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## **Comments**

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# Racial Microaggressions: The Schooling Experiences of Black Middle-Class Males in Arizona's Secondary Schools

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*The literature on Black education has often neglected significant analysis of life in schools and the experience of racism among Black middle-class students in general and Black middle-class males specifically. Moreover, the achievement gap between this population and their White counterparts in many cases is greater than the gap that exists among working-class Blacks and Whites. This study begins to document the aforementioned by illuminating the racial microaggressions experienced by Black middle-class males while in school and how their families' usage of social and cultural capital deflect the potential negative outcomes of school racism.*

## Introduction

The experiences of Black males in schools are diverse in both success and failure. Subsequently, Black males are at high risk of academic failure, dropout, suspension, expulsion, or referral to special education programs. Many studies on Black male students in schools have analyzed school achievement and failure, resistance, accommodation, and reform (Dhondy, 1974; Fine, 1991; Fordham, 1988, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; MacLeod, 1987; Noguera, 2008; J. Ogbu, 1974; J. U. Ogbu, 1978; Solomon, 1992). These studies have illuminated the various ways in which Black males are alienated from the process of schooling because of incongruences between school culture and African-American culture. However, the majority of previous studies have chosen Black students from low-income or working-class backgrounds as the primary unit of analysis. While the relationship between race and class is one that cannot be ignored in American society, research tends to essentialize Black students experiences as existing within a homogeneous lower class.

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Although few studies have examined the schooling experiences through the intersectional lens of race, middle-class, and gender; virtually no studies examine Black middle-class males. Black male students, regardless of class standing, lag behind their White male counterparts and Black female students in terms of achievement scores and graduation rates (Belluck, 1999; Hallinan, 2001; Hubbard, 1999). If previous studies explain how the ideological and economic reality of working-class Black male students has factored into their educational experiences, then we must explore what factors play into Black middle-class male success and failure in school. Additionally, we must concurrently show how the race-gendered nature of their identity may in many ways be incompatible with the process of schooling (A. A. Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2003, 2008). This study commences the exploration and documentation of Black middle-class males, discovering how these young men, despite their privileged class standing, experience racial microaggressions within schools. However, the privilege of class and the access to certain social and cultural capital may have provided their parents the ability to dilute the impact of racism on these Black middle –class male students academic capabilities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Critical Race Theory and Racial Microaggressions.** Employing Critical Race Theory's (CRT) use of racial microaggressions as its theoretical lens, this study foregrounds the role of race and racism in the secondary schooling experiences of Black middle-class males. The belief that race is endemic to American life and intersects with other subordinated identities is one of five foundational tenants of critical race theory. CRT also seeks to challenge dominant claims of neutrality and ahistoricism; recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color; maintains a commitment to social justice; and is transdisciplinary in nature (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Matsuda, 1991; Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). At its axis, CRT analysis invariably uncovers how race mediates the manner in which people of color experience subordination through social and institutional racism.

Overt racism is prevalent in American society. However, it is the covert or subtle racism that often goes unnoticed, the racial microaggressions that quietly denigrate people of color. Pierce et al (1978) defines microaggressions as:

...subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders. The offensive mechanisms used against blacks often are innocuous. The cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions (p. 66).

Non-verbal or behavioral exchanges identified as microaggressions may include a White woman clutching her purse when a Black man walks by or a group of Black students being ignored or given "slow" service at a restaurant. Microaggressions also include verbal exchanges that aim to denigrate people of color as well (Solórzano et al., 2000) such as "she's so articulate" or "you're different from the others." Sue et al (2007) explains that in the business world, 'microinequities' is a similar term "used to describe the pattern of being overlooked, underrespected, and devalued because of one's race or gender" (p. 273). Many Black students experience microaggressions through invisibility on campus, differential treatment by faculty members, and the feeling of being stereotyped based on pejorative perceptions (Solórzano et al., 2000). These microaggressions are impactful as they can psychologically and spiritually affect students' experiences in schools or in other settings (Franklin, 2004; Sue, 2004).

In this study, I extend the discussion of racial microaggressions to include the everyday subtleties of race encountered by middle-class Black males in secondary education. Privileging the voice and the experiential knowledge of these students through their narratives is an important tenant of the CRT model, necessary to achieve social justice (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1995; Montoya, 1995). The students encountered feelings of invisibility in the school, pejorative teacher attitudes based on Black male stereotypes, and the subtle process of being academically tracked out of educational opportunities. Despite their middle-class status, these young Black men were not exempt from the experience of school racism and racial microaggressions. However, what made some of these young men and their families unique was their ability to circumnavigate the potential negative outcomes of these microaggressions largely through their accumulation and actuation of social and cultural capital.

