Pathologizing Culture in Early Childhood Education: Illuminating Microaggressions from the Narratives of the Parents of Black Children

Idara Essien- San Diego State University

Introduction

In the 1970's, Chester Pierce coined the term microaggressions to describe the subtle forms of racism that were regularly communicated to people of color, often unconsciously. Since then, the research community – as led by Derald Wing Sue – have rigorously examined the manner in which microaggressions manifest in everyday life (DeAngelis, 2009; Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall & Lewis, 2012; Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012). This research base has led to a greater understanding of the role the race and racism have in the normal daily exchanges between people. Microaggressions have been written about extensively in counseling, the workplace, and in school settings (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood & Hunt, 2013; Nadal, 2011). This study sought to further examine the nature of microaggressions in a school setting that has been largely absent from the extant literature base, early childhood education.

As noted by Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Nadal and Esquilin (2007), racial micro-aggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p. 271). Embodied within this definition is the notion that these messages can emanate from a variety of sources, as they can be verbalized, demonstrated through non-verbal behavior, and even involve environmental conditions (Sue, 2010). This type of messaging is rooted in racism and is often unknowingly communicated from the perpetrator of the microaggression to their recipients (Delgado, 1987; Lewis et al., 2013; Nadal, 2008; Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007; Sue & Constantine, 2007). Though often communicated unconsciously, microaggressions can have a negative influence on learners in academic and social environments. This is due to the fact that recipients of microaggressions often have a difficult time making sense of the message, leading to feelings of self-doubt and invalidation (Sue & Constantine, 2007).

Sue (2010) has documented the myriad of ways in which microaggressions can affect learners in educational settings. He has noted that recipients of microaggressions experience elevated anxiety, depression, and feelings of worthlessness while also having a lower sense of personal confidence and drive. While prior research has shown the negative influences of microaggressions on learners, the vast majority of this research is focused on young adult and adult learners in high school and college settings. Conversely, very few studies examine the influences of microaggression in early learning contexts. Most often, it may be mentioned as a topic in the pantheon of associated topics shaping experiences in early childhood (e.g. bias, discrimination, racial identity, racism) but rarely as a primary topic of focus.

Purpose and Significance

Guided by this context, the purpose of this study was to examine the nature of microaggressions documented by the parents of Black children. Specifically,

__Dr. Idara Essien__ earned her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from Arizona State University (ASU). She also holds a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in Early Childhood Education from ASU and a second master's in Bilingual and Multicultural Education from California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). Her research focuses on the dynamics between educators and the children and families that they serve. In particular, her work employs counter-storytelling as a lens to illuminate crossracial dynamics in early childhood contexts.

this study sought to uncover the ways in which they and their children (as reported by the parents) encountered microaggressions in early childhood education (from preschool through third grade). These experiences were examined through narratives that reflected racialized experiences and stories. This study represents a significant addition to the research for several reasons. First, as noted, few studies examine experiences with microaggressions in early childhood settings. Thus, there is a lack of information on how microaggressions manifest in locales that serve to shape the foundational learning and development of Black children. Second, the research on microaggressions in education prioritizes experiences of students. This is essential because it provides insights into how students encounter, make sense of, and resist microaggressive messaging. However, this focus has not led to a fuller understanding of how microaggressions may be evident in the relational dynamics and exchanges between educators and the families that they serve. Thus, this study illuminated the often-unheard stories of parents of Black children about their experiences and that of their children.

Third, extant research has shown educators who have an understanding of microaggressions and how these factors influence student success are more likely to employ practices that benefit minoritized populations. For example, research from Wood and Harris (2015) on males of color found that educators who were knowledgeable of microaggressions were more likely to employ relational techniques such as validating messages that affirmed students and practices that intentionally welcomed students' engagement inside the classroom. Moreover, they also found that these same educators had greater use of instructional strategies such as collaborative and cooperative learning, emancipatory pedagogy, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Given this, findings from this study may serve to create a greater awareness among educators about topics that may lead to more comprehensive relational and teaching strategies that holistically benefit the educational experiences of students of color. Motivated by this perspective, the next section overviews research relevant to this topic.

Relevant Literature

As noted by Jones (1997), racism at the personal-level involves actions and behaviors that extend or reinforce preconceived notions of the superiority of one race in contrast with that of others. The exaction of these beliefs serves to disadvantage, harm, and inhibit the success of those whose lives are perceived as being lesser than others. Clear examples of overt and visible racism have afflicted Black communities throughout American history. Codes and laws that readily serve as examples of this include miscegenation laws that barred Blacks from marrying Whites, the policy of separate but equal, and disparate prison sentences for illicit drugs. At the personal level, the lynching of Black children and adults, racial epitaphs, and White supremacist organizations have served to shape the perspectives of what constitutes racism (Thompson-Miller & Feagin, 2008). However, as noted by a number of scholars, contemporary racism tends to be less overt (DeAngelis, 2009; Davis, Whiteman, & Nadal, 2015; McCabe, 2009; Nadal, 2008, 2011). Rather, racism has become so engrained into American life and culture that the value system readily influences unconscious actions (Sue, 2010).

