify racism and inequity (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a, p. 4).

The foundation of CRT reflects the resistance and reformation that critical race theorists seek to embody (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a). The use of CRT in higher education scholarship has increased drastically over the last decade bringing attention to and pursuing the deconstruction of norms and practices that systemically oppress both students and faculty of color (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a; Baber, 2017). Within the critical race theory camp there are scholars that have expressed existing problems within higher education and the limitations of current CRT scholarship within the academy (e.g., Baber, 2017; Solórzano, 1997).

Critiques

Solórzano (1997) discusses how many cultural stereotypes about people of color remain ubiquitous in institutions of higher learning often bringing attention to cultural

factors within communities of color that account for unequal outcomes between Whites and minorities. Solórzano (1997) suggests that by utilizing CRT, stereotypes about people of color can be disrupted, resisted, and then the process of working toward reformation can begin. Other scholars (e.g., D'Souza, 1991; Subotnik, 2017; Zorn, 2018) express concern about what this resistance (and the assumptions of CRT) has on students. For instance, Subotnik (2017) and Zorn (2018) suggest that critical race theory encourages a victim mentality in students of color by focusing on racism and disadvantage. D'Souza (1991) proposes that the assumptions informing CRT lead to self-segregation among students of color and Whites, creating negative student outcomes.

Baber (2017), a critical race theorist, gave an analysis of the use of CRT constructs in higher education scholarship between 2006 and 2015. In his analysis, he outlined what he identified to be several limitations in current CRT scholarship. Perhaps one the most notable limitations that Baber (2017) recognized was that CRT tenets are frequently presented as a set of canonical concepts or doctrines that are seldom extended or debated about. Because of this, Baber (2017) explains that CRT scholarship appears repetitive and abstract. He goes on stating that CRT scholarship within higher education "…has been too quick to set ontological parameters for CRT analysis, prematurely limiting intellectual dialogue on positioning CRT discourses within the unique sociopolitical landscape of higher education for radical transformation" (p. 187). This is important to note as much of the scholarship that Baber (2017) critiqued has informed much of the current methodological, pedagogical, and dialogical practices within higher education and may greatly inform how students of color are often discussed and positioned within educational institutions.

In many ways, CRT is a parent theory that birthed other theories and practices (e.g., critical whiteness, intersectionality, etc.) that also weave the narrative of oppression. In order to better understand how CRT is utilized in higher education and how it may be influential in the development of student perceptions of self, I outline several key tenets, schools of thought and extensions that inform current praxes.

Key Tenets

While there are many tenets to CRT, in reviewing literature, there were five tenets that were consistent throughout. The five central tenets to CRT that I outline are: a critique of liberalism, Whiteness as property, the permanence of racism, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling (Baber, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

One primary tenet of CRT is a critique of liberalism. Critical race theorists argue that many liberals appeal to colorblindness and the neutrality of constitutional law, and in so doing embolden racism and racist acts that are embedded in "ordinary" practices and structures by paying no due regard to color (Baber, 2017). They encourage "aggressive, color-conscious efforts" to ultimately bring about desired changes in our legal and societal systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 22; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Whiteness as a kind of property speaks to the central, normative nature of whiteness in society, and the valuable privileges it provides those who possess it. According to Harris (1993), historically, Whiteness has been seen as an inalienable property that only Whites possess. However, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2001) Whiteness is evolving and variable. For instance, in early America Jews were viewed as low-class (Sowell, 2005) and non-white, but Delgado and Stefancic (2001) suggest that it

was through the accumulation of wealth and joining labor unions that these groups "earned" a social standing that would move them into the white race. Throughout history, other white people groups have been marginalized from larger white society because they were deemed as less than because of unfavorable behavioral practices within the group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Sowell, 2005). This implies that whiteness as property is not merely tied to the skin color of an individual, but it refers to whiteness as an ideological construct that takes into consideration other characteristics in the people that possess it.

The third tenet, the permanence of racism, speaks to the endemic nature of racism within the political, legal, economic, and social systems in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Hiraldo, 2010). According to this tenet, while Whiteness may evolve and be variable, as Delgado and Stefancic (2001) suggest, racism is a constant. According to Delgado (1995) racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (p. xvi). In other words, because racism is laced throughout the fabric of American life and history, it appears "normal and natural" to those who are accustomed to the culture. This makes exposing and resisting racism a central goal of CRT.

Interest convergence, the fourth tenet of CRT, suggests that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. For instance, research shows that White women are largely recipients of affirmative action when it was intended to provide more opportunities to people of Color (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Hiraldo, 2010). In this perspective, another example of interest convergence would be that of black athletes at predominately white institutions. The student may be there on a scholarship to get an education with hopes of a professional sports career; but, as Hill

(2019) suggested in *The Atlantic*, the white institution may be the beneficiary of economic and advertising incentives, consequently taking advantage of the black athlete (Hargrove, 2014).

The fifth tenet of CRT, and central to the work I hope to accomplish in the current study, is counter-storytelling. Stories put context and interpretation together to give more depth to personal experience. Many scholars would suggest that people are naturally storytellers; however, due to power differences and cultural standards, some stories are heard and normative, while others are suppressed and marginalized (Delgado, 1989; McAdams, 1997; McAdams, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT seeks to give voice to marginalized and suppressed individuals through different avenues of narrative, including parable, testimony (or what Bryson (2017), calls "bearing witness" (p. 528)), poetry, or counter-story (Cerezo et al., 2013; Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a; Farrington, 2018; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-story, also known as counter-narrative, as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)" (p. 32). Bryson (2017) suggests that testimony should be used in pedagogical practice to bring light to the racism that students of Color have had to deal with in their institutions. The use of testimony allows for counter-stories to surface that challenge the dominant narratives in society and can bring new perspectives. For instance, Farrington (2018), informed by a LatCrit[2] framework, used what she calls a *testimonios methodology* in her study on the familial origins of

[2] LatCrit is a theoretical lens extended from critical race theory that includes other dimensions (e.g. language, immigration, ethnicity, and culture) for consideration in theorizing the experiences of Latinx people (Farrington, 2018).

educational resilience for four Latino brothers. Using this methodology allowed her to "gain a more nuanced understanding of the educational journey" of her interviewees (p. 393). According to critical race theorists, the emphasis on storytelling within CRT speaks to the valuable experiential knowledge that people of Color have to offer perspective on their experience living within a racist society (Bryson, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Schools of Thought

Even with the many theoretical extensions and broad scope that the tenets of CRT offers, theorists typically align with one of two schools of thought: the *real world school* and the *discourse analysts* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Theorists in the real world school typically align with the early critical race theorists' (e.g., Derrick Bell) conceptions on race and racism focusing more on globalization, human rights, race and poverty, immigration, and the criminal justice system. Discourse analysts focus on "ideas and categories by which our society constructs and understands race and racism" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 120). Scholars and authors in the discourse analysis camp typically attend to issues such as intersectionality and identity, looking at the complexity of race and racism in words, ideas, common practices, and the prevalence of unconscious discrimination through implicit biases or microaggressions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Marom, 2019). "Intersectionality", a term coined by Crenshaw (1989), was originally rooted in jurisprudence as a lens to examine the different aspects of an individual's identity (e.g., race, class, sex, gender) that create an overlap of the systems that discriminate and oppress. This concept of intersectionality was birthed from the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The effort of essentialism in the context of CRT seeks to find what unifying factor is present among

oppressed individuals. The primary unifying factor is oppression; however, through intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989) highlighted how oppressed peoples experience oppression differently and at varying levels depending on the identities they hold. In other words, the more disadvantaged identities that a person embodies, the more oppression they are likely to experience. Now, intersectionality is central to most discourse analysis around race.

Crenshaw's contributions to critical race theorizing have helped redefine how scholars, activists, and even those in the legal system (e.g. judges, lawyers, etc.), understand the complexity of oppression people of color experience. The history of discrimination in the United States is often seen in a black-white binary. As CRT has gained popularity and deepened its roots, the lenses (like that of intersectionality) it enables have broadened the scope to include other people of color, namely Latinos (LatCrit), Asian Americans, and Indigenous Peoples (TribCrit) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Intersectionality has also been extended to other marginalized groups (e.g., disabled people and the LGBTQ community) to better understand the experiences and biases they may encounter (see Gillborn, 2015; Hiraldo, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Warner & Brown, 2011). Intersectionality is also used in education to better understand the experiences of minority student populations.

Discourse and Identity

The personal experiences of people of color are central to critical race theory. The centrality of experience brings attention to the identities of these individuals through the ways in which their views, struggles, and self-perceptions are discussed and embodied (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hiraldo, 2010; Salter & Adams, 2013).

Theoretical Extension: Critical Whiteness Studies

As pedagogies and praxis informed by CRT have found a home firmly in education and popular culture, it would seem that the ideals of discourse analysts are leading in higher education primarily highlighting issues in discourse and identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hiraldo, 2010; Salter & Adams, 2013). For instance, scholars have extended critical race theory with the development of critical whiteness studies (which emerged before the turn of the century) to explain the social construction of whiteness and the privilege that is embedded in the white identity (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). At its heart, critical whiteness studies examine whiteness as a discourse. The emphasis on discourse refers to whiteness as a rhetorical construction that is constituted through everyday language and accepted norms to establish whiteness as the standard for culture, and the "invisible center" that everything is known in relation to (i.e., white is natural, everything else is "other" and ethnic, etc.) (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Nakayama & Martin, 1993).

Critical whiteness studies have gained interdisciplinary attention and popularity through media outlets by scholars, like Robin DiAngelo, who have explained the purpose of such lenses in a way that is attainable to general populations. DiAngelo's (2018) work has, as she said herself, greatly influenced the dialogue surrounding race on a national level. In many ways, her article and book (*White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism*) have brought whiteness, racism, and critical race tenets to the center of national and educational dialogue, from NBC News (2018) spotlights to university diversity conferences.

Many critical race and whiteness theorists define racism as cultural, social, or economic beliefs, structures, and resources that advantage Whites and disadvantage and subordinate racial minorities (DiAngelo, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). With this definition, racial minorities, like myself, can never be racist because we are not in a position of power. We are the receivers of racial injustice and grievance, but cannot be the aggressor. This notion of racism leads critical whiteness theorists to focus much of their attention on the analysis of the white identity, as opposed to the identities of people of color. Sowell (2005) and others (e.g., Subotnik, 2017; Zorn, 2018) critique this definition of racism as encouraging victimization in people of color. However, to suggest any other potential cause for disparity between people of color and whites other than racism is often discouraged among critical race theorists (see Bell, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This stance displays how critical race theorists view people of color and whites are positioned in relation to the power that they claim is embedded in whiteness.

In 2011, DiAngelo, coined the term "white fragility" to explain how whites are positioned in regard to race. DiAngelo (2011) defined white fragility as:

> …a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves [in whites]. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (p. 57)

DiAngelo (2011) suggests that white people experience turmoil due to not knowing how to properly discuss issues of race, let alone reconcile their own privilege

and inherent racism. This concept of white fragility, and the call for white people to be aware of their privilege and deal with their racism, has been a critical step in mainstream culture and higher education, to establish whiteness and white supremacy as the socially constructed institution that oppresses *the other*.

With the deep emphasis on racial identity that CRT promotes, one primary critique of the theory is that it takes on racism (Hiraldo, 2010). For example, DiAngelo, a white critical whiteness theorist claims and accepts that she has racist thinking (Big Think, 2018). She asserts that by being white and growing up in a world that privileges whiteness, racism is inevitable. Due to this, she states that the best way to fight racism is for one to admit that they are racist. In response, critical race scholars claim that acknowledging race and racism and bringing it to the center of discourse is the most productive way to progress forward (DiAngelo, 2011; Hiraldo, 2010; Hargrove, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For instance, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) claim that,

> Methodologies that dismiss or decenter racism and its intersections with other forms of subordination omit and distort the experiences of those whose lives are daily affected by racism—those 'at the bottom of society's well' (Bell, 1992, p. vi). In other words, downplaying the intercentricity of race and racism in the discourse helps tell majoritarian stories about the insignificance of race and the notion that racism is something in the past. (pp. 31-32)

Very few people would claim that racism has been eradicated; however, there is debate on whether racism and white supremacy are as prevalent and systemic as they were when, for example, slavery was an institutionalized right in this nation (see Sowell,

2013; Subotnik, 1998; Williams, 2019; Zorn, 2018). Critical race theory is built on the foundation and the premise that institutional racism is alive and well (i.e., the permanence of racism). Bell (1989), one of the early critical legal scholars and creators of critical race theory, claims that "while slavery is over, a racist society continues to exert dominion over black men and their maleness in ways more subtle but hardly less castrating…" (p. 205). Within the realm of critical race theory, to say otherwise, or appealing to the notion of colorblindness, is downplaying the central role that race and racism have played in American society, and therefore promotes majoritarian stories (or master narratives) that claim racism has declined or is not a central issue (Bell, 1989; Delgado, 1989; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017b; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). According to Bryson (2017), majoritarian stories also contain sub-stories that promote deficit notions about people of color and give power and privilege to Whites (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It is for this very reason that critical race theorists claim that race and racism need to be placed at the center of discourse to be rightly analyzed.

Placing Race and Racism at the Center of Discourse

In the pages that follow I review literature examining what race and racism at the center of discourse looks like as it is reflected in higher education. When examining how scholars conceptualize race and racial disparities, majoritarian and counter-stories, and how students of color are positioned within all of these discussions, it portrays a narrow view in the identities of minority students. I seek to reflect on the literature to both complicate and interrogate the assumptions that critical race theory is built upon.

Race Evolution

According to Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2017a), the academy has historically advantaged and privileged whites and is therefore an institution where the oppression of people of color, and 'difference', in education must be analyzed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1998; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Therefore, critical race scholars suggest that the stories and counter-stories that are told should be examined in terms of what they say about individuals' racialized experiences and dealings with racism (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017b; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In education, many scholars have tried to explicate the reason for disparities between minority racial groups and Whites, the latter historically being the dominant group. The analyses surrounding race and racism have evolved over the years. Examining this evolution is helpful in understanding why critical race theorists believe that race and racism need to be brought to the center of discourse; namely, because race and racism are central to the experiences of students of color (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017b; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Sowell (2013), in his book *Race and Intellectuals*, maps out two dominant ideologies held about race among intelligentsia in the twentieth century: *liberalism* and *multiculturalism*. These ideologies greatly impacted how racialized experiences and racial disparities were thought about, both in popular and academic culture. While there have always been individual scholars with differing thoughts and views, as a whole there have tended to be trends or schools of thought that scholars glom onto. For purposes of this study, I will regard these trends as stories or narratives. In other words, I will examine the popular narratives about race that have trended in academia and ultimately led to what is trending now within the tenets of critical race theory.

The Liberal Race Narrative

In the first half of the twentieth century, liberal approaches to race relations were widely accepted. Central to liberalism was the pursuit of equal treatment for all people groups "regardless of race, color or creed" (Sowell, 2013, p. 102). This same ideological view (liberalism) also largely held that the disparities seen between minorities and whites was due to external factors (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Sowell, 2005; Sowell, 2013). Prior to this movement, many intellectuals claimed that genetic, internal deficiencies accounted for disparities and made one group of people less educatable than another (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Sowell, 2013; Valencia, 1997). During the liberal era, we saw movement away from this thought where the causation of racial disparity toward minorities was now said to be due to the external environment and largely in the minds of white individuals (e.g., racism, oppressive systems and 'ways of being' imposed by the majority). In this line of thought and story of race, attributing disparity to cultural factors from within a minority group would be classified as "blaming the victim" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Sowell, 2013; Valencia, 1997). Multiculturalists in the last half of the twentieth century, also held this conceptualization of people of color as the victims of oppression.