**Social and cultural capital.** First theorized by Bourdieu (1977) and extended by others (Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Wacquant, 1993), the theory of social capital describes how individuals of families accrue benefits by means of social networks. Through such networks, parents are able to provide more favorable opportunities for their children, particularly in schools. Lee and Bowen (2006) provide examples of how social capital can be obtained in ways that promotes student achievement:

Social capital obtained through visits to the school may take the form of information (e.g., about upcoming events or available enrichment activities), skills (e.g., how to help with homework and home reading, parenting tips), access to resources (e.g., books, study aids, sources of assistance), and sources of social control (e.g., school-home agreement on behavior expectations and educational values), all of which can help parents promote their children's school achievement (p. 196).

Through developed relationships with teachers and school staff, and the time spent at home making these relationships operational for their children, families create social capital providing access to knowledge and resources to their children that enhances educational achievement. Additionally, social capital includes the larger non-school networks families develop and access that may also favorably advantage their children. This includes other family members employed in various industries, work colleagues, and memberships in social and professional organizations. Access to these networks subsequently creates access to certain experiences and knowledge such as cultural trips or particular work opportunities. These experiences provide concrete applications of academic material. For example, the opportunity to intern at a science museum where a relative works and interact with the exhibits certainly yields greater learning benefits than simply reading about science in a school text. The acquisition of particular forms of knowledge that enable academic achievement is what Bourdieu (1977) first identified as cultural capital.

Cultural capital was theorized to explain how social inequalities were reproduced through schools. Cultural capital is the “high-brow” bourgeois knowledge that one gains and exercises as a result of a middle or upper class standing. Lamont and Lareau (1988) extend this definition by further explaining cultural capital as “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (p. 156). Cultural capital includes access to personal libraries, large vocabularies, cultural outings (i.e. museums, vacations), and technology. It also includes the inside knowledge of schooling processes and the occupational flexibility to attend a variety of school events.

Bourdieu described schools as ideological tools controlled by the dominant elite that value bourgeois knowledge. According to this logic, students from middle-class backgrounds or students able to adopt and perform middle-class values and knowledge (cultural capital) will find greater compatibility and success within the school. Those who fail to acquire such cultural capital will more than likely struggle to succeed academically. The perpetuation of failure for families lacking the privileged middle-class cultural capital is how Bourdieu identifies schools' role in the reproduction of social inequalities. However, Bourdieu presumes that parents' social and cultural capital is automatically transmitted to their children in ways that ensures academic success, that both parents and children activate their social and cultural capital, and that their forms of capital are valued in any particular setting. This presumption was Lamont and Lareau's (1988) and others (Lareau, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999) critique of Bourdieu's deterministic reproduction model.

Lareau and Horvat (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) suggest a non-deterministic method of relating cultural capital to social reproduction by looking at the "context in which the capital is situated, the efforts by individuals to activate their capital, the skill with which individuals activate their cultural capital, and the institutional response to the activation" (p. 38). They refer to the working together of these factors as moments of social inclusion and social exclusion. Moments of inclusion include "the coming together of various forces to provide an advantage to the child in his or her life trajectory" (p. 48) and are exemplified by successful entrance into a gifted program or a study abroad experience. Conversely, moments of exclusion include forces that create disadvantage, which may include incompleteness of graduation requirements or lack of involvement in extra-curricular academic activities. In this study, while exploring schooling experiences of Black middle-class male students, I also document the ways that their middle-class parents are able use their accumulated social and cultural capital to create moments of inclusion within response to racial microaggressions.

## **Methodology**

Data collection for this study took place through a university-sponsored program that works with the recruitment, retention, and graduation of Black male students, while working toward the development of progressive Black male identity. The program includes a high school component that focuses on preparation for college admission, retention and graduation. The larger project, of which this study is a part of, worked with high school and college Black males. However, this study focuses specifically on Black middle-class high school male students.

Data were collected over a nine-month period but the actual dates are omitted to protect the participants' identities. These Black middle-class high school male students were recruited, along with their parents, to participate in this study through their involvement in the university-sponsored program. Middle-class was determined by their responses to initial demographics survey (i.e. residential data, income, education, occupation). Though both middle and working-class students participated in the study, it is the experiences of the middle-class males that are exclusively presented here. The student and parent participants in this study each participated in an open-ended interview, focusing on the interpretation of Black male educational experiences from the student and the parent perspective. Parents were included in the study to provide multivocal interpretations on the phenomena of Black middle-class male education. Parents and their sons were interviewed separately.