Scholars have often extended Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework for investigating both overt and covert racism in everyday life. As a result, numerous scholarly works on microaggressions emanate from the CRT tradition (Desai & Abeita, 2017; Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Solórzano, 1998; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). According to Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso (2000), this tradition is codified by their five tenets as it relates to the application of CRT in education. They include: "(a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the transdisciplinary perspective" (p. 63). Through these tenets, the extant research on microaggression has emphasized challenging dominant ideologies by elevating the experiential knowledges of communities of color.

Macroaggressions and microaggressions are two different types of racial or discriminatory insults that either target a specific individual. Racial macroaggressions are typically overt and intentional actions towards people of color. Racial Microaggressions are daily verbal, behavioral or environmental slights that can be intentional or unintentional that imply negative racial indignities towards people of color (Sue et. al, 2007). According to Sue et al., (2007), there are three primary types of microaggressions, they include micro-assault, micro-invalidation, and micro-insult. The first form of microaggression is termed a micro-assault. While a micro-assault is often consciously communicated by the perpetrator to the recipient, micro-insults and micro-invalidations are more often unintentionally directed from one individual to another. Sue et al.

defines micro-assaults as "explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions" (p. 278). Thus, micro-assaults are most closely aligned with popularly conceived instances of overt racism. They could include referring to someone using a racial epitaph, intentional excluding someone because of their race, or making overt statements about the inferiority of certain racial groups (Constantine & Sue, 2007). Due to the direct nature of micro-assaults, the recipients are usually aware that the acts and messages are racist in nature.

Micro-assaults represent was is commonly perceived as 'old-fashioned racism'. In contrast, the other forms of microaggressions represent more contemporary manifestations of racism. The second type of microaggression is a micro-invalidation. This involves "verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (p. 278). This type of microaggression is thought to be particularly insidious as it negates the lived socio-cultural experiences and realities of people of color (Constantine & Sue, 2007). Examples of messages that invalidate people of color include statements that assume that people of color are foreigners, do not belong on college campuses, messages that deny the existence of individual racism, and avoidance of racial intervention when people of color are afflicted. Unlike a micro-assault, the perpetrator of a micro-invalidation is often unaware that they have committed a microaggression. This is due to the fact that micro-insults are usually conveyed unconsciously.

The third type of microaggression is referred to as a micro-insult. A micro-insult involves "communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. Micro-insults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color" (p. 274). More simply, they are messages that insult people of color based on their race/ethnic identity. There are numerous ways in which micro-insults may be communicated. They can involve messages that question a student's academic aptitude, convey assumptions that they are criminals or deviants, or treat them as lower or lesser than (among many other messages).

Within each category of microaggression (e.g., assault, insult, invalidation) are numerous types of microaggressions that exemplify some of the most common messages connoted by perpetrators. For example, assuming that a person of color is academically inferior is referred to as an ascription of intelligence. Moreover, viewpoints that suppose that people of color are criminals, deviants, or dangerous are referred to as an assumption of criminality. As noted by Wood and Harris (2015), students of color (particularly males of color) are most likely to be recipients of ascriptions of intelligence, assumptions of criminality, and pathologizing culture (the latter being the focus of this current study).

As noted by Sue et al., (2007), pathologizing culture is the "notion that the values and communications styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal" (p. 276) while those of people of color are undesirable. Wood and Harris (2016a, 2017) have expanded upon this notion to also include stereotyped assumptions about the ways of being and lives of people of color. They noted that pathologizing culture often involves statements that negatively characterize or stereotype people of color as all having undesirable characteristics, such as being lazy, uncaring, or loud. They can also involve similar assumptions about their communities, such as viewing all people of color in a ghettoized fashion (i.e., being poor, from dangerous neighborhoods).

With all microaggressions, there are two messages that are conveyed simultaneously. This involves what was verbalized and the actual message that the recipient received. Because microaggressions are unconsciously rendered, it is often perceived by the perpetrator that what they have asked or said was polite, assistive, or complimentary in nature. In reality, the message derived from the communication is one that is received as injurious, denigrating, and/or rude (Sue, 2010). Sue et al, (2007) notes that the act of "dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in [a] work/school setting" may be viewed by the perpetrator in one way but connotes a message to the recipient to "leave your cultural baggage outside" because it is viewed as being lesser than (p. 276). Another example could involve a teacher saying to a student with a sense of surprise "You are so articulate". The message may be rendered as a compliment by the teacher but received as an insult that contends that "people of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites" or that "it is unusual for someone of your race to be so intelligent" (p. 276). In all these cases, the message conveyed was not the message received. Given this, the focus of the analysis was on identifying both the message conveyed and the sense-making received by parents, as expressed through their own narratives.

As noted, few studies have examined microaggressions from the perspective of parents. One of these few

studies by Allen (2013) investigated microaggressions described by Black fathers whose sons attended middle-class high schools. He noted that fathers described instances where their sons were assumed to be deviant and singled-out for behaviors that were benign in comparison to those of their peers. For example, one father in his study noted that he was volunteering in the classroom and that many students were getting up during the lecture to get a drink of water and sharper pencils. However, when a Black male student did the same thing, the teacher 'lashed' out at the student. Allen extended another experience where a father attended a school-community event where parents were being briefed by local law enforcement. The examples given of issues they should look for were indicative of racial profiling of Black youth and focused on cultural styles specific to this population. While Allen's work articulates, what would be viewed as an assumption of criminality, the concept of pathologizing culture and other microaggression types were not discussed. This study helps to advance the research in this area by addressing a topic that has been underexplored in the scholarly literature.

