ABSTRACT

RIEL, VIRGINIA P. "I Don't Go by White, Black, and Stuff like that…I Don't See a Race. I See it's all Equal:" Racial Microinsults and Microinvalidations in a Rural High School. (Under the direction of Dr. Martha Crowley.)

Scholars have long noted that racial stratification exists within schools, and racial microaggressions have gained increasing attention in recent years. However, researchers disproportionately focus on college context and largely ignore the experiences of Black, White, and Mixed-race students in rural schools. In addition, scholars' construction of rural locales as White spaces undermines racial heterogeneity in rural contexts and the significance of race in rural schools. To fill this gap, I utilize in-depth interviews with twenty-six students—twelve Black students, ten White students, and four Mixed-race students attending the same predominantly Black rural high school—to examine their experiences with and interpretations of racial microaggressions. I find evidence of racial microinsults (verbal assaults to students' belonging, ability, and innocence—often rooted in racial stereotypes) and microinvalidations (negations of marginalized racial groups' lived experiences—often through racial ideologies of meritocracy and colorblindness). In particular, Black and Mixed-race students interpreted racial microinsults using microinvalidations, minimizing the salience of race and asserting meritocratic ideology. White students both elucidated the prevalence of racial microinsults and espoused them. These findings underscore the value of incorporating White students' interpretations of racial microaggressions in school, and they suggest the power of meritocracy and colorblindness to mask mistreatment of Black and Mixed-race students, even from these students' own views. The findings convey enduring implications of rural-school-based racial microaggressions in the ostensibly "postracial" era.

"I Don't Go by White, Black, and Stuff like that…I Don't See a Race. I See it's all Equal:"
Racial Microinsults and Microinvalidations in a Rural High School

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1993, Virginia Riel is a lifelong North Carolinian with intellectual interest in educational stratification, school choice, and perception of school experiences and opportunity among students. She attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and American Studies in 2015, with highest honors and highest distinction. Virginia began graduate school at North Carolina State University in the fall of 2015. She plans to continue her graduate coursework in the Ph.D. program and pursue a career in higher education following graduation.

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Introduction

Despite the long-held and coveted promise that schools promote opportunity, they tend to stratify students by race. Racial stratification in schools historically limits the opportunities available to African Americans (Tieken 2014; Williams 2005). Moreover, Black students continue to receive unequal treatment and experience racial microaggressions across educational contexts, especially through academic tracking and disciplinary control (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2005; Tyson 2011). While not always labeled as *racial microaggressions*, incidents documented in the literature illuminate their content: racial microaggressions question Black students' intelligence, assume their criminality, and pathologize their cultural values and communication styles, as well as nullify these incidents (Sue 2010a).

But inquiry about racial microaggressions in school has been too narrow in its scope. We know far more about racial microaggressions in college context. Inquiry about high school students focuses too narrowly on predominantly White educational institutions and urban or suburban locales. It also neglects the perspectives of Mixed-race students. While studies analyze racialized incidents and treatment in school, with academic and disciplinary consequences, they fail to consider the potential of students' own racial ideologies to mask the effects of assaults to Black students' belonging, intelligence, and criminality.

This study fills the gap through interview-based investigation of racial microaggressions among White, Black, and Mixed-race high school students in rural, predominantly Black context. Filling the gap matters because we know little about racial microaggressions in rural school context. We know even less about how students interpret or react to these incidents in school.

Though documenting racial stratification in school, prior qualitative studies lack consensus about students' awareness and interpretation of differential treatment by race (Lewis-McCoy 2014:97; MacLeod 2009:224; Morris 2011:27). Paired with Americans' enduring support of meritocracy, or the notion that outcomes merely depend on "hard work," the prevalence of colorblindness raises questions about how students interpret racialized incidents in school (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Gallagher 2015). These questions are complicated by the ways that schools conceal racial microaggressions occurring within them, especially in the case of oft-neglected rural locales.

This study examines students' experiences with and interpretations of racial microaggressions in a rural Southern high school. It reveals that Black and Mixed-race students experience and encounter racial microinsults in school while supporting ideologies of colorblindness and meritocracy. White students espouse microinsults and serve as informants to racialized processes when information gaps exist. In their interpretations of treatment in school, Black and Mixed-Race students deny the significance of race in their schooling experiences *and* resist negative depictions of themselves, thereby conveying resilience—albeit also normalizing their treatment in school. First, I distinguish racial microinsults from microinvalidations. Next, I review literature on racial microaggressions in school, calling attention to students' resilience in the face of deprived opportunity. I also pinpoint a gap in the literature wherein rural areas are neglected or homogenized and how my analysis of Black, White, and Mixed-Race students' accounts in a rural school fills that gap. The findings that follow elucidate how colorblind and meritocratic ideology—defined as microinvalidations—mask racial microinsults within school.

Microinsults and Microinvalidations

Racial microaggressions encompass both microinsults and microinvalidations. The origins of racial microaggressions trace back to Chester Pierce (1970, 1974, 1995), who conceived of them as subtle racialized incidents that marginalized individuals must actively combat in order to protect against their cumulative impacts. Building on this definition, Derald Wing Sue (2010a) breaks down racial microaggressions into a taxonomy of common themes, identifying microinsults and microinvalidations as two forms of racial microaggressions.

Microinsults communicate demeaning messages to racial minorities, while microinvalidations undermine these experiences. Racial microinsults against African Americans include *ascription of intelligence* (stereotypes undermining Black intelligence)*, second-class citizen* (treatment as inferior), *pathologizing cultural values* (devaluation of expression, dress, and behavior linked to Blackness), and *assumption of criminality* (presumed criminal status for Black individuals). Microinvalidations nullify the lived experiences of Black individuals, including microinsults, often by denying that race shapes their experiences (Sue 2010a:29). Microinvalidations include *alien in own land* (treatment as outsider), *color-blindness* (denunciation of racial significance)*, myth of meritocracy* (espousal of hard work as ultimate predictor for outcomes), and *denial of individual racism* (denunciation of individual responsibility for racial disparities).

While Sue's (2010a) classification system informs inquiry about microaggressions, more research needs to explore how racial microinsults and microinvalidations work together and to examine how these incidents compares across the informants of racial microaggressions. Whether perpetrators, targets, or witnesses of microaggressions, students may not recognize

microinsults as rooted in race. Embedded in the microaggression taxonomy, evocation of colorblindness and meritocracy can be considered microinvalidations (Sue 2010a). Given the achievement ideology that plays out in U.S. schools, Black students have shown to focus on individual hard work as the ultimate predictor of school outcomes and treatment, regardless of a student's race (MacLeod 2009; Tyson 2011). These same ideological processes may be at work for rural students as well.

Colorblind and merit-based achievement ideologies pervade the 'post-racial America' rhetoric that amplified following Obama's election. For many Americans, his election signaled as reinforcement of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2015; Gallagher 2003) and meritocracy (McNamee and Miller 2014:95), as legitimating and mutually reinforcing ideologies. Sixty percent of all Americans believe in equal opportunity to get ahead, regardless of race (Gallagher 2015:47). The shift to colorblind ideology subverts social justice aims through charges of "reverse" racism among whites (Bonilla-Silva 2014:7; Omi and Winant 2015:262). Though considered a manifestation of colorblind ideology, insisting race does not matter (Bonilla-Silva 2014), charges of "reverse" racism take colorblindness a step further: Whites who think discrimination against their own racial group is more prevalent than for people of color express disdain for the mere recognition of race. In this formulation, mention of race equates with racism, and Whites claim to be the truly disadvantaged group. Articulating the tension between racial groups when one feels that another threatens their position, Blumer's (1958) group threat theory helps to understand this sentiment.

Colorblindness and meritocracy work together ideologically (Bonilla-Silva 2015; Sue 2010a). As a corollary to meritocratic achievement ideology that assumes hard work derives

from individuals and success naturally follows it, colorblindness reflects similarly rugged individualism (Wilson 2009:43, see also Morris 2011; Royster 2003). Asserting the prevalence of colorblind ideology among Whites, Bonilla-Silva (2014) posits four frames of colorblindness, including *abstract liberalism*, *cultural racism*, *minimization of racism*, and *naturalization of racism*. *Abstract liberalism* asserts an equal opportunity rhetoric akin to meritocracy; *cultural racism* replaces biological racism with assertions of cultural inferiority towards marginalized racial groups; *minimization of racism* undermines the centrality of race, and *naturalization of racism* suggests a homophilic argument about racial groups' supposedly innate inclinations to dwell, marry, and socialize together (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Bonilla-Silva (2004:942) suggests that, over time, colorblind views will increase in salience among all racial groups and that Blacks can exhibit colorblindness through naturalization and cultural attribution of racial disparities (Bonilla-Silva 2014:205-208). This stimulates questions about Black and Mixed-race students' views of racial microaggressions in school and how they interpret them.

Meritocracy and colorblindness are central to dominant ideology, and thus racially marginalized individuals can adhere to colorblindness and meritocracy as well. There is consensus that meritocratic and colorblind ideologies have become part of modern societal consciousness (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011; Gallagher 2015; Manning, Hartmann, and Gerteis 2015; McNamee and Miller 2014). Although Sue (2010a:32) locates colorblindness and meritocracy among Whites, Black individuals also espouse colorblindness (Hayes 2013; Lewis-McCoy 2014; Manning, Hartmann, and Gerteis 2015; Morris 2011; Neville, Coleman, Falconer, and Holmes 2005; Yull 2014) *and* support meritocracy (Lewis and Diamond 2015; MacLeod 2009). But Blacks' minimizing racism has shown to legitimate inequality (Perkins and Cross, Jr.