In addition to traditional interview methods, a slightly altered visual method entitled photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) was utilized to elicit responses. Using this method, digital cameras were distributed to volunteering male students and they were provided with broad and vague prompts to capture visuals of their social world. Simply explained to them, “if I were to hang out with you over the next few weeks, what would we see, who would we see, where would we go, and what would we do?” This method allowed the informants to represent their communities and lives through photographs in a manner that privileges the insider voice. This study’s use of photovoice differs from its traditional use through photos to elicit information from the informants rather than as explicit data. Through a follow up interview, informants explained the meanings of their photographs. These narratives provided a deeper insight into their lives as Black males that superseded the one-dimensional description of the photographs. All interviews were audiotaped and the sample for this portion of the study included five Black male students and four parents for a total of nine participants.<sup>1</sup>

### **Black Middle-Class Participants**

Five major criteria were used to determine class standing, which included 1) household income in relation to the state poverty line, 2) education level of parent(s), 3) occupation of parent(s), 4) residential location and ownership (i.e. property values, renting vs. owning), as well as 5) social groups the families were involved in (e.g. fraternities, Jack and Jill, Mason’s). While the use of these criteria were useful in initially distinguishing class positions, throughout the course of the interviews the parents generally confirmed my initial class identification by articulating their own class standing through statements such as “well, we’re definitely middle-class...look at where we live” or “I wouldn’t consider us middle-class...cuz I mean, we’re living in section 8 housing.”

Of the families participating in the study, two were lower middle-class and three were middle to upper middle-class. The families’ middle-class status was categorized as such largely due to their household income’s relation to the poverty line. In Arizona, household incomes for a family of four that are 200% and above the state poverty line are considered middle-class (*Arizona poverty line*, 2001; *Poverty in pima county stats*, 2008). Plainly stated, if the state poverty line for a family of four is \$17,000, then families of four making over \$34,000 (200% above poverty line) or more qualify as middle-class.

The two lower middle-class families received their classification, as their household income was roughly 300% above the state poverty line and held entry-level government positions. Though these lower middle-class families resided in a large urban district, they were particularly located in relatively new infill housing developments resulting from re-gentrification efforts. The families were involved in social organizations such as the Urban League and held Associate’s degrees from community colleges. Additionally, these lower middle-class families sent their children, at one time or another, to charter schools outside of their neighborhoods, transporting their children through private transportation. However, for one family, the cost of travel to send their son to a charter high school became such a burden, they elected to send him to the neighborhood high school where 60% of the student population qualified for free or reduced lunch.

The three middle to upper middle-class families in this study were classified as such because their household incomes ranged from 400%-600% above the state poverty level. The parents either held Associates, Bachelors, or Masters degrees. They were involved in social

organizations such as Jack and Jill or college fraternities/sororities and were employed in management or academic positions. They owned homes in middle-class neighborhoods and sent their sons to suburban, predominantly White high schools, sometimes outside of their neighborhoods. At these schools, less than 20% of the population were eligible for free or reduced lunch, with one middle-class parent exclaiming, “They can’t even find kids to get on the lunch program.”

### **Black Student Integration in Arizona Schools**

The brief descriptions of these families and the schools the Black males attended begin to illustrate a unique characteristic of Black education in Arizona. Black students in Arizona are highly integrated, attending schools that are typically either urban and predominantly Latino or suburban and predominantly White (Orfield & Lee, 2006, 2007). Rarely do Black Arizona students attend schools that are majority Black. For example, the lower middle-class families described above sent their sons to schools that were not only considered working-class schools but maintained a population of over 65% Latino students. The polarized integration of Black students into working-class Latino schools or middle-class White schools set particular stages for similar but varied encounters with racial microaggressions.

### **Results**

**Racial microaggressions: Invisibility and differential treatment.** The students in this study provided stories about not feeling accounted for and feeling invisible within their schools. When teachers or administrators did notice them, they felt they were in many cases treated differentially. For instance, students spoke of having limited meaningful interactions with teachers and staff aside from quotidian classroom events or counselor appointments. In some cases, the students felt their teachers hardly knew who they were. For example Darrell<sup>ii</sup>, a middle-class male attending a suburban, predominantly White high school, recalled an unfulfilling teacher relationship in which he felt the teacher seemed oblivious to his presence in the class:

She doesn’t know my name, like, just the other day we were having a test review game and like she was throwing popsicle sticks out of the [cup], and I’m like, you know, I’m the only Black kid in your class, uh, next to three other Black kids in there, and I’m like one of the most goofiest ones in there and so she pulls my name out and she goes ‘D-D-Darrell?’ And it’s her own handwriting and everything and I’m like, ‘Come on now, lady. I’ve been in your class now for about four months now and you don’t know my name.’ She doesn’t know me or anything like that.