The Multicultural Race Narrative

Following the Civil Rights Movement in the late twentieth century, multiculturalism, multicultural education, and critical pedagogy began to grow in popularity among intellectuals (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Sowell, 2013). Multiculturalism differs from and challenges liberalism (a tenet of CRT, as aforementioned). The "colorblindness" that was embedded in the liberal concept of equal

treatment proved unsatisfactory and disingenuous to this new thought. Many liberal thinkers claim “universalism” (we are all the same) and “individualism” (we are all different) to espouse the understanding of a shared human experience as well as the rights and agency endowed to the individual (Baber, 2017; DiAngelo, 2011). Multiculturalists, on the other hand, believe that when it comes to racism, universalism erroneously implies that Whites and people of Color have the same lived reality and individualism doesn’t take into consideration the external structures that inhibit individuals of particular groups from thriving (DiAngelo 2011; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). In this sense, scholars that align with multiculturalism give what they call *due attention* to color and race and greater credence to difference (DiAngelo 2011; Montecinos, 1995; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Sowell, 2013).

At its heart, multiculturalism disparages practices of cultural imperialism that larger society uses to oppress and/or acculturate racial minorities to the norms of the dominant culture. In effect, multiculturalism suggests that cultural groups that are less fortunate within society and experience disparity are not to be blamed because they are merely existing in ways that hegemonic norms allow; thereby, privileging whites and Whiteness and disadvantaging the minority (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Moon, 1996; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Sowell, 2013). In this regard, mistreatment, discrimination by others and external systems are seen as a primary cause of racial disparity in education, and ‘diversity’ and ‘social justice’ have become a key pursuit of multiculturalists (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Sowell, 2013). The movement toward multiculturalism is important to note given that the

thought process behind it, and what it suggests about race, is central to critical pedagogy, and particularly critical race theory.

The Oppression Narrative

The common thread between the prior liberal and multicultural race narratives is the progression toward stories of grievance, oppression and victimhood—the person of color always positioned as the victim to oppression. Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2017a) claim that CRT seeks to actualize liberation and end oppression; however, in practice it seems to perpetuate the view of students of color in positions of oppression (e.g., lacking power to move up, lacking resources, etc.). Among CRT scholarship in higher education, oppression is often discussed on a variety of planes: race, class, gender, etc. However, racism is central to CRT analysis. Racism (one form of oppression) is often defined as the systemic distribution of structures and resources that advantage Whites and disadvantage, subordinate, or exclude racial minorities (DiAngelo, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This definition implies that minorities do not hold the power. Because this is the predominate definition and perspective utilized among critical race scholars, it informs the ways in which minority students' experiences are analyzed (i.e., lacking power, disadvantaged, etc.).

Freire (1970) is accredited for much of the critical approaches to pedagogy in the academy today. In discussing the issues of oppression and how it is manifested within the oppressed, he writes:

> The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are

> at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. (Freire, 1970, p. 48)

He then goes on to ask a valid question: "How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?" His answer? "Only as they discover themselves to be 'hosts' of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy" (Freire, 1970, p. 48). In essence, Freire (1970) suggests that in order for strides be made toward liberation, an oppressed individual must first admit and awaken to the fact they are oppressed and that they have internalized their oppressor (in essence, oppressing themselves). This is a logical assertion *if* someone is oppressed. In the oppression narrative that I identify within the assumptions of CRT, people of color are *assumed* to be oppressed, yet this is an arguable assumption (which the current study seeks to investigate).

Throughout critical race and whiteness literature this oppression narrative and the perspective of awakening the oppressed to their oppression, creating solidarity between the oppressed, and awakening the oppressor to their oppressive acts keeps the concept of oppression ever-present before the student. This narrative of oppression is exemplified in

how critical race theorists view students of color in relation to the majoritarian stories that critical race theory seeks to disavow.

The Role of Majoritarian Stories and Counternarrative

Majoritarian stories can focus on a variety of things. Of particular interest to critical race theorists, these stories center and privilege Whites and Whiteness thereby disadvantaging other people groups. Bryson (2017) explains a majoritarian story as,

> …meritocratic in nature, explaining success and failure at the individual level while ignoring structural barriers and challenges faced by those marginalized by racism and other intersecting -isms. It is a one-sided story about society that filters into its institutions and manifests in ways that reinforce racism and unequal power. (p. 530)

These majoritarian/master narratives are said to often be perpetuated by the dominant or ingroup and people of color (or individuals from a disadvantaged group) who 'buy into' the story. It is then through the use of counter-storytelling that the outgroup seeks to disrupt and disavow the reality that these stories seek to maintain (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In higher education, counter-stories serve to counter deficit and majoritarian stories by bringing attention to race and racism, and particularly how students and/or faculty of color experience marginalization or oppression (Bryson, 2017; Cerezo et al., 2013; Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a; Hiraldo, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT claims that racism is continually reconstituted through these majoritarian stories and therefore, it is "important for CRT scholars in education to tell…counter-stories as a means to challenge the story of white supremacy" (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a, p. 5). Delgado (1989) claimed that

"…there is a war between stories. They contend for, tug at, our minds..." and have reality-creating potential (p. 2418). The stories we tell and adopt as our own carry with them the weight and implication of enabling or constraining possibilities. This is best seen in the creation and establishment of master narratives that engender and inform cultural practices, thereby reducing the experiences of others to a univocal reality (Montecinos, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The Construction of Master Narratives

Cultural understandings are contextual (Hall, 1976), and we make sense of our context through the telling and retelling of stories (Alemán & Helfrich, 2010; McAdams, 2001; Montecinos, 1995). People are often blind to their own culture until they leave it and are afforded opportunities to challenge the myths and stories that shaped them (Hall, 1976; Stone, 2004). Stone (2004) suggests that it isn't until individuals gain more independence from familial influence that they are even able to challenge stories. If one is never afforded the opportunity for reflection, then they may not notice the myths that have constructed their life (Stone, 2004). In this respect, many individuals operate within their culture unconsciously. The stories and myths that are propagated within a culture inform what is deemed as appropriate and normal (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In other words, culture and cultural practices inform our stories, and our stories concurrently inform our culture and the ways we respond to and view the world.

Over time, cultural norms, often those of the predominate people group, become hegemonic and the stories and experiences of the minority are not attended to (Delgado, 1989; Moon, 1996; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). There may be a variety of positionings and different understandings embodied within a culture,

however, as Moon (1996) suggests, certain definitions and ideas "become hegemonic, thereby reading others out" (p. 78). In other words, stories told by people or institutions with more power and influence over others tend to have the advantage in establishing broad cultural stories that set the standard for what is normal and true. Meanwhile, those with less influence and power are not afforded the same space to create such pervasive standards, and (as such) are often left to exist within standards that were created by others that may not reflect their true identity and experience. Within individual cultures there are hegemonic norms or stories that claim to be the natural standard for conduct and being, but they also may marginalize or diminish the experiences of certain individuals. This illustrates the limited general assertions made through master narratives. Often, these grand stories give a narrow representation of what it means to Black, White, Native American, etc. (Montecinos, 1995).

Laying the aspect of race and racism aside, according to the Oxford University Press Reference (2017), a grand narrative, as described by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, represents "the totalizing narratives or metadiscourses of modernity which have provided ideologies with a legitimating philosophy of history…." Stephens and McCallum (1998) illustrate in clearer terms the power of master narratives as "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (p. 6). In other words, grand narratives organize our knowledge and experience. As critical race theorists examine the stories that have dominated American culture, they seek to create and give voice to other stories that challenge the notion of 'one way of being' (i.e., generalizations and assumptions made about people of Color), and ultimately seek to breakdown the hold of White privilege and supremacy (Dixson &

Rousseau Anderson, 2017a; Hiraldo, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). However, within the oppression narrative in higher education that CRT purports, students of color are situated in the discourse in a way that explains their knowledge and experience in terms of the oppression and racism they face, whether experientially or not. In many ways, the narrative of oppression has become a type of master narrative in higher education.

The next section seeks to explain how (with the adoption of critical race tenets in higher education) students are positioned in the oppression narrative, and how this narrative (operating as a grand narrative) may impact students of Color.

Positioned as Oppressed in Higher Education

In recent years, the demographics of students in higher education has changed dramatically (Notre Dame of Maryland University, 2018) and with it, many scholars have made efforts to think differently in their approaches to accommodate, promote, and adapt to a more diverse landscape (Montecinos, 1995; Rudick, 2017; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995).

As has been discussed, DiAngelo's work, and the work of other critical race and whiteness scholars with a multicultural ideology, has greatly impacted universities and classroom culture. Because CRT has informed discussions about how universities have often reconstituted racism and white supremacy through policy and curricula, many instructors have worked toward transforming institutions of higher learning into "sites [of] social-justice, equity, and inclusivity", often by facilitating discussion in classrooms about race to encourage students to have a critical consciousness of their racial identity and privilege (Cerezo et al., 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hiraldo, 2010; Rudick, 2017, p. 162). Critical consciousness, developed by Freire (1970), is defined as "the

ability to perceive oppression within social, political, and economic realms and to encourage others to take action against oppressive systems" (as cited in Cerezo et al., 2013, p. 10). The purpose is not merely to bring attention to one's culture and assumptions, but to bring attention to how students and their understandings of culture might be oppressive or how a student might be experiencing oppression.

Additionally, scholars suggest that students of color will not be comfortable and will not trust instructors to the degree of sharing their personal experience of dealing with racism if a professor has not examined how they themselves feed into the systems of domination and oppression that reproduce whiteness and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2011; Rudick, 2017). To counteract this, Rudick (2017) suggests professors incorporate confidential opportunities for feedback, whether that be students writing journal entries or responding to short prompts. By doing so, when "interrogating racism in the classroom" professors will show an openness to defer to "the wishes of students of color" (Rudick, 2017, p. 162). While providing minority students opportunities to share their experience should not be discouraged, the suggested practice from Rudick (2017) is built on the underlying premise that students of color are oppressed.

As institutions of higher education are growing more diverse, it does call for changes in processes and approaches to aid in bridging difference. According to Montecinos (1995), an educational curriculum that is to fit within this new landscape must reject the use and assumptions of master narratives to represent people groups. One's positionality, or subjectivity, within a discourse will determine what they can or cannot do and be (Delgado, 1989; Montecinos, 1995; Weedon, 1987). Subjectivity, in

short, is one's understanding of their relationship in the world, and is reconstituted through language and discourse in culture (Weedon, 1987). In other words, the construction and understanding of the self is through how we internalize the dialogues and narratives we have negotiated with ourselves, family, and larger cultural environment (McAdams, 1997; McAdams, 2001; Montecinos, 1995). In higher education, perceived disparities between racial minorities and whites in education is accounted for based on where these peoples' identities are positioned within the discourse. Because of the pervasive nature of majoritarian stories, if one is white, they are considered privileged and even unconsciously benefitting and contributing to systems of oppression and racism. If one is a "person of Color" they are disadvantaged and on the receiving end of systems of oppression, and even potentially feeding into the systems that oppress them.

Montecinos (1995) claims that master narratives create a representation of cultural groups that promote stereotypes and even create representations where individuals do not see a reflection of themselves. In speaking of master narratives Montecinos (1995) claims

> To the extent that a group's cultural life cannot be subsumed into a master narrative, the use of such a narrative only gives the illusion of plurality. That narrative represents a monovocal discourse that negates diversity if majority and minority voices within an ethnic group are not heard. Representing groups as dynamic involves representing the conflicts, contradictions, and consensus that exist within, and between, ethnic groups. To represent the plurality of voices that compete for legitimacy, any description of a group's social life needs to be interrogated to uncover the politics of representation implicated in that description: Who holds the power to speak for the group? Who defines whom,

> who interprets, how in what ways, and towards what end? (Montecinos, 1995, p. 298)

The oppression narrative in higher education shares some constraining elements of master narratives that Montecinos (1995) outlined. It would seem that because the oppression narrative is theoretically the narrative of the oppressed (i.e. racial minorities, etc.), it follows that it speaks for all people of color within the same racial group. What about those people of color who do not identify as oppressed? Do those who identify as oppressed speak for the whole? In the case of higher education and critical race theory, the answer to this question seems to be yes. The oppression narrative seems to give the illusion of the plurality of voices by claiming that it gives voice to voices that are not heard. People of color that speak contrary to this narrative are typically not attended to, therefore, the "conflicts, contradictions, and consensus that exist within, and between, ethnic groups" are not deliberated in any productive way. For example, Sowell (2005), a black American economist who has been labelled as participating in majoritarian storytelling (see Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28), in speaking of the disparities between whites and blacks claims that

> Alternative explanations of economic and social lags provide a more satisfying ability to blame all such lags on the sins of others, such as racism or discrimination. Equally important, such external explanations require no painful internal changes in the black population but leave all changes to whites, who are seen as needing to be harangued, threatened, or otherwise forced to change. (p. 62)

Statements like these should not be so quickly labelled as majoritarian or feeding into systems of racism, as what Sowell suggests has experientially taken place through the development of critical whiteness studies and the scrutiny of Whiteness in critical race theory. Instead of promoting deeper investigation, the oppression narrative labels dissenters as "buying into" majoritarian storytelling. Even as a black man, Sowell and others are not allowed to "speak for the group", but those who identify with the narrative (whether white or black) can speak for the group. This aspect of the oppression narrative silences nonconforming voices. The narrative dismisses individual instances for the sake of the universal minority experience and continues to perpetuate narratives of oppression.

Critical race theory as it is situated in higher education today deals closely with confronting and identifying systems and practices that are seen to oppress students of color. As such, identity is scrutinized in the classroom. Students of color are positioned in the narrative in relation to oppression. In critical race literature, the stories that are shared to highlight the resiliency, strength, and perseverance of students of color within higher education still position them in relation to racism and oppressive systems (see Cerezo et al., 2013; Farrington, 2018; Hargrove, 2014; Marom, 2018; Salter & Adams, 2013). This subject-position and assumed identity of 'oppressed' within the narrative has potential to constrain how students of color understand their sense of self and personal resilience.

Wellness and Resilience

The following sections serve to provide a review of literature on wellness and resilience as it relates to the experiences of students of color in higher education. Among critical race literature it is not uncommon to see references to resilience, as it often focuses on liberation and how the oppressed resist the dominant culture to create change

and reform (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). In comparison, I am defining resilience as the process of actualizing promotive factors and moving on in a meaningful manner (Lenette, Brough, & Cox, 2013; Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011; Zimmerman, 2013). In light of how minority students are situated in the narratives of critical race theory, I review literature expressing the need for continued research in the resilience and wellness of minority students. I also explain the importance of a communicative approach to resilience and discuss what factors are seen to be positive and negative influences in the process of resilience among students of color.

Why Consider Resilience Among Students of Color?

Universities are situated in a vital position in the development of the nation's future leaders. Due to this positioning, professors, instructors, and programs have a unique influence on the minds and well-being of students. In recent years, popular business news and magazine sources, like Forbes and Business Insider, have written about the growing importance of resilience and wellness in the workplace. For instance, in Business Insider, Premack (2018) had resilience as one of the top seven traits that employers look for in their employees. Additionally, among leadership strategists and scholars there is greater discussion in how to nourish a culture within an organization that encourages not merely physical well-being, but mental health and resiliency in organization members (Britt et al., 2016; Kohll, 2017). This same trend in improving organizational culture in regard to resilience and wellness is also taking place in institutions of higher education.