Lastly, another key point worth mentioning. Black children likely experience microaggressions as a unique experience that Black adults, because their experiences are filtered through the intersection of two identifies, race and being a child. These two identities are also associated with two different forms of discrimination, racism and childism. Childism refers to assumptions that being an adult should have greater superiority over children. In fact, Pierce and Allen (1975) contend that the discrimination faced by children is the root of racism, they stated:

"We contend that childism is the basic form of oppression in our society and underlies all alienation and violence, for it teaches everyone how to be an oppressor and makes them focus on the exercise of raw power rather than on volitional humaneness (p. 266).

Given this, early childhood education represents a unique setting for examining racial microaggressions, as these messages are framed in a context rooted in childism.

Methods

This study examined racial microaggressions in early childhood education through the lens of Critical Race counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling involves illuminating the stories of minoritized populations, as an avenue for sharing experiences that are often untold (Harper, 2009). These stories are "counter" in nature, in that they represent the realities of non-dominant groups and are intended to confront and resist dominant narratives about communities of color. These dominant narratives often portray communities of color from negative and deficit-oriented viewpoints. Through counter-storytelling, critical race theorist provide insight into the role of race and racism in shaping societal experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-stories are rooted in the histories of many communities of color. As detailed by Delgado (1989) "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation" (p. 2436). As such, storytelling has been used both historically and contemporarily as a method of transmitting cultural knowledge and as an instrument for liberation (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

As a research method, counter-stories are often conveyed through counter-narratives, where individuals from minoritized populations share their experiences and realities through various forms of narrative. As noted by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), there are three primary types of counter-stories, including: a) personal narratives (where researchers from marginalized groups document their personal experiences); b) other people's narratives (where participants from marginalized groups document their lived socio-cultural experiences); and c) composite narratives (where thematic elements from personal and/or other people's narratives are combined into amalgamated stories). In this research project, other people's narratives were elicited from parents of Black children to document their experiences and that of their children, in early childhood education settings (from preschool through third grade). These stories were elicited from parents with the goal of empowering disaffected communities by validating experiences with racism (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997) and to promote improved interactions between educators and the students and families that they serve.

Data Collection

According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), there are four sources of data that should be used in Critical Race counter-storytelling. These sources include previous research, the professional insights of the researcher, the researcher's experiential knowledge, and data collected throughout the course of the study. These sources of data were employed in this study, the researcher's professional and personal experiential knowledge are articulated in the section on positionality while the

findings section focuses on data gathered during the study. A total of 58 parents of Black children who were enrolled or had recently traversed through early childhood education participated in the study. In this study, most of the parent participants were Black at 93% and 7% of the respondents were non-Black. Within the 7% of non-black parents, their ethnicities were White, Latino and Multiethnic. The parents were recruited using non-probabilistic sampling via a targeted convenience sampling technique (Marshall, 1996). It should be noted that race in this study was self-identified, so participants could include any child who had a parent who identified the child as being Black. This method involves researchers' exploiting their social networks to gain access to participants who are more readily accessible. Specifically, participants were recruited through social media through an announcement on my account and through targeted (paid) advertising using the keywords "African American", "Black", "Parents", and "Early Childhood Education" designations. Participants were informed that the study focused (generically) on the parents of Black children in early childhood education (pre-school through third grade). Participants were screened to ensure adherence to eligibility requirements (e.g., 18 years old, having Black children).

Participants were provided with information that defined racial microaggressions and the primary subtypes based on Sue's et al. (2007) taxonomy. Participants were then asked to submit narratives that detailed their experiences and that of their children with microaggressions. As part of their intake to the study, they received a written description of what microaggressions are, common examples of microaggressions from Sue's taxonomy, and an invitation to share their perspectives on this topic. Participants were compensated $20 for their participation in this study. Of the 58 participants, 55 indicated experiences with microaggressions and provided detailed narratives that contextualized and described multiple salient microaggressions that influenced them and their children during early childhood education. These written narratives, composed by the participants themselves, reflected experiences that were largely emblematic of micro-insults, as defined by Sue et al. In this particular study, I articulate the experiences of the participants as expressed in their narratives that address one larger theme and multiple sub-themes relevant to pathologizing culture.

An overview of respondent characteristics is provided in Table 1. Of the 55 respondents included in this study, the mean age was 31.9 years old. The percentage breakdown demonstrated variation across age groups. The vast majority of participants were Black at 93%, though 7% were non-Black. This included respondents who were White, Latino, and Multiethnic. Most respondents were also female at 83%, with only 17% being male. The mean number of children was 1.85, though the largest number of respondents had one child (44%). In terms of state-regional representation, the respondents hailed from 26 states. The breakdown by region was as follows: 20%, Mid-West; 33%, North-East, 33%, West; and 15%, South. The most represented states included: California, Georgia, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, and Texas.