This student’s experience was a strong articulation of the larger sentiments of the middle-class males in the study. Often times the students struggled, particularly those in predominantly White schools, with relating with their teachers or believing that their teachers cared about them. When they did identify positive student-teacher relationships, they were often a result of the teacher attempting to find a way to relate to them (i.e. via sports) and feeling that the teacher held high expectations for them. One student talked about having a teacher who “talks to me on a daily basis about colleges and different stuff that [I] need to do academically to get to college.” Another student expressed that “I’ve got a teacher that makes me push.”

While there were a few examples of good student-teacher relationships, these instances were diminutive in comparison to the larger sense of invisibility the males felt in their schools. All the students described how their schools lacked any Black cultural organizations (a major reason for their participation in the university program) and many of those students attending predominantly Latino, working-class schools felt their schools catered more to the needs of the Latino community, which differed from their own, and thus were largely overlooked. Whether attending working-class or middle-class schools, these students recognized that they held little meaningful presence on campus, and when they were made visible in the school, they often experienced differential treatment from their peers. Darrell spoke of a Black teacher he felt treated him differently than other Black students in the class because of his choice of Hip-Hop cultural style:

I think it was definitely, her thing was definitely a race thing, I think, because there was this other Black kid in there named Jon and he was like the loudest of the loud in there and everything, but you know, I think it's the fact that you know, I came in there dressing the way I dress, which is more Hip-Hop style and this other kid Jon who, you know, dressed in this Polo and the tie and stuff everyday. You know, I think she appreciated him way more out of everybody. And you know, you try your hardest in the class, and she was just so aggravated with all these kids, seeing these fights every day at school with these kids that look like me, dress like me, whatever, it kind of had an impact on her and mine relationship.

Darrell's narrative about his African American teacher's differential treatment with him and another African American male due to his dress style provides entrance to a discussion about how teacher perceptions of Black males are often influenced by racist discourse about Black males. Black masculine representation, through media discourse and sensationalization, often contribute to the negative imagery of Black men as deviant, irresponsible and uneducable (Entman, 1990; Fujioka, 1999; Gibbs, 1988; Golden *et al.*, 1994; Hall, 1993; Staples, 1982). Undoubtedly, this discourse and popular ideas of Black male deviancy spill over into the schools in ways that influence how Black males are perceived and treated by others. As such, teachers regularly interpret the behaviors and style of Black male youth as aggressive, disrespectful, defiant, and intimidating even when such behaviors were not intended to be so (Davis, 2003; Delpit, 1995; A. A. Ferguson, 2000; R. F. Ferguson, 1998, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Neal *et al.*, 2003; Weinstein *et al.*, 2004; Weinstein *et al.*, 2003). The imprecise interpretation of these behaviors results in discipline that is often unnecessary, unfair, and in many cases, harsher for Black boys than it would be for their White counterparts (A. A. Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005; Skiba, 2001).

Darrell distinguished how his preferred dress style was more in line with popular Hip-Hop culture, a style that he felt this teacher used as an indicator of deviance. The assumption could be made that a Black teacher would be less likely to misread this student's dress style as deviant. Yet her preferential treatment for another Black male student in her class who "dressed in this Polo and the tie and stuff everyday" demonstrates the power race-gendered representation plays in influencing how teachers (even Black teachers) may perceive and consequently judge Black male students.

Similar to the microaggressions within the classroom, the students discussed how they were treated differentially outside of the classroom and on the schoolyard. Some students related

incidents where school administrators seemed to demonstrate their distrust for the Black students, frequently applying a double standard. One of the students attending a predominantly Latino, urban school explained how he felt that Blacks in his school were often singled out and punished for the same behaviors that other students engage in. Here he explains a lunchtime activity scenario where Black students were treated differently than their Latino peers:

...we had like the radio station come out and play music and then we be dancing and they're like, our, our athletic director went and told on us because of the way we was dancing and then they had two other Mexican radio stations come out there and they was doing what they was doing but they didn't get in trouble for the way they was dancing...They look at us more than they look at anybody else. They see us as the troublemakers.

Another student, attending a predominantly White suburban school, also shared a lunchtime situation that demonstrates the cultural unawareness and bias of the school staff:

I think they also have sort of the same, well oh, I see a bunch of Black people wearing baggy pants, Nikes and some hoodies and so what they do is during lunch where the Black people are at, they will stand literally like 10 feet away and watch them the whole lunch. Literally. No joke...Yeah, I definitely think it's an issue of fear, meaning that their school, they think that their school will go into chaos if they let, you know, these Black youths go crazy at their school.