2014) and to justify hierarchy among social groups, attribute injustice to individual choices, and internalize racist messages among African Americans (Neville et al. 2005). These findings raise questions about students' interpretations of racial microinsults in school.

Racial Microaggressions in Educational Settings

Sue's (2010a) taxonomy provides the framework to explore students' experiences with and interpretations of racial microaggressions in educational context. Defining microaggressions as "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages," Sue (2010b:3) situates the taxonomy of racially microaggressive behavior in the context of both traditionally overt forms of racial discrimination and covert racism. Emphasis on covert racism coincides with emphasis on colorblindness and discourse about "post-racial" America since (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2015; Gallagher 2003; Sue, Nadal, Capodilupo, Lin, Torino, and Rivera 2008).

Scholars frame racial microaggressions as characteristic of subtle racial discrimination with more detrimental consequences than old-fashioned, overt racism for those affected. Racial microaggressions produce distress and frustration (Rollock 2012; Sue et al. 2009), anxiety and exhaustion (Sue et al. 2009:187) and self-esteem deficits (Nadal et al. 2014; Seaton 2010). While some studies utilize quantitative methods (Nadal et al. 2014) or mixed-methods (Torres, Driscoll, and Burrow 2010) to study racial microaggressions, most studies in educational settings utilize qualitative methods, illuminating occurrences of and possible ways to ameliorate racial microaggressions in schools (Carter 2008a; Gomez, Khurshid, Freitag, and Lachuk 2011; McCabe 2009; Rollock 2012; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000).

Racial Microaggressions: in the Classroom and Beyond

<u>College Context</u>

Analyses of racial microaggressions in school disproportionately focus on college students. While some scholars examine Black graduate students' experiences with treatment as second-class citizens, assumptions about their criminality, and underestimations of ability (Torres et al. 2010; Harris, Haywood, Ivery, and Shuck 2015), most research examines Black undergraduates' experiences in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Framing their analysis through the meritocracy-promoting values that often eclipse discussion about racial discrimination in school, Watkins et al. (2010:33) note that Black undergraduates report feeling stereotypes as unintelligent, loud or 'ghetto,' and angry or criminal. These themes mirror Sue's (2010a) themes *ascription of intelligence*, *pathologizing cultural values*, and *assumption of criminality*.

Literature about college-specific racial microaggressions reveals how they pervade campuses, classrooms, and social spaces. Focus group interview data with Black college students at three predominantly White research universities suggests that racial microaggressions operate within multiple settings on campuses, including classrooms, libraries, academic departments, and student unions (Solorzano et al. 2000). Black students at PWIs express feeling invisible, unintelligent, and excluded from class group work (Solorzano et al. 2000:65-67). This directly affects academic performance, with students reporting they had to drop classes, change majors, or exit the university on account of racial microaggressions (Solorzano et al. 2000:69).

Racial microaggressions are not exclusive to predominantly White colleges. Among students living in the urban Northeast and attending a minority-serving institution, Nadal et al.

(2014:471) find that Black undergraduates experienced more microaggressions related to *second-class citizen*, *assumption of criminality*, and *assumptions of inferiority* compared to their White, Asian, and Latino counterparts. Experiencing racial microaggressions in predominantly minority college context corresponds with lower self-esteem for Black students, particularly when students report being treated like second-class citizens and criminals (Nadal et al. 2014:468). However, little is known about how Mixed-race students experience racial microaggressions, and inquiry about racial microaggressions neglects students' experiences in rural high school context.

High School Context

Racial microaggressions carry unique implications for Black and Mixed-race high school students, whose dealing with those experiences affects their stress, self-esteem, and psyches. These effects are multiply detrimental for high school students due to the more confining and less independent nature of secondary education. The energy required to determine whether incidents are intentionally racist and how to react to the more subtle nature of microaggressions has draining effects on students (Seaton 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008:329). Unlike college students, high school students cannot as easily drop classes or take them online. Black high school students in predominantly White high schools face similar challenges to those in predominantly White colleges, including extremes of invisibility and hyper-visibility (Andrews 2012). Black high school students also experience microaggressive themes of *second-class citizen* and *ascription of intelligence* in racially diverse suburban school context (Allen 2013). However, literature about racial microaggressions in high schools focuses too narrowly on predominantly White educational institutions and urban or suburban locales. This lack of attention to high schools with more diverse populations, especially in rural locales, precludes

understanding of racialized incidents and interpretations of such incidents in those school contexts.

Studies that attend to racial processes affecting younger populations of students glean insight about racial microaggressions as well, even though they do not always label incidents as microaggressions. Scholars examine stereotypes about Black students' academic ability (Tyson 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005) and disciplinary processes that rest on racialized assumptions of criminality (Ferguson 2001; Lewis and Diamond 2015). They also examine Black students' cultural 'fit' and schools' tendency to prefer white middle class norms of dressing and acting 'appropriately' (Morris 2005; Tyson 2003).

While these dynamics within schools are not framed as racial microaggressions, they can be mapped onto the themes *ascription of intelligence*, *assumption of criminality,* and *pathologizing cultural values* (Sue 2010a). Stratifying students by race between classrooms, tracking perpetuates racial stereotypes about ability (Tyson et al. 2005). This promotes racial microinsults that ascribe *intelligence*. Tracking racially divide students within schools, thereby limiting educational opportunities as well as opportunity for interracial interaction and friendship (Tyson 2011:157). This contributes to perceptions of *cultural* differences between racial groups. In addition to differential placement into tracks, students are selected and processed for discipline differently by race (Lewis and Diamond 2015). This promotes assumptions about Black students' *criminality*, as school personnel consider Black students' criminality from a young age (Ferguson 2001) and treat Black boys as criminals in need of control (Rios 2011). White parents also influence discipline by constructing White students as 'good kids' when they interact with administrators (Lewis and Diamond 2015). In Morris' (2005:43) study in a

predominantly minority urban middle school, a Black male student suggests that his school's uniforms and disciplinary control created a prison-like atmosphere. These prior studies elucidate the assumptions that Black students face about their intelligence, criminality, and cultural values.

Resilience: How Students React to Racialized Treatment in School

Equally striking as the array of Black students' experiences with racial microaggressions in schools is their resiliency. Despite encounters with discrimination in school, Black students exhibit resilience by valuing of education (Carter 2008a:12; Lewis and Diamond 2015:29). There is little consensus about students' awareness of racial discrimination. However, recent studies in suburban and urban settings suggest that they are aware of racialized mistreatment (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2005). Yet Black students downplay racial discrimination in regards to urban (MacLeod 2009:224; Morris 2011:27) and rural school experiences (Yull 2014).

Students may try to ignore racial discrimination, but research shows that socialization to racial discrimination mitigates the effects of racial microaggressions in school for students. Family and community education about racism and pride in culture promote self-esteem for Black youth (Smith 2009:305, see also Bynum, Burton, and Best 2007; Scott 2003). While internalization of colorblind ideology can be antithetical to protective racial socialization (Barr and Neville 2014:160), awareness of racial barriers plays an important protective function (Brown 2008:58). Examining racial discrimination's influence on Black adolescents in rural context, Berkel, Murry, Hurt, Chen, Brody, Simons, Cutrona, and Gibbons (2008) find that racial socialization buffers against the negative impacts of discrimination. Colorblindness may cushion against microaggressions temporarily, but awareness of racism serves a protective function.

The experience of racial microaggressions carries implications for students' learning opportunities within school as well. When school personnel and peers treat African American students as intellectually inferior, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy about racially stratified academic ability (Brint 1998; Flores 2007; Tyson 2011). When treated as criminal, African American students are denied opportunities to learn as a result of expulsions and suspensions (Ferguson 2001; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Morris 2005; Skiba et al. 2014). Despite these persistent messages received from schools about how they are perceived, Black students often express optimism about opportunity, conveying high aspirations and positive attitudes toward school (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Harris 2011; Tyson 2011). This suggests that some Black students might cope with microinsults by focusing on their individual aspirations.

But focusing on the self does not detract from the differential treatment structured in schools, just as denunciation of individual responsibility for racial disparities does not alter categorical inequality. Colorblindness may foster optimism and encourage determination in academic achievement among racially marginalized students, but it also individualizes blame. In MacLeod's (2009) seminal work *Ain't No Makin' It*, the young Black men comprising the Brothers minimized racism and supported achievement ideology in their urban school context, which sustained optimism about their academic and occupational outcomes. However, their tendency to downplay racial discrimination and support the achievement ideology caused them to blame themselves later without wholly taking factors such as school treatment into account (MacLeod 2009:224). Lower-track black students in Tyson's (2011:140) study also attributed their academic placements to their individual shortcomings. Thus, the allure of individual opportunity sustains morale and discourages collective action while maintaining a façade of

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neutrality (Parkin 1971). Resulting self-blame reflects a potential consequence of racial microaggressions for Black and Mixed-race students targeted in rural school context.