Data Analysis

Data in this study were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach, as articulated by Charmaz (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). I employed three types of coding, including open, axial, and selective coding. This approach allowed the researcher to deconstruct the narratives and make meaning of the experiences expressed in their narratives. Open coding involved reading the narratives and identifying initial ideas and concepts that were evident. Subsequently, words and phrases were assigned to these ideas (as informed by Sue's et al., (2007) taxonomy of microaggression types. During open coding, written documentation was made regarding initial interpretations and reflections as I engaged in sense-making. Axial coding involved grouping the recurrent ideas into relevant constructs and sub-constructs. Moreover, relationships between constructs were noted along with previous documentation of the reflections that arose during coding. Linkages were made between larger constructs and sub-constructs, such as presented in this manuscript. For example, instances of micro-insults were further disaggregated by sub-type with one of those types focused on pathologizing culture. Concepts associated with pathologizing culture such as "hair," "animals,", "ghettoization," "ethnic foods," "absent fathers," "home cultures", "violence," "perceptions of time," and "poverty" were concepts that were associated with pathologizing culture. In the selective coding phase, further re-coding and re-analysis produced themes that were most salient within the narratives. Themes that related most closely to the category and were most emblematic of participants' experiences were selected.

Several procedures were employed to ensure trustworthiness, including inter-coder reliability and bracketing. To pursue intercoder reliability, a colleague and I coded sections of the dataset. These sections were

Table 1.

Overview of Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Sub-Group	Percentage
Respondent Age		
	18 to 24	15%
	25 to 29	22%
	30 to 34	25%
	35 to 39	27%
	40 to 45	7%
	46 and older	4%
Race		
	Black	93%
	All Other	7%
Gender		
	Male	17%
	Female	83%
Total Number of Children	1 child	44%
	2 children	31%
	3 children or more	25%
Region		
	Mid-West	20%
	North-East	33%
	West	33%
	South	15%
N=55		

then compared to cross-check for coding congruency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process occurred three times on smaller sections of the data until a higher level of congruency was reached. Then, the peer researcher and I coded the entirety of the dataset, separately. After coding was complete, we compared areas of dis-congruence to discuss individual sense-making and to achieve greater congruence. Few areas of incongruence were evident and those that were often encompasses multiple microaggression types occurring within a given utterance.

Positionality

I am a Black female who self-identifies as Nigerian-American. I teach undergraduate courses to university students in the field of early childhood education, with a focus on parenting and research methods. My father was born and raised in Nigeria and mother is an African American from the southern United States. I have three children currently in early childhood education, including a daughter in preschool, a son in first-grade, and daughter in third grade. These children have experienced microaggressions, which was the initial set of experiences that prompted my interest in this study. Several salient examples involved perceptions from teachers that my children would be academically

inferior due to being African American and a resulting sense of surprise when they outperformed low expectations. My experiences enabled me to be reflexive about how my identity as an educator and parent could lead to skewed interpretations of participants' narratives. In the next section, I present the findings from this study.

Bracketing was employed in this study. Bracketing is a qualitative technique where the researchers set aside preconceived notions about their perceptions of the study (Ahern, 1999). Given that Solórzano and Yosso (2002) note that the researchers' own experiential knowledge is a relevant source of data for narrative researcher, bracketing involved the researcher documenting her own experiences. These experiences allowed me to come to a greater understanding of preconceived perspectives and to better set these notions aside during coding. After the selective coding stage, I revisited their personal narrative to further the sense-making process. Elements of the bracketing narrative are included below in the section on positionality.

Findings

Three primary themes emerged that aligned with the concept of pathologizing culture. These themes included: assumptions of being low-income, presumptions of fatherless homes, and ascriptions of an unstructured home environment. In all, the overarching perception perceived by parents is that educators view their children, their families, and their communities as emanating from a 'ghettoized culture'. This culture was pathologized as being undesirable, deviant, and lesser than. What follows, is a description of experiences documented in the personal narratives of parents of Black children in early childhood education that evidences these themes.

Assumptions of Being Low-Income

A number of parents discussed experiences with educators that communicated their assumptions that they were low-income. These experiences spanned settings, including: interactions with front-office staff, school principals, and teachers. For example, one parent of an African American male pre-schooler documented an exchange with a front-office staff person. This incident occurred when the parent attempted to enroll her son in a local preschool.

> My son was breastfed until he was one years and therefore was never really left with anyone other than myself and his father. When he was about 18 months, I decided I was ready to go back to work and began my search for a learning center. I walked into the building of one of the most prestigious early child centers in my area and upon entering and asking the front desk receptionist if they had any openings for enrollment I was greeted with a simple "we have reached our max amount of subsidy enrolled children". I have four college degrees; my husband has two. I have never qualified for any subsidy but because of my brown skin color that must have been what [they assumed] I was there for.

In this instance, the child's parent perceived that their skin color lead to an assumption about her inability to pay for preschool. As noted previously, verbal microaggressions often communicate two different messages at the same time. One message that is often shrouded as a compliment or framed as being assistive and an underlying message that communicates an insult (Sue et a., 2007). In this case, the verbalized message entailed the staff person providing accurate information that their subsidy enrollment was fulfilled. It is conceivable that this statement was designed to allow the parent to move more quickly in making decisions about other locations for their child's care. However, the underlying message communicated an assumption of her being low-income. As a result, the environment was portrayed as one that the parent and child did not belong in.