In both of these instances race is a catalyst for the microaggressions, even at a school that has a large population of students of color. The Black males in this study felt that the teachers and the staff did not value or think highly of the Black population, held negative perceptions of them, or at best did not know how to interpret the behaviors, attitudes, and culture of Black youth.

The parents of the male participants also identified the race-gendered microaggressions in their sons' schooling experiences and how these microaggressions held the opportunity to impact their sons' academic and personal success in school. Jilian, the mother of Darrell, spoke about the same Black teacher her son spoke of earlier, feeling that the teacher's racist perception of her son did not set a positive example:

...if I had to sum her up I would say that she didn't believe in Darrell and so Darrell is extremely sensitive to that. If you don't believe in him, he doesn't do well. Period. And the few things that she said to me indicated that...she was looking at him like this baggy pant, hip-hop kid who didn't wear, as Darrell said, a Polo shirt to school everyday. And, you know, may not have been the most articulate, and so she was like, 'He probably just needs this class to pass!' I mean, that's how she talked, [*makes 'snooty noise'*]. So um, some of the things she did were very shifty and underhanded, but my cousin was just here from California, he's a teacher in San Diego, and he's like, 'No, that's not unusual.' I just thought it was shifty and underhanded and I thought for a role model as a Black teacher, she didn't do Darrell any justice at all. I mean, he was excited because he was getting a Black teacher, but she was just, unfortunately, not a good teacher to have [*laughs*] for any student!

The parent showed a clear disappointment in the teacher's low and racist expectations for her son, which she felt impacted her son's ability to succeed in school. Stereotype threat, theorized by Steele and Aronson's (1995) and extended by others (Aronson et al., 2002; Cohen et al., 2006; Fryer, 2006), contends that students of color "face the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative societal stereotype – a suspicion – about their group's intellectual ability and

competence” (p. 797). They assert that the imposition of stereotypical views of racial intelligence may, in certain situations, impact how students of color fair in school. Plainly stated, if teachers hold the belief that their Black students are somehow less intelligent or less capable of being academically successful, and interact with their students in such a way (i.e. having lower standards for Blacks than for Whites), then in many situations this may impact how Black students are able to perform. As the mother explained, the racist stereotypes of Black male youth embraced by the teacher may have accounted for her lack of belief in the ability of Darrell, ultimately impacting his class performance.

Another middle-class mother named Lynette expressed her extreme frustration with the school as she told the story of how her son Andrew, who attends a suburban, predominantly White school, and maintains a self-reported 3.0 GPA, was treated unfairly by a school counselor:

... he came home and I was so excited because I thought, ‘Great! They’re going to have it all mapped out’...she [counselor] says ‘You know, there’s a lot of 4.0 students, there’s none of that [scholarships] available to you right now. You’re grades aren’t that high, but if you want to think of a community college, if you want to play football, that would be okay for you, but let me get you some brochures.’ And she handed him the technical brochures for technical places. Like automotive school? *[laughs]* And there is nothing wrong with that, if Andrew excelled at it. But to not even say there is a road for you to follow. You need to reach your highest potential or to even offer that opportunity? I heard him talk and I was stunned. And I was livid.

The mother explains that her high achieving son was initially denied information on college opportunities and was instead referred to vocational schools. School counselors in secondary education often intentionally or unintentionally play the role of gatekeeper to their students (Banks, 1978; Erickson, 1975). They are able to both open and close doors on the educational opportunities for students (i.e. tracking, college scholarships, etc.). Black students are often denied these meaningful opportunities, encountering situations where they are tracked out of college preparatory and gifted programs and into remedial, vocational or special education programs (Catsambis, 1994; Council, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Davis, 2003; Grantham, 2004a, 2004b; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Hrabowski III et al., 1998; Meier et al., 1989; Noguera, 2008; Oaks, 1985). Middle-class Black students are no exception to this rule (Oakes, 1995) and often find themselves in non-college track classrooms or, as in the case of Lynette and her son Andrew, denied higher education opportunities by their own school staff.