Many students will eventually be in the workforce and recent studies reflect a greater emphasis placed on the mental health, wellness, and resilience experienced by

students. Consequently, questions emerge about how to give aid to a generation of students that are experiencing what seems to be a wellness crisis (Beauchemin, 2018; Gray, 2015; Liu et al., 2018; Soet & Sevig, 2006; Woodford et al., 2014).

Among students of color, Hispanic and black students complete college at much lower rates compared to whites and Asians; black male students having the lowest graduation rates among all students (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Chinese and Japanese American students outperform other minorities (and White students) in regard to test scores and completing their degree (Sowell, 2013; Tate, 2017). There is an abundance of research discussing the potential causes of the performance disparities, as well as studies that challenge the deficit frameworks that many researchers, school leaders, and professors have viewed students of color through (Hargrove, 2013; Howard, 2013; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Sowell, 2005; Valencia, 1997). For many years common assumptions among intellectuals suggested that the primary cause for a lack in excelling had to do with internal deficits such as a genetic proclivity toward ineducability (Sowell, 2005; Valencia, 1997). Theories, like that of CRT, encouraged a broadening of the potential causes of education gaps by identifying systemic barriers like institutionalized racism. By broadening the scope, scholars have worked toward identifying and reducing external factors that potentially render hurdles in the way of minority student success (Sowell, 2005; Hargrove, 2013).

Historically, black and Hispanic students have experienced greater disparities in higher education. With the emergence of CRT, the experiences and identities of these students are the subject of study and classroom discussion (Farrington, 2018; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Roberson, 2018;

Rudick, 2017). According to Liu et al. (2018) college is a time where students begin to explore more possibilities and perspectives in regard to their racial/ethnic identity. Additional studies suggest that this exploration in regard to identity increases experiences of stress that may negatively impact students' mental health and wellness (Soet & Sevig, 2006; Woodford et al., 2014). The reiteration of oppression, disadvantage, endemic racism, and resisting oppression in universities that have adopted a CRT informed framework, gives rise to questions regarding how this impacts the mental wellness and resilience of students of color who live out their identities every day.

Resilience Defined

Resiliency has long been studied in the field of psychology and in recent years communication scholars have built on existing research to take a communicative approach to resilience. Buzzanell (2010) and other scholars (e.g. Torres & Fyke, 2013) describe resilience as a process that enables an individual to '[bounce] back' from setbacks, or as "the process of reintegrating" following ''disruptions in life'' (Richardson, 2002, p. 309). In their qualitative study of educational resilience exhibited in fifty students of color from a low socioeconomic background, Morales and Trotman (2011) define academic resilience as "the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding" (p. 8). While this definition focuses more specifically on the ability of students from the same background to overcome in spite of obstacles, it still speaks to the general definition of pushing through and reintegrating from disruptions.

The goal of developing resiliency within individuals is tied deeply to wellness and

even mental health (Richardson, 2002). Richardson (2002) claims that resilience and resiliency have the potential to increase self-efficacy and, with practice, allow people to gain more control and order in their lives to eventually rely less on external supports (i.e., medications). The fact that Richardson views resilience as something that an individual can "practice" signifies that resiliency is a process that can be influenced. Relatedly, Buzzanell (2010) suggests that resilience is something that can be developed and grown through discourse, narratives, and our everyday communicative interactions (Torres & Fyke, 2013). Viewing resilience communicatively, and as something that can be learned, brings attention to the importance of understanding how our communicative practices and the stories we tell may shape our sense of self and abilities to be resilient.

In the everyday discourse and narrative processes that impact student development, it is useful to examine factors that positively and negatively influence the process of resilience for students of color. Taking a communicative approach to resilience is a pragmatic perspective to explore how the wellness and personal sense of identity is affected in students of color by the narratives that are perpetuated in higher education.

Resilience, Narrative and Personal Identity

Based on the *protective factor model* of resiliency, scholars study and seek ways to maximize the protective factors in the lives of individuals that promote their ability to be resilient in the face of setbacks (Cefai, 2007; Gunnestad, 2006; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Zimmerman, 2013). Protective or promotive factors are assets and resources that serve to moderate the risk of negative impacts for an individual (Cefai, 2007; Zimmerman, 2013). Zimmerman (2013) describes assets as protective factors within individuals (e.g., self-efficacy, self-esteem) that promote healthy adaptation. Resources,

on the other hand, are protective factors external to the individual such as peer support, parental support, and programs (Zimmerman, 2013).

Actualizing Protective Factors

Resiliency and protective/promotive factors are often studied across multiple domains: individual, interpersonal, and socio-cultural (Gunnestad, 2006; Zimmerman, 2013). Gunnestad (2006) suggests that the presence of promotive factors does not guarantee resiliency but that resilience is developed when the relationship between factors and risks initiate processes within an individual that reduce the effect of negative outcomes and creates or maintains a positive self-image and esteem within them (Cefai, 2007; Zimmerman, 2013).

For instance, in a study expanding Galassi and Akos' (2007) explanation of the Strengths-Based School Counseling framework, Day-Vines and Terriquez (2008) reflect on a strength-based school discipline initiative that was created in response to high suspension and expulsion rates among Black and Latino male students at a California high school. The initiative included student-led efforts to improve practices and rules within the school that produced high discipline rates. Day-Vines and Terriquez (2008) found that the initiative "stimulat[ed] and promot[ed] personal accountability, leadership, resiliency, self-management, and social competence in students as opposed to merely reducing student deficits" (p. 170). Day-Vines and Terriquez (2008) suggest that school leaders and teachers "empower students by emphasizing their strength and resilience as opposed to their deficits" and support students in advocating for themselves (p. 174-175). In other words, school personnel can help students actualize the promotive factors in their lives to help reduce negative outcomes while promoting a positive sense of self and

ability. It is a subtle but significant change of focus by encouraging students to focus more on their personal development and strengths, as opposed to the internal and external obstacles (i.e., deficits) that attempt to keep them from advancing and thriving.

The Role of Life Stories and Resilience

A large part of empowering students to utilize supportive resources and develop resiliency lies in reconstituting the ways in which students understand their sense of self and life story. McAdams (2001) asserts that our life stories are ever-evolving, co-constructed stories that we internalize to make sense of ourselves. A life story is not the identity of a person, but more so a way in which individuals arrange *the self* and make sense of themselves in a meaningful way. McAdams (2001) claims that individuals have a sense of identity to the degree that their self-understanding provides them "unity and purpose" in their life (p. 102). In other words, when a person feels divided and lacks purpose, they are primed for an identity crisis.

In writing about the connection between life stories, narrative, culture and identity, McAdams (2019) recounts a news story where an entrepreneur bought cheap home items and then hired fiction writers to construct stories mapping the unique history of the particular items. McAdams (2019) goes on to say,

> Simply having a story attached to the object greatly increases the market value of the object. The entrepreneur makes a significant profit on each one, even though he tells the purchaser that the story accompanying the object is completely fictional. An old lamp feels more valuable if the purchaser knows "its story"—even if the purchaser knows the story is fake! (p. 81)

This anecdote speaks to the power of narrative to create our reality and, in effect,

impact our thoughts and behaviors in regard to things as simple as belongings in our life. With McAdams' (2019) anecdote in mind, how might the stories *we* students of color hear about and tell ourselves impact our thoughts, wellness, behavior, and resilience?

CRT and Resilience

Most critical race theorists view counternarrative as an opportunity to highlight the strength and resiliency of students of color. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) claim that a critical race methodology allows for the critique of White privilege and exposes deficit-informed research and practices that either ignore, distort, or silence the experiences of students of color. In so doing, they suggest that this methodology allows them to focus on minorities' racialized experiences as a source of strength and looks to the counternarratives of students of color as an expression of their resilience. Much of the literature on students of color gives voice to counternarratives that focus on their resiliency, particularly highlighting how these students navigate through an educational pipeline riddled with barriers, setbacks, and instances of prejudice (Farrington, 2018; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Barriers to Resilience

Central to critical race theory is the confrontation of racism. Studies suggest that racism is an exacerbator for mental health issues within students of color (Brown, 2003; Brown, 2008; McGee & Stovall, 2015). Brown (2003) claims that the permanence of racism can create fatalism within blacks, which results in nihilistic behavior. While there are many people of color who have capitulated to not moving forward, there are also many who have persevered and/or reorganized their lives to gain success and normalcy in

spite of real or suggested barriers (Farrington, 2018; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Hargrove, 2013; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Lenette et al., 2013; Sowell, 2005; Williams, 2019). However, the point to underscore is that research suggests the presence of racism and oppression may have extremely detrimental effects on the mental health and resilience of individuals (Brown, 2003; Brown, 2008; McGee & Stovall, 2015).

Studies have shown that black students who constantly face negative-ability stereotypes in school about their intellectual capabilities experience frustration, in some cases leading to decreased academic performance, dissociating with their academic pursuits, and an increase in student attrition rates (Brown, 2003; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Hargrove, 2013; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Owens & Lynch, 2012; Roberson, 2018). Even within the oppression narrative there are many stereotypes attached to students of color as they are regarded as being a part of a disadvantaged group. For example, the assumption of lack of access to resources, the assumption of the lack of trust in white professors (e.g., Rudick, 2017), or even the assumption of weariness and defeat from catering to Whiteness, may push White school personnel to alter the manner in which they deal with students of color in condescending ways, even if unintentionally (e.g., Big Think, 2018; DiAngelo, 2011).

The emphasized focus on perceived barriers to students of color has the potential to sell them short when efforts to encourage their ability to succeed are secondary in discussions of race. While negative-ability stereotypes have shown to adversely impact students of color, the emphasis on negative barriers and outcomes could be just as impactful. Minority people are not unified in the ways they approach seeking solutions for disparities in higher education. This difference is largely because of the underlying

assumptions that some people of color fear may hinder success and wellness in minority students.

Students of Color and Resilience

There are many people of color in leadership positions that adopt a critical race pedagogy and approach. However, there are also many people of color in leadership capacities that take issue with the tenets of critical race theory and the implications of adopting that worldview for young people in regard to wellness, responsibility and resilience (e.g., Ben Carson, Clarence Thomas, Larry Elder, Ravi Zacharias; Sowell, 2013; Williams, 2019). In a recent article, Williams (2019), a black academic, economist and commentator, pleaded with fellow black Americans in response to the claims asserted about institutional racism in the United States,

> Here are my questions to those who blame racial discrimination for the problems of black people: Is it necessary for us to await some kind of moral rejuvenation among white people before measures can be taken to end or at least reduce the kind of behavior that spells socioeconomic disaster in so many black communities? Is it a requirement that we await moral rejuvenation among white people before we stop permitting some black youngsters from making education impossible for other black youngsters? Blacks were not the only people discriminated against in America. While Jews and Asians were not enslaved, they encountered gross discrimination. Nonetheless, neither Jews nor Asians felt that they had to await the end of discrimination before they took measures to gain upward mobility. (p. 2)

In many ways, Williams' (2019) questions and comments appeal to the same

elements suggested by Day-Vines and Terriquez (2008) in promoting "personal accountability, leadership, resiliency, self-management, and social competence in students" by emphasizing their strength and resiliency as opposed to focusing on deficits and what is blocking success (p. 170). Williams' is suggesting that black Americans (and by extension, students) actualize the promotive factors within their communities.

Looking across perceived disadvantaged people groups and demographics, one can see time and time again people who engage in processes of actualizing and maintaining promotive factors from within themselves and their communities. In their study of the everyday resilience of single refugee women with children, Lenette et al. (2013) argue that looking at the everyday life-worlds of refugee women allows for more dynamic and complex possibilities for understanding and giving meaning to the processes of their resilience as opposed to merely traits of resilience. Many articulations of resilience regarding the wellbeing of refugee women is reduced to viewing them as victims of trauma or resilient survivors that overcame trauma (Lenette et al., 2013; Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011). Pulvirenti and Mason (2011) suggest that what makes these women resilient isn't merely their ability to cope with negative circumstance, but the capacity to which they transform their lives through a process of moving forward and establishing a meaningful existence. In other words, instead of the notion of *bouncing back*, these women engage in a resilient act of *moving on* (Lenette et al., 2013; Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011). While students of color may have very different experiences than those of female refugees, the critique of the limited view of resilience can be extended.

In critical race literature and the narratives that CRT assumes, minority students are positioned as 'at the bottom of society's well' (Bell, 1992, p. vi, as cited in Solórzano

& Yosso, 2002, p. 31), and as disadvantaged and oppressed. Even if scholars attempt to highlight the strength and resilience of these demographic of students, they still fall into the dichotomy of resilience that Lenette, Brough, and Cox (2013) and Pulvirenti and Mason (2011) critique. Students of color are positioned as either victims of trauma and discrimination or survivors of the like. This raises the question of whether the oppression narrative can even permit a minority student to overcome this label (i.e., victim/survivor) and move forward meaningfully in their everyday lives; in effect, changing the notion of resilience from *bouncing back* to *moving on*. Critical race theory seems to perpetuate the positioning of students of color in relation to the trauma, discrimination, or inequality they may have faced; thus, not allowing them to move forward and overcome the deficits that society may place on them.

Summary

In a higher educational landscape where students are experiencing a wellness crisis, it is vital that scholars, instructors, and school leaders examine how to best support students and identify practices that may hinder them in engaging in processes that promote resiliency. In an effort to build on the strengths of students of color, the emphasis on oppression embedded in CRT makes it easy to look at students' failure or success in terms of the constraining dichotomy of victim-survivor. Broadening the scope of resilience may be a pragmatic approach to complicate and give a more dynamic understanding to the experiences of students of color.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how the emphasis on the oppression of racial minorities may potentially perpetuate a deficit approach that frames them in relation to trauma. While CRT claims to build on the strengths of students of color, I seek to explore if the narrative of oppression that is also embedded in the framework works counterproductively to the work that critical race theorists hope to accomplish. At the heart of this study, I seek to understand how students of color understand their identity in relation to oppression and how the stories that inform their identity may influence their process of resilience and moving forward. I seek to discover if the reiteration of students of color being in the position of oppressed may cause them to focus more on the internal and external deficits that keep them back, as opposed to the strengths that they embody, and the processes they engage in that make them resilient.

We cannot choose our race, and in the beginning of our lives we have very little input into who we are supposed to be and how we are to act; this is greatly informed by interpersonal (familial relations) and societal/cultural norms and myths (McAdams, 1997; Stone, 2004). The stories we tell have consequences, whether immediate or down the line. It is my simple hope, in the pages that follow, to examine and generate discussion on the perpetuation of marginalization that has the potential to take place when the oppression narrative becomes a grand-narrative itself. As students of color are under pressure and experiencing stress due to issues of identity, I ask the following questions to guide my study:

1. In what ways do students' stories and personal identification differ from or relate to the oppression narrative?

2. What primarily informs why students accept or reject the label of oppressed?
3. How might students' stories display processes of resiliency, and how do students perceive their identification impacts their processes of resiliency?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Participants

The data in this study was drawn from semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight students of color. Within critical race literature people of color are generalized as a disadvantaged population in the United States. The literature often focuses on the experiences of black and Latinx students due to data revealing greater achievement gaps experienced among these student populations (see, for example, Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Owens & Lynch, 2012; Sowell, 2005; Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Therefore, I recruited black and Latinx college students to better understand their experiences with oppression, whether or not they identify as oppressed, and the perceived impact that embodying that identity has on their sense of self and resiliency. Critical race theory was introduced into higher education more than 20 years ago; however, it has gained greater attention in popular culture over the last few years. Thus, participation in this study was limited to students who were currently enrolled in college or students who had graduated within the last four years so that they would be more apt to recall their experiences.