Another example of a presumption of low-income status, related to a narrative contributed by a parent of a Black kindergartener. The parent stated:

> My child just started public kindergarten this year. I told the principal that she is enrolled in Kumon for reading. She said, "wow. Isn't that expensive? Was she behind?" My reply: "no, the ad came in the mail and she read it and wanted to go." Ugh!

The overt message that was communicated was that the Kumon program was expensive, however, the underlying message received by the parent was that the principal was surprised that the parent was able to pay for such a high cost program. As a result, this instance pathologized the parent through an assumption of being low-income, a notion that the recipient perceived was tied directly to their race/ethnicity.

In several circumstances, the pathologized messaging involved a linkage between the parent being a person of color and therefore surmising that they must live in an area that is low-income. Thus, residing in a low-income neighborhood was a sub-theme of the

larger theme as an assumption of being low-income. An example of this was offered by a parent who noted the following:

> While attending a predominantly white magnet school, the social studies teacher (Caucasian) was discussing neighborhoods with the class. She then proceeded to name all of the black areas in our city and had the children tell what neighborhood each of them lived in. When my son stated his neighborhood, the teacher told him that he couldn't possibly live there and proceeded to tell him that he has to live in one of the more impoverished areas of town.

In this case, the teacher may have been attempting to help ensure that the child had an accurate understanding of what neighborhood they lived in. However, in doing so, they communicated an assumption that the child's family must reside in a more low-income area. Ultimately, the teacher was incorrect and communicated a sense of surprise to the student, and their peers, that they lived in an affluent part of town. This microaggression communicated a notion that pathologized all Black families to living in more underdeveloped communities. Another similar example of this was offered by a parent of a Black preschooler, who stated:

> My daughter was 3 years old entering preschool at a private school. The school requires a meeting with the teacher a week before school starts. It can be in the classroom or a home visit. We opted for a home visit. When my daughter's two teachers arrived, let's call them John and Sue, whom are both White, I was met with not much of a welcome from Sue. John was great, but Sue was questioning me about how can I afford two 46-inch TV's and 3 tablets. She asked questions about how could I afford private school and made a comment about my apartment being in the "ghetto". I'm middle class and make $52,000 a year.

There are two instances of microaggressions that pathologized culture in this statement. First, Sue demonstrated a sense of surprise that the parent could afford a private school and the technology that was in their home. The assumption was that this combination of a higher cost school, two larger televisions, and three tablets would fall outside the parent's purchasing power. Second, the teacher remarked that the family's home was in the "ghetto", a stereotypical perception often held about Black families. Interestingly, the parent noted that the perception was not accurate anyhow. Moreover, the use of the word "ghetto" to describe the home falls in line with the pathologizing culture as a micro-insult.

Presumptions of Fatherless Homes

Another sub-theme of pathologizing culture was the presumption of an absentee father. Parents of Black children offered narratives that described how teachers, school leaders, and even other parents made presumptions that mothers were single parents and that Black children did not know their fathers. One example of this came from a mother of a pre-schooler who discussed a Father's Day card project. She stated the following:

> When my son was in pre-kindergarten, his teachers automatically assumed his father wasn't in the picture. For Father's Day, they sent home a card for my dad (his grandfather) and nothing for my husband. My son is very intelligent. When my son asked if he could make one for his own dad, they replied, "Well sweetie, we don't know if you have a dad at home." That absolutely broke his heart.

In the example, the teacher may have sought to be inclusive with children who did not have fathers at home, but communicated a presumption that Black children have absentee fathers. This inevitably excluded the child from being able to construct a card for his father and, as reported by the parent, "broke his heart."

In a similar manner, the child of another parent noted that her preschooler was asked by the teacher "if she has a father and if she knew him… and if her father claims her". In both of these instances, a presumption was made that the father was absent from the home. In the latter case, the example goes further to inquire whether the child knew the father at all and whether the father recognized (i.e., claimed parentage of) the child. Possibly, the teacher was attempting to learn more about the child as an effort to build a personal relationship with them, however, the message conveyed was a micro-level insult. Ultimately, such presumptions could frame children's early understanding of Black fatherhood from a deficit perspective.

While teachers and principals were described as the primary purveyors of this sub-type of pathologizing culture, some examples demonstrated how parents can microaggress other parents. One particularly salient example came from a parent who described her son's first day attending preschool, she stated the following:

> It was hard leaving my son for his first day at the early childhood center, he dug his nails into my leg

> and held on for dear life screaming at the top of his lungs. My husband and our parents were his only babysitters and they all stood peering through the glass behind the door while Mommy did the "dirty deed". I begged, pleaded and bribed him to let go but he hadn't budged. Another parent, a mother, comes in and drops her child off. The little girl walks in with a smile and runs of to lay with the other children. With daring eyes the mother turns to me and says "this is why it's so important for their dad to be in their lives". I used all four of my degrees to politely tear her unmarried soul to pieces.

Similar to the examples communicated by teachers to parents and children, the message conveyed here pathologized Black mothers. Specifically, the message communicated a presumption that mothers were single parents and fathers of Black children were 'deadbeat' dads who do not engage in the rearing of their own children. In this case, this presumption was also tied to a notion that the child was undisciplined due to the perception of an absent father. This notion is more fully evidenced in the following theme, a presumption of an unstructured home environment.

