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Racism, Immigration Laws, and Financial Hurdles: An Assessment of Triadic Traumatizing Experiences of BIPOC Students in the USA

Abel A. Akinsanya

Many BIPOC students come to predominantly white institutions to pursue their education. They come to the campus with high hopes and the determination to have an amazing higher education experience. However, they are met with the harsh reality of racism, unfavorable immigration laws, and financial hurdles that affect their mental well-being, and academic performance and even make some quit school. Generally, research work has been done to capture the experiences of BIPOC students which ascertains that they do have unique experiences. This paper builds on them by focusing specifically on these three intertwined traumatizing experiences of BIPOC students at universities in the United States.

*Keywords:* BIPOC, financial hurdles, immigration laws, microaggressions, racism, traumatizing

Abel A. Akinsanya was born and raised in West Africa, Nigeria. He is a Black Cisgender, Christian Black man, from a socio-economic marginalized background in a developing Nation. For over 5 years, he has worked as a K12 educator, teaching and motivating students from marginalized backgrounds due to his passion for education. During his years in college as an undergraduate, he studied Education and English, a double major, where he took student leadership roles. Upon graduation, he worked as an educator teaching English Language and Literature. As a K12 educator, his focus is on helping marginalized and disadvantaged students have fair and equal access to good and quality education. He is currently pursuing his M.A in Higher Education Administration at the University of Vermont.
Introduction

It is both a shocking and unfortunate reality that racism in America has existed for hundreds of years and continues to affect students in colleges and universities around the United States taking different forms (Swim et al., 2003). Racism is foundational to the United States. People experience it from birth and mostly throughout their lifetime. The sad truth, however, is that it may continue in the future if drastic measures are not taken to completely restructure the systems that promote it (Swim et al., 2003). As Poon et al., (2016) assert, race and racism are central and do not exist in a vacuum but work in synergy with other forms of oppression like classism, sexism, and heterosexism which means that racism carries with it forms of unpalatable experiences that the oppressed go through.

In colleges, BIPOC students experience racism differently and uniquely (Swim et al., 2003). The way an African American student experiences racism is different from how an Asian-American or Latinx does. Racism is cross-cultural and intersectional (Swim et al., 2003). As (Swim et al., 2003) assert the experiences of racism on campuses can differ wildly, that is, gender identity can influence the ways individuals are subject to racist treatment. For instance, both female and male African Americans are usually targets of hostility and discrimination. However, African-American women and Latinx women are often targets of sexual assaults with little or no justice for the perpetrators (Poon et al., 2016).

Racism can manifest in multiple forms including but not limited to collective labeling, color-blindness, meritocracy, and underestimation of one’s potential (Poon et al., 2016). For instance, African Americans are often perceived as less intelligent because of how they speak and look. They are naturally assumed to be intellectually incapable academic success when compared to their White counterparts who have more privileges than them (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Also, with the concept of color-blindness, there is a disregard of the historically marginalizing experiences such as colonization, slavery, oppression, segregation and discrimination of BIPOC students which continually makes them invisible, and unheard thereby furthering racism (Poon et al., 2016).

Racism has an adverse effect on students’ mental health and well-being since it causes them to experience psychological stress, which can negatively impact their academic performance and create a bad perception of the campus community (Shalka, 2022). Regrettably, some academicians exacerbate this. They accomplish this by creating a learning atmosphere that is unsuitable for individuals, either by passing judgment on their real or perceived English language learning challenges or by requiring assignments and projects that do not consider their varied backgrounds in education. Because of this, they feel completely alienated in a classroom that is primarily populated by their white colleagues (Cabrera, 2014).

Other forms that racism that include staring, unfriendly verbal expression, bad service in public establishments, racist comments which are degrading (Swim et al., 2003). Some BIPOC student complain of such things both in class and in the campus environment where certain White students stare at them in a very conspicuous and awkward manner which made them feel uncomfortable (Yoo et al., 2010). These kinds of actions make BIPOC students feel like they are unwanted in such an environment. They sometimes find it difficult to fit into the campus because they feel isolated, and separated from others due to their inability to sufficiently socialize (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).
Racism has huge impact on the people that experience it. Ranging from physical to emotional and psychological. It affects the entire being of students. It tells on their finances, the kind of job they get, the access they have to good health care and school, and their ability to generally afford a good lifestyle (Anderson & Span, 2016).