Demographics

All participants in this study either currently attend or have recently graduated from a PWI in the Northwest. At the time of this study, two participants were currently enrolled in undergraduate courses, four were currently in a PhD program, and two held Masters degrees (which they received within the last three years). A variety of majors were represented: Materials Science and Engineering, Ecology, Communication, Public

Policy and Administration, Health Promotion, and Elementary and Secondary Education. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 35 years old, with an average age of 27.6. All participants identified their racial background as either black or Latinx. Two participants were black (one specifying Afro-Caribbean), three were of mixed race (White and Latina; Puerto Rican, Bolivian, and Mexican), and three were Latino (Mexican). Five participants were female and three were male.

Recruitment

Following IRB approval, I conducted my research early in the Spring of 2020. I recruited participants through purposive and snowball sampling. To recruit participants for this study, I contacted several student organizations on campus with information about my study to allow students who were interested in participating to contact me via email. Due to only receiving a few responses and several cancellations, I built my sample through participant recommendations. Snowball sampling was useful as some students may have been hesitant to reach out unless prompted by their peers.

Procedures

Upon scheduling interviews participants were asked via email to fill out a brief demographic survey where they identified basic demographic information and chose their own pseudonym. Six participants filled out the survey at the beginning of our interview, so selecting their own pseudonym served as a great rapport building tool while also serving to protect confidentiality. In sharing student stories, I omit their majors and the names of student organizations/clubs to further protect participant identities. All interviews were conducted in person in locations convenient for participants (e.g., Student Union Building or Library). Each participant was provided with a consent form

to request permission for audio recording to take place during the interview process. The interviews ranged from approximately 30 minutes to an hour and 10 minutes, with an average length of 50 minutes.

I used a combination of narrative (Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2001) and semi-structured interviewing (Mason, 2002) approaches. In interviewing, stories are often interrupted with questions from the researcher that can distract or otherwise fragment a participant's narrative (Gilbert, 2002; Riessman, 1993). A narrative approach allows for the participant to take the seat as storyteller (Beuthin, 2014; Gilbert, 2002). Riessman (2001) suggests that narratives are windows into lives and not only represent identity, but also provide space for analyzing identities. Examining how students perceive themselves is at the heart of this study, so I wanted to give space and voice to their narratives. This was ideal for analyzing how students identified themselves within their stories, and how they negotiated and felt about the stories that may be told about them.

According to Beuthin (2014), simply by being an interviewer one becomes a collaborator in a co-constructed story with their participants (Gilbert, 2002). With this in mind, I recognized that by conducting an interview, the context would change the ways in which people came to understand their own stories, and that my own narrative impacted what I perceived (Gilbert, 2002). This is an important aspect of interviewing that "guide[d] [my] awareness and sense of responsibility" in sharing others stories (Gilbert, 2002, p. 236).

To maintain a consistent focus (e.g., examining resiliency, oppression narrative, etc.) throughout the interviews, I used an interview guide. Utilizing a semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed for comparison and pattern checking between

interviews (Leisenring, 2006). This loose guide allowed for a degree of spontaneity, rapport building, and for each interview to resemble what Burgess (1988) refers to as conversations with a purpose. In other words, the guide assisted in keeping the focus on the purpose of this study and answering my research questions, while also allowing for flexibility within each conversation. Each interview was transcribed for purposes of analysis, resulting in 203 pages of data.

Interview Guide

I began the interviews by asking participants to tell me their story. This question alone elicited responses that were 25 minutes long. Students talked about their upbringing, how they came to the university, and their experience as a student of color at a PWI. Following this, I asked students to describe their identity and discuss what influenced their identity. I then asked questions to probe into their narratives and elicit information regarding each students' perception of self and their sense of resilience, and how the stories that informed their lives influenced those perceptions. Each interview contained a time for students to explain how they understood oppression, and how they saw themselves in relation to it.

My first research question (*in what ways do students' stories and personal identification differ from or relate to the oppression narrative?*) primarily guided probing questions. Because I wanted to elicit participants' lived experiences, I asked questions that would direct students to discuss how they saw themselves, how that influenced the way they moved through their lives, and their experience with disadvantage due to their race. To answer my second and third research questions, during interviews I asked questions centered on the identity of my participants and what informed their identity.

Students were asked to describe how they felt they relate to or connect with other people, a time they overcame a challenge/barrier, and how they feel their identity influences the way they navigate through school (e.g., classes, peer interaction, student-teacher interaction, etc.).

Analysis

As I displayed through my literature review, critical race theory has informed many practices within educational institutions and is widely implemented. Because of this, many professors accept the assumptions of the theory and interpret students' experiences through a critical race informed framework. I was interested in taking a narrative approach to understand the lived experiences of the individuals (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Reissman, 1993). Thus, I chose not to interpret the data with a critical race lens, but to understand students' perspectives and how they differed from or related to the assumed oppression narrative.

Two separate segments of analysis occurred: 1) interpretation, reorganization, and development of participants' narratives, and 2) an inductive coding approach to the data.

Following the transcription of each interview, to better identify how students' narratives are similar or different from the narrative of oppression in a critical race theoretical framework, I approached each narrative by examining how the student structured their story. In accordance with Riessman's (1993) suggestion, I approached the narratives asking two questions: "How is it organized? Why does an informant develop her tale *this* way in conversation with *this* listener?" (p. 61). How a participant identifies themselves and positions themselves within a story can be telling of how they are making sense of their perception and narrative. Because participants often speak in ways that are

not a fluid narrative (e.g., fragments, asides, pauses, etc.), I engaged in a reorganization of the narrative content to help in the interpretation of the story (Gilbert, 2002). This reorganization took the form of not only reading stories from beginning to end, but seeing how students moved between stories they shared. Often stories students shared would seem to contradict until they shared a different story toward the end of the interview. Having flexibility in the interpretation of students' stories allowed for seeing more connections between stories than if I would have read them from beginning to end.

Following this process, I went through each narrative and highlighted words, phrases, or segments that seemed to best represent the interviewee (Faulkner, 2020). Similar to the work of Hargrove (2014), after doing this for each narrative, I created a brief individual profile that exemplified the students' narratives and how they represented and made sense of their stories. I used these narratives to inform the themes related to my research questions.

To analyze the data from the semi-structured portion of the interview process, I utilized an inductive coding approach to my research (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I went through an open-coding process looking for themes and phrases throughout the interviews that captured participants' stories. Particularly I looked for ways they made sense of how they felt their perception of themselves and their resiliency is impacted by the stories they hear about disadvantage and oppression. Furthermore, I looked for aspects in their narratives that related to or differed from the assumptions of the oppression narrative in critical race literature. Critical race theory seeks to expose and resist systems that oppress people of color, thus I sought to understand how the participants understood oppression and how (if at all) they

experienced it in their life (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a). According to CRT, this oppression would entail anything that feeds into a system of racism or inequality (e.g., microaggressions, bigotry, disadvantage, etc.) (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017a). I went through each transcription line by line engaging in constant comparison where I compared emerging findings in the data with previous data to try to capture the similarities and differences between student narratives (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Leisenring, 2006). Through these processes, I was able to develop seven themes with my research questions as an organizing framework that captured the complex ways in which the students' stories related to and also rejected the oppression narrative, and how the students perceived their identity was important to their processes of resiliency.

The next section contains results from this study in two segments. First, I provide eight brief thematized profiles for each participant based on the stories that they shared during the interview phase. I then present my thematized findings derived from what was most salient throughout the participants' responses in regard to (*RQ1*) how students' experiences differ and/or relate to the oppression narrative, (*RQ2*) what informed why students accepted or rejected the label of oppressed, and (*RQ3*) how students stories displayed processes of resiliency, and how they perceive their identification impacts their processes of resiliency.

CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Introduction

An important aspect of this work is the attention brought to the individual experience. While students' stories do have some similarities, which are important to identify, the nuances of experience that make each story unique are important to why students identify the way they do. This is also informative for understanding how these individuals see and interact with the world around them. To bring attention to the individual, the next section comprises participant profiles that contain a brief overview of my interpretation of their stories and how participants primarily identified themselves.

Individual Stories

Ashton— Keeping Perspective

Ashton is a 25-year-old who recently graduated with her Master's degree. When asked how she would describe her identity she immediately said "a scholar" and prides herself in her academic achievement. She grew up in a bi-racial home (white and Latino) and after her father passed away she became more aware of how she was different from others in her family. One thing that was evident throughout Ashton's story was the idea of keeping her perspective and making the most of each circumstance. Whether it was adapting to life after her dad passed away or when she was robbed, Ashton described that sometimes negative experiences take place and "it is what is". From that point, after a challenge or hurdle arises, Ashton said she intentionally wanted to choose to move forward because "you gotta keep your perspective."

Cake— Persistence

"I gotta keep going. That's what I want to do." Born in Texas, but raised in Mexico, Cake's story exemplified persistence. Cake came to the United States to attend University. When he first came he spoke only a little bit of English and was able to get a job at a restaurant. He recalled several times when he would have to answer the phone to get orders and pass the call on to someone else because he couldn't understand what was being said or how to communicate. Through encouragement from his coworkers and picking up the language, Cake described how he got to the point where he decided that he was going to answer the phone and learn how to improve his English. He described how the restaurant was a great place for him to grow and learn, but he still wanted to go to college. One day he hopped on the bus to the University, missed the stop, had to pay to go back and was so defeated that he just took the bus back home. A week or two passed and he decided to try again. He saw a sign that said "University Drive", got off the bus, found the university, got enrolled, and the rest is history. At the time of this study, Cake was 26-years-old and currently enrolled in a PhD program. Cake's hope is to be able to help others who were in similar situations as he was, recognizing that immigrating and not speaking the common language is a steep learning curve, but it can be accomplished with support from others.

Karen— Making My Own Path

"I make my own path. I could be just as successful as anyone else." In Karen's story she exuded confidence, assertiveness, and a sense that she was sure of herself. Karen a 32-year-old woman is Puerto Rican and German by blood and has an adoptive black father. When she first began to describe her background and identity to me, she

laughed and said that her story was unique. In describing her identity Karen simply said her name. Throughout her story there was a clear theme of individuality and rejecting labels. She described how her identity often stumps people. Whether people assume she spoke Spanish, were shocked that she spoke German, surprised that she's a veteran—Karen said "they want to be able to check a box and say you fit in this box. And I'm like, no, it's not that easy."

Dion— Learning

"I want to know about everyone and everything. Like why things are the way they are…I just want to know everything about other people while also, like, learn about myself too." Dion's story was clearly marked by growing and the journey toward understanding who she is. At the time of this study, Dion was a 21-year-old with hopes of becoming a teacher. She was adopted by a white couple along with her other half siblings. One thing that continued to emerge throughout Dion's story was the concept of learning. Whether it was learning more about the area she was living in, learning about black history, or even, now, she says the adventure of learning more about herself. Her story highlighted the great value in having a community for support and being a learner to adapt to changes both personally and environmentally.

Coffee— For the Greater Good

Coffee is a 25-year-old first-generation PhD student and self-proclaimed "science guy". Growing up with immigrant parents, he recalled that his parents primary concern was working to provide food and shelter for their family and didn't teach them about Mexican culture. After receiving a full-ride scholarship to a college in the Midwest and being in a diverse cohort, Coffee began to learn more about identity. During the

interview, Coffee continually came back to the idea of not wanting to lose his identity while he climbed in academia, but to stay true to his values. He always wanted to remember where he came from and fuse that with engineering and science. More than just building a product, Coffee wants to infuse his knowledge and experience into his education in a way that will benefit the community and serve the public good.

Liny— Changing Perceptions

"I want to see that change…because I think I could help change [the] perception that people have on us." Liny's story was one marked by perseverance. After studying in Mexico and completing his Master's degree in Canada, Liny (32-years-old), came to the United States to pursue his PhD. Due to English not being his primary language, getting into graduate school was not a breeze. After taking the GRE multiple times and sending countless emails to schools, Liny realized he needed to find a different method to get his foot in the door. He went to a university and asked if he could volunteer and work for free, worked his way toward a paid position as an employee, and was eventually in the position to express that he wanted to pursue his PhD. Now that he made it into his program, Liny expressed that he hopes to see change for future students who are in a similar position as he was in. He wants to help "change perceptions" that people have on Mexican immigrants.

J. Adeline Grey— Freedom

"I like expression of color, print, I don't care. If I'm gonna put myself out there I want you to see who I am before I even open my mouth." This statement from J. Adeline Grey captures her story quite well. Throughout her narrative J. Adeline Grey, a 25-year-old, made it clear that in spite of leading a troubled life and being estranged from some

family, she is “free” and is not afraid to share it. She was born and raised in the Caribbean in a family that highly valued education. Her grandparents were financing her education, but she decided to go a different way and joined the military. Being a black female in the military, she quickly learned that people will make assumptions about who you are and that you have to have a strong “sense of self” to make it. J. Adeline Grey exemplified what it can look like to take control of your own narrative.

Amelia—Giving Back

“I'm going to make this better. I'm going to make it better for others.” Amelia, a 35-year-old PhD student, emphasized a desire to give back to her mother that sacrificed so much for her to be where she is now. Amelia was born to her mother, a Bolivian-immigrant, and her father who is white, but after they divorced, she found herself immersed in two different cultures. Amelia recalled how both of her parents valued education, but it was communicated differently. Her mother saw higher education as the way to a better life and better work and for her father it wasn’t *if* Amelia would go to college, it was *when*. When she was with her father, she was able to learn about the value of time, the arts, and travel, and with her mother she learned how to be resourceful and how to use your community. Because of the sacrifices that she saw her mother make to give her a foundation, Amelia expressed the desire she has to be more engaged in the community civically and to make things better for others.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

In higher education, pop culture, and politics today, there is an emphasis on the stories of oppression regarding racial minorities. The purpose of the present study was to explore how minority students at a PWI understand their identity (in regards to whether or not they internalize oppression) and how the stories that inform their identity may empower or disempower their sense of resiliency. Going into this study I wanted to better understand why students of color might accept or reject the oppression narrative. Through my review of literature, I suggested that the oppression narrative within critical race theory has become a type of grand narrative in that it presents a narrow view of the minority student experience. I also suggested that this narrative may perpetuate a deficit approach that limits students of color to identify with and be identified by the oppression or hardships they may face, potentially hindering students from engaging in processes of resiliency.

Through my analysis of the eight interviews, seven themes were developed that captured the complexity of these students' identities in regard to oppression, resiliency, and how they felt the narratives that informed their identities influence the way they navigate life and move forward. In the following pages I present my findings using my research questions as an organizing framework with each section having themes and subthemes to display how students understand their personal narratives and identities within them, and the ways in which students' stories and experiences relate to and/or

differ from the oppression narrative. I also describe the ways in which these participants actualized promotive factors and moved forward from difficulty meaningfully and productively in their lives. Overall, I found that these individuals clearly reflected a perspective of resiliency that promotes a positive sense of self and ability to move forward.

Narrative and Identity Formation

RQ1: In what ways do students' stories and personal identification differ from or relate to the oppression narrative?

Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2017b) claim that race and racism are central to the experiences of students of color and therefore should be brought to the center of discourse (also see Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I found that race is central to students' experiences as it is an evident aspect of who they are. While some students had experienced more racialized incidents than others, seven out of the eight participants did not identify dealing with racism as central to their experience. Even so, every student had some story to share that was specifically tied to their experience as a student of color. Several of the assumptions made within critical race and whiteness literature about the oppression narrative regarding students of color included the assumption of disadvantage and the lack of access to resources, lack of privilege, combatting white supremacy, the assumption of a distrust toward white instructors (e.g., Rudick, 2017) and the assumption of weariness and defeat from catering to Whiteness (e.g., Big Think, 2018; DiAngelo, 2011). As a whole, the ways students navigated circumstances deviated away from the previously stated assumptions of the race and racial oppression narrative. In this first section I discuss two themes to explain the ways students' stories and identification relate

and differ from the oppression narrative: *external/internal identity tension* and *not leading with challenges.*

External/Internal Identity Tension

I began each interview by asking students to tell me their story, following this I asked each participant to explain how they would describe their identity. This question elicited responses that ranged from confusion to what one student identified as a "rant." While responses varied in tone (e.g., assertive or subdued), each explanation highlighted the tension present in identity formation and the importance that identity played into these students' experiences. This was an interesting point of tension as some students internally identified and lived out their identities differently than people expected them to. It was this tension that caused the participants to want to avoid being "labelled", "categorized", or "check boxed". This tension being present signifies that there are external assumptions made about race that seek to mold individuals into a particular way of being. In some cases, this pressure was not from white people, but from people of participants' own ethnicity.

Complexity of Identity

We often make sense of our culture and context through the telling and retelling of stories (Alemán & Helfrich, 2010; McAdams, 2001; Montecinos, 1995). Whether intentionally or not we often organize ideas and even people into categories to help make sense of our world; however, people often don't fit nicely into one category. This complexity caused students to find their own path and connect with others based on similarities (e.g., cultural or interest-based [band, food, choir, etc.]). Students emphasized that they were a person with more to their identity than their color and/or race.

Throughout the interviews each student touched on ways they have either been categorized incorrectly by others and how they have had to work through ways in which to think about themselves due to the complexity of who they are.

Improperly Categorized

Several participants expressed how people often assume their experience because of the way they look. For instance, several students expressed people assuming they spoke Spanish and had engaged in traditional cultural Latinx traditions, though that was never a part of their life growing up. This at times made them feel a tension or disconnect from what they internally felt about themselves and what, externally, people assumed about them causing feelings of confusion or even guilt. Ashton, a Latina, described her experience: "Like, when they would ask, 'You speak Spanish' I used to be like, 'oh, no, I'm super whitewashed,' as a way to like validate why I don't speak Spanish because I'm brown and I should." J. Adeline Grey, a black student, recalled a time when she was in the military and a ranking officer assumed she grew up in an inner-city and that she led a reckless life. In reality she grew up on the Virgin Islands in a family of educators.

Amelia, who is white and Bolivian and identifies as a Latina, explained the complexity of her identity in the following way:

> I think that Latina encompasses all of me. Um, but do I—I'm, I think sometimes people don't see that. Um, because it's—my skin color isn't always reflective, but if you go to Mexico, there's some blue eyed, blonde Mexicans, so it, it's hard.

She went on to explain how when she was young people would talk about her in Spanish assuming that she was white and didn't speak the language, though she speaks it fluently.

Cake and Liny were the only participants who grew up in Mexico and now live in the United States. They expressed this internal/external complexity to their identity in a different way. They both described "Mexican" as deeply cultural. Cake described feeling like he's "in between" because he sees himself as Mexican but he feels that other Mexicans who came here later in life may not see him that way since he has changed through his experience of being an American student. Similarly, Liny said that he doesn't see some people who identify themselves as Mexican *as Mexican* because it is so deeply tied to culture in his perspective. In describing what a Mexican is to him, Liny said:

> It's someone that has Spanish has his native language. Someone who grew up outside the States—in Mexico, of course. One of our main value characteristics is that family comes first. The classic thing that everybody says here that "My house is your house." And it's true. Mi casa es tú casa. Y es, it's, uh, it's, uh, it shows how important friendships are for us. I think we're warm hearted. Yeah, we're, we're more emphatic [sic] sometimes.

Liny also shared a story where he told a group of young Mexicans, that he worked with at a grocery, that he also worked at a university. They all assumed that he was a janitor and did not believe him when he said he was a researcher at the university. He explained how their opinion left him feeling "disheartened" and that "we [Mexicans] don't expect much from ourselves". This more internalized view is nuanced from the previous examples because Liny and Cake identified a categorization that takes place not only based on external appearance, but cultural values and adherence.

Working Through the Complexity

Several participants seemed to initially struggle with explaining their identity to me during interviews. For example, Dion, a black female, was adopted by white parents. When I asked her how she would describe her identity she was quiet for a couple of minutes, got emotional, and asked if we could come back to the question. Later in the interview she expressed that it was hard to answer because she felt like she *should* say that she identified as a black woman, however because she didn't grow up in a black culture, she didn't know what to say. Similarly, Coffee described not knowing how to identify himself. His parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico, but he was born in Texas and raised more "Americanized", mainly speaking English in his home. In explaining the difficulty of how to identify himself he said:

> Because of the way I was brought up, I don't necessarily identify as like Hispanic, Latinx, or Chicano, maybe a little bit like Chicano, because I feel like as much as I have learned from that word that that kind of means that I'm not necessarily claiming some sort of like Mexican heritage just like this idea that, like, it's a new thing, right? So, I think I would identify more with that if I were to pick like a demographic box to tick, but I don't really even identify with that so much because, yeah, it was never really instilled in me.

Both of these students verbally processed why they felt it was difficult to identify themselves in regard to their race or ethnicity and then went on to describe how they identify; namely as a "learner" and "science guy", respectively.

Karen described how she has felt people trying to fit her in a box, but that it's "not that easy" because of her background. She grew up in Germany, but is Latina and has an

adoptive black father. Because of the dynamic of her cultural background and never feeling like she fit into any category, she said her response to how she identifies herself is simply "I'm Karen." In a similar manner, Ashton, who had previously described herself as "whitewashed" to validate why she didn't speak Spanish and to cope with the guilt for not being a "stereotypical Hispanic", went on to describe how she feels about it now. She explained, "I think it was like last year is when I was like, yeah no, I'm not using that excuse. I just straight up don't speak Spanish. Screw you." She explains how she primarily identifies as an "extroverted scholar" as opposed to her race or ethnicity.

The participants emphasized how and why their identity was a site of tension at times because of external profiling or assumed cultural expectations. They were able to work through it by finding ways to identify that rang true to them and that they felt encompassed who they were. In most cases, embracing and working through this tension ushered the participants into connecting with others based on cultural similarities or shared interests. Dion described how joining choir allowed her to connect with a variety of people from different backgrounds where they could get to know each other while rallying around a shared interest. Similarly, Cake described how he started taking a Basque class with his friends where none of them know the language and get to learn together.

Summary

The expectations of a particular lived experience and of what it means to be Black, Mexican, Bolivian, or Puerto Rican was a site of tension for these participants. However, the tension of not fitting into peoples' ideas of what they *should* be and do was not framed as a disadvantage. Instead, by developing ways to work through the tension

and finding ways to resist labels and identify themselves, it served as a point of resilience for these individuals both in school and throughout their lives. Each participant was able to showcase how they overcame or are in the process of overcoming external pressures to conform.

Not Leading with Challenges

Most participants highlighted challenges in their life and schooling that were not tied to their racial identity (e.g., college budget, time managing, difficult school work, challenging others' ideas). Even though most students denied having experientially dealt with oppression and all students said they did not identify as racially oppressed, there were still a few stories shared that are linked to elements often cited in critical race and whiteness literature (e.g., othering, racism, microaggressions, etc.). The way students talked about potentially oppressive incidents, and dealt with them, displayed how they engaged in a process of reframing situations where they didn't internalize the challenge or identify themselves by the oppressive act of another. Participants' stories often highlighted choosing to lead with their strengths or personal goals as opposed to being inhibited by challenges linked to being a person of color at a PWI.

Below I address four different manifestations students encountered that relate to assumptions embedded in critical race theory, and explain how students' perspectives and or actions seem to depart from the grand oppression narrative.

Othering: Awareness of Difference

Every participant had experienced some form of othering in the sense that they were aware of their difference. This was largely due to the fact that several of the participants had moved from a more diverse area to attend a PWI in a predominately

white town. Ashton, who moved from a diverse city in Southern California, stated, "I really realized, hello, no one looks like me… I am the only one in this classroom." Dion, from a diverse urban area on the East Coast, said:

> …there's diversity here, but, like, not so much from what I was seeing. So, like, the areas I was in I just kind of started just freaking out just a little bit. Like, I knew we [blacks] were scarce, but I did not know that we were like this scarce.

Participants recognizing their difference was present in every student narrative shared. In some instances, it wasn't necessarily tied to recognizing that they look different, but recognizing that culturally they thought differently. For instance, Liny described how simple things, like the lack of people saying hi or bye when they enter or leave a room "shock [him]", "make [him] wonder", and make him more aware of his cultural difference.

Racism

Three out of the eight participants shared stories in which they personally experienced blatant racism. For those who had experienced racist incidents, they generally explained that dealings with racism and discrimination were not central to their experience and not defining of how they saw themselves. The most common way participants talked about these instances was in a reflective or reframing manner. They would describe the interaction, express how it made them feel, and then explain how they think about their experiences now. Karen described a bigoted incident that occurred in the waiting room of the VA when she was going to sit in a chair next to a middle-aged military retiree. As she approached the chair the man said that he was "not sitting next to that monkey." Karen went on to explain her anger after the incident:

> Never in my life did I think I'd be in that setting where someone would say that. And of course, immediately, I'm uncomfortable, so I just go sit out in the hallway. I was like, I'm not dealing with this.

Later in reflecting on why she didn't see incidents like the aforementioned one as barriers to her success and personal identification, she added, "I don't lead with that, because I'm like, it doesn't matter. I've never—I never really thought like veteran, woman, anything, was like a barrier."

Microaggressions: Racialized or Ignorant Comments

Several participants shared stories where they had personally interacted with someone making discriminatory or ignorant comments and/or actions toward them. These instances often happened in situations that caught the participants by surprise. Coffee recalled a time when he and his boss were joking about how nice it would be to have a nap in the middle of the day. He went on to describe the incident,

> …she was like, "Oh, yeah, like don't your people call them siestas?" And I'm like, wait, what? We have never had a conversation about my culture ever. And she just turns to me and says that. What? What are you doing? It was so uncomfortable.

J. Adeline Grey, a black student, shared a similar story in which she gave advice to a white classmate regarding their hair and their response was, "I'm not black!" She went on to explain, "I didn't give her suggestions off of me. I knew she was white…. But just me being there and suggesting an undercut to her for whatever reason, screamed 'That's some black people shit.' And for me, I'm like, what?"

The unsolicited nature of such comments made these instances stand out to the students. However, even when surprising, misunderstood, or unsolicited comments were made the participants displayed how they did not let it define them. For example, Cake, who was raised in Mexico, describes that when he is confronted with cultural differences or jokes that he doesn't understand he "does not let any of that define [him]." He went on to say, "I've let my work be the one that shows I'm here because I'm learning and whatever I learn I try to do it well enough."

Fewer Resources

Other instances that could be seen as fitting within the oppression narrative were displayed in individuals that were either the first in their family to go to college and having to navigate uncharted territory alone, or those who had a language barrier which made the process of applying to schools, etc., more difficult. In describing her experience being the first to go to college in her family, Karen said,

> So, my entire college career, except for that one semester, when it came to like doing my own courses, doing my own financial aid and all that, I did it all my own because I was like, I had no one to tell me.

Even so, Karen discussed how she was resourceful and "made it a point to learn as much as [she] could about financial aid so that [she] knew what to do." Cake and Liny both had a language and cultural barrier since they were born and raised in Mexico. They both described stories of how they had to learn to navigate how to apply to graduate school. Cake turned to Google to learn how to do a graduate school application, and Liny started volunteering in a university to network and get his foot in the door.

Summary

Two students, J. Adeline Grey and Liny, expressed a greater awareness of how they have been treated differently based on their appearance. However, they, along with the other participants, seemed able to separate negative or uncomfortable circumstances from how they saw themselves and described their identity. Participants often decentered their experience with challenges or racism throughout their narratives seeing it as external and not something that they lead with, noting that "not every white person is an oppressor". Due to this, they often drew upon their culture and other aspects of their identity as more influential to their experience and outcome. This was displayed in students sharing values that were instilled in them and positive ways in which they view themselves (e.g., "giving up is not an option"; "be resourceful" … "use your community"; "I am an outgoing scholar and like I think I'm a badass individual"). For instance, in describing why oppressive things can happen to her but she doesn't identify as oppressed, J. Adeline Grey said,

> I can experience oppressive things, but I will not take the ownership of being oppressed. I know when something racist is being [sic] occurring to me. I know when blocks are being put in my way because of who I am, not because of what I can do. And that is when I say that oppressive things are occurring to me. But I will never take on the title of being oppressed. It's not me. Even if someone is stepping to me in an oppressive nature, what I am doing to succeed is not even—It's not even the same level. I'm passing you. I don't care. You're doing that on your own. I'm skyrocketing.

In this sense, participants seemed to separate a negative circumstance from who they were and, in effect, felt like they could still move forward successfully. Even amongst the experiences that relate to the oppression narrative, the participants did not express a weariness from catering to Whiteness, a distrust of white professors, or even oppression being central to their experience as a student of color. Instead, students' experiences and perceptions seemed to deviate from the assumptions embedded within the oppression narrative.

Rejecting the Oppression Narrative

RQ2: What primarily informs why students accept or reject the label of oppressed?

Throughout the interviews I asked each participant to explain what oppression meant to them. This question elicited a variety of responses that led students to discuss their identity and how they made sense of their experiences. All participants conceptualized oppression as some form of an unequal power distribution. Three participants emphasized that oppression is systemic, and three participants conceptualized oppression particularly linked to systemic racism. Overwhelmingly, the participants explicitly rejected identifying as oppressed, and their stories painted a picture of eight people of color where racial oppression was not central to their experience. In this section I address two themes that capture why these participants did not self-identify as oppressed: *claiming privilege or support* and *denying a deficit*.

Claiming Privilege or Support

I began each interview by asking participants to tell me their story in regard to their upbringing, how they came to their institution, and how their time in school was/has been. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed that they were "privileged" in the sense of

having access to resources in the form of community, finances, or having others in their life who valued and encouraged their education. Many of the participants expressed that their experience growing up never made them feel like their race disadvantaged them or set them back. Two sub-themes help exemplify the way students articulated having privilege or support: *having role models* and *university and peer support*.

Having Role Models

One aspect that seemed to greatly influence how participants perceived their stories, upbringing, and identification was the people they had in their lives and the stories they told them or values they passed on. In the interviews, this was often expressed in sharing family stories and values or pivotal experiences with individuals they looked up to as role models. For instance, Cake described a moment when he was still a child living in Mexico and a man that he saw as his spiritual guide recited a mathematic formula:

> I was like "I don't know what that is, but it's pretty cool that you know what that is", like that's the sign of someone who's studied and learned. Just pulled it out of your head! I was like, that's awesome. I want to do that I want to be able to be respected like the way I'm respecting you because of how cool that was.

Having moments and people like this in the participants' lives allowed them to see what was possible for them to achieve. This was also influential into why participants expressed having supportive people in their lives was vital to their success and largely why they felt privileged, supported, and not oppressed.