Ascriptions of Unstructured Home Environments

Parents in this study described experiences that they and their children had that ascribed Black children as coming from unstructured home environments. This perception was mostly described as emanating from teachers following an incident of misbehavior or perceived misbehavior. In particular, this ascription was used to as a method of making meaning of the actions they encountered by broadly associating unstructured home environments with Black childrearing. One parent stated the following:

> We live in a predominantly White neighborhood and my son was standing on his chair [in the classroom] and the teacher told him we don't behave like that anymore, you are not in the hood. My son's kindergarten teacher [said this].

As evidenced in this quote, the teacher made an association between perceived misbehavior and an unstructured home environment. Moreover, the teacher also conveyed an assumption that the child came from a home that was located in the hood. This is a similar connotation to the sub-theme of an assumption of being low-income that was previously articulated. Another parent described an experience with a teacher that ascribed her child as emanating from an unstructured home environment. The parent offered the following narrative:

> In 1st grade, my son had a teacher who was genuinely disinterested in teaching her students and would often take sick days and eventually completely abandoned her position. My son has ADHD and this was before I could get a formal diagnosis. The teacher would never communicate with me and upon finally granting me a conference the teacher suggested my child was unable to learn and it was certainly the fault of his upbringing because these behaviors (hyperactivity) only manifest in children with no home structure. This was our first conversation and she referenced statistics that apply to African American children and their academic abilities relevant to socio-economics. I was caught off guard and shocked that she felt so candid and spewed her disbelief in the abilities of the children in her class who were Black. It was eye opening and I was glad to see her leave.

In this instance, the teacher avoided engaging the parent and was reportedly unsatisfied with their teaching duties. These actions led the parent to perceive that the teacher was dis-interested in the success of their child. During the meeting, the teacher communicated their assumption that the child's actions were the function of an unstructured home environment.

This perception was further reinforced by statistical information that ascribed the child and their family as being low-income. While it is accurate that the school had a high concentration of free and reduced lunch children, the assumption expressed by the educator was that the child was low-income and therefore came from an environment that was unstructured. This example, like the others provided, demonstrated a 'ghettoized' perspective of Black families and therefore communicated lower expectations for behavior and academic performance.

These aforementioned examples illustrate how Black culture and therefore Black communities, parents, and children are pathologized with assumptions. These assumptions convey messages that they were undesirable, deviant, and lesser than. In the next section, we contextualized these findings in light of prior research and offer implications for practice in educational settings.

Discussion and Implications

This study set out to explore the racialized experiences of the parents of Black children in early childhood education. Using the lens of racial microaggressions, parents offered insights into the myriad of ways that Black children and their parents are exposed to experiences that pathologize their culture. While Sue et al.'s (2007) taxonomy has provided a framework for understanding what constitutes pathologizing culture, this study has expanded upon this concept by demonstrating the unique ways in which culture is pathologized for parents of Black children. Thus, this study represents an initial exploration into elements that could serve as a nomenclature for understanding the ways that culture is pathologized in school settings.

In this particular study, three primary themes emerged. Parents reported experiences where they were assumed to be low-income, to come from homes with absent fathers, and to have an unstructured home environment. These messages were communicated to parents and their children by principals, front-office staff, teachers, and even other parents. A pervasive message expressed by these individuals was one that assumed a 'ghettoized culture'. This perceived culture was pathologized as being undesirable, deviant, and lesser than.

As expressed throughout this study, research on microaggressions have shown that there are often two messages that are conveyed simultaneously. An overt message that is often perceived as assistance or complimentary and an underlying message that is hurtful, demeaning, and harmful (Sue, 2010). In line with this notion, the comments expressed by parents throughout this narrative study demonstrate that the messages were indeed received in this manner. It is important to note that underlying messages are often rendered unconsciously from the perpetrator of the microaggression to the recipient. Thus, the educators in this study were not necessarily intended to cause harm, however, the end results were that the messages rendered were harmful.

At face value, the assumptions conveyed in this study may seem innocuous. For instance, it is accurate that Black children are overrepresented among those who qualify for free and reduced lunch (Wood & Harris, 2017). Moreover, data from Thistle (2006) demonstrated that 25% of Black mothers between the ages of 22 and 44 were single in comparison to 9% of White women. However, 25% certainly does not represent the majority of Black families, nor does it account for communalist rearing common in Black communities due to the systematic destruction of Black families beginning with slavery and continued today through widespread disparities in the criminal justice system (see McAdoo, 2007). Notwithstanding, the messages and the contexts that they were delivered were received by recipients as degrading, insulting, and dismissive. This pattern seemed to be evident regardless of whether the message rendered was accurate or inaccurate. Thus, it is not simply *what* was communicated but the meanings that the parents and their children ascribed from these encounters. The underlying communication was fraught with insulting assumptions and connotations. Moreover, it should also be noted that deriving from a low-income background, coming from a single-parent home, or residing in a low-income predominantly Black community do not cause poor outcomes. Rather, it is the assumptions and stereotypes that educators have about these backgrounds that are ultimately, most harmful. Moreover, having a monolithic perspective of Black families and children may be equally harmful.