Perspective and Place

Scholars prioritize historical significance of racial microaggressions over spatial considerations, confining much inquiry to college settings and urban or suburban locales. Despite interest in rural America's emerging forms of racial diversity (Lichter 2012) and historical emphasis on the Black Belt (Kluger 2011), analyses of racial dynamics—particularly microaggressions in school—tend to focus on urban or suburban locales and college settings more than secondary schools. Rural educational context receives far less attention at every level of schooling. Studies that attend to rural areas focus on those that are predominantly White (Morris 2011; Yull 2014). Rural predominantly Black spaces differ because, though sharing qualities of rural locales, they also allow for more salient racial identity formation (Yull 2014).

Predominantly Black rural high schools have been particularly under-explored. Findings about perceptions of race in school have disproportionately targeted urban locales (Carter 2008b; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, and Sriken 2014; Watkins, LaBarrie, and Appio 2010) and suburban areas (Allen 2013; Chapman 2014; Lewis-McCoy 2014; Lewis 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015). Though oft-neglected and generalized as monolithically White, rural America contains racially diverse populations, particularly in the South (Tieken 2014:7). About ninety percent of African Americans living in nonmetropolitan America reside in the South (Brown and Shafft 2011:125; Harris and Worthen 2010:32). Critiquing the preoccupation with urban areas in discourse about inequality, Burton, Lichter, Baker, and Eason (2013:1134-1141) note the

existence and stigma of 'rural ghettos' and enduring segregation between Blacks and Whites in rural areas. But these inquiries neglect rural schools with more diverse student populations.

Although rural areas have often been neglected in racial microaggressions literature, various scholars have worked to emphasize their existence and their diversity, as well as the implications of racial stratification for rural communities. As Tieken (2014:140) argues, schools are central to rural communities, facilitating social interaction outside of the home and structuring interracial contact in rural communities. While schools shape social interaction, they also denote social boundaries within rural communities (Tieken 2014:7). Even more central to rural areas than in other contexts due to their facilitating interracial contact, rural schools establish boundaries in non-school settings (Brown and Schafft 2011:62). Thus, rural areas are relevant for understanding educational processes that divide and demean students by race.

While scholars note that place is important for understanding experience with and perception of racial discrimination, they often overlook rural areas in analyses of educational inequality (for an exception, see Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Crowley 2006). Moreover, comparisons between rural, urban, and suburban spaces vary across studies. Compared to Black individuals who espoused colorblindness in rural areas, those in predominantly Black urban areas convey frankness about their experience with racism in school (Yull 2014:7). However, other studies show that some Black students in urban and suburban schools also downplay racial discrimination (Lewis-McCoy 2014:97; MacLeod 2009:224; Morris 2011:27). The prevalence of colorblindness in rural areas in particular is attributable to a sense of community based on shared sentiments and communal norms (Tieken 2014:26). While communal norms may

reinforce colorblindness in rural areas, it is unclear how colorblind ideology operates in rural

contexts with large proportions of Black residents.

Yull (2014) examines Black individuals' interpretations of racialized incidents in school

between rural and urban spaces. Finding colorblindness among rural respondents and frank

assertions of racism in school among urban ones, Yull (2014) attributes colorblindness in the

rural school to the rural community's relatively small Black population. That is, she attributes

Black respondents' colorblindness to their racial isolation in rural areas, arguing that it inhibits

crystallization of a communal Black identity or a strong racial consciousness (Yull 2014:9),

which other research suggests protects youth from the negative consequences of racism (Brown

2008). While Yull's (2014) assertion that location matters expands educational literature to rural

locales, we continue to lack information on schools in rural areas with more diverse populations

that contain larger shares of African Americans.

Rural students' academic outlooks are particularly susceptible to alteration based on

treatment and expectations; thus, there is a need to garner perspectives of racially diverse rural

students. Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012:360) highlight the importance of teachers'

expectations for rural high school students' own educational aspirations. They emphasize the

unique aspects of rural life that affect schools and communities, such as geographic isolation and

limited employment opportunity. Therefore, we need to examine processes through which

schooling impacts the futures of racially and ethnically diverse rural youth (Byun et al.

2012:375; Forman 2004:58), as their geographic isolation conceals generations of racial

segregation and suppression (Burton et al. 2013:1132). This thesis fills the gap in rural,

predominantly Black school context.

The Current Study

Several questions guide the study: (1) What forms do racial microaggressions take in the rural high school being studied? (2) How do students make sense of their racialized experiences? (3) How do students interpret or justify racial microaggressions when they occur? (4) What are the implications of espousing colorblind ideology for Black and Mixed-race students? To explore these questions from students' perspectives, in terms of their experiences *and* interpretations of racial microaggressions, I utilize in-depth interviewing.

Data and Methodology

I conducted twenty-six semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with students attending a predominantly Black rural high school, garnering insight about a formative period for their life trajectories. I also briefly observed English and Science classrooms in addition to other learning spaces, specifically the library and HOPE, which I discuss below. This qualitative approach reveals both the processes within schools that structure students by race, and students' responses to their arrangements and treatment in school. While observational data glean insight about how racial microaggressions occur, interviews allow students to reflect on what they experienced and express how they interpret those experiences. I rely heavily on the interview data for this project, an approach limited by the empirically shown disparity in what people say and do (Pager and Quillian 2005). During interviews, I asked students about their interactions in school with teachers and students as well as their view of race relations and racial diversity in school. I also asked students to elaborate on their experiences more generally, and I probed about whether students' encountered or witnessed racialized incidents in school and how they interpreted them.

Some scholars suggest that Black students' encounters with racial microaggressions are exacerbated in predominantly White institutions (Evans and Moore 2015). Thus, educational contexts with increasing numbers of Black students are regarded as *safer* spaces for Black students because they allow for Black students to be considered high achievers (Tyson 2011), as well as for them to create their own self-definitions (Collins 2008). Yet inquiry about racial microaggressions neglects these contexts at the high school level and in rural context. Thus, I elicit the students' perspectives in a predominantly Black high school situated in the rural South.

Recruiting Participants and Collecting Data

My data collection in one rural high school—Northwood—involved entering classrooms to recruit students, returning to the classrooms on designated days to select students to interview, informing students about the consent process, and interviewing students individually. After arriving at Northwood and checking in at the front office to obtain a designated pass, I entered various classrooms, the library, and HOPE. While the library provides a space for students to take independent study or online classes through the school, community college, or university, HOPE internally houses the students sanctioned to in-school suspension, students with behavioral problems, and students who have trouble focusing in a typical classroom.

Within the various classrooms, I introduced myself to students and invited students to take part in my study by taking a parental consent form to be signed by a parent or guardian. I verbally noted that their names would not be connected with any information they were willing to share, as pseudonyms replace their actual names. When I returned to the classrooms on designated days, I selected students to interview among those with signed consent forms, garnering as much diversity as possible. Prior to the interviews, I informed students about the

study and consent process and emphasized that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

I also obtained their signatures on minor assent forms. Before proceeding with the interviews, I asked students for permission to record them. I interviewed students individually in a vacant office or computer lab for thirty to forty-five minutes, in order to ensure a quiet setting for the interview. Interview questions were open-ended with similar or identical wording. I transcribed the interviews in order to be closer to the data (Bryman 2001).

Sample Characteristics

The school and participants are both purposively sampled. The county in which the high school is situated has an African American population that exceeds the percentage of African Americans in the state and more than doubles national percentages. Interview-based studies rely on the researcher's ability to be knowledgeable and familiar with the setting (Bryman 2001). More than twenty-five miles from an urbanized area and more than ten miles from an urban cluster (Brown and Schafft 2011:62), Northwood is a *remote rural* locale. Thus, the sampled school a) has a substantial Black population to allow for comparison to studies in predominantly White settings and b) is rural to allow for comparison to studies in urban and suburban locales.

This study utilizes purposive sampling as the method of selecting students to interview, and I chose students due to their race and track position. The participants are male and female students who racially identify as Black, White, or Mixed-race from varied academic tracks. Tables 1 and 2 display the breakdown of student respondents by race, gender, and academic plan and pathway. Table 2 shows students' variation in educational pathways and occupational goals.

I actively sought out the perspectives of students with varied tracks, pathways, and plans (Morris 2011:180). I sampled students from HOPE, the library, a standard Physical Science

class, and an honors English class. According to the guidelines of utilizing purposive sampling, informants should be knowledgeable about the situation being studied, willing to share their experiences, and representative of a range of perspectives (Schutt 2011:157). I fulfilled these prerequisites by sampling students who could speak about their experiences due to their current positions as rural students, asking if students were comfortable prior to the interviews and throughout their duration, and sampling racially and academically diverse students.

Table 1. Northwood High School Interview Respondents by Race and Gender

Black Female Students	7
Black Male Students	6
Black Students Total	**13**
Mixed-Race Female Students	1
Mixed-Race Male Students	2
Mixed-Race Students Total	**3**
White Female Students	5
White Male Students	5
White Students Total	**10**
Students Interviewed Total	**26**

Table 2. Interview Respondents' Characteristics, Listed Individually

Student Name (Pseudonym)	Race/Gender	Academic Pathway/Plan
Claire	Black female	College – honors track – aspired lawyer
Sam	Mixed-race male	Career – some honors courses – aspired military
Delilah	White female	College – standard track
Amanda	Black female	Community college (CC) and career – aspired OB-GYN
Tracey	White female	CC and plans to transfer to four year college (FY) – aspired nurse
Alexis	Black female	College – honors track
Trey	White male	College – honors track – aspired to enter medical field
Emily	Black female	College – some honors
Peter	White male	College – some honors – agricultural focus
Mary	White female	College – honors track –aspired nurse
Tara	Black female	College – some honors – aspired pediatrician
Josh	Black male	College, art institute – standard track – aspired fashion store owner
Tim	White male	CC and plans to transfer to FY– standard track– aspired military
Zoe	White female	CC and plans to transfer to FY for Psychology – some honors
Dylan	Black male	College – non-clarified track
Cody	Black male	College – honors track – aspired civil engineer
Edward	White male	College – some honors – aspired artist
Matt	Mixed-race male	College – some honors – aspired plastic surgeon
Brittany	Black female	Career – standard track – aspired military
Frederick	Black male	College/career – standard track – aspired tattoo artist
Todd	Black male	College – standard track – aspired choreographer
Carrie	White female	College – honors track – aspired physical therapist
Gerald	Black male	Career – standard track – aspired barber
Allie	Mixed-race female	Career – standard track – aspired cosmetologist
Jocelyn	Black female	College – standard track – aspired nurse
David	White male	CC and plans to transfer to FY college – standard track – aspired farmer or construction worker

* Interviewees appear in the order by which they were interviewed.

Data Analysis

I employed focused coding for analysis according to themes in the literature. I used Sue's (2010) racial microinsult and microinvalidation themes, Bonilla-Silva's (2014) color-blind racism frames, and Blumer's (1958) group threat theory, or racial backlash more generally, as well as teacher interaction, student interaction, classroom structure, racial diversity across classrooms, sports, and events, and resilience. This coding approach allows for constant comparison between themes (Charmaz 2001), and racial ideology frames assisted in the analysis of interview transcripts. Coding of microinsults, like *ascription of intelligence*, overlapped with microinvalidations, like *myth of meritocracy*. I coded resilience in coordination with teachers' expectations, which also coincided in the data. I utilized focused coding in Microsoft Word, coding line-by-line and copying and pasting excerpts by theme for analysis.

Garnering the perspectives of Black, White, and Mixed-race students through interviews reveals the types of racial microaggressions occurring in the school. The study examines microinsults and interpretations of racialized experiences across groups of students. In doing so, the study uncovers variation among students based on the intersection of race and discussions of microaggressions. These include Black and Mixed-race students who encounter racial microinsults, Black and Mixed-race students who do not perceive racial microinsults as central to their school experiences, Black and Mixed-race students who utilize racial microinvalidations to interpret their experiences, White students who call attention to racial microaggression as witnesses to their prevalence, and White students who espouse them while being interviewed. The thesis illuminates the processes underlying the use and interpretations of microaggression that help reproduce racial inequalities in a rural, predominantly Black high school.

Limitations

      This project expands on quantitative work and other qualitative inquiry by eliciting processes by which race shapes interactions in school and interpretations of racialized incidents in particular. However, it is limited in its scope, as this project trades breadth for depth. Focus on one school allows for a honed analysis of processes relating to that school as well as comparisons within the school. The project may also be limited by my own positionality as a White, college-educated female. Although I aimed to be reflexive in data collection and analysis, working to make participants feel comfortable with the setting and interviewer, the students may have framed their responses to questions in terms of saying the "right things."

      The goal of this project lies in examining racial microaggressions in rural school context. Even if this research cannot be generalized to larger populations, as it focuses specifically on rural context, *analytic generalizations* of qualitative research provide meaning to social processes through in-depth analysis of sociological phenomena (Stone 2007:248). Central to this type of generalizability is obtaining a diverse sample with enough variation among the dimensions of this project, especially race and academic pathway, and my sampling procedure discussed above fulfills this criterion (Stone 2007:248). Furthermore, emphasis on rural context provides an often-neglected perspective to the literature on racial stratification in schools.

      Broader challenges accompany this research project as well. For example, obtaining consent from teachers to release students from class for interviews posed challenges, as juniors and seniors were involved in testing, future planning in the guidance office, and college trips. The time needed for students to obtain parental consent often required returning to the school on multiple occasions to complete interviews. Based on previous research, I avoided the potential

dilemma of school personnel trying to select students to be interviewed, as implicated by other work (Tyson 2011), since my goal was to attain a purposive sample (Schutt 2011:157). I tackled these limitations by acquiring a purposive sample by race and track—two general strata.

While this study contains limitations with regard to generalizability and positionality, as well as broader challenges associated with school research, it contributes to the existent literature through analysis of racial microaggressions in a *rural* school with a substantial black population.

Findings

Racial microinvalidations collide with microinsults in rural educational context. Black and Mixed-race students' espousal of microinvalidations often, though not always, followed experiencing microinsults. Below, I discuss microinsults and then examine microinvalidations in Northwood, noting the contribution of White informants to describing racial microaggressions involving Black students, a neglected area of race in schools (for an exception, see Lewis and Diamond 2015). Next, I elaborate on the collision of microinsults and microinvalidations in rural school context and what this means for students. Lastly, I discuss students' resilience and the resulting implications in light of expressed racial microaggressions.

Microinsults: Verbal Assaults to Students' Belonging, Ability, and Innocence

Students conveyed microinsults that map onto Sue's (2010a) taxonomy. For example, Tracey—a White female student—*pathologized* her Black classmates' communication styles.

> I ain't trying to be racist, but the Black people, they're very outbursting. They don't like to *keep their mouth shut* and you can't hardly learn whenever they're constantly talking and yelling, and they have *loud voices*.

Earlier in the interview when discussing the same science course, the student described her classmates as "horrible" and claimed that they "weren't raised right." This demeaning language compares similarly to that of a White male student, David, who evoked this microinsult:

> Well I get along with pretty much everybody, but some people are just, you know [laughs], *like the ones that haven't been raised right, mostly Blacks*.

Following this statement, David also referred to Black students as "retarded," which maps onto the microinsult theme *ascription of intelligence* (Sue 2010a). This coincides with Bonilla-Silva's (2014) colorblind frame *cultural racism* as well. Similarly to pathologizing cultural values or communication styles, associating Black students with inferior intelligence traces back to legitimating ideologies of slavery and segregation, whereby intellectual activity was reserved for Whites and often only the elite (Tieken 2014; Williams 2005).

Pathologizing communication styles rests on stereotypes and spans from classrooms to cafeterias. Also referred to as the confrontational White frame, Whites utilize stereotypes to aid stereotypical views about racialized Others (Wingfield, Harvey, and Feagin 2012:145). Framing Blacks as loud builds on racial stereotypes and works to elevate Whiteness (Morris 2007). This stereotype even extends to disciplinary efforts, as Todd—a Black male student—illuminates.

> Interviewer: You mentioned before we started that you were suspended recently because of something that happened in the cafeteria. What happened with that?
> Todd: Well, *we were told to stop being loud because we were laughing so loud and joking around. He sent us out and we had to get three days home* [suspension]. We were supposed to go out of the cafeteria, but a teacher told us just to go to the office. They thought they were going to write us up, and it was a whole misunderstanding. We did not really deserve to be written up and get suspended, but they just wanted to stop us in the cafeteria for being loud and everything because we were disrupting the whole cafeteria. The reason is, they are getting serious about that. They say it is very important. It's toward the end of the year, and they won't be tolerating that because people have tests and everything.
> Interviewer: So y'all were just laughing?

Todd: *We were just laughing and joking around*, just doing stupid stuff. I really regret it because I got everything taken, my video games and my phone.
Interviewer: Oh, at home?
Todd: Mm hmm.

White students and school personnel devalued talking among Black students. However, educators typically encourage outspokenness and assertiveness for White and middle-class students because it promotes entitlement norms linked to academic success (Morris 2007:509). Students' accounts suggest that White students and school personnel engage in the framing and pathologizing that degrades Black students' communication styles in the classroom and cafeteria and that labels them as antithetical to learning, which ultimately harms their academic image.

Microinsults can be even more subtle, including *pathologizing* attributes when linked to Blackness. Some White students espoused racial microinsults about communication styles, and Black students experienced them. However, Claire—a Black female student—provided insight about a new teacher's expectation that she was a troubled student possessing an "attitude:"

All the teachers, I think they just look at us the same, you know. I don't feel nothing different. But there was this one teacher, and for some reason I think she felt as though *I was supposed to have an attitude or supposed to be this person I'm not*, and I'm just like, I'm not going to argue. I'm not going to say anything back. I'm going to do your work and I'm going to be quiet, and it was just that she wasn't having it…I'm just like the other students. There's nothing different. I'm not going to argue.

Despite the assumption that Claire possessed an "attitude," she did not allow the interaction to hinder her academic aspirations or her positive view of teachers at the school generally. Suggesting continuity across educational context, Watkins et al. (2010:38) also finds that Black female students report being perceived as having an attitude in college settings. Sam—who was "half Black and half White" in his own words—evoked *pathologizing cultural values*. He presented the example of a hypothetical student to justify teachers' treatment of students:

Interviewer: Do you feel that your teachers in the past believe in you individually?
Sam: Probably not in middle school. They probably don't see what track–because they don't know what pathway you're taking. It all changes when you get to high school. As far as high school, all the teachers do…*Now, common sense tells you if you've got this kid that walks in school, and not saying that he can't be nothing, but when he walks in the school, pants sagging, and he just walks in with his music, the teacher's talking to him and all he's listening to is his music,* it's like, well, I kinda can't see where he's going with this. It's a possibility that he might do something but I can't see it. But then you've got the majority of the rest of the students, they come in, they get their stuff done, they're like, okay, this is what I want to do, and they take all kind of CTE classes and they go ahead and plan for the rest of their life.

The valuing of individual attributes and behavioral traits—to which Bowles and Gintis (1975:75) refer as existing in the labor market—is just as pervasive in schools, as Sam's quote illuminates. It also suggests the way in which he accepted the stratification of educational tracks within the school, as he implied that taking CTE (career and technical education, or vocational) classes are the optimal route for planning for the rest of one's life rather than preparing for further education. Within the same vein as *pathologizing cultural values and communication styles* of Nonwhites, *sanctifying Whiteness* could be considered a corollary to the trend, as it appeared in equally stigmatizing yet more covert ways. Through another example, though this time not hypothetical, Sam described his common response to the question "what [race] are you?," exemplifying this corollary of sanctifying Whiteness.

> They're like, "Are you–?" I've actually been called Indian a lot. They're like, "Aren't you Indian?"
> "No, I'm Black and White."
> "Oh, I thought you were Indian. I just did. I thought maybe, because of your complexion, but I can see how you're White, because like your hair. You do have good hair."
> I'm like, "Okay, well, thank you."

Sam conveys the way in which Whiteness becomes synonymous with goodness. By applying racial stereotypes and controlling images that contribute to discrimination (Feagin 2006:26),

racial microinsults can serve to sanctify Whiteness as "good" or acceptable, which further

contributes to the pathologizing of cultural and communication styles associated with Blackness.

Students also conveyed the microinsult theme *second-class citizen.* This refers to the

tendency for racially subordinated groups to be considered inferior to the dominant group (Sue

2010a:35). Indicating the benefit of including Whites' accounts to analyze microaggressions,

Delilah—a White student—elucidated a comment her math teacher made to a Black classmate.

> Delilah*: She [teacher] asked a Black student if he would rather be outside picking cotton,*
> and I found that kind of inappropriate. Yeah, that was my expression too.
> Interviewer: She said that in class?
> Delilah: In class.

Delilah mentioned later in the interview that it was only the second day of school when

the teacher made the picking cotton remark to her fellow classmate. In lieu of an explicit racial

epithet, the teacher's reference to picking cotton evokes a historically rooted image from the

South's racial past, specifically in regards to forced labor and deprived education during and

following slavery (Williams 2005). However, in contemporary context, racial microinsults are

not always this blatant and often coincide with microinvalidations.

Microinvalidations: Undermining Students' Lived Experiences

Microinvalidations facilitate interpersonal or environmental intimidation, undermining

the lived experiences of Black individuals (Sue 2010a). In the context of a majority Black high

school, Northwood, Black students were made to feel like *aliens in [their] own land.* These are

supposedly spaces in which Black students can feel most comfortable (Tyson 2011), especially

compared to predominantly White schools. However, processes within school excluded them.

Tracking structured students' academic placements and alienated them from other tracks. As a mincroinvalidation, tracking subtly excludes marginalized racial groups through processes that appear as benign, customary or standard procedure, and often both. Contrary to Tyson's (2011) finding of majority Black higher-tracked courses in predominantly Black high schools, Northwood contained predominantly White honors courses, evidenced by brief observation of three classrooms and interviews with students. Students also conveyed tracking alongside their perception of the school environment as unified. For instance, Cody—a Black male student— noted how tracking embedded students within classrooms across years. He also simultaneously recognized that he is usually the only Black student in his class. Despite this apparent separation between tracks by race, Cody described students' interaction by race as one "big family."

> Interviewer: So how is that, being like one of the only Black students in the class?
> Cody: Um, I mean, I am fine with it, but it wouldn't hurt to see a different face. Because it is usually like every semester I am in the same class with the same people. Because, let's say we are in math 1 honors, and then I switch [next semester to another math class], I will be with the same group of people next semester *because they don't switch it. See this group right here, they are going to put them in the honors class. And the other people in the regular one, they are going to be in the same one [class]. So it is not really new faces*. So if this was a bigger school and they did that, I would not be able to meet any new people really.
> Interviewer: Thank you for the insight. How do you perceive your school environment in terms of race relations and racial diversity?
> Cody: Do you mean like how do they interact?
> Interviewer: Yes.
> Cody: They interact really well. You can walk around the school when classes switch or something, and they just kind of mesh together. You can't really tell the difference [laughs]. We all just kind of connect. Most people from the school, we know most of them so when they are not feeling kind of like scared. You know how when you first get out to high school and you wonder how they're going to treat me; 'are they going to be mean?' *We really all just mesh together. When they say we are like a big family, we really are.*

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Despite recognition of tracking, Cody insisted on the unified nature of the school, with students resembling a "big family" just "meshing together." Notably, meshing occurred *between* rather than during classes. This suggests that racial stratification in school extends beyond classrooms.

Students were similarly segregated in the sports they played. While noted as a facet of racially stratified schools (Lewis and Diamond 2015) and society more generally (McNamee and Miller 2014), it is striking that racially divided sports can become normalized among Black students in a predominantly Black school. Although students described the racial stratification of their school's sports teams, Black students naturalized the racial division between sports teams.

> No, no, I would not say racially diverse. It's more of people have their preferences of certain sports. You are probably going to see more African Americans on the football team than the baseball team because most people at this school like football, and they just happen to be African American. We *are* a majority African American school. [Dylan – Black male]

In this instance, Dylan characterized racial segregation within Northwood sports as a result of personal preferences. He naturalized the division by race with assertion of the school's racial composition, emphasizing the logic of predominantly Black sports in a majority Black school. This quote reflects Bonilla-Silva's (2014) colorblind frame *naturalization of racism*.

These notions of belonging extend beyond the classroom and sporting events to dances. Black students noted the "sudden" announcement of a winter formal that gave them little time to prepare though White parents had been long planning the event. However, white students provided deeper insight about its exclusivity and planning. Cody—a Black male student—most clearly elucidated the dance planning from the perspective of students whom were excluded.

> Interviewer: Did you go [to the dance]?
> Cody: No. That came up like *really* all of a sudden, but it was not a lot of people there. But I know it was a lot, if anything, *it was more White people because it was so sudden.* It was like a Monday and then they were like 'formal is Friday; have your money in by

Friday.' And we were like "what?" 'Have your money in by Thursday,' and we were like "we need to get this and we need to get this." So most of us really did not go and kind of overlooked it.

Insight about the event derived mainly from White students, who suggested its exclusivity and their discomfort about it. Zoe, a White female student, conveyed discomfort about the dance.

Interviewer: What about school-related events, such as dances?
Zoe: We had a semi-formal and that it was sort of with the school but was not with the school. I went. It was a lot of fun, *but it was like all of the white kids went,* and that was just it. *So it was sort of weird because they were selling the tickets for it at the school.*

White students may be considered informants of racialized processes (Lewis and Diamond 2015), about which Black students might wish to avoid discussion or cannot discuss due to information gaps. Recent analysis of survey findings suggest that Whites recognize racialized systems (Croll 2013). However, White students' recognizing racial microinsults has been under-explored in prior analyses. In this study, for White students, race was salient in the case of a majority White, school-endorsed dance serving a majority Black student population. Whites' filling of information gaps about the school also provides a link to past educational stratification in the South. Reflecting a historical legacy of exclusion, Black students who desegregated schools were often isolated from taking part in the formerly all-White schools' dances, festivals, sports, and other extracurricular activities (Cecelski 1994:9). White students' informing about racial microinsults and racial exclusion in the school is strikingly different when compared to the complacency that White school boards expressed during desegregation and how hate groups like White citizen councils targeted those who supported racial desegregation of Southern public schools (Cobb 2014:134). Racial microinsults and microinvalidations' coexistence in Northwood suggests the prevalence of legitimating ideology among Black and

Mixed-Race students, even in spite of contradictory incidents. The data also suggest potential for White students to inform about these incidents, albeit after students of color have been excluded from classes and social activities. Including Black, White, and Mixed-race students' perspectives helps to clarify the context in which racially stratified academic tracks, sports teams, and dances, microinsults about Black students' intellectual ability, *and* microinvalidations supporting meritocracy and colorblindness in school can coexist.

Microinsults and Microinvalidations Collide in Rural Educational Context

Experiencing microinsults does not necessarily preclude microinvalidations. Despite enduring treatment as criminal or culturally inept, Black and Mixed-race espoused the *myth of meritocracy, colorblindness,* and *denial of individual racism* (Sue 2010a). They also utilized alternative explanations to explain treatment or encounters, undermining the significance of race by asserting the influence of gender and sexuality, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, class size, age, or athletic ability on school dynamics, even when asked specifically about race. While some of the students used these strategies without elaborating on racialized incidents in school, several Black and Mixed-race students described their encounters with racial microinsults and espoused microinvalidations in the same interview.

The microaggressive theme *second-class citizen* conceptually overlaps with the microaggressive theme *assumption of criminality*. These themes refer to the assumption of inferior and criminal status for racial minorities (Sue 2010a:36). In school context, something as simple as a family name can connote prestige or stigma. While a name's influence might be interpreted as characteristic of rural communities (Morris 2011), school personnel associate students with the reputations of their family members in urban context as well (MacLeod 2009).

Consistent with racial microaggression literature about hyper-visibility among Black students (Andrews 2012), Gerald—a Black male student—discussed how school police officers watched some students closer than others and called them by their last names. Gerald suggested that his last name is a "bad one," as *assumption of criminality* followed Gerald since middle school. School personnel and police officers called him by his last name as a proxy for his cousins' reputation.

> Gerald: I got arrested one time because the dude said – *I guess, because, he went by my last name, and he [school police officer] always watched me.* And the teacher said I smelled like smoke. Then when I asked the teacher did she say that, because they told me when I came to the office that the teacher said I smelled like smoke when I came in the classroom. But it was just the resource [school police] officer saying that stuff, instead of the teacher. And they tried to switch stuff around. Got mixed up.
> Interviewer: What did you think about that?
> Gerald: I thought it was kind of messed up. The reason why he arrested me was, we were all in the gym, and then he couldn't keep up with me. And he got mad. He put his hands on me and stuff. So I moved his hand. T hen I guess, they can do anything, by the time you touch them. That's it now. So I guess he was saying that he felt threatened, so I got arrested.
> Interviewer: What do you mean by he couldn't keep up with you?
> Gerald: He tried to watch me all of the time. He was just harassing me and stuff. That's what it was.
> Interviewer: Why did you say your last name?
> Gerald: You know how certain kids, like, a lot of people go by last names. Like, [his last name] is a bad one, stuff like that.
> …
> Interviewer: Did he call you by your last name too?
> Gerald: Yeah. I guess my cousins and stuff that went to the school before me. He knew that they were kin to me and stuff.
> Interviewer: What did that mean, that y'all were related?
> Gerald: *I guess, they were bad, so he expected me to be bad.*

As a result of this treatment, Gerald felt that surveillance of his body was "messed up." His feeling targeted contributes also to the theme *second-class citizen*, as Gerald was not deemed worthy of freedom of movement. While Gerald discussed the implication of a last name, he did

not connect this to race or being Black in particular. However, when asked about race relations

in school, he noted the racial segregation of students in the hallway of his previous high school.

Following this observation, he immediately stated that students were "all cool though; we all

came together and stuff." Tara—a Black female student—also described feeling suspect in

school when describing her interaction with a teacher, who assumed her criminality (Sue 2010a).

> Tara: Well, since my freshman year, you know how kids get into things, you change, and people still hold you to your past. I've had that happen to me, like multiple times, a lot of times, and it really makes me feel some type of way. But I might go in a class, I might have a note for something, and they still want to *like backtrack and see if I'm like lying or just wrong, or, "Oh, you didn't used to do your work, so do you have your work now?"*
> Interviewer: Do you feel like that happens to a lot of students, or–?
> Tara: Yeah. It's only certain students that are held, like they feel like they're held higher. I don't feel like it's right but it happens…I've actually had a teacher–. She's not my teacher. She's not anything to me. I feel like maybe she throws racial slurs, maybe. One time she told me–. I'm very smart so I don't really–. I don't know. Class work, sometimes I do it, sometimes I don't, but when I take tests it's like, oh, wow, oh, wow. So she was like, *"Hmm, you could have had us fooled. We've been thinking you were stupid all this time."* I'm like, excuse me? What do you mean? Any teacher can pull my stuff and see that, if you really wanted to know.

This encounter exemplifies *assumption of criminality* and *ascription of intelligence* microinsults

(Sue 2010a:35). Tara insisted that, even when she had a note, teachers assumed that she was

lying. In addition, teachers expressed shock when she performed well in school, as they stated

that they thought she was "stupid" without relying on information in her records. Tara

interpreted these encounters as personal insults and even mentioned that one of her teachers

maybe "throws racial slurs." Nonetheless, she insisted the following statement:

> It's either you're going *to do your work and you're going to make the name for yourself or just not–. It doesn't matter what color*, I feel like. I don't feel like the school focuses too much on that.

This quote conveys how students, even those who have experienced racial microinsults and have been subjected to discriminatory treatment, espouse meritocracy and colorblindness. Tara asserted the importance of individual hard work in school, regardless of race. Her account thus reflects the *myth of meritocracy* and *colorblindness* microinvalidation themes (Sue 2010a), comparable to the colorblind frame *abstract liberalism* (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Microinvalidations can serve as justifications for racial microinsults by the targets of such insults. This could be a coping strategy that Black students use to avoid confronting unjust treatment based on race.

The story is much more complex than the meritocracy myth would indicate (McNamee and Miller 2014:19), as shown through students' perspectives in this one rural school. While Tara posited meritocratic principle of hard work in order to make a name for one's self, regardless of "color," Sam—a Mixed-race male student—also evoked meritocracy. Sam described the stark racial segregation of his English class, being split down a large aisle with Black students on one side of the classroom and White students on the other, but he insisted that it was *chosen*, rather than forced. His emphasis on personal choice reiterates the *myth of meritocracy* microinvalidation (Sue 2010a).

> Sam: But overall–. I tell you what, the class we were just in, did you notice how it kind of looked like Black people were on this side and Whites were on this side?
> Interviewer: Yes.
> Sam: *It wasn't intentional, because she let's us sit where we want*…They feel like that's where they–. I mean they still talk like normal, just like let's say I was Black and you were White, okay. We're talking normal, but when it comes down to it I'm going to sit over here with Black people and you sit over here with White people, or whatever. For me, I'm sitting in between. Literally I sit in between the Blacks and the Whites.
> Interviewer: Does it bother you, that it's separated?
> Sam: It doesn't bother me at all…I think it's an extreme advantage, being Black and White, because it's a little easier to be accepted by both races. I mean it's not like it's a job or something but—it's easier to be–. Yeah. It's easier to be accepted. You're more accepted by both races.

Sam's insistence that the racial segregation "wasn't intentional" reinforces the separation of students by race. Sam's previous description of and disdain for the hypothetical student with sagging pants and listening to music also evokes meritocracy and legitimates inequality. Although meritocracy and colorblindness are often conceived as prevalent among Whites (Gallagher 2015), Black and Mixed-race students employed these notions as well.

Far from deeming microinsults as racist, Black and Mixed-race students used alternative explanations to make sense of their experiences in school. These students attributed differential treatment to factors other than race and denied the significance of race in their school. As they avoided "race talk" (Sue 2015), Black and Mixed-race students spoke in terms of gender and sexuality, socioeconomic status, political ideology, class size, age, or athletic ability, even when asked about racial dynamics in their school. Allie—a Mixed-race female student—directly substituted *gender* and *sexuality* for perceptions of race in school.

> Interviewer: How do you perceive your school environment in terms of race relations?
> Allie: I think it's pretty, I don't like see nobody saying – I hear a lot of racist stuff about *gender roles and stuff like that*. But it's not nothing, not big, not a big deal, just little stuff. *It's more like 'how come the boys do this and the girls do this?'* It's just little stuff, nothing big.
> Interviewer: What kind of stuff do you see, relating to race?
> Allie: We have a lot of *gays and stuff here*, and then *that transgender thing with the bathrooms and stuff.*
> Interviewer: Yeah, you can be honest with me about your perceptions of race.
> Allie: I know, but *I don't go by White, Black, and stuff like that. It's just not me.*
> Interviewer: What do you mean by that?
> Allie: *I don't see a race. I see it's all equal.* People just separate us by the color of our skin when it's only the melanin.

Jocelyn—a Black female student—substituted *socioeconomic status* for race, relating it

to students' having their way. After being asked how she perceived the school in terms of race

relations, Jocelyn discussed why students dislike classmates who simply "get what they want."

> Interviewer: Interesting. So people *getting what they want*, does that play into the school?
> Jocelyn: Yeah, basically. Yeah they do. So they feel like they are better than anybody.
> They feel like if they ask their momma for something, then she'll get it. Or if they ask
> for something, then they'll get it. *And they feel like they are just better than everybody*
> *and think that they have the most money in the world.*
> Interviewer: The White kids?
> Jocelyn: *The Black kids too. They all act like that*, but for me it doesn't matter because I
> know that I don't get anything that I want. Most of the time, but not all of the time.

Amanda—another Black female student—substituted *political ideology* that students

learn at home from their parents for race. Avoiding discussion of race in regards to emotionally

charged classroom discussion, Amanda suggested that politics play a role more than race.

> Interviewer: Where do you think that comes from? Like is it mostly White students that
> say things?
> Amanda: *It's White students, Black students. I mean it's all races sometimes, because*, I
> don't know how to put it, but it's like–. Honestly, if it was me, *I guess they get it from*
> *like their parents.* If they hear their parents say it then it's like some kids, not all kids, but
> some kids will say, "My mom said–." Like for instance, like I'm eighteen now so I can
> vote this year, so I personally feel like I will vote for a Democrat versus a Republican
> because I feel like Republicans, they don't–. If you're not rich I feel like they don't care
> about you. Even if you're middle class they really don't care about you. They're all for
> the rich. Like, I listen to the different stuff because I like to learn about politics and stuff
> like that.

Students also used *class size* to explain differential expectations between classes, rather than

racial composition. Josh—a Black male student—attributed differential treatment from teachers

to class size instead of race. After being asked about the racial diversity of his classes, Josh

laughed, responding that he did not know because he "never paid attention to it." He suggested

that some teachers had high expectations and others did not, which he attributed to class size.

Age also served as a substitute for race. Matt—a Mixed-race male student—substituted age

for race even after discussing foregone dating encounters with White females due to being "cut

off" by their parents. The two Mixed-race males interviewed both noted their negative

encounters with dating White female classmates, as they conveyed hostility from peers, school

personnel, and parents. Sam suggested that he transcended the tension and that it wasn't a major

concern. Even after elaborating on his troubles with interracial dating, Matt posited that it was

more about age than race, insisting that concerns about dating resided more in age disparity than

racial differences. Sam elaborated on the "weirdness" that he encountered in school with

interracial dating, yet he attributed these issues to age. While this explanation could certainly

hold, Matt's transition to talking about age suggests that attributing obstacles to age is preferable

to race, perhaps as a means of self-protection (Rooks 2006:9).

Black and Mixed-race students also substituted *athletic ability* for race. While discussing

racial diversity of sports, Dylan—a Black male student—exhibited colorblind ideology.

> Interviewer: Interesting. So is the baseball team mostly White?
> Dylan: No, this year it is about 50/50, something like that. *They are all closely knit, so I would say they are all the same race. They are all baseball lovers; it doesn't matter what color they are.*

A Mixed-race male student, Matt, evoked similar sentiments regarding sports when asked about

their racial diversity. However, Matt expressed colorblindness with a more personal connection.

> With sports, you are one family. We are not going to be that way. We are going to bring everybody as one. *You are not a color; you're a brother.* That's what you are on the team, and even in school. I mean I have a lot of Black friends, White friends, everybody friends, you know. If you have a problem with one person, then I have a problem with that. I don't like that because I have dealt with it. People look at me like 'why do you care?' It's because I have dealt with that. I know what it feels like.

Although experiences with racial discrimination and microaggressions are cumulative in their impacts (Feagin 1991; Pierce 1970), it was common for Black and Mixed-race students to regard racialized incidents as isolated occurrences (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Sam—a Mixed-race student—conveyed Sue's (2010a) racial microinvalidation theme *denial of individual racism*. In the following quote, Sam's responded to inquiry about race relations at this rural school.

> There's probably like two rednecks in the whole school that are like, 'oh no, it's strictly White,' or something like that, but nobody really cares about that.

By implying that nobody cares about race, Sam engaged in the *denial of individual racism* microinvalidation (Sue 2010a). Amanda—a Black female student—also conveyed this theme.

> Amanda: I was cool with everybody in the class, but it was like when you talked about certain stuff you saw different sides of people that you never saw before and it made you think, you know, they're not racist, but *I think some people have racism in them but they're not necessarily racists.*
> Interviewer: Do you have any examples or stories that you can think of that really impacted you or resonated with you in class about that, like things that happened?
> Amanda: Like, because we were an honors class, so she kind of felt like we could talk about certain things like young adults without people getting angry. Like when we talked about the government and presidents and stuff, that would, you know, kind of spark people up, *but it's not necessarily about the color or the race.* Everybody is trying to blame, you know, like because the President now [Obama], they're trying to say it's all his fault, but what they don't realize is that when the new person get in office they have to go back from what the presidents–. Because they already have stuff stacked before, so that's what they have to go on, but I don't think people realize that. They're just quick to say what they think and feel and not really understand.

This quote conveys the epitome of new racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014): individuals can exhibit some qualities of racial bias without being racist. This can be considered a form of colorblind ideology, whereby a new consensus on race precludes individual manifestation of racism (Gallagher 2015:45). In accordance with colorblindness, racial microaggressions can be

rearticulated as isolated incidents, even from the perspective of affected students. However,

Amanda's commentary about her math class also suggests the presence of racial backlash:

> So my particular group, we had history and mathematics, so someone wrote "Barack Obama." So when we got up there we pretty much didn't go by what everybody put on the poster. We could relate to some things. But a girl in my class, she had made the comment, "This is supposed to be math class. What Barack Obama got to do with math?" and then we explained, you know, he has to count numbers, and I mean that's math and history, because he's making history. He's going to be in the history. She just kept going on and on. It was just like she felt some type of way like it shouldn't have been on there. I mean I talked to the girl in my class but I just felt like it was not that she's racist but I felt like she had *racism in her* because, you know, she was the only one that said something about it, really.

This resistance to acknowledging a Black President parallels the resistance to Black authority

conveyed by two of the White students interviewed, both of whom were resistant to the Black

principal of the school. Tracey—a White female student—expressed the following sentiments:

> *Principal-wise they lean more to the Black side*, so there is kind of–. I don't want to say segregated, but they kind of favor the more Black side, I guess because it's more Black than White here. It's not really too bad but some people just look at Blacks higher than others, so.

This quote, though claiming a variation of "reverse" discrimination, subtly conveys a fear of the

Black principal having too much power, similarly to the fear of having a Black President.

Tracey's account suggests presence of racial backlash, suggesting that Blacks threaten her own

position in the school (Blumer 1958). This claim of "reverse" racism also exemplifies Bonilla-

Silva's (2014:76) colorblind frame *abstract liberalism*, as it places emphasis on individual

choice comparably to the aversion to group rights within colorblind and meritocratic ideology

(Omi and Winant 2015). Thus, the data suggest how individualism and meritocracy work

together to promote colorblindness as the racial ideal, despite existence of racial microinsults.

Though less prevalent, White students also espoused colorblindness, specifically the *naturalization* and *abstract liberalism* frames (Bonilla-Silva 2014). One White male, Tim, who described himself as Hispanic and White but identified as White, and one White female, Carrie, espoused *naturalization* by describing those who "hang" together as inherently homogeneous. Yet they claimed to spend time with students from different racial backgrounds. After espousing comments that pathologized the home-lives and demeaned the intelligence of Black students, David—a White male—insisted the following statement about the racial diversity of his classes, exemplifying *colorblindness* (Sue 2010a), specifically *abstract liberalism* (Bonilla-Silva 2014):

I don't usually do anything about race. Race is – my best friend is Black, or one of them. While these instances of colorblindness should be noted, their rarity stands markedly juxtaposed to the recurrence of legitimating ideologies among Black and Mixed-race students.

Divergent from prior claims, students did not 'whine' about racialized incidents (Steele 1991:33) or 'cry racism' (McWhorter 2000:15). Both Black and Mixed-race students tended to discount the role of race, substituting it for another dimension of inequality or legitimating treatment with assertions of rugged individualism. While some White students expressed discomfort about the treatment of their Black peers, others pathologized communication styles of Black students, ascribed inferior intelligence to Black students, and demonized Black leadership in the supposedly 'postracial' America. School personnel demeaned Black students through attitudinal, intellectual, and criminal assumptions. Yet Black and Mixed-race students supported meritocracy and colorblindness, remaining strikingly resilient despite the prevalence of racial microaggressions and division within their school.

Students' Resilience: Asserting Control Where They Can

Uninhibited by teachers' and classmates' treatment of them, Black and Mixed-race students expressed resilience to racial microaggressions. This resilience is consistent with the literature, as microaggressive encounters did not hinder optimism among Black students in college (Watkins et al. 2010:45) or high school context (Tyson 2011). Though White students' tied their views of their school experiences and themselves as learners to teachers' expectations, Black and Mixed-race students exhibited resilience regardless of treatment or expectations.

> Interviewer: What about teacher expectations? How do your teacher expectations affect your academics?
> Student: The teachers expect us to do our best, and I believe that they encourage us to do our best.
> Interviewer: Do you feel like your teachers believe in you individually?
> Student: Yes, ma'am. I do believe that my teachers believe in me.
> Interviewer: How does that affect you? Does that help you?
> Student: *Yes, ma'am, it helps me with my academics and getting higher grades in their classes.* [Peter – White male]

> Interviewer: How do these expectations affect your academics?
> Student: *It doesn't really affect my academics because I always put my education first and stuff like that…*
> Interviewer: What they expect of you, does it affect how you view yourself as a student?
> Student: *No, I have high standards for myself.* The way they expect me, my standards, I do want to impress my teachers. Even though they want that for me, I try to push and get all of my stuff done. I try to show them that I'm responsible. [Allie – Mixed-race female]

> Interviewer: How do [teachers'] expectations affect your academics?
> Student: In most cases they don't. It just has to be on what you want to achieve. It doesn't really matter what they want, even though *what they want should be the same thing you want. But what they want does not really matter.* [Dylan – Black male]

> Interviewer: How do teacher expectations affect your academics? [Pause] Do you think teachers expect a lot out of you and believe in you individually?
> Student: *Yeah, but I try my best anyway, so.* [Emily – Black female]

Black and Mixed-race students' outlooks for the future and self-concepts asserted optimism, despite the prevalence of racial microaggressions in their school. Their assertion of optimism and insistence on their capabilities reflect minority students' asserting control of their academic lives, even in the face of assaults to their intelligence, communication styles, and innocence.