Other participants talked about how they saw examples of people who "worked really hard" and were able to support their family. Ashton explained how her dad started

working from “scratch”, built up a company and eventually became the president of the company. Echoing this sentiment, Karen explained how growing up with her adoptive black father, he never talked about being oppressed or disadvantaged because of his race. She described,

> It was never a thing about race, about oppression and about the struggles, it was more about, like, he had a hard-working family. Like, you love who you love. It doesn't matter. And, like even my mom's side, like my grandpa, they're all accepting of, like, my dad. It was just never a thing. Like it wasn't like “you're different” or just like, it was “you're a person.”

Seeing examples like these in the family or community seem to greatly inform how these participants viewed their own potential and personal values.

University and Peer Support

A common thread throughout the interviews was that students had not experienced disadvantages because of their race during their time in school. In fact, some students expressed that they perceived more “pros” in relation to their race and interaction with peers and faculty. Participants expressed not feeling like they were treated unfairly or like their racial identity was an obstacle for their success; on the contrary, it was a point of building community within their friend groups and/or universities. For example, in entering her PhD program, Amelia described the community she has been able to help develop and connect with by getting involved with a committee to encourage diversity. Through this association she has been able to connect with other doctoral students and faculty of color across departments on campus to build community and encourage mentorship. Another student described how she has attended events that

are specifically tailored for students of color on campus where she has been able to connect with other students and get involved in the community.

Denying a Deficit

Every participant recognized that oppression exists and that there are people throughout the world who are oppressed. However, none of these students self-identified as oppressed (even despite the experiences often related to oppression noted previously; e.g., microaggressions, othering, etc.). Participants articulated that if they were to self-identify as oppressed it would make them feel like they "don't belong", like they are "settling" or "weak", like they would have less "hope", they would be "giving up power", that it would put them at a "negative start", and that to be seen or treated as though they are racially oppressed or disadvantaged is "condescending" and "reductive". Implicit in these responses is the notion that words and stories do have reality-creating potential (Delgado, 1989). The reality that identifying as oppressed may bring is one to which these individuals did not want to give power. One student, J. Adeline Grey, expressed that "words are really just an exchange of power;" and when a person tries to bring up that she is oppressed because of the color of her skin, she will not accept that label because "the power isn't theirs to have."

Summary

These students expressed that they rejected the notion of being racially oppressed because they are in positions where they have access to assistance and support, feel like they can still rise to their potential and in their careers, feel like they can achieve, and are in positions where they feel they can be of influence to others. Several participants claimed that they did not live in a situation where they felt someone had power over them

because of their race. In these students' lives, this seemed to challenge the notion that whiteness automatically endowed another with more power and privilege leaving students of color at a disadvantage. A majority (*n=7*) of the participants felt that if they were to identify as oppressed that they would be giving up power that they have and then put themselves at a disadvantage.

Moving Forward: Reflected Resiliency and Actualizing Promotive Factors

RQ3: How might students' stories display processes of resiliency, and how do students perceive their identification impacts their processes of resiliency?

When conceptualizing resiliency communicatively, it brings attention to the processes and discourses that enable individuals to actualize promotive factors and to move on in a meaningful way (Lenette et al., 2013; Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011; & Zimmerman, 2013). The stories that participants shared and internalized focused on their strengths, capability, and community as opposed to the external factors (e.g., self-efficacy and self-esteem, stories from family, peer and program support) that may work to oppress them. Each participant actualized promotive factors (e.g., personal ability, support from others, etc.) that offset negative circumstances that occurred in their lives. In this section I draw out three themes that display the way these students engaged in processes of resiliency and how their identification influenced that process: *identity as an anchor*, *using community*, and *reframing circumstances and highlighting victories*.

Identity as An Anchor

Participants' narratives were rich in underscoring the multifaceted nature of their identity. Throughout their stories they continually relied on aspects of who they were and how that informed the way they understood themselves and their ability to be resilient

through challenges. The stories highlighted that the way these individuals identified kept them grounded through life changes, and strongly influenced how they navigated circumstances. For instance, Ashton described what her identity meant for her:

> I am an outgoing scholar, and like I think I'm a badass individual (laughter). So, I think like my confidence is much higher. So, finding a job, I was very confident in everything that I was doing. And through school, I was very confident in what I was studying because I didn't, I didn't think about what I looked like, I thought about what I bring to the table. Um, so it was super easy to navigate those things because I was like, here's what I am, who I am. Here's what I bring to the table.

Having a strong anchor in her academic achievement and ability beyond her Latina identity gave Ashton a sense of assurance and confidence that informed how she confronted situations in school or work. Other students also highlighted the multifaceted nature of their identity as being an important aspect of their ability to be resilient by appealing not only to their personal interests, but also the importance of their culture and background as a site of strength. This is exemplified by Amelia explaining how her heritage is a vital aspect to why she does what she does and thinks the way she thinks:

> I'm Bolivian. I'm a daughter. I am, one day hope to be, a mother. I'm a farmer. I'm a beekeeper. I like—I'm a whole person. Um, and that my, my Hispanic background and being a Latina encompasses all of what I do… I look at where I am today, and it's built on generations of, you know, family, having a stable home life and then having you know, the ability to send your kids to college and then having your ability, you know that a lot of families don't have that.

Other Latinx participants made similar statements about aspects of their culture being a strong identity anchor for them in making statements like “family comes first” and keeping the goal of “helping family” as central to who they are and what they do. Even without this type of specific cultural identity anchor, some participants described how they make their “own path” or rely on the many things that they feel make them who they are. Dion expressed that because she identifies as a learner, she feels that it has allowed her to “adapt” to different environments.

Using Community

Students of all backgrounds face issues with adjusting to difficult workloads, finances, or finding a community to be a part of. For the participants in this study that went from diverse areas to a predominately white area, the adjustment of trying to find a community in the midst of difference can be difficult. Each student, however, shared some aspect of their story that incorporated an outside group offering support or belonging (e.g., family, friends, faculty). Leaning on and reaching out to a community was a vital way in which these students stories reflected actualizing interpersonal promotive factors in their lives.

Five students clearly said they felt that the main reason they were able to move forward and find success was from the support from their professors, families and friends. This was seen through setting up one-on-one meetings with faculty to talk about difficulties or even engaging in extracurricular activities with friends. Amelia said that for her wherever she is it is all about “community.” She described several instances where she actively would “search for community” and “reach” out to others. Liny expressed how he never would have made it to where he was without his ex-wife making

sacrifices so that he could pursue his education. Coffee talked about resiliency as a community effort saying that "if you have a group of people you can rely on, like you bounce into them, they help. You kind of bounce back in."

This support from community also came in the form of encouragement from others that would affirm the ability of the individual. Cake explained how in his job when he was struggling with speaking English his other Latinx coworkers would continually tell him that he would learn it in a matter of time. He then went on to explain how their encouragement influenced him, "So I felt like, yeah, I can do it. And I mean, if you're there and you know the language. I can learn the language." Similarly, students shared instances where they would go to a professor or family member feeling like giving up but then were able to see things in a different perspective and get back on track.

Keeping their identity and goals in the forefront, and leaning on support from their communities helped participants navigate through the variety of challenges and barriers they faced. Though they experienced challenges, participants were not inhibited from engaging in the processes that helped them be resilient. Primarily, they did not base their actions or decisions with their barriers or challenges in mind.

Reframing Circumstances and Highlighting Victories

Many of the challenges that students discussed were not merely centered on issues with their race. Each participant shared experiences that reflected resilience in a transformative way, where they engaged in a process of moving forward and establishing a meaningful existence following traumatic or challenging circumstances. Some challenges that students faced were the death of a parent, sexual assault, negative interaction with border patrol, moving to a new country and not speaking the language,

being the first in their family to go to college, lack of finances, and being estranged from family. Even though these challenges came up throughout their stories, when asked to describe any experienced barriers to their success, most participants had a hard time identifying any. For instance, students expressed that they never thought of barriers in a way of stopping them from doing anything. Participants described a process of reframing negative circumstances. Instead of seeing something as a "true barrier", participants spoke more of seeing them as "minor obstacles", "a challenge", "a bump in the road", or an opportunity to "learn" something.

Additionally, participants shared how their experiences have helped shape how they view things and even broadened or reframed how they discuss issues now. For instance, J. Adeline Grey talked about how meeting her husband, a white man, is an important reason why she doesn't see herself as oppressed. She said, "I don't see myself as oppressed because I don't view every white person as an oppressor." Prior to this she had talked about how it is easy to project "privileged white male" onto someone, but that she has met people that do not fit into that stereotype. That has expanded the way in which she interacts with people, and therefore how she views the world. Experiences like this aided students in having a different perspective. Similarly, several participants discussed the oppression that they witnessed or heard about in Mexico among the indigenous peoples. Seeing oppression in ways that inhibited people from rising up, getting educated, or leaving them "impotent", as one student said, gave students a broad view of what oppression means and led them to reframe situations in their own lives.

Students' narratives also often focused on the victories in their lives or that of their family. For instance, participants showed pride in talking about the "tools" they

have acquired through their education, emphasizing their “beautiful culture”, and praising and showing gratitude to those that did the hard work before them so that they could be where they are now. Every participant linked some aspect of their identity and perspective to victories they have witnessed or been a part of. This was exemplified during a moment in J. Adeline Grey’s interview as she celebrated the shared experiences of black people but also how “we’re not monoliths”. She began to talk about the many things (e.g., music, language, etc.) that bring us together and stated, “It doesn't have to be skin tone. It doesn't even have to be oppression.” J. Adeline Grey echoed what was present in other interviews as well, that there is more to an individual than their racial identity and many aspects within their culture or personal achievements that are important to their perspectives going forward. This highlighted how the participants valued celebrating victories and reframing difficult circumstances which enabled them to feel empowered to continue moving forward in their lives.

Summary

The stories that these individuals internalized, enabled them to move forward in spite of the external pressures or circumstances that had the potential to oppress them. The participants stories were rich in showcasing how these individuals remained grounded while also transforming their lives through difficulties. These students relied on aspects of their identity that they felt helped them in their processes of resilience (e.g., self-efficacy, cultural background, etc.). Each story also spoke to the importance of support from their environments, either from their university and programs provided, families, or peers. Many of the challenges that the participants endured were vital to how they understood themselves, transformed their lives, and engaged in processes of

resiliency. When confronted with difficulty, the participants reframed circumstances (e.g., not seeing something as a barrier but as a "minor obstacle"), expressed their broadened perspectives, and highlighted victories by focusing on those who made their success possible and the many aspects of their cultures that they celebrate.

Summary

Seven overarching themes were presented to explore how the participants in this study understood their identity in relation to oppression and how they engaged in processes of resiliency. The many situations that the participants faced were not things that they could necessarily bounce back from, but situations that drastically changed them and their perspectives (e.g., death of a parent, joining the military). Each narrative displayed the processes by which these students changed from circumstance and moved forward. Each participant expressed the multifaceted and complex nature of their identity which often served as a site that grounded them in their experiences. While these individuals shared the experience of being a minority student at a PWI, their stories seemed to suggest that racist, ignorant comments, or feeling and being different was not necessarily linked to oppression or identifying as oppressed. Having the ability and support to reframe instances and keep their future and potential in mind aided the participants in their ability to move forward.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study I asked three main research questions: In what ways do students' stories and personal identification differ from or relate to the oppression narrative? What primarily informs why students accept or reject the label of oppressed? How might students' stories display processes of resiliency, and how do students perceive their identification impacts their processes of resiliency? In terms of how these participants stories related to the oppression narrative (*RQ1*), I found that there were elements of their stories shared that are often found within critical race literature. For example, they had faced external expectations of what it meant to live out their particular racial identity, experienced feeling like the 'other', had instances with microaggressions or bigotry, and (because some of them were the first to go to college in their family) had to navigate uncharted territory with few resources.

What differed from the common assumptions about people of color was how the participants personally identified themselves in terms of those circumstances and how they viewed those circumstances. For example, in response to the many external expectations that differed from how they internally felt about themselves, the participants resisted labels and found ways to identify that rang true to them (e.g., "scholar", "learner", "science guy", etc.). By relying on other aspects of their identity, this assisted the students in decentering racism, and in some cases even their race, as central to how they made sense of their lives. In this sense, their race was not a salient factor in the way they categorized their lived experiences. It is with that notion that their stories displayed a

separation of negative occurrences from how they identified themselves. It also positioned them to lead their lives without challenges as their primary focus. Previous research suggests that the presence of racism and negative-ability stereotypes may hinder both the mental health, academic performance, and resilience of students of color (Brown, 2003; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Owens & Lynch, 2012). The students in this study did not constantly face racism or negative-ability stereotypes, and claimed not to be oppressed. Because the participants did not feel oppressed and did not experience constant racism, this may account for their positive outcomes and perspectives.

What I found interesting was that none of the participants explicitly identified as racially oppressed, noting that they were privileged, had support, and/or felt that identifying as oppressed would put them at a disadvantage (*RQ2*). Based on the literature and the suggested lack of privilege and the widespread disadvantage experienced by racial minorities in this country, I was surprised that none of these students who have spent time at a predominately white institution felt disadvantaged or that their chances of excelling were inhibited. Most of the students did not have many experiences with racism or even microaggressions. They shared a few stories but said that they were not regular occurrences in their lives. In combatting racialized incidents they displayed a resolve and process through which they relied on their assets (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy) and resources (e.g., support from others) to not let others' actions diminish the view they had of themselves (Cefai, 2007; Zimmerman, 2013).

Supporting resilience literature (e.g., Buzzanell, 2010; Lenette et al., 2013; Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011), these students engaged in processes of resiliency (*RQ3*)

through discourse and interaction that assisted them in moving forward through challenging times. Buzzanell (2010) suggests that by affirming identity anchors, relying on support from others, and even reframing circumstances, a process can be enacted that helps develop and sustain resilience. These are all elements that were salient throughout each narrative. Stories that they believed about themselves, encouragement and support from their communities, highlighting their successes, and/or putting things into perspective worked in tandem to keep them sustained through difficulty.

Identity and Life Stories

These findings are valuable to consider in the discussion of identity among students of color, and have implications on how we come to know and talk about ourselves and others. So much of who we are and how we construct ourselves is done through discourses and stories within the many institutions in our world (e.g., the family, universities, work places, government, etc.) (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Montecinos, 1995). There is much research on people groups that are typically categorized as an oppressed/disadvantaged identity (e.g., victims of abuse, racial minorities, etc.). In these works, there is an effort to understand the why behind how people make sense of themselves and circumstance (e.g., Freire, 1970; Leisenring, 2006; Loseke, 2001). McAdams (2019) suggested that narratives have the power to influence our behaviors, and life stories (i.e., the way we arrange *the self* to make meaning of *the self*) constitutes identity (McAdams, 2001). The participants in this study arranged their *sense of self* in a such a way that helped them make sense of who they were, therefore giving them a sense of purpose and identity (McAdams, 2001).

The way the participants identified themselves was both a site of tension and importance to them. In a world where people, institutions, and clubs are so quick to label the students' stories and perspectives displayed a desire and ability to take control of their own narrative. Loseke (2001) suggests that it is not a simple task to assign meaning to peoples' experiences in regard to lived troubles or challenges because "in lived experience, troubles do not come to us with labels describing their names, meanings, seriousness, and so forth" (p. 108). The discourses that inform different interpretations are varied and complex. In her work examining why some women who experienced abuse in relationships identify as victims while others do not, Leisenring (2006) drew out that identities are complex because they are informed and developed through discourses, stories, and personal interpretations.

In the current study, all of the participants identified as Black or Latinx, including those who identified as mixed race, but each had different experiences, stories, and interpretations that compiled their identity. Because of the complexity of identities, as displayed by my findings, it is important to slow down in trying to assign meaning to peoples' experiences. As members of a historically oppressed group within the United States there are many assumptions that may not be true of all members (e.g., racism may not be central to one's experience). The oppression narrative, as a grand narrative, assumes that something is true of a whole (all people of color) because it is true of some parts of the whole. Therefore, the oppression narrative organizes and explains our knowledge and experience (Stephens & McCallum, 1998) in such a way where all people of color are situated as oppressed. My findings call for a richer discussion of the experiences of minority individuals to disrupt the cultural narrative of the oppressed by

examining the many other cultural factors that inform how individuals identify themselves and organize their experiences.

Racial Classification and Stereotypes

Research has shown (e.g., Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Owens & Lynch, 2012; Ployhart, Ziegert, & McFarland, 2003) that academic achievement gaps between Whites & Asians and black and Latino students in the United States are in part due to negative-ability stereotypes that minorities internalize, also known as stereotype threat. In their study determining if first- and second-generation immigrants are also susceptible to negative-ability stereotypes like domestic minority students, Owens and Lynch (2012) found that immigrants tend to be more resilient to negative-ability stereotyping than domestic minorities because they have a deeper identity to their immigrant status and the hopes of opportunity that lead to perseverance. Interestingly, Owens and Lynch (2012) found that second-generation students earned higher GPAs than first-generation students because of their parent's role in becoming more affluent with American expectations and norms, and because of a sense of responsibility to attain success because of the sacrifices made by their parents. Four of the participants in my study were first- or second-generation immigrants and expressed a sense of responsibility and desire to give back to their families. Based on the literature, their immigrant status may account for their resistance to internalizing stereotypes, and rejecting the notion of being oppressed. However, the four other participants had one or both parents that were born and raised in the United States.

Owens and Lynch (2012) claim that the racial classification system that is present in much of education and stratification research is insufficient in that it "overlooks

significant heterogeneity among minority students along lines of immigrant background" (p. 321). In this present study, this heterogeneity among minority groups was expressed and evident in the vast perspectives shared from the participants. These students were in situations where they were able to emphasize their strengths, resilience, and achievements as opposed to deficits or assumed disadvantages. By focusing on their strengths (similar to the initiative discussed by Day-Vines and Terriquez [2008] with high school Black and Latino males) the students were supported in their ability to advocate for themselves whether in seeking out community, volunteering to get a job, or rejecting labels. While not all of my participants had a strong cultural or immigrant identity, what seemed to be present in all of their stories was a strong desire for and sense of identity that grounded them to be self-determined, seek out opportunities, and envision success as achievable.

The examination of personal experiences, the assumptions embedded within critical race theory, and the oppression narrative is important because the stories that we tell and internalize have real consequences (Delgado, 1989; Montecinos, 1995). The participants in this study articulated that identifying as oppressed would be constraining for them, yet, in higher education people of color are often talked about in terms of being an oppressed group facing massive disadvantages. I found it interesting that the students' stories displayed separating incidents from their identity. They could have a racially charged interaction with someone, but because they did not internalize it and embody the identity of oppressed, they still felt capable of moving forward. My research findings supported that these participants showed a resistance to buying-in to negative stereotypes or expectations from others. Because they perceived *oppressed* as signaling impotence or

a negative-start, they expressed rejecting this identity (Owens & Lynch, 2012). These participants had aspects to their identities other than their race that they felt were central to the way they understood the world.

There were many stories of success and victories shared in the participants narratives. Each individual discussed their challenges and strengths, and a majority of the participants felt that to do otherwise would inevitably leave them in a position of deficit. However, research shows that many black and Latino students do experience inhibitions because of stereotype threat, by internalizing what may be believed about them. Which stories are we highlighting in students' lives, in classroom discussion, etc.? In an effort to eradicate oppression many scholars bring attention to it, while the many successes within minority communities are overshadowed. Perhaps we can learn from those that have experienced success and hopeful outcomes.

The way we talk about issues of race, racism, and identity as it pertains to people of color is important, especially when looking at a predominately white institution where racial diversity is slim. In classrooms with mostly white students who may not be from a diverse area, it is important to take care in making sure that the stories and ideas that are presented do not display a monovocal view of people of color. For instance, several participants acknowledged having interactions with people who had a presupposition that a racial minorities experience was one of oppression and disadvantage. If the black and Latinx experience is presented in these narrow ways in which oppression is the primary unifying point of discussion, then institutions are doing these people of color a disservice by rejecting a history of successes through strength, and missing opportunities to learn

from people of color who have "made it" when the narrative said everything was against them.

Emphasize Strengths and Resilience

In an effort to unify minority peoples and encourage solidarity, within critical race theory oppression and disadvantage is often presented as the common denominator and shared experience among people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This study with only eight participants, displayed that, we, minority people are not a monolith. There are a variety of cultural backgrounds that can even complicate interactions between two people of the 'same race.' Some people of color do not deal with daily racism or discrimination and do not view every white person as inherently privileged or having power over them. This different perspective informed how these students identified themselves and navigated their world.

Just as Delgado (1989) suggests that there are wars between stories vying for the seat of prominence with the potential to create realities, the commonly held notions, narratives, and discourses about racial minorities also have the potential to maintain a reality that is not true for every person of color. Each participants' narrative brought out they were more than their race and that incidents of racism were not central to their experience or identity. These particular participants personally rejected many of the assumptions of the oppression narrative in their personal experience because they have been in positions where they have excelled, have had access, and have been able to establish community and support.

Solórzano (1997) suggests that "we must find examples within and about communities of color that challenge and transform racial stereotypes" (p. 15). My

findings do this very thing. The participants' stories displayed a rejection of giving power to narratives that they felt hindered their resiliency and would ultimately keep limitations ever-present in their lives. The participants displayed a reality that minority students do not all experience their race or racism in the same way, and the way they personally identify has the potential to empower them or disempower them. CRT scholars attempt to highlight the strengths and resilience of students of color, yet the students are positioned as either victims or survivors of discrimination and oppression, while the students themselves may not even identify that way (as the present study spoke to). If the focus is changed from the oppression and disadvantage that some minority students may experience, to their strengths and victories, there is the potential to empower students to move on, transform their lives, and if they are oppressed, it can assist them in self-advocacy and establishing a place for them to work toward their own liberation (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Lenette et al., 2013; Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011).

Diversity and Inclusion Going Forward

The discussion of diversity and inclusion came up throughout interviews, and while it was outside the scope of the present research, it still has implications that are relevant to the present discussion and trajectory going forward.

At the end of my interview with Cake he described the process by which he worked through struggles (i.e., learning a new language, navigating college, etc.) and is now wanting to use his knowledge to help others. He then shared something that speaks to the heart of this study. He explained:

> I'm hoping that in the future there's more focus on actual diversity because I feel the effort of being diverse can alienate some people still. And to a certain extent

> that makes you lose hope or trust in that feeling of diversity. And that even makes you at like, at some point I felt, um, the feeling of I didn't want to come here and it's not diverse like I'm here and they have not asked me anything. So, I feel like having that—sitting down with people with all the people and just asking is the best way. And I know it's, it's hard because the majority will be of a certain group and the minorities, again, might not feel heard, but there is, there's, there's a lot of different peoples—so like reaching out, even in cycles, I don't know, it's really important.

What Cake expressed is something that has been reflected in other studies as well. In a 2012 study, black male students were interviewed about their experiences in higher education. Nearly all of those participants said that it was the first time they sat down with anyone and were asked to share their experiences, how they successfully navigated higher education, and gained success (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). When it comes to diversity, there seems to be a tendency to look for different colors in the room or what is selected on a demographic sheet. However, what Cake expressed in his comment is that diversity is more than race. For example, in the case of Latinx people, Cake explained that their experiences may be entirely different depending upon whether they themselves immigrated, as in his case, or if their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents did. By conflating what it means to be a "person of color", a variety of experiences, rich stories, and examples to learn from are not attended to and thus marginalization still takes place.

This issue, and the question of diversity, that Cake brought up is not isolated. The importance of properly implementing and supporting diversity and inclusion has been a discussion regarding institutions (e.g., universities and other workplaces) for years with

many reports of failure. Martinez-Acosta and Favero (2018) suggest that “best practices” regarding how to increase both diversity and inclusion in institutions of higher learning are few and far between because “we are on the frontier of truly beginning inclusive work at the institutional level” (p. A258).

In discussing the different microaggressions that minority students face in residence halls at PWIs, Harwood et al. (2012) suggest that “It is not enough to increase numerical diversity in institutions of higher education. It is important for university administrators and educators to implement engaged and purposeful diversity programs to help students develop essential dialogic skills to prepare themselves for a diverse democracy” (Harwood et al., 2012, p. 171). They go on to explain that the goal should be to create “opportunities for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to learn how to interact with their peers” in order to create universities that give students a sense of belonging (p. 171). Unfortunately, in many instances, true dialogue is not achieved and instead of communicating across difference, people groups are persistently segmented by their differences (e.g., see Burke, 2020).

By embracing critical race theory and placing race at the center of discourse, this multiculturalist ideology gives more attention to color and race and greater credence to difference (DiAngelo 2011; Montecinos, 1995; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Sowell, 2013). My findings suggest that diversity is important, especially to people who are a part of a minority group. Recognizing difference is an important aspect of diversity; however, when difference is reduced to race and not taking into consideration that people with a similar exterior may have entirely different cultures, then the positive outcomes for encouraging diversity and inclusion are reduced. What, then, is the goal of diversity and

inclusion within universities? Are the ways we champion difference effective? Based on my findings, by acknowledging culture, lived experiences, and shared experiences among individuals of all backgrounds, a bridge can be built to help close the gap between diversity and inclusion as opposed to dividing and othering while capitalizing upon difference.

Difference isn't going anywhere, and if we take culture and experience into consideration, our institutions may be much more diverse than we think. When people are given the opportunity to share their individual cultures and contexts, then there is space for a bridge to be built and perspectives to be broadened (Reid, 2020). In essence my participants shared their culture and context with me, and by doing so, what began as a study of "students of color" turned into a conversation with people who had varied experiences. Interestingly, the participants in my study all had stories to share where they were able to connect with others and develop community not based on their differences, but by their shared interests. This was seen in participants who joined choir, band, took a foreign language class, and simply connected with others based on similarities as opposed to always highlighting the difference. By giving space for students to share their culture and contexts they inevitably might find that they connect with people that they initially thought they would never connect with. This very principle was displayed in the lives of the eight participants in this study whether through meeting their spouses of a different race or getting involved in school groups, they shared their contexts, celebrated their differences, and connected through shared values or experiences.

The Grand Narrative of Oppression, CRT, and Resilience

My findings speak to the complex nature of identity. At first glance, one might suggest that intersectionality is the answer for understanding the complexities of identity among people of color; however, it too keeps oppression as central to the conversation (Crenshaw, 1989). One aspect of my participants' stories that should be considered is that none of them personally saw themselves as oppressed, thereby rejecting the oppression narrative. The examination of the different oppressed identities within intersectionality would exclude the ways these participants understand their stories and themselves. The grand narrative of oppression is not sufficient in understanding the lived experiences among people of color. It has the potential to be an oppressive narrative in that it seeks to give voice to oppressed identities while simultaneously not attending to the many perceptions and identity markers of those it claims are oppressed.

The participants in this study shared stories that acknowledge the presence of oppression in the world (including racialized incidents that they have experienced) while concurrently highlighting the ways in which they reframe circumstances, connect with others for support, and cling to identities that keep them anchored and grounded through difficulty and transitions in life (Buzzanell, 2010). The stories shared in this study serve as a counter to the counternarrative within CRT. The central focus of many counternarratives is on racial minorities and their experience with racism or discrimination; however, the *counter*-counternarratives in the present study bring our attention to how the students engage in processes of identity acknowledgment and resilience that lead to their thriving and success. The recognition of strength rather than the deficit of oppression put these individuals in the position to continue in their own

sense of freedom and purpose. Giving voice to people of color who do not identify with the oppression narrative, who highlight salient identity markers beyond race, and who feel like they are in positions of influence and thriving in their lives is worth exploring in future research. The participants' stories and journeys toward success are a credit to the processes of resilience in which they engaged.

Summary and Conclusion

My research displays how the stories we internalize can be empowering or disempowering to our sense of identity. Because of where the participants were situated in their lives and the experiences they encountered, they internalized stories that they felt propelled them forward. The assumptions and stories in the oppression narrative do not fully capture the breadth of experiences among students of color. There are vast experiences, cultures, and complexities within identities that make labels, and the stories that create labels, far too simplistic (Leisenring, 2006). Each participant in this study showed a resistance to being labelled or to be seen solely as their race. Giving space for students to share their lived experiences, culture, and shared experiences highlights the broad perspectives and lived realities that are held among students of color.

The participants represented in this study believed that if they were to lead with challenges in mind, they would inhibit themselves. This study illustrates that by focusing on their strengths, supportive communities, and resilience, instead of the challenges in their lives, the participants felt empowered personally and academically. All of the participants recognized that oppression is real and that there are people who face it; however, in spite of experiencing oppressive incidents each one of them personally

denied being racially oppressed due to the resources and access to resources they had, their skills, no one having power over them, and because of the identities that they held.

In the effort to encourage students in processes of resiliency and to see racial equality in our universities, it is imperative that we interrogate the stories and discourses that become prominent. While CRT suggests racial oppression is a commonality between people of color, the stories in this study displayed individuals who shared a commonality of resilience through difficulty, not necessarily having to do with race or racism. Ultimately, these eight participants' narratives demonstrate the reward in taking control of one's own narrative, the complex nature of identity, and that race merely scratches the surface.

As a final note, it is important to state that this work is by no means meant to invalidate the experiences or voices of those who *do* identify as oppressed and live with the constant burden of oppression and othering. I only wish to encourage people of color in their strengths and to highlight the experiences of those who may not be represented within the tenets of CRT. In a world where we are so quick to label and try to make sense of circumstance, I hope what all readers can take from this work is that in the midst of difficulty you do not have to own the unjust act of another.

Thinking back to my own experiences with being labeled as oppressed, there are some recommendations I can now make to professors teaching in the midst of diversity. Most importantly, do not make assumptions. Big ideas about systems can and should be interrogated in the classroom. However, we need to slow down in telling individuals that because of such-and-such a theory, their life or their identity means x. There are many theories that we can utilize to understand lived experiences; however, unless we know the

lived experiences of the individuals with whom we are talking, how can we be respectful to their circumstance? So with that, another recommendation is to get to know students and their individual perspectives. Be the source of community and support they may need; give them opportunities to share their identities with you and with each other. It is widely understood that students of all backgrounds deal with difficulty and disruptions in life—this is a shared experience. Resilience can be encouraged in any individual from any background. As opposed to emphasizing the difficulty and pain that students experience, it is advantageous for us to find ways to help them work through times of difficulty and encourage them in processes of resiliency.

REFERENCES

Alemán, M.W., & Helfrich, K.W. (2010). Inheriting the narratives of dementia: A collaborative tale of a daughter and mother. *Journal of Family Communication, 10*, 7-23.

Arvan, M. (2015). How to rationally approach life's transformative experiences. *Philosophical Psychology*, *28*(8), 1199-1218.

Baber, L.D. (2017). Beyond the "tenets": Reconsidering critical race theory in higher education scholarship. In Dixson, A.D., Rousseau Anderson, C.K., & Donnor, J.K. (2017), *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song* (182-199). New York: Routledge.

Beauchemin, J. D. (2018). Solution-focused wellness: A randomized controlled trial of college students. *Health & Social Work*, *43*(2), 94-100.

Bell, D. (1989). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice*. San Francisco, California: Basic Books.

Beuthin, R. E. (2014). Breathing in the mud: Tensions in narrative interviewing. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *13*, 122-134.

Big Think. (2018, October 1st). *Why "I'm not racist" is only half the story: Robin DiAngelo*

[Video file]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/kzLT54QjclA

Britt, T. W., Shen, W., Sinclair, R. R., Grossman, M. R., & Klieger, D. M. (2016). How much do we really know about employee resilience?. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *9*(2), 378-404.

Brown, I. M. (2018). 3 out of 4 college students say they're stressed, many report suicidal thoughts: Study. Retrieved from https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/college-students-stressed-report-suicidal-thoughts-study/story?id=57646236

Brown, T. N. (2003). Critical race theory speaks to the sociology of mental health: Mental health problems produced by racial stratification. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *44*(3), 292-301.

Brown, T. N. (2008). Race, racism, and mental health: Elaboration of critical race theory's contribution to the sociology of mental health. *Contemporary Justice Review*, *11*(1), 53-62.

Bryson, B. S. (2017). 'They were constantly on the losing side of things': The pedagogical power of an African-American teacher candidate bearing witness in teacher education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *20*(4), 527-545.

Burgess, R. G. (1988). Conversations with a purpose: The ethnographic interview in educational research. In Burgess, R.G. (Ed.), *Studies in Qualitative Methodology: A Research Annual* (Vol. 1., pp. 137-155). London: JAI Press.

Burke, L. (2020). University of Virginia clarifies all students allowed in multicultural center. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/02/14/university-virginia-clarifies-all-students-allowed-multicultural-center

Buzzanell, P.M. (2010). Resilience: Talking, resisting, and imagining new normalcies into being. *Journal of Communication, 60*, 1-14.

Cefai, C. (2007). Resilience for all: A study of classrooms as protective contexts. *Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties, 12*(2), 119-134.

Cerezo, A., McWhirter, B.T., Pena, D., Valdez, M., & Bustos, C. (2013). Giving voice: Ultilizing critical race theory to facilitate consciousness of racial identity for Latina/o college students. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, *5*(3), 1-23.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1*(8), 139-167.

Croucher, S. M., & Cronn-Mills, D. (2015). *Understanding communication research methods*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Day-Vines, N. L., & Terriquez, V. (2008). A strength-based approach to promoting prosocial behavior among African American and Latino students. *Professional School Counseling*, *12*(2), 170-175.

Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, *87*(8), 2411-2441.

Delgado, R. (1995). *Critical race theory: the cutting edge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (1997). *Critical white studies*: *Looking behind the mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York and London: New York University Press.

DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *3*(3), 54-70.

Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau Anderson, C. K. (2017a). Critical race theory and education: Singing a "new" song. In Dixson, A. D., Rousseau Anderson, C. K., & Donnor, J. K. (2017), *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song* (1-8). New York: Routledge.

Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau Anderson, C. K. (2017b). And we are still not saved: 20 years of CRT and education. In Dixson, A. D., Rousseau Anderson, C. K., & Donnor, J. K. (2017), *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song* (32-54). New York: Routledge.

D'Souza, D. (1991). Illiberal education: The politics of race and sex on campus. New York: Free Press.

Dweck, C. S. (2015). Growth. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *85*(2), 242–245.

Farrington, D. (2018). Leaving the barrio and entering the culture of college: Padilla testimonios. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *40*(4), 391-413.

Faulkner, S. L. (2020). Poetic transcription. In S. L. Faulkner, *Poetic Inquiry: Craft, Method and Practice* (2nd ed., pp. 159-164). New York: Routledge.

Field, K. (2016). How to make student leaders more resilient. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *63*(14), A24.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.

Galassi, J. P., & Akos, P. (2007). *Strengths-Based School Counseling: Promoting student development and achievement*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gilbert, K. R. (2002). Taking a narrative approach to grief research: Finding meaning in stories. *Death Studies*, *26*, 223-239.

Gillborn, D. (2015). Intersectionality, critical race theory, and the primacy of racism: Race, class, gender, and disability in education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *21*(3), 277-287.

Gray, P. (2015). Declining student resilience: A serious problem for colleges. Retrieved from https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201509/declining-student-resilience-serious-problem-colleges.

Griffin, K., & Allen, W. (2006). Mo' money, mo' problems? High-achieving black high school students' experiences with resources, racial climate, and resilience. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *75*(3), 478-494.

Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2001). "Introduction." Pp. 1-20 in *Institutional Selves: Troubles Identities in a Postmodern World*, edited by J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gunnestad, A. (2006). Resilience in a cross-cultural perspective: How resilience is generated in different cultures. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, *11*(1), 1-24.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books

Hargrove, D. T. (2014). This is how we did it: A study of black male resilience and attainment at a Hispanic serving institution through the lenses of critical race

theory (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey.

Harris, C.I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, *106*(8), 1707-1791.

Harwood, S. A., Huntt, M. B., Mendenhall, R., & Lewis, J. A. (2012). Racial microaggressions in the residence halls: Experiences of students of color at a predominately White university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *5*(3), 159-173.

Hill, J. (2019). It's Time for Black Athletes to Leave White Colleges. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/10/black-athletes-should-leave-white-colleges/596629

Hiraldo, P. (2010). The role of critical race theory in higher education. *The Vermont Connection*, *31*(7), 53-59.

Howard, T. C. (2013). How does it feel to be a problem? Black male students, schools, and learning in enhancing the knowledge base to disrupt deficit frameworks. *Review of Research in Education*, *37*(1), 54-86.

Kim, E., & Hargrove D. T. (2013). Deficient or resilient: A critical review of Black male academic success and persistence in higher education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *82*(3), 300-311.

Kohll, A. (2017). How you can build a more resilient workforce. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/alankohll/2017/01/05/how-you-can-build-a-more-resilient-workforce/#136a24999b50.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *11*(1), 7-24.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W.F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. In Dixson, A.D., Rousseau Anderson, C.K., & Donnor, J.K. (2017). *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song* (11-30). New York: Routledge.

Leisenring, A. (2006). Confronting "victim" discourses: The identity work of battered women. *Symbolic Interaction, 29*(3), 307-330.

Lenette, C., Brough, M., & Cox, L. (2013). Everyday resilience: Narratives of single refugee women with children. *Qualitative Social Work, 12*(5), 637-653.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (1995). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Liu, C. H., Stevens, C., Wong, S. H. M., Yasui, M., & Chen, J. A. (2018). The prevalence and predictors of mental health diagnoses and suicide among U.S. college students: Implications for addressing disparities in service use. *Depression Anxiety, 36,* 8-17.

Loseke, D. R. (2001). Lived Realities and Formula Stories of 'Battered Women. Pp. 107-26 in *Institutional Selves: Troubled Identities in a Postmodern World*, edited by J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marom, L. (2019). Under the cloak of professionalism: Covert racism in teacher education. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 22*(3), 319-337.

Martinez-Acosta, V. G., & Favero, C. B. (2018). A discussion of diversity and inclusivity at the institutional level: The need for a strategic plan. *Journal of Undergraduate Neuroscience Education, 16*(3), A252-A260.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching, Second Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Matsuda, M. J. (1991). Voices of America: Accent, antidiscrimination law, and a jurisprudence for the last reconstruction. *Yale Law Journal, 100*(5), 1329-1407.

McAdams, D. P. (1997). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. New York and London: The Guilford Press.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*(2), 100-122.

McAdams, D. P. (2019). Identity, narrative, language, culture, and the problem of variation in life stories. *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture, 3*(1), 77-83.

McGee, E. O., & Stovall, D. (2015). Reimagining critical race theory in education: Mental health, healing, and the pathway to liberatory praxis. *Educational Theory, 65*(5), 491-511.

Montecinos, C. (1995). Culture as an ongoing dialog: Implications for multicultural teacher education. In Sleeter, C. E., & McLaren, P. L. (1995). *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference* (291-308). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Moon, D. G. (1996). Concepts of "culture": Implication for intercultural communication research. *Communication Quarterly, 44*, 70-84.

Morales, E. E., & Trotman, F. K. (2011). *A focus on hope: Fifty resilient students speak*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Nakayama, T.K., & Krizek, R.L. (1995). Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 81*, 291-309.

Nakayama, T.K., & Martin, J.N. (1993). The "white problem" in intercultural communication research and pedagogy. In Cooks, L.M, & Simpson, J.S. (2007). *Whiteness, Pedagogy, Performance: Dis/Placing Race* (111-133). Lanham: Lexington Books.

NBC News. (2018, September 25th). *Debunking the most common myths white people tell about race* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjHg65JORi8

Notre Dame of Maryland University. (2018). 5 Changing Demographics in Higher Education: Infographic. Retrieved from https://online.ndm.edu/news/education/changing-demographics-in-higher-education/.

Owens, J., & Lynch, S. (2012). Black and Hispanic immigrants' resilience against negative-ability racial stereotypes at selective colleges and universities in the United States. *Sociology of Education, 85*(4), 303-325.

Oxford University Press. (2017). Grand narrative - Oxford Reference. Retrieved from https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.2011080309590349.

Ployhart, R. E., Ziegert, J. C., & McFarland, L. A. (2003). Understanding racial differences on cognitive ability tests in selection contexts: An integration of stereotype threat and applicant reactions research. *Human Performance*, *16*, 231–259.

Premack, R. (2018). These are 7 of the qualities bosses want the most in their employees. Retrieved from https://www.businessinsider.com/7-qualities-most-in-demand-at-the-workplace-2012-3.

Pulvirenti, M., & Mason, G. (2011). Resilience and survival: Refugee women and violence. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, *23*(1), 37–52.

Reid, M. (2020). What if workplace diversity is the biggest 'scam' yet. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/maryannreid/2020/02/24/what-if-workplace-diversity-is-the-biggest-scam-yet/#1ef2f3ba7cf9

Richardson, G. E. (2002). The metatheory of resilience and resiliency. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *58*(3), 307–321.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Riessman, C. K. (2001). Analysis of personal narratives. In Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A., Handbook of Interview Research (695-710), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Roberson, C. L. (2018). Legitimate narratives: An action research study of a strengths-oriented educational approach to uncovering black male stories of success in high education (Published doctoral dissertation). Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California.

Rudick, C. K. (2017). A critical organizational communication framework for communication and instruction scholarship: Narrative explorations of resistance, racism, and pedagogy. *Communication Education*, *66*(2), 148-167.

Salter, P., & Adams, G. (2013). Toward a critical race psychology. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *7*(11), 781-793.

Sleeter, C. E., & McLaren, P. L. (1995). Introduction: Exploring connections to build a critical multiculturalism. In Sleeter, C. E., & McLaren, P. L. (1995). *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference* (5-32). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Snyder, T. D., & Dillow, S. A. (2013). *Digest of Education Statistics 2012*. (Report No. NCES 2014-015). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch

Soet, J., & Sevig, T. (2006). Mental health issues facing a diverse sample of college students: Results from the college student mental health survey. *NASPA Journal*, *43*(3), 410–431.

Solórzano, D. G. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *24*(3), 5-19.

Solórzano, D. G., & Bernal, D.D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and latcrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Urban Education*, *36*(3), 308-342.

Solórzano, D.G., & Yosso, T.J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(1).

Southern Baptist Convention. (2019). Retrieved from http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/2308/resolution-9--on-critical-race-theory-and-intersectionality

Sowell, T. (2005). *Black rednecks and white liberals*. New York: Encounter Books.

Sowell, T. (2013). *Intellectuals and race*. New York: Basic Books.

Stephens, J., & McCallum, R. (1998). Pre-texts, metanarratives, and the western metaethic. In *Retelling stories, framing culture: Traditional story and metanarratives in children's literature* (3-23). New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Stone, E. (2004). Family myths. In *Black sheep and kissing cousins: How our family stories shape us* (98). New York, New York: Routledge.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. A. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Subotnik, D. (1998). What's wrong with critical race theory: Reopening the case for middle class values. Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy, 7(3), 681-756.

Subotnik, D. (2017). The dangers of racial thinking. *Academic Questions*, *30*(1), 58–64.

Tate, E. (2017). College completion rates vary by race and ethnicity, report finds. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/04/26/college-completion-rates-vary-and-ethnicity-reports-finds

Torres, D.H., & Fyke, J.P. (2013). Communicating resilience: A discursive leadership perspective. *M/C A Journal of Media and Culture*, 16(5).

Valencia, R. R. (1997). Conceptualizing the notion of deficit thinking. In R. R. Valencia, *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice* (1-12). London: The Falmer Press.

Warner, D. F., & Brown, T. H. (2011). Understanding how race/ethnicity and gender define age-trajectories of disability: An intersectionality approach. *Social Science & Medicine*, *72*(8), 1236-1248.

Washington, B.T. (1901). *Up from slavery*. New York: Magnum Books.

Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice & poststructuralist theory*. Oxford, Angleterre: Blackwell.

White Flight. (2019). Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white flight.

Williams, W. E. (2019). Why blacks should ignore the liberal agenda. Retrieved from https://www.dailysignal.com/2019/08/14/why-blacks-should-ignore-the-liberal-agenda/.

Woodford, M. R., Han, Y., Craig, S., Lim, C., & Matney, M. M. (2014). Discrimination and mental health among sexual minority college students: The type and form of discrimination does matter. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, *18*(2), 142–163.

Zimmerman, M. A. (2013). Resiliency theory: A strengths-based approach to research and practice for adolescent health. *Health Education Behavior*, *40*(4), 381-383.

Zorn, J. (2018). Critical race theory in education: Where farce meets tragedy. *Academic Questions*, *31*, 203-211.

APPENDIX A

Demographic Questionnaire

Oppression Narratives and Resiliency

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this project. As I mentioned in the prior email, this study focuses on the experiences and life stories of black and Latina/o students, and how the stories adopted or told about these student populations impact their sense of self and resilience.

Please fill out the following survey and email it back to me prior to our scheduled interview. **Important:** *Any information provided that could reveal your identity will be kept confidential.*

1. Age: _____
2. Place of Birth: _____
3. Where did you grow up?

   _____

4. What is your ethnic background?
   a. Black
   b. Latina/o
   c. Two or more races: _____
5. What year of school are you in? _____
6. Are/Were you a transfer student? _____
7. What is/was your major? _____
8. Please identify what you would like as a pseudonym to replace your name in this study: _____

   Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

Interview Guiding Questions

Narrative Prompt:

Please tell me your life story. [upbringing, what brought you to Boise State, how your time as a student has been]

Additional Questions:

1. How do you feel you relate or connect with people on campus, in your work, etc.?
    a. Does the way you identify as a student impact the way you relate with others? How so?
    b. How does that make you feel?
2. Can you tell me about a time when you felt that there were barriers (if any) in the way of your success?
    a. What were the causes of these barriers?
    b. What did you do? How did you know to do [x]?
3. Can you tell me about a time when you were faced with a challenging circumstance and still moved forward?
    a. What happened? Who was involved? How did you feel?
    b. How did you move forward? And how does that make you feel now?
4. Explain what oppression means to you.
    a. Do you identify as oppressed as a student of color?
    b. What do you think impacts your definition and your personal identification with oppression?
5. Do you feel that identifying as oppressed/not oppressed impacts:

a. How you described your identity as a student?

b. How you navigate your way through college (i.e., classes, peer interaction, student-teacher interaction, etc.)? How so?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't addressed?

7. Do you have any questions for me?