**Interracial microaggressions: Blacks and Latinos in conflict.** Lynette’s experience with the gate-keeping practices was an example of the struggles these families faced in attempting to experience the full range of opportunity within the school. Though it is sometimes assumed that middle-class families, particularly those sending their children to suburban, predominantly White schools, have equal opportunity to succeed in schools, the mother’s example demonstrated the fight many middle-class parents must engage in to ensure the resources available at a middle-class school are accessible to their children. However, not all middle-class Black families live in predominantly White neighborhoods and send their schools to predominantly White suburban schools. Similar to the families in Pattillo-McCoy’s (1999) study, many middle-class Blacks in Arizona live in neighborhoods that border urban centers. Such was the case with the lower-middle-class participants in the study. These parents sent their sons to neighborhood schools, which were primarily in the nearby working-class, predominantly Latino

neighborhoods. Therefore, many of the racial microaggressions experienced by these Black families were not a result of traditional Black-White racial tensions but were a result of conflicts between the Black and Latino populations.

As is common in many poor and working-class communities there is a constant struggle to control the already limited resources. The cultural, linguistic, and citizenship divisions amongst the local Black and Latino population in this metropolis has spilled into the schools. Stories of Latino nepotism in the school districts, the replacement of Black teachers with Latino teachers, and the perceived overemphasis on Latino cultural issues in the schools has caused many in the Black community to feel as though they are being forgotten (Kossan, 2008; Kossan & Reid, 2006; Reid, 2006, 2008). No doubt these events are interconnected with the Black males' feelings of invisibility in the school. The result of the feelings of Black devaluation in the schools has created the events of Black-on-Brown racial microaggressions. Augmenting the reality of Black and Latino conflict, one Black grandmother who wanted to add her own observations found that her granddaughter's teacher spent more time speaking in Spanish than in English. Though she realized that the teacher was attempting to bridge the gap for the English language learners in the class, she felt the teacher's instruction style to be damaging for her granddaughter, explaining that her granddaughter received an 'A' in Spanish class but received an 'F' in English.

All of the families talked about these unique "Black vs. Brown" microaggressions but it was the lower-middle-class families with sons attending predominantly Latino, working-class schools that were most impacted. These families felt that their son's opportunities for academic success were being limited due to the educational emphasis being placed on the Latino population. A lower-middle-class father sending his son to one of the predominantly Latino, working-class schools discussed his frustration with how the school seemingly accommodated the Latino students at the expense of the other non-Latino students:

I always say, I want my kids to eat off the same plate White kids eat off...you know what I mean? Because it's like in, in inner-city schools, they're not really caring for these kids, man. You know, and for the most part a lot of it is most of these kids are Hispanic and they don't speak English, you know what I mean? And so that's what they pretty much do is basically teach these kids English. As far as educating them, that's two different things...I mean, well, they don't want the other students [non-Hispanics] to get so far away from these kids [Hispanics] that are way behind and that's not fair to a lot of these kids that once they go and take their SATs and get registered for a college and they're not prepared.

Similarly, another mother who is also a grandmother, voiced her concern saying:

...even the grade schools because my two granddaughters go to school here, it is geared toward more Hispanic. Um...that, that SPL [ESL] or something like that where they have, you know, English learning Spanish. It's still, it's geared toward more the Hispanic community...I saw that with my grandkids. Um, they couldn't get into Head Start. Um...I think because um...and I'm not saying all Hispanics, it's mostly geared towards the illegal ones here, or even the ones that do have permission to be here. It's geared towards them...but now the illegals and the ones that, you know, are working under the table who don't have to say that they're working, their kids get into that [Head Start] and they are predominantly

Hispanic and they're Spanish-speaking. So, you know, only one grandchild got into Head Start and it was because she had a disability.

The lower-middle-class parents sending their sons to working-class schools, often explained that they felt the schools were not doing enough for their children. They believed the schools were focusing more on accommodating the linguistic and cultural needs of the Latino population, and in doing so, were neglecting the academic needs of the Black students. In the mother's case, she worried that her grandchildren were being forgotten, that they were being pushed out of educational services that historically had benefited Blacks. In this case, she felt that the influx of Latinos in the area, and particularly "the illegals," who did not have reportable income were unfairly utilizing academic services such as Head Start. This is an interesting take on racial microaggressions because the microaggressions towards these Black families comes as a result of perceived benefits for another cultural group. Surely, educational services that help Latino students achieve better schooling outcomes is desirable, but for the middle-class Black parents sharing geographical spaces and resources with the Latino population, these educational benefits were perceived as coming at the expense of their children's academic success.