Discussion

Black, Mixed-race, and White students' combined perspectives provide insight about rural educational processes and the racial ideology that operates therein. While White students espoused "reverse" racism sentiments and microinsults or elucidated racial discrimination in classrooms and school events, Black and Mixed-race students supported colorblindness and denied individual racism, undermining their discriminatory treatment and legitimating it with assertions of meritocracy. This conveys the impact of prolific post-racial America rhetoric (Gallagher 2015; Omi and Winant 2015), and it reveals the way in which microinvalidations (Sue 2010a)—*colorblindness*, *myth of meritocracy*, and *denial of individual racism*—can mask racialized experiences for Black and Mixed-race students, even from their own perspectives.

Black and Mixed-race students' interpretations of racial microinsults limit recognition of the role of such incidents in their schooling. Chester Pierce (1970:280, 1974:520) argues that microaggressions could be ameliorated through both recognizing and challenging them. However, students' espousal of colorblindness and meritocracy does not recognize and defend against racial microaggressions, and students subverted their own experiences with an emphasis on individualism and hard work regardless of race. Black and Mixed-race students' alternative explanations also do not negate the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions.

The implications of racial microaggressions extend beyond students' time in school. Students' resilience expresses optimistic and supports their aspirations to achieve academically, a finding consistent with other qualitative inquiry (Tyson 2005:589). But optimism about the future does not preclude exclusion from academic opportunity and potential job networks (Royster 2003). Differential treatment impacts students' abilities to matriculate to and complete college, and exclusion from networks in schools translates into foregone job opportunities (Royster 2003). These cumulative impacts are not easily over-written by hard work and rugged individualism, but rather these notions reinforce achievement ideology in views of schooling. While colorblindness may serve as a temporary buffer for negative encounters relating to race, awareness of racism has shown to be more beneficial for Black individuals health and well-being (Barr and Neville 2014; Berkel et al. 2008; Brown 2008; Bynum et al. 2007; Scott 2003). Adherence to colorblindness does not prevent the consequences of racialized treatment, from being treated as criminal, unintelligent, or a second-class citizen to being stigmatized culturally.

Although colorblindness among Black students could be attributed to interviewer effects, it is a finding nonetheless since this study does not assess public opinion. Rather, this study examines the perspectives of students who have little to lose with assurance of confidentiality and reminders throughout interviewing that they can be honest in expressing their views. Schools are filled with personnel who look something like the White interviewer, and students interact and share information with them on a daily basis. According to Chester Pierce (1970:280), microaggressions can only be ameliorated through both recognizing *and* challenging them. Students' espousal of colorblindness and meritocracy appears to neither recognize nor defend against racial microaggressions, as their own experiences are subverted by an emphasis on

individualism and hard work regardless of race. While White students may not *intend* on

excluding their nonwhite peers when they plan a formal, sit on the other side of the classroom, or

critique the contribution of a Black President or principal, the implications of these actions

remain (Lewis and Diamond 2015). And Black and Mixed-race students' explanations—whether

relating to gender and sexuality, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, class size, age, or

athletic ability —do not erase the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions in school.

While public schools ostensibly serve as engines of meritocracy, the American Dream is

not colorblind (Hochschild and Scovronick 2003). Yet colorblindness and meritocracy endure as

mutually reinforcing ideologies operating in school, even from the perspectives of racially

marginalized students, though not from most White students. The notion that any diversion from

racial integration is natural and normal merely justifies the status quos in schools and society

(Bonilla-Silva 2014), as sorting and differentially treating students by race is not natural or

inevitable (Lewis and Diamond 2015:11). Racial microaggressions' effects on Black and

Mixed-race students' educational opportunities maintain the historically disparate treatment of

these groups of learners. And individualistic ideology conceals them.

Conclusion

Within rural communities exists striking juxtaposition between strong communal ties and

rugged individualism that constrains those who call rural America home (Tieken 2014:144).

While rural schools are inextricably tied to communities and vice versa, this collectivism is

tempered by an emphasis on individualism (Morris 2011; Sherman 2006). Contrary to supposed

solidarity and tight-knit nature of rural areas, increasing cultural and economic heterogeneity in

rural America stimulated a decline in community and thus a resurgence of rugged individualism

(Lichter 2012:3). The stark contrast between Black and Mixed-race students' positing colorblindness, meritocracy, and denial of individual racism and their experiencing insults to their belonging, ability, and innocence suggests the complexity of perspectives.

It may be challenging to reconcile how students who experience or bear witness to racial microaggressions can remain optimistic or insist on the importance of hard work. However, this resilience is less surprising when placed in historical context. While pro-school attitudes have been regarded as an anomaly with regard to achievement (Mickelson 1990), Black and Mixed-race students' pro-school attitudes do not seem like an anomaly when considering how African Americans historically fought for educational opportunity despite the constraints of slavery and segregation (Harris 2011; Williams 2005).

Yet, Black and Mixed-race students' interpretations and assertions of self-definition do not protect them from disparate treatment, including insults to their intelligence (Collins 2008). Colorblindness provides illusory comfort about opportunity in school (Carter 2008a; Hayes 2013). But this comes at a high cost to students who experience racial microaggressions. Their optimism about the potential of hard work to "make a name for yourself" cushions disappointment, but being labeled as stupid, criminal, or having an attitude by teachers and degraded by classmates eventually affects the opportunities available for students to excel academically. Just as African Americans can be discriminated against in housing without awareness of it (Bonilla-Silva 2014:34), racial microaggressions in school do not have to be named in order to affect students' educational experiences and trajectories. These processes are too often concealed in rural schools by the neglect of rural locales within scholarly inquiry.

Rural schools are far from insignificant, however, as context matters for students. Interviews with rural students in one predominantly Black high school situated in the South indicate the historical significance of place. Drawing upon the historicism of cotton plantations in rural America (Tieken 2014:132), the data elicit historically relevant themes. In a majority Black institution, a White teacher asked a Black classmate if he would rather be picking cotton, a White teacher called a Black student stupid and questions her innocence, and the school sponsored a predominantly white dance. These incidents should be placed in both historical and spatial context. Reflecting racial microinsults *second-class citizen*, *ascription of intelligence, assumption of criminality,* and *pathologizing cultural values or communication styles* (Sue 2010a), these incidents invoke a historical legacy of racial norms about who belongs where in school. Additionally, they reveal the historical resistance to Black education in the South (Tieken 2014; Williams 2005). It is possible that students' interpretations of racial microinsults also reflect a legacy of coping in the rural South for Black Americans: asserting self-definitions protects students' confidence from assault (Collins 2008).

Legacies of racialized education have not eroded in Northwood, but voices of resistance have not been smothered either. Despite differential treatment, Black and Mixed-race students remained optimistic about their academics. Although they emphasized individual merit and colorblindness to interpret their school experiences, they resisted characterizations as criminal or "stupid." Being deprived or disrespected in school reflects a historical legacy of educational inequality, yet students' resilience reflects a legacy of educational striving since slavery (Collins 2008:57; Rooks 2006:9; Williams 2005:20). Consistent with this legacy, Black and Mixed-race students resisted demeaning messages by relying on their own direction and self-worth.

The prospect of educational opportunity stimulates hope. But schools also structure disadvantage and stratify students by race. The combined forces of community and individuality in rural areas discourage questioning, much less challenging, the status quo. The data shed doubt on Pierce's (1970) approach to ameliorating racial microaggressions, which requires both recognition and denunciation of their occurrence. Contrary to enduring belief in meritocracy and colorblindness, how race actually operates in rural schools deserves further inquiry. Rural schools' isolation only amplifies the implications of racial microaggressions for students.

Directions for Future Research

Methodological literature suggests the importance of using more nationally representative secondary data to elicit a "point of comparison" for micro-level data (Firebaugh 2008:22). This project could be expanded further through the comparison of these interview data with secondary data analysis of the ELS:2002, which contains an indicator of rural locale in addition to region.

It would also be beneficial to examine students' perspectives after they enter the labor market. While Black students may be "cooled out," or realize the civil rights era gains were not what they expected (MacLeod 2009), White students may be increasingly individualistic and colorblind, or their recognition of racial disparity may become more acute. Assessing labor market transitions would also illustrate the degree to which networks established during secondary schooling endure and play a role in employment opportunities and outcomes.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

This is interview #__. This interview is confidential, and your name will not be connected to any information you share with me. I am going to ask you questions in regards to school experiences. If you do not wish to answer any questions, just let me know, and I will proceed to the next question. You may also withdraw from the interview at any time.

1. What grade are you in?

2. How would you describe your school experiences, particularly in relation to interactions with teachers?

    ▪ What about interactions with other students?

3. Could you tell me a bit about what you think teachers expect from you?

    ▪ How do these expectations affect your academics?

4. In your opinion, how important is school performance in determining success?

5. How do you or your peers get ahead in school?

6. Do you feel like you can compete fairly in school for opportunities?

    ▪ Do you perceive barriers to opportunity?

7. How do you perceive your school environment in terms of race relations?

8. How racially diverse are your classes?

    ▪ How racially diverse are sports teams?

    ▪ What about school-related events, such as dances?

9. Where do you see yourself in three years?