**Racism and its Impact on BIPOC**

Racism is no longer a new concept. The way in which people experience it is different and constantly evolving. It is usually perceived differently and uniquely depending on who you are, where you are from, the color of your skin, and your ancestry (Anderson & Span, 2016). This goes a long way to determining how you will be treated, and the kind of access or limitations you encounter. This is mostly true for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, or BIPOC. They are largely impacted by racism in all its forms. They feel the harsh realities physically, financially, and mentally every day of their lives and they accept it as a part of them by developing coping strategies to survive (Anderson & Span, 2016). Racism is highly systemic and it is built into organizations, practices and policies (Zhong, 2023).

The extent to which racism impacts BIPOC students cannot be quantifiable because it has become a daily experience. This oftentimes occurs in the dormitory, dining hall, classroom, fitness center, playground, and sometimes on the street. When they happen, they are mostly unnoticed as they take on subtle forms that are difficult to identify which attests to the fact that racism experienced today is more covert than it used to be in the 70s. Hence, the impact is complicated and significant that it cannot be quantified (Spanierman et al., 2021).

The subtle ways in which BIPOC students suffer from racism is through microaggressions. The term microaggression is first mentioned in the work of Harvard professor of Psychiatry and Education Chester Middlebrook Pierce. After a series of studies during the 1970s, Pierce presented “offensive mechanisms” to explain the conscious or unconscious “subtle blows [that] are delivered incessantly” by White offenders during their interpersonal interactions with Black individuals (Pierce, 1970, p. 266). He named these subtle blows “micro-aggressions,” which he connected to greater disease and mortality rates in Black communities than in White communities (Pierce, 1970, p. 266).

Using the lens of Pierce, Solorzano et al. (2000) defined racial microaggressions as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60). These subtle insults can demoralize the victims of racism and oftentimes become incapacitated or stressed out because of their reaction to their assailant. Hence, the student who experiences racism is left with the burden of decoding the subtle racist expression fittingly, and at the same time avoid being accused of “oversensitivity”. Also, since the responsibility of self-defense is saddled on the victim, they often suffer from inferiority complex and the feeling of devastation (Yosso et al., 2009).

Even though modern-day subtle form of racism is invisible, the impacts are seriously felt. Students of color perceive different types of microaggressions daily. Sometimes it may be through verbal or behavioral gestures and expressions with the purpose of derogating them which may make them feel uncomfortable. While at other times, it may manifest in the hostile campus environment which makes them feel unwelcomed in the learning space for the people of color (Park & Bahia, 2022).
Furthermore, BIPOC students frequently encounter actual racism in the classroom, which is another setting where this pressure exists. In addition to experiencing ongoing segregation, individuals encounter various forms of prejudice that conflict with their academic pursuits. They must contend with the demands of their studies as well as the animosity that racism exposes them to (Park & Bahia, 2022). Sadly, some professors exacerbate this by creating an environment that is unwelcoming and conducive to learning for pupils of color in the classroom. This is occasionally accomplished by pressing them to represent their entire group, therefore creating a stereotype of them (Cabrera, 2014).

Students of color who identify differently—in terms of gender, sexual orientation, or religion—face an even more difficult situation. They endure a great deal of marginalization. In colleges with a large white student body, particularly those that claim to implement DEI, it is more severe. Students of color who identify as LGBTQ+ and non-Christians experience a higher rate of exclusionary microaggressions. They are a group that is never seen and seldom receives the assistance they require (Andrasik et al., 2022). In an era where racism is so pervasive, the institution cannot afford to take a less aggressive stance (Yosso et al., 2009).

Racism affects people of color every day of their lives. Racism is ingrained in the system from birth, and children perpetuate it. During the Covid-19 outbreak, the extent of racial unfairness that Students of Color faced became extremely evident (Blake et al., 2021). Due to their financial situation, they faced severe stigma from the medical community. Since there was no reliable source of income during the lockdown, many people are unable to pay their medical costs (Andrasik et al., 2022). In addition to the expense of their medical bills, many of them found that studying at home was a significant concern because it was difficult for them to get access to a computer and the internet, which left them with no choice but to divert their attention with other endangering activities like involvement in drug use (Andrasik et al., 2022).

Microaggressions Connected to Immigration Status, Laws, and Nationality

Migration has always been a norm as people move from one place to the other. Some leave their home country in search of a better life while some are displaced due to wars, hardships, and civil unrest. People move from different countries all over the world including the United States. As a result of this migration, there have been several trends in the immigration laws of the US which are usually determined by who is in power or laws passed by different parastatals. Within them are several discriminatory laws and policies that marginalize the minority identity and makes life extremely difficult for them (Folkwein, 2022).

The high rate of refugees who are displaced makes it possible for BIPOC students to experience discrimination. For instance, the 2019 alone, over 70 million people are reported to be globally displaced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Folkwein, 2022). Also, the number of those who come into the US and other countries to seek asylum keeps multiplying. The resultant effect of this increase in the need for people to successfully migrate compels nations to adopt and continuously modify existing immigration protocols to meet the growing need. However, many of these changes do not favor Black and Indigenous People of Color, most especially, the students (de Jesús, 2021).
Students of Color in predominantly white institutions find themselves seriously struggling due to the inconsistencies and changes that occur in the immigration policies. Many of them constantly face the issue of wrong assumption of their immigration status which opens them to some form of harassment and victimization. For example, in the work of Solorzano et al. (2000), on Latinx Critical Theory, he captures the unique experience of Latinx on criminalization which is premised on racialized traits such as language, culture, ethnic and immigration. Through this theory, Latinx are being seen as undocumented immigrant. Hence, they may suffer more racialized attacks due to wrong assumptions of the immigration status (Barrita et al., 2023).

Consequently, Barrita et al. (2023), further confirms the racial microaggression connected to the assumption of immigration status in his research. He found that the individuals that usually experience this kind of stereotype have one time or the other been asked questions like “What is your legal status in the US?” or someone just assuming that they are foreigner which is all linked to their race or color. In fact, the participants attests to the fact that they are frequently asked the above question or just assumed to be a foreigners (Barrita et al., 2023).

Moreover, the Donald Trump administration, he signed series of executive orders that gave more power to the immigration authority to detain and deport illegal immigrant from the US in the year 2017. This automatically reinforce the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which restricted Chinese people from immigrating into the and prevents them from becoming naturalized citizens. Also, one can recollect that the Trump administration exposed minority identities to serious of racialization mostly through microaggressions manifesting as hostility which can be demoralizing for those experiencing it (Barrita et al., 2023).

It is crucial to emphasize that Asian and Latinx people are more vulnerable to the worst forms of discrimination related to their immigration status. During the Covid-19 surge, the level at which Asian Americans experienced racism is unspeakable. The accusation that the virus came from China and Donald Trump calling Corona Virus, the Chinese Virus contributed to the negative experience of Asian Americans. They were instantly placed into the stereotype of being “foreigners”. Whereas they are people born in America. Also, this time is marked with different socio-political conflict that has huge effect on students holding minoritized identity as they are being targeted and often fall victims in their own country just because of their color (Barrita et al., 2023).

The anxiety related to the immigration stereotype has greatly heightened among people color because they constant get this racist message which at the same time creates that fear and tension. Many of them are constantly under the tension to fight back and defend themselves in any way possible (Folkwein, 2022). The anxiety was increased when the government endorsed the anti-immigrant executive orders which can be highly devastating for students who are striving to focus on their academic work. They will constantly get distracted. Hence, the microaggression manifesting in form stereotype created based on the assumption immigration status is often directed to the Asian and Latinx due to the wrong perception that an average American have of them (Folkwein, 2022).

The effect that microaggressions can be extended to the emotional damage that is done to the BIPOC students. (Barrita et al., 2023) asserts that studies have found that Latinx usually experienced the highest form of psychological distress that is racially based on immigration microaggression which is because those microaggressions are internalized when confronted by such. Internalization of racist
microaggressions due to immigration status is dangerous. It affects the behavior and attitude of the individuals involved. They developed a low perception of self in such a way that is highly detrimental to their mental wellbeing (Barrita et al., 2023).

Furthermore, BIPOC students learn to cope by putting in adaptive strategies. They get psychologically affected by this immigration stereotype premised on racism to the point that they form alliances to strengthen themselves by making efforts to resist and fight against systemic racism. While others resist, some internalize it in a maladaptive way and switch to indulging themselves in destructive behaviors like doing drugs. This kind of indulgence affect their mental health making them more distressed (Barrita et al., 2023)

The continuous growth of people of color in the United States seems to be a threat to the Whites. With this growth, unfavorable immigration laws keep getting implemented. Laws that are race specific, making life unbearable to them (Folkwein, 2022). For instance, many families experience separation due to strict enforcement of immigration based on false criminalization created by the Donald Trump administration. At least 545 children could not reunite with their parents due to the enforcement of the policy (Folkwein, 2022). Many such actions that have grievous consequences against the people are ending. Also, the U.S. media is weaponized against this group of people by constant misrepresentation who there are too who they are not (Folkwein, 2022).

Immigration laws over the years have always been oppressive and remain oppressive. From the forceful movement of Black people from Africa to the displacement indigenous people. It appears to be progressive. Policies made only just offer temporary ease with two internationalities. First to exclude many who are mostly people of color; and second, to include few based on their race (often whites) (Barrita et al., 2023). Most of the benefits that come through immigration laws only affect the BIPOC population in a limited way. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) is an example. Though they got documented, it does not give a permanent legal status to them. It only gives them temporal suspension from deportation and grants authorization to work in the U.S (Barrita et al., 2023).

The event of September 11, 2001, marked a great turn in the immigration laws which hugely affected BIPOC students with overlapping identities. The focus of the United States was on strengthening national security because of that event. This increased criminalization innocent people of color who had nothing to do with the issue. Some were tagged suspected terrorist. It was really a tough time for BIPOC students in colleges and universities especially those that are Muslims (Folkwein, 2022). Security presence and lots of criminalization took place at this time. However, from then till the administration of Donald Trump, the enforcement of immigration policies increased creating more tension and trauma for people of color till now (de Jesúś, 2021).

**Financial Hurdles and BIPOC students**

The BIPOC students are victims of financial hardship which makes college difficult. Being stripped of their resources and right to existence with any reprieve done to amend all the wrongs done to this unique population, the hardship in terms of getting access to basic need for daily human sustainability is difficult (Garba & Sorentino, 2020). They suffer neglect in severe ways, changing from
one job to another, not having a steady source of income, running into debts to be able to pay, and the list is endless (Glantsman et al., 2022). They lack the financial wherewithal to pay their health insurance, mortgage, and other expenses.

An average BIPOC student come from a family where the source of income is affected either by the loss of job of the provider or death (Glantsman et al., 2022). This leaves most of them with the responsibility of finding ways to survive. Poor people that are BIPOC hardly get access to good education (O’Neill et al., 2022). Their live expectancy shortens and often experiences criminalization leading to incarceration which impacts the likely possibility for economic upliftment. The environment where they find themselves has very limited financial resources and that hardly get financial support from institutions that can be helpful to them which leads to the continuous chain of poverty, lack and disadvantage (O’Neill et al., 2022).

The financial hurdles faced by this unique group of students is aided by the American criminal legal system. Many BIPOC students come from families where one or more member of the family have experienced some level of crime victimization due to the fact that they cannot the legal battles that they’ve been implicated with (O’Neill et al., 2022). This has an adverse effect on the entire family. For instance, a parent who has the responsibility of sponsoring the education of their children but gets implicated or unlawfully convicted leading incarceration will affect those children (O’Neill et al., 2022). In fact, the level at which young Black men are incarcerated in high. One in six Latino men born in 2001 has the tendency to be imprisoned while Native American tend to continually experience re-incarcerated for parole violation at least 3 times more when compared to the White Counterparts. Unfortunately, they do not have the economic power to advocate for justice (O’Neill et al., 2022).

BIPOC students who are able to make it colleges or universities often experience unimaginable financial struggle ranging from the inability to pay tuition, housing, and other required college expenses (Glantsman et al., 2022). Often, they must work and study to meet up with the cost of attending school. Although some get some financial aid from the government, it hardly go a long because off the high cost of higher education (Fuller, 2014). Some get loans to help pay some of their expenses which one the other hand leads to debt that may affect their financial stability in the future, reproducing poverty (Wei & Horn, n.d.). However, many of these students become frustrated and anxious having the feeling of hopelessness and fear which may affect their mental health (Hurlocker et al., 2022).

**Triadic Traumatizing Experiences**

Trauma has been explained to be different from stress other forms of daily stressors to be severe and life-threatening (Zhong, 2023). Racism is not often counted as traumatic because it is not life-threatening or physical (First et al., 2022), of which has faced criticism from scholars because the noticed the correlation between the narratives shared by BIPOC of how they react to racism and the symptoms of posttraumatic stress (Zhong, 2023). This is exact because the emotional uproar and severe stress that racist discrimination exposes BIPOC to is related to that of a person diagnosed with PTSD.