As noted by Sue et al., (2007), racial microaggressions can be harmful. As such, reducing experiences with microaggressions is essential to creating an environment that fosters the learning, development, and success of children. Sue et al., contends that education and training on racial microaggressions is needed to reduce their prevalence. As such, educational professionals who work with the Black children and their families should engage in training on bias, stereotypes, and microaggressions. Given that the microaggressions addressed in this study emanated from principals, classroom teachers, and front office staff, it is essential that trainings incorporate individuals from all these designations. Moreover, some of the microaggressions noted in this study were perpetrated by other parents. In the spirit of creating a welcoming climate that fosters a sense of belonging for all parents and students, schools can also consider whether public development opportunities can be provided for parents as well. Guidance is provided by Sue with respect to the nature of these trainings. Though their recommendations are specific to mental health clinicians, the focus may be applicable to educators. They note that the training should be designed to:

> (a) increase their ability to identify racial microaggressions in general and in themselves in particular; (b) understand how racial microaggressions, including their own, detrimentally impact clients of color; and (c) accept responsibility for taking corrective actions to overcome racial biases (p. 283).

As demonstrated within this quote, trainings should prioritize identification of microaggressions, the influ-

ence of microaggressions, and corrective actions to address bias. In particular, this study has offered some insights that may be useful to inform training and development programs for early childhood educators by articulating the nature of pathologized messages. As such, examples within these trainings should emphasize avoiding microaggressions as it relates to an assumption of low-income status, presumption of fatherless homes, and ascriptions of unstructured home environments.

This study provides a critical, yet tentative lens into the nature of microaggressions documented by the parents of Black children. As noted, save Allen (2012), few studies have examined the narratives of parents. This is of particular concern given that parents may be most suited to describe the experiences of those who may not be able to fully articulate their experiences, namely, young children. Future research should further explore the nature of microaggressions documented by the parents of Black children. While this study focused on themes that addressed the concept of pathologizing culture, other research can explore the innumerable other microaggression types and sub-types articulated by Sue et al., (2007).

Moreover, this study was limited in that it prioritized meta-level experiences. However, future inquiry into the ways in which pathologizing culture manifests in early childhood education should consider analyses that examine intersectional experiences based on demographic factors. This could include comparisons across family size, urbanicity, and demographic characteristics of the parents and/or children. Ultimately, the research on microaggressions has been criticized for focusing exclusively on singular identities (Nadal, Mazzula, Rivera, & Fujii-Doe, 2014). However, as noted by Nadal, Davidoff, Davis, Wong, Marshall and McKenzie (2015) microaggressions are often intersectional, relating directly to the multiple of identities that an individual may have. Thus, such insights would serve as an appropriate next phase of research on the topic of pathologizing culture.

Limitations

As with all research, this study was not without limitations. While I took steps to ensure trustworthiness (e.g., inter-coder reliability, bracketing) the study could have benefitted from member checking. Member checking occurs when participants are asked to reflect on the coding and analysis conducted by me and provide affirmation to its accuracy (Carlson, 2010). In this case, I needed to ensure anonymity of the participants to guard against potential harm of the participant's identities becoming known.

As a strategy for mitigating this limitation, I 'literature-checked' the findings in comparison to extant research to ensure that the findings were in line with other experiences with pathologizing culture in the microaggression literature base (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Another limitation of this study was on meta-level experiences with microaggressions rather than differences between groups. As evident in table 1, participants were diverse in terms of family size, state of residence, and other demographic factors. However, comparisons were not made across these groups as finding salient themes across parents was the focus on the analysis. Lastly, with respect to making statements across groups, this study was also limited by the predominance of female respondents who participated in the study. Notwithstanding these limitations, I perceive the themes to be emblematic of the experiences and realities of my parents of Black children in early childhood education.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study set out to provide to provide a voice to those who are often unheard, by expressing the narratives of the parents of Black children who articulated their experiences and that of their children. Given that early learners may not fully understand the depth and nature of the racialized messages they see and experience, parent's viewpoints may be the next best pathway to understanding such experiences. The silence of the extant literature on microaggressions in early childhood education may serve to exacerbate these issues because practitioners may be unaware of the extent that these incidents occur and the nature in which they are manifested. This research has helped to address this concern, serving to illuminate microaggressions experienced in the most formative years of schooling.

Bearing the findings from this study in mind, future research should expand on the sample collected from this study to examine a larger pool of parents. This larger pool would help to better illuminate whether or not the patterns identified in this study are recurrent. Moreover, an increased sample would also allow for comparisons to be made across parental characteristics, schooling context (e.g., urban, suburban), and locale. In addition, this study yields three major themes, future studies could go deeper in understanding the nuances of these areas. For example, Black children were assumed to come from a fatherless home, possibly there

are nuance ways that this message is communicated to parents and their children, or discrete rationales as to *why* students are assumed to come from these homes. A deeper analysis into one thematic areas could provide this type of insight, which could be both beneficial for research but for practice as well.

References

Ahern, K. J. (1999). Ten tips for reflexive bracketing. *Qualitative health research*, *9*(3), 407-411.

Allen, Q. (2013). "They Think Minority Means Lesser Than" Black Middle-Class Sons and Fathers Resisting Microaggressions in the School. *Urban education*, *48*(2), 171-197.

Banks-Wallace, J. (2002). Talk that talk: Storytelling and analysis rooted in African American oral tradition. *Qualitative Health Research*, *12*(3), 410-426.

Carlson, J. A. (2010). Avoiding traps in member checking. *The qualitative report*, *15*(5), 1102.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Constantine, M. G., & Sue, D. W. (2007). Perceptions of racial microaggressions among black supervisees in cross-racial dyads. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *54*(2), 142.

Davis, L., Whitman, C., & Nadal, K. (2015). Microaggressions in the workplace: Recommendations for best practice. *Sexual harassment in education and work settings*, 135-155.

DeAngelis, T. (2009). Unmasking racial micro aggressions'. *Monitor on Psychology*, *40*(2), 42.

Delgado, R. (1987). The ethereal scholar: Does critical legal studies have what minorities want. *Harvard CR-CLL Rev.*, *22*, 301.

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

Desai, S. R., & Abeita, A. (2017). Institutional microaggressions at a Hispanic Serving Institution: A Diné (Navajo) woman utilizing Tribal Critical Race Theory through student activism. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *50*(3), 275-289.

Harper, S. R. (2009). Niggers no more: A critical race counternarrative on Black male student achievement at predominantly White colleges and universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 22*(6), 697-712.

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 predominantly White university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *5*(3), 159.

Jones, J. M. (1997). *Prejudice and racism.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Lewis, J. A., Mendenhall, R., Harwood, S. A., & Huntt, M. B. (2013). Coping with gendered racial microaggressions among Black women college students. *Journal of African American Studies*, *17*(1), 51-73.

Lewis, J. A., & Neville, H. A. (2015). Construction and initial validation of the Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale for Black women. *Journal of counseling psychology*, *62*(2), 289.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family practice*, *13*(6), 522-526.

McAdoo, H. P. (Ed.). (2007). *Black families*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

McCabe, J. (2009). Racial and gender microaggressions on a predominantly-White campus: Experiences of Black, Latina/o and White undergraduates. *Race, Gender & Class*, 133-151.

Nadal, K. L. (2008). Preventing racial, ethnic, gender, sexual minority, disability, and religious microaggressions: Recommendations for promoting positive mental health. *Prevention in Counseling Psychology: Theory, Research, Practice and Training*, *2*(1), 22-27.

Nadal, K. L. (2011). The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS): construction, reliability, and validity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *58*(4), 470.

Nadal, K. L., Davidoff, K. C., Davis, L. S., Wong, Y., Marshall, D., & McKenzie, V. (2015). A qualitative approach to intersectional microaggressions: Understanding influences of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion. *Qualitative Psychology*, *2*(2), 147.

Nadal, K. L., Mazzula, S. L., Rivera, D. P., & Fujii-Doe, W. (2014). Microaggressions and Latina/o Americans: An analysis of nativity, gender, and ethnicity. *Journal of Latina/o Psychology*, *2*(2), 67.

Pérez Huber, L., & Solórzano, D. G. (2015). Visualizing everyday racism: Critical race theory, visual microaggressions, and the historical image of Mexican banditry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *21*(3), 223-238.

Pierce, C. M., & Allen, G. B. (1975). Childism. *Psychiatric Annals*, *5*(7), 15-24.

Thistle, S. (2006). *From marriage to the market: the transformation of women's lives and work*. University of California.

Thompson-Miller, R., & Feagin, J. R. (2008). Jim Crow and the case for reparations: Lessons from the African diaspora. In A. J. Hattery, D. G. Embrick, and E. Smith (eds.), *Globalization and America (pp. 46-63). New York, NY: Rowman*

and Littlefield.
Torres-Harding, S. R., Andrade Jr, A. L., & Romero Diaz, C. E. (2012). The Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS): a new scale to measure experiences of racial microaggressions in people of color. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *18*(2), 153.
Smith, W. A., Allen, W. R., & Danley, L. L. (2007). "Assume the position... you fit the description" psychosocial experiences and racial battle fatigue among African American male college students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *51*(4), 551-578.
Solórzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International journal of qualitative studies in education*, *11*(1), 121-136.
Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60-73.
Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *8*(1), 23-44.
Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice. *American psychologist*, *62*(4), 271.
Sue, D. W., & Constantine, M. G. (2007). Racial microaggressions as instigators of difficult dialogues on race: Implications for student affairs educators and students. *College Student Affairs Journal*, *26*(2), 136.
Valencia, R. R., & Solórzano, D. G. (1997). Contemporary deficit thinking. *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*, 160-210.
Wood, J. L., & Harris III, F. (2015). *Teaching men of color in the community college: A guidebook.* San Diego, CA: Lawndale Hill.
Wood, J. L., & Harris III, F. (2016a). *Teaching boys and young men of color in the community college: A guidebook.* San Diego, CA: Lawndale Hill.
Wood, J. L., & Harris III, F. (2017). *Supporting men of color in the community college: A guidebook.* San Diego, CA: Lawndale Hill.
Yosso, T., Smith, W., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. (2009). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review*, *79*(4), 659-691.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.