Among the students, both middle-class and working-class males in suburban and urban schools talked about the numerous campus fights between Blacks and Latinos. One of the students attending a working-class school spoke of a "race riot" that occurred at his school. When asked about what were the reasons for these fights, the Black males could not identify any particular reason except that the "Mexicans didn't like Blacks." Even in the suburban predominantly White schools the male students talked about not feeling any tension necessarily from their White peers but mainly their Latino peers. One student attending a suburban school tried to explain:

I don't know why but Mexicans just have a problem with the Black people at our school. Like my friend Antwon, he's almost gotten into numerous altercations with Mexicans at our school because it's just, I guess it's just like an ego thing, which race is the best in school or whatever. But recently there was just a Black and Mexican fight about, uh, two weeks before school had ended and like all the Mexicans were going on, 'Yeah, we'll whoop any Black dudes, *dadada*,' and they were just talking a lot of trash and a lot of the Black people we're getting heated and stuff saying, you know, 'What's up with this?' Like, I can't find out really why, why Mexicans would even want to like start problems and stuff like that, but I think, I think Blacks also have a lot to do with it cuz you know a lot of the Blacks in our schools, they like to talk a lot of trash and so I think that definitely motivates the tension in our school.

Despite the peer group racial tensions in the schools, the impact of the Black-on-Brown racial microaggressions seemed more structurally and materially impactful on the lower-middle-class students attending working-class schools. This was due to the feeling of being denied services and opportunities, and feeling like "visitors" at their own schools, particularly noting the disparity in cultural opportunities and organizations between them and the Latino students. For the middle-class males attending suburban schools, though many fights occurred as a result of the Black-Latino tensions, their ability to access equitable resources was not impacted. They did not sense that the schools catered more to the needs of the Latino community, thus their opportunity was never believed to be in danger. Class positioning seemed to have kept the middle-class students attending suburban schools "above the fray" so to speak, not having to address the volatile political environment that existed in the urban schools.

**Responding to racial microaggressions with social and cultural capital.** All of the middle-class parents transmitted various forms of cultural capital through the lessons taught to their sons or through resources they were able to provide. This included lessons on test preparation, the relationship between their high school courses and their future college experiences, as well as access to tutoring. Additionally, the middle-class parents were also able to provide their sons with academic and professional experiences, largely as a result of their own social capital. Jilian, the mother of Darrell talked about an opportunity he had over the summer:

I mean, my brother is one of the vice presidents of a major media company. He runs a radio station down in Atlanta. Um, for him to show Darrell the ins and outs of the stuff on a daily basis while Darrell is there—what more could you ask for? [laughs] That's like so important, you know!

The middle-class parents were able to provide particular opportunities and resources to their sons as a result of their cultural and social capital. The families also activated their social and cultural capital in ways that created moments of inclusion despite the experience of racial microaggressions, racial tensions, or institutional racism. When the middle-class males experienced conflicts within the school, either with teachers, staff or peers, the parents, who were college educated, were generally able to provide advice on how to successfully handle these situations. In many cases the parents were able to provide similar situations they experienced in high school and modeled how they were able to navigate the situation in ways that did not result in failure.

Furthermore, most of the middle-class parents made explicit to their sons how the information and skills they were learning in high school directly related to what they would experience in college. This is important because it put the sons' immediate schooling experience in a larger context, allowing them to weather racial microaggressions knowing that the failure to do so could result in a hindered academic future. The middle-class families in this study, and their ability to conceptualize time and space, to delay immediate gratification for long term success, and recognize racial issues but find ways to circumvent them in ways that are not self-defeating, characterized their ideology and performance. Both middle-class males and their parents were very conscious of the role race played in their schooling experiences and how racism could impact their ability to succeed, but these middle-class families seemed tactical in how they socialized their sons to weather the racial storms. One mother explained this saying:

I think they need to work hard and I tell my children, 'You're going to have to work twice as hard as anybody else out there just because you've got so many things that you're up against. You need to be brighter, you need to be stronger. You need to be more emotionally intelligent. You need to know where your center is because you're always going to be thrown.

Related to their ability to transmit middle-class cultural capital and racial awareness, the middle-class parents also seemed to have significant involvement and influence in the outcomes of their son's schooling experience. So while their sons may have experienced racial microaggressions and discrimination within the school, by means of their cultural and social capital, the parents were able to manipulate the social stratification process of the school. Learning of unfair and racist treatment of their sons, these middle-class parents were able activate their capital and enter into the school, interrupting schooling processes that would have limited the academic and personal success of their son. In essence, these parents were able to create moments of inclusion for their sons.

Lynette's disappointment in the gatekeeping practices at her son's school was previously documented; here she explains how she reconciled the issue, creating a moment of inclusion:

We finally, at the beginning of this year, saw his counselor because they finally got an appointment and we sat down and we talked...and I said, 'I think it's wrong that this child came in your office and got no encouragement. Not that you need to direct my child's life, but can you imagine if there was a goal there and you would have been his only opportunity, that you wouldn't have even opened a door or a window for him. I have a problem with that. And I don't know if it's because he's Black. He comes from everything that you don't want. He is from a single-parent household. His mom is Mexican, his dad is Black. Um, but-but my problem is you didn't even offer the opportunity. You didn't even say-you didn't even have that expectation of him.'