The product of racism manifests through several oppressive, degrading, discriminatory laws built into systems and structures that recycles in unending wheel pain that is likened to trauma.
Racism can therefore be seen as traumatic (Bryant et al., 2007). According to Bryant et al., (2007), trauma defined racial trauma as (a) an emotional injury that is motivated by hate or fear of a person or group of people as a result of their race; (b) a racially motivated stressor that overwhelms a person’s capacity to cope; (c) a racially motivated, interpersonal severe stressor that causes bodily harm or threatens one’s life integrity; or (d) a severe interpersonal or institutional stressor motivated by racism that causes fear, helplessness, or horror.

Since whiteness is seen as property, every other person, thing, work of art or idea that is not produced by the Whites is regarded as inferior or reduced to nothing (Annamma, 2015). Whites are seen as saints and the sinless while blacks are constantly perceived as criminals. criminalization of Blacks are often baseless and are tactics to reproduce the system of racism that thrives on discrimination (McGee & Stovall, 2015). This may account for the silence and hasty generalization that come up when BIPOC students are victims of raped and other dehumanizing experiences. They simply do nothing because they are presumed abnormal and dangerous which can be traumatizing (Zhong, 2023).

Immigration Laws and financial hurdles are both products of racism. Systems and structures built on the backs of slaves with the blood of the indigenous people on stolen lands will continue to serve such oppressive purpose unless it is intentionally dismantled (Garba & Sorentino, 2020). The combination of racism, immigration laws and financial hurdles can be very traumatizing. These triads are peculiar and can be seen as life-threatening because they are targeted at the essential areas of their lives (Zhong, 2023).

**Recommendations for the Future**

There seems to be not so much work that is done yet to account for the experiences of BIPOC international students. As a BIPOC international student, there is this feeling of “being nowhere” A Black international student in the United States, there is this feeling of extinction, not knowing where to fit in among other people. It is like they are occupying the middle ground where they almost feel non-existent. They encounter a harsher reality in the United States with racism and the immigration laws placing several restriction and limitations on them. Their experience is so unique that needs to be accounted for. They find themselves always being concerned with the issue of maintaining their status at all costs to stay in the United States.

For them, racism occur to them, a concept they have been reading in the book or hearing about soon confronts them, leaving them totally shocked and estranged. They occupy a middle ground between the Whites and the BIPOC students. The BIPOC students find it hard to accept them as part of theirs while the Whites students hardly welcome them. They occupy the middle ground facing a similar experience as the BIPOC students but largely unique in it from. Additionally, some of the immigration restriction on them include limited work hours, denial of work authorization for dependents which makes it difficult for them meet up with the financial requirements they have like housing, medical insurance and feeding.

There is a need for institutions to take the issue of racial microaggressions seriously amongst students. They need to be aware of what the BIPOC students are passing through and do something drastic about it. Finding out how and what the responses of school administrator are to reports racial
discrimination on campus where students are predominantly white. This is important because some institutions hardly have good administrative processes and protocols that ensure that such reports do not go unattended. Also, carrying out research on the present campus climate to be able to assess the level of experiences BIPOC students face.

Also, since racism is more systemic and structural, the government, Law makers, heads of industries and corporations must join hands together to oppose racism. They need to get serious and be more intentional about putting serious efforts towards ensuring that the history of racism, inequality, injustice, discrimination, and poverty be met with unalterable provisions in the laws and policies enacted to bring all round economic relief and ease for the BIPOC student and community at large.

**Conclusion**

This paper contributes to the voice of individuals advocating for change in a society to put an end to the injustice and racism. The solutions to the problems of racism discussed in this paper are before our eyes. We know that the starting point of all the discriminatory laws that are endemic into practice, systems and structure in our society today is racism. If racism were to end today, many of this oppressive systems and structures will collapse and we will have a society to is free. But the question is, can racism end? According to Southwick et al., (2014), the fight for social justice is a marathon and not a sprint denoting that the struggle for freedom, to end injustice, maybe long but is sure. Hence, we continue to resist the oppressive systems and structures that make life unbearable for people until there is victory.
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