Surely without the mother's persistence and knowledge of school practices (she holds a masters in counseling), her son could have been tracked into a vocational school without being provided any opportunity to gain access to a school of higher education. Jilian described a similar event in which she felt Darrell was the victim of racial discrimination. A teacher had given Darrell a low grade on a paper even though Jilian had worked extensively with Darrell on crafting it (Jilian was a graduate of Tufts University and was a writer for a local paper). The teacher also made some racially insensitive remarks on his paper:

...the teacher gives this paper back with a C or something like that saying 'You are lazy!' Of course, lazy in my mind, Black thing, slavery...[laughs] so immediately I'm on the email. And not disrespectful or anything I said, 'I watched Darrell go through this process. I read his drafts. He did three or four drafts after you wrote your thing,' and I said, 'His paper was almost perfect.' Well, there were a few exchanges going back and forth, and so I finally said, 'I disagree with you. And I'm going to go to administration.' Why did I say that? Because all of a sudden, he's like, fuming, and he goes, 'It was disrespectful of me to go and talk to administration' when that's the policy of the school...the principal knew who Darrell was, and he had met me and so he knew who I was, he knew who Darrell was, and he said, the first thing out of his mouth was that, 'I understand...we've had problems with this teacher.' And I was like, 'Huh!' So anyway, they had to work out their thing. Darrell ended up getting a C in his course because they couldn't change his grade, but they ended up letting the teacher go after the first year.

In both of these instances, the social and cultural capital of the parents directly impacted the ability for their sons to traverse the microaggressions of race in the school and manipulate the structural processes of schooling that often stratify Black men out of the opportunity structure. In response to the racial microaggressions in school, these parents were able to draw from and enact particular cultural capital in particular situations to create moments of social inclusions, resisting the effects of school racism.

### Conclusion

The research literature on Black middle-class male schooling experiences is currently limited in its scope. This study hopefully marks the beginning of future work on this understudied population. The educational and cultural experiences of these young men were

varied and very much influenced by the type of school they attended (predominantly White suburban vs. predominantly Latino urban). Still, it was evident that race played a significant role in how they experienced school.

The Black males participating in this study felt invisible to many of their schoolteachers and administrators, and were treated differently when they were acknowledged. The young men and their families also expressed the feeling of being undervalued or less important than their Latino peers. The feeling of not having the same academic and cultural opportunities as their Latino counterparts often resulted in increased tensions between Black and Latinos within the school. The interracial microaggressions experienced within the school demonstrates the endemicity of race in society as racially oppressed groups, in the struggle for power and representation, often internalize and appropriate the racist ideology and subordinative techniques historically imposed upon them by Whites. This study as well as others (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Tatum, 1987) also demonstrates that middle-class standing in and of itself does not shield people of color from racist encounters. However, the access to and activation of middle-class social and cultural capital enabled many of the middle-class families in this study to avert some of the negative outcomes racism often creates for people of color.

Along with illuminating some of the experiences of Black male middle-class students in Arizona secondary schools, the results of this study should stimulate further research that delves into the educational experiences of Black middle-class male students and their families. Future research may include an analysis of Black middle-class male students in different schooling contexts (i.e. predominantly White schools, predominantly Black schools, racially diverse schools, non-Arizona schools, charter, and private schools). Future studies should also attempt to include the interpretive narratives of schoolteachers and staff on the educational experiences of Black middle-class male students. The voices of school staff would greatly enrich the discussion by providing an interpretation of Black middle-class male schooling from an institutional perspective. The coalescing of student, parent, and school staff voices not only preserves the dialogic nature of interpretive research but also allows readers to hear different perspectives of experiential events.

Particular to Arizona schools, a study that focuses on the Latino perspective on Black and Latino conflicts, along with a documentation of Latino schooling experiences in Arizona schools would provide balance to the discussion on interracial microaggressions. Lastly, empirical work should examine how people of color internalize racism in ways that lead to compensatory subordination (Ehrenreich, 2002), which is the compensation for subordination by subordinating others (e.g. because I'm oppressed as a Black person, I oppress another racial minority I believe is subordinate to me). Research could explore how compensatory subordination is manifested through racial microaggressions such as those experienced by the Black middle-class families in this study.

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<sup>i</sup> One of the parents did not wish to be included in the study accounting for the difference in student and parent participants.

<sup>ii</sup> All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants