

Critical Care as Anti-Racist Disability Activism: Subverted Truths Around Mental Health and Wellness of Black and Brown Students on a College Campus

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Abstract

In this research, we surface, interrogate, and disrupt how Disability³ law and the work of Disabled activists are appropriated and supplanted in ways that perpetuate the isolation of Disability as an individual experience in higher education. Alternatively, we theorize Disability law in higher education through a collaborative examination of the meaning and impact of mental health and wellness with Black and Brown college students with and without identified, or codified, Disabilities. We surface the presumed Whiteness of Disability by making visible Disability law's emphasis on individualism, paternalism, and "worship of the written word" (Okun & Jones, 2001, p. 3), and the consequence of the overemphasis on individual accommodation and intervention as a substitute for equity. We use the concept of "Terrible Sticky Truths" to highlight the pervasiveness of individualism in conceptualizations of Disability and the concept of "Subverted Truths" (Cannon, 2019) to illustrate the possibilities of reframing Disability in higher education around collaborative and communal accessible educational services and experiences facilitated by emphasizing intergenerational teaching and learning and critical care in work toward collective access.

Keywords: mental health, higher education, mental disability, accessible education service community of practice

The interplay between Disability law, the advocacy efforts of Disabled activists, and the sociopolitical and sociohistorical landscapes of higher education is difficult to parse. In this research, we explore the organizational, social, and cultural threads that comprise "mental Disability" (Price, 2009) on a college campus, as narrated by students of Color⁴. Importantly, we center the narratives of participants to diverge from conventional "Disability analyses" and instead engage in a collaborative examination to surface the "connected knowing" of the participants and researchers (Collins, 2000, 2003). Accordingly, our research questions are:

1. How do current Disability laws and institutional policies in higher education contribute to the isolation of students of Color?

2. How do students of Color narrate their experiences with defining and understanding mental health, wellness, and mental Disability on a predominantly White campus?
3. In what ways can collaborative and communal educational practices, including intergenerational teaching and critical care, be implemented to foster collective access and well-being for Black and Brown college students with and without identified Disabilities?

A central focus of this inquiry is to address the dearth of research that includes Black and Brown participants as both subject and collaborator in research (Stapleton & James, 2020) and includes unveiling the often invisibilized mechanisms of "white suprema-

¹ Colorado College; ² Indiana University Indianapolis; ³ The Capital "D" signal that "Disability" and "Disabled" discursively serve to signal a social and political identity and location, bearing both material and symbolic impacts. This usage is significant in the context of Disability identity for Disabled and people with Disabilities and their educational experiences. ⁴ "Color" is capitalized to signal a racial identity that may not be a legal or codified racial category, but as a non-white, social and political identity that bears both symbolic and material impact.

cy culture” (Okun & Jones, 2001) in the ways that Disability laws are interpreted and applied in post-secondary education. By surfacing pronounced emphases on individualism, productivity, perfectionism, and exclusion in approaches to Disability on post-secondary campuses, we underscore the outcomes of these principles, specifically the undue emphasis on individual accommodation and intervention at the expense of broader equity. In doing so, we rely on the theoretical concepts of “Terrible Sticky Truths” (TSTs) and “Subverted Truths” (STs; Cannon, 2019) to understand the complex and co-constitutive interaction of race, Disability, and other markers of marginalized identities, including gender and gender expression, sexuality, and class (Annamma et al., 2013; Erevelles & Minear, 2010). These conceptual tools aid in illustrating the interaction of broad cultural narratives of overcoming Disability in educational spaces, and the counternarratives students of Color draw upon to “talk back” (Smitherman, 1986) to the tacit, yet persistent, cultural assertions of Disability as an individualized experience.

Importantly, we look to the work of Black and Brown student activists on the campus of a small liberal arts college in the central United States to examine alternatives to this logic. Using the concepts of TSTs and STs noted above, along with Okun and Jones’ (2001) understanding of “white supremacy culture,” we theorize around mental health and wellness, Disability, and activism. We interrogate the notion of Disability advocacy as the acquisition of individual accommodations, and instead center the narratives of Black and Brown students to frame Disability justice through their ontologies and epistemologies around mental health and wellness. Importantly, we intentionally amplify the voices of students of Color as a response to the dearth of Disability research that includes students of Color as knowers (Stapleton & James, 2020). We aim to bring Black and Brown students’ perspectives to the forefront, identifying TSTs and examining the antidotal STs that come from their knowing (Cannon & Thorius, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Terrible Sticky Truths and Subverted Truths

The theoretical underpinnings of TSTs and STs are derived from Mercèdes Cannon’s (2019) work with Disabled Black women. Bridging Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) (Annamma et al., 2013) and Black Womanism/Feminism (Collins, 2000, 2003), Cannon (2019) surfaces how Black women with mental health related Disability labels are “talkin’ back” to the TSTs that envelop their identities by highlighting

how Black and Brown women with Disabilities resist pathological treatment within educational settings marked by ableism, racism, sexism, and classism (Connor & Ferri, 2010; Peterson, 2009). Although we do not draw directly from the essential foundational work of Black Womanisms/Feminism (Collins, 2000,2003), we do draw from Cannon’s (2019) work in developing TSTs and STs, which is deeply informed by Black Womanism/Feminism.

Disability Law and the “Retrofit”

In this section, we answer Research Question 1: How do current Disability laws and institutional policies in higher education contribute to the isolation of disabled students of Color?

Common cultural conceptualizations of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) (1990) center the law’s presumed protections of the rights of Disabled individuals in public and private employment (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2014; Shallish, 2015). Although the ADA is one of the most widely recognized Disability rights laws, other Disability-related laws, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA; 2004), also presumably protect the rights of Disabled individuals in the public sphere. Importantly, educational protections afforded by the ADA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and IDEA include the prohibition of discrimination in governmental and federally-funded services, as well as private and public employment, and access to a free and appropriate primary and secondary public education.

Although the accomplishments of the ADA may be widely—and symbolically—understood, the interpretation and “appropriation” (Levinson et al., 2004, p. 363) of the law in higher education settings is culturally and historically situated in the policies, processes, hidden curricula, and, ultimately, neoliberal aims of higher education (Mitchell & Snyder, 2019; Taylor & Shallish, 2019). Because the adoption of the law is situated in cultures that rely on and reproduce systems of oppression, including interlocking systems of ableism and racism, in its application, the ADA becomes a fulcrum of power to enforce and approximate normalcy rather than to envelop Disability and accessibility into higher education landscapes (Albanesi & Nusbaum, 2017; Taylor & Shallish, 2019).

In his book, *Academic Ableism*, Jay Dolmage (2017) challenges the symbolic adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act to instead consider what Disability is and means away from legislation that—in many cases—retroactively mandates isolated accommodations for Disabled people. Dolmage (2017)

argues that these accommodations are often limited by temporality; that is, accommodations arise from a need and are “retrofitted” to a structure, a course, or a human in a way that is meant only to accommodate “for only one (particular person) at one time” (p. 79). Importantly, by describing the “retrofit” approach to accommodation as compelled by the ADA, Dolmage (2017) forces a reconsideration of the law as one that prioritizes the approximation of a prescribed normal. In institutions of higher education, the approximation of normal is actualized through the administration of the ADA through campus offices of Accessibility or Disability Services. The role of this office often includes the interpretation and administration of the ADA through the provision of accommodations for college students. Though these offices can often act in advocacy positions for students, by their nature they often isolate Disability within the student. Even in advocacy roles, however, the rhetorical position a student must occupy to receive accommodations requires that they (a) be afforded the presumption of reliability in narrating their own condition and (b) present a case that ensures the “reasonability of accommodations” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 80). Thus, this compelled normalcy “masquerades as rigor” (Taylor & Shallish, 2019, p. 3) within a “bio-meritocracy” (Taylor & Shallish, 2019, p. 3) that assumes some ways of thinking, knowing, learning, and being are naturally preferable to the conditions of educational institutions. Accordingly, the process of request and provision of accommodation rests on the logic that education is, and must be, competitive to be “rigorous” (Taylor & Shallish, 2019, p. 3). By having to rationalize the need for accommodation, students are put in a rhetorical position of defense of securing learning accommodations and to avoid positioning themselves as at an unfair advantage in the competitive classroom (and elsewhere) (see Dorfman, 2020). Accordingly, rather than systemically accessible schooling, the ADA compels “abeyance structures (that are) allowing for access but disallowing the possibility of action for change” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 77).

Mental Disability

We draw upon Margaret Price’s (2010) framing of “mental Disability” to understand Discourses of mental health and wellness on the college campus that serves as the research site. Occupying a liminal space within Disability discourses, “mental health and wellness” is an important area of Disability to study because individuals who experience times of mental distress may not necessarily adopt a Disabled identity. Importantly, Price (2010) uses the term “mental Disability” as a broad term to encompass a wide range

of Disabilities that are attributed or prescribed to the mind through diagnostic processes. We own the political motivation of using the term “mental Disability” to draw attention to the mutable ways in which the presumed wholeness of rationality is denied or afforded people with mental Disabilities, and that this denial or affordance can mark the ways Disability is legible to self and others (Price, 2010). Price (2010) argues for the need for a coalitional term that broadly defines Disability to advocate for those who “live under the rubric of the [D]isabled mind” (p. 122). Thus, the term “mental Disability,” as used to encompass a range of Disabilities that presume the self is located in the mind, draws the significance of the role of *power* in the definition, valuation, and implications of Disability (Price, 2010). We accordingly use the term “mental health and wellness” throughout this study to refrain from imposing Disabled identities onto participants, while also acknowledging that mental health and wellness, as well as mental and emotional distress, can be characterized as “mental Disability” (Price, 2009).

Black and Brown Students and Mental Disability. Naming “mental disability” for Black and Brown students bears the weight of “racialized histories of mental illness” (Jarman, 2011, p. 11) that are not automatically applicable to white students. Importantly, extant literature on mental health experiences among college students is limited because most of this research focuses on sample populations that are almost entirely non-Hispanic White (Kosish et al., 2022). Relatedly, Black and Brown students on college campuses are more likely to experience mental distress but less likely to have accessed support services prior to attending college (Kosish et al., 2022). And, importantly, the elevated risks of experiencing mental disability for Black and Brown students, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, are compounded by the impact and effect of racism, whereby racism may be the root cause (Kosish et al., 2022). For example, Black and Brown students are more likely to experience mental distress as a result of “microaggressions, discrimination, imposter syndrome, and negative campus climate” (Kosish et al., 2022, p. 268; see also Hwang & Goto, 2008; Nadal et al., 2014; Prelow et al., 2006). The relationship, then, between mental disability and interpersonal and systemic racism for students of Color is co-constitutive. In this way, unidimensional approaches to studying mental disability among Black and Brown students on college campuses that focus only on mental disability or racism are not only limited, they are paradigmatically dysfunctional for students of Color. Deeper understandings of mental disability for students of Color require a

theoretical framework for how whiteness operates as a governance mechanism within institutes of higher education, as well as a counternarratives that situate the experiences and knowledge of Black and Brown students as multidimensional, yet subverted, truths.

Whiteness and Disability in Higher Education

Rhetorics of race and Disability are co-constitutive: both identity markers are often co-constructed in tandem with discourses of race and Disability (Annamma et al. 2013; Shallish, 2015; Taylor & Shallish, 2019). Theoretical frameworks such as Critical Disability Studies (e.g., Bell, 2017; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Goodley, 2013; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Minich, 2017) and DisCrit (the explicit naming of the connection between Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies; Annamma et al., 2013) attend to the intersection of race and Disability under systems of oppression. However, there remains a phenomena whereby discourses of Disability that are intended to surface—and disrupt—the oppression of those with identities multiply marginalized through and by racism and ableism (e.g., Erevelles & Minear, 2010), are enveloped into White discourses and the protective folds of Whiteness (Bell, 2017; Beneke, 2021; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Mueller & Beneke, 2022) Importantly, surfacing the ways in which Whiteness operates as a cultural phenomenon that can be known through the languages and practices of those who exist within cultures of Whiteness is important to disrupting understandings of Disability as experiences isolated from other marginalized identities and experiences. Critically, surfacing the markers of a “culture of white supremacy” (Okun & Jones, 2001) makes visible the ways in which Whiteness moves to envelop, appropriate, and, ultimately, colonize the knowledges of people of Color around Disability access, care, and justice in favor of individualized accommodation.

Tema Okun’s (2001) framework for “white supremacy culture” surfaces the practices within an organization (or culture) that adhere to preferences of the White middle class. Okun and Jones (2001) surface 15 cultural practices that adhere to value systems and taken-for-granted norms that were not explicitly decided upon by a given group (Okun & Jones, 2001). We focus on three of Okun’s (2001) characteristics of White supremacy culture to surface the ways in which anti-racist and Disability justice efforts are often appropriated into policies and practices that reproduce inequity, rather than work to address it. We focus our interpretation of Okun’s (2001) framework to center the ways in which the “white gaze” (hooks, 1992, p. 338) on Disability in higher education over-emphasizes adherence to the ADA and de-

prioritizes the intersectional experiences of students of Color. The elements of White supremacy culture that we use to theoretically consider the experiences of students of Color with Disabilities (codified and non-codified) are as follows:

1. **Worship of the written word:** In considering the ways in which the ADA is adopted into the practices of an institute of higher education, this element of “white supremacy culture” (Okun & Jones, 2001) refers to the willingness to only do enough to legally meet the law, rather than to consider providing genuinely inclusive and accessible learning environments for students.
2. **Paternalism:** Paternalism refers to the ways that decisions related to Disability services are sought and advocated for by the student, but are ultimately made far away from them, by an administering body.
3. **Individualism:** Individualism refers to the ways accommodations for Disability are provided to “one student at one point in time” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 79).

Importantly, we draw from relational models of Disability (e.g., Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Reindal, 2008) to reframe access and inclusion for Disabled individuals away from a narrow focus on “individualized” accommodations and toward accessibility decision-making that goes beyond compliance-driven measures like the ADA and Section 504. Instead, we adopt a transformative approach that considers Disabled students of Color communities as “connected knowers” (Cannon, 2019). We illustrate how access intimacy and collective interdependence can guide our understanding of Disability, creating spaces where both Disabled and non-Disabled individuals and groups can thrive (Berne et al., 2018; Mingus, 2011).

Thus, we rely on Dolmage’s (2017) conceptualization of “the retrofit” to consider the inadequacy of both accommodation in higher education and onto-epistemological orientations to Disability that assume that Disability can be mediated in the public sphere through isolated, individual approaches. In the following subsections, we present a theoretical framework to consider (a) the broad cultural narratives that derive from cultural interpretations of the ADA and mediate Disability and (b) the ways in which students of Color navigate these onto-epistemological orientations toward Disability that exist within and under the organizational provision of the ADA and among Black and Brown students at a PWI.

Terrible Sticky Truths. TSTs are the persistent, yet often subtle, deficit-oriented narratives that are considered the “common sense” definitions of (pathologizing) labels related to marginalized identities or experiences. The words “terrible” and “sticky” signal the effect of discourses that cultivate negative perceptions of raced and Disabled identities. TSTs can be mobilized through restrictive disablement of cultural narratives and onto-epistemological orientations that understand Disability primarily—or only—as a limiting experience. Importantly, when applied to Disability, TSTs equate material needs for support as a condition of access rather than as a logical outcome of exclusion and as signs of deficit.

Subverted Truths. STs include the lived experiences and connected knowing (Cannon, 2019; Collins, 2000) of those who exist within and under TSTs. STs counteract and dismantle the restrictive narratives imposed by those who seek to undermine one’s knowledge and access to resources. Building on the work of theorists of narrative identity (McAdams, 2018; McClean, 2008; Loseke, 2007), we look at the roles of story- and truth-telling as a means to derive the Subverted Truths that lay the foundation for (counter)cultural narratives that empower Black and Brown students to confront TSTs head-on, questioning the presumptions and “truths” assigned to racialized, Disabled identities (Cannon, 2019). Importantly, STs represent the genuine experiences and connected knowing (Cannon, 2019; Collins, 2000) of individuals who exist within and under TSTs. STs counteract and dismantle the restrictive narratives imposed by those who seek to control access to resources.

Methods

Positionality Statement

We are four researchers across two institutions. M. Nickie Coomer identifies as a White and Asian American cis woman (femme), whose racial identity is often ambiguously interpreted by others as either White or, broadly, “not-White.” She is connected to the issues examined in this research as a Disability studies scholar and instructor in higher education, as well as someone who identifies as having a mental Disability. Importantly, she deeply cares for her students and their wellbeing, and emphasizes the importance of centering the ways in which students of Color with Disabilities make meaning of and communicate their own experiences of mental Disability.

Mercédès Cannon is a Black woman with a Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) Disability from her youth. As an adult, she has dealt with impairments in her speech, enunciation, and language skills, and

has been perceived as uneducable. She has also been pathologized based on her communication style: a pathologization that has been informed and complicated by Eurocentric approaches to speech, grammar, and literacy. Dr. Cannon’s positionality informs her interdisciplinary work around the complex interplay of power and oppression at the intersections of race, gender, accessibility, Disability, and humanizing pedagogy in higher education. Nickie and Mercédès are close friends and colleagues.

Vicente Blas Taijeron identifies as a Queer, cis man from Guam and one of the undergraduate participant-researchers of this project. Tahamina Prity identifies as a Black, Muslim, cis woman and is also one of the undergraduate participant-researchers of this project. Vicente and Tahamina are dear friends, and their relationship informs their approach to this research through their critical care for each other. Nickie, Vicente, and Tahamina are connected to each other through the same institution. Nickie and Vicente met at an off-campus protest by engaging in a conversation. As student leaders on the campus, Vicente and Tahamina participated in meetings with campus administration and faculty regarding student mental health on campus. In community with Authors Nickie and Mercédès, Vicente and Tahamina led the development of the focus group questions, as well as led the focus group.

Context for the Study

This study took place on the campus of a predominantly White, selective liberal arts college. In the Spring of 2022, students at this college organized a walk-out to bring attention to the mental health concerns of the student body. The walk-out, colloquially referred to as “Pause Day,” was rife with tension. Resulting conversations, however, among students, faculty, and administration surfaced the tensions between accessibility and “rigor,” as conceptualized on this campus as competitive, difficult, stressful, and burdensome. Importantly, the discursive implications of accessible curricula as less rigorous surfaced the idea that classroom policies that respect and tend to student mental health and wellness need stand in direct contrast to the competitive rigor that characterizes this school as “selective.”

Despite the tension and critiques from and between some faculty and members of the administration, the students’ organizing—and their activism—led to changes in curriculum, policy, and culture. The college responded to the students’ activism by instituting a 24-hour available online counseling service, many professors responded by including a list of student-recommended commitments to mental health in

their syllabi, and the activism opened doors to broad conversations about mental health and wellness in both public and private conversations, nuancing the situated meanings of that phrase as localized to the college campus. The college also hired a Vice President of Wellness and organized a subcommittee on mental health and wellness that presents quarterly reports on progress toward meeting the demands of students.

We brought together some of the students of Color who were involved in the activism that led to these changes, as well as new students of Color to the campus who volunteered to participate in a focus group about mental health and wellness, Disability, and activism. Participants were recruited through a “snowball method:” student researchers crafted a call for participants and disseminated the call through e-mails and text messages. To protect the privacy of all participants, each participant was assigned a pseudonym in the writing of this research. Furthermore, the recording of the focus group did not include any participants’ names or introductions and was stored in a password-protected database. All files were deleted after they were transcribed. Though Nickie is an instructor on the same campus as the students in the study, she had not taught any of the participants in class during the time of the focus group nor has had them in class at the writing of this manuscript. Recruitment methods, focus group questions, and consent forms were all approved by the Institutional Review Board.

All students self-identified as students of Color: student identities include Black, Arabic, Middle Eastern, Eastern Asian, Latiné, and Southeast Asian. Several students also identified themselves as the children of recent immigrants. Eight participants, all undergraduate students of Color, participated in the focus group. The focus group questions, developed by Vicente and Tahamina, included following:

1. How does your activism relate to identity?
2. What are some core beliefs you have about activism?
3. Are there certain experiences on campus that prompted your activism?
4. How did you learn about Disability/mental health activism?
5. Have you seen your activism produce results (e.g., policy or cultural changes)?
6. Have you encountered Disability scholars of Color in your classes?

Using Cannon’s (2019) framework for Terrible Sticky Truths and Subverted Truths, we engaged in a narrative analysis to examine the reflexive rela-

tionship between cultural, institutional, organizational, and personal narratives (Loseke 2007) through a thematic coding of the transcripts of the focus group. We situated two Terrible Sticky Truths within Okun’s (2001) framework for White supremacy culture to draw the connections between mental wellness and Disability and race and ethnicity, as well as to situate students’ Subverted Truths as onto-epistemologically rooted in their racial and ethnic identities. This process contextualizes students’ Subverted Truths as indivisible from their racial and ethnic identities and makes visible the ways students “talk back” to broader narratives that equate “rigor” with inaccessibility and exclusion.

Findings and Analysis

In this section, we answer Research Question 2: How do students of Color narrate their experiences with defining and understanding mental health, wellness, and mental Disability on a predominantly White campus?

We present these findings by surfacing the TSTs embedded in participants’ discourses throughout the focus group, and then by disrupting those TSTs with a corresponding ST that also surfaced in participants’ narratives throughout the focus group (see Table 1). Importantly, the STs act as critical reframes of TSTs. Drawing attention to the language of both, it is important to remember that both TSTs and STs exist and are taken as truth. Drawing on Margaret Price’s (2010) conceptualization of “mental Disability” as a phrase that encompasses broad experiences of disablement based on the presumption of rationality, it is significant to these findings that we situate participants’ interpretation of their experiences within structures of Whiteness as taken-for-granted truths (i.e., TSTs), and that we situate the critical reframes within participant narratives as equally valid—yet subverted—truths. Importantly, these STs are informed by students’ race, ethnicity, immigration stories, Disability, multigenerational familial interactions, classroom interactions, and the sociopolitical and sociohistorical global contexts through which these identities are formed.

Terrible Sticky Truth 1, Pathologization: Disability is an Isolated Experience

“Therapy is a White Person’s Thing”

The interaction between Whiteness, mental health, and individualism surfaced in students’ narratives in varying ways. During some moments of the focus group, participants attended to the disconnect

Table 1*TSTs and STs Concepts of “Talkin’ Back”*

Terrible Sticky Truth (TSTs)	Subverted Truth (STs)	“Talkin’ Back”
Pathologization: Disability is an Isolated Experience	(Re)Defined Identities, Knowledge, and Competence: Mental Health is an Intergenerational and Communal Experience Shaped by Language	Talking Back to Individualism: Critique of individualized approaches to Disability: that language around mental Disabilities, and talking about them as shared experiences constructed in, by, and through relationship, is an iterative, sociopolitical, and sociohistorical process that is both individual and communal
Disablement and Exclusion: Bio-Meritocracy as Rigorous, Natural, and Necessary	(Re)Valued Identity and Community: Educating Each Other is a Non-Competitive Act of Care	Talking Back to Paternalism and Worship of the Written Word: Educating as activism has to rebuke the idea that there is and can be a perfectionist approach to mental disabilities on campus. This emphasizes a coalitional approach to mental Disabilities in higher education, pushing back on assumptions that equate “belonging” with traditional forms of academic participation. This Subverted Truth values access over accommodation.

between their approaches to mental health and their parents’, alluding to the ways in which attending to mental health and wellness requires the acknowledgment of an issue, as well as a willingness to accept help for that issue. Relatedly, when students discussed how their experiences of mental health and wellness on campus are couched in their racial identities, they alluded to the idea that a singularly understood experience of mental health and wellness through the “white gaze” (hooks, 1992, p. 338) is not accessible to them. Importantly, apparent in many student participant narratives was the idea that there are some experiences that are difficult, but there is an implicit expectation that they should be able to handle them because these experiences are not as intense or as difficult as those of their family members. As participants explained, this feeling toward mental health and wellness is directly related to intergenerational

trauma and the pressure to be grateful for opportunity without complaining; and, importantly, that “therapy” is considered a solution suitable for White people, but not, necessarily, people of Color. We see in participant responses that there is not only an inherently individualistic approach to accommodating mental health and wellness through therapy, but that even accessing therapy is complicated for people of Color who may be more intimately connected (through immediate and recent generations of their family) to the isolating repercussions of colonial violence. Tiana explained this phenomenon:

I never really considered therapy because I think I grew up in a city and I grew up in a school that was like primarily Black and so there's a lot of stigma in Black communities about mental health and, like, therapy being, like, a White person's thing.

And so, like, it was just never talked about at my house. And then my mom started going to therapy after she separated from my father and that was the first time where I was, like, oh, okay, like, this is something that could, like, actually be beneficial.

Similarly, John included how mental health in his family is complicated by the traumas of war.

My family had, like, these mental health issues that they didn't really wanna talk about. And everyone was kind of caged in, like, everything to, the back of their heads, including me. I kind of caged in, almost normalized coming from, like, traumas of war and all that is, [my family] they don't really wanna talk about certain things and they don't wanna talk about, mental health or, like, sexuality and all that.

Paulina indicated similar experiences with being raised with an aversion to acknowledging her own mental health needs.

Yeah, for me, um, growing up, living on a small island, everyone knows everyone. You have to have a good reputation and, I always had to be good in school. I always had to make sure that I was the perfect student. And I didn't realize how that was affecting my mental health until I came here and I realized that I also, you know, I had major anxiety and I would push that aside during high school. So, until recently when I went to therapy I fully sat down with my anxiety and my trauma and gave myself some self-love. I did all of that in high school while still having this mental illness.

Relatedly, Husto highlighted how the pervasiveness of Whiteness at the college, both culturally and institutionally, fosters an aversion to addressing personal mental health needs. He explained how Whiteness made his own mental health experiences invisible and discussed the interplay between race, gender, and mental health. In explaining the interaction between race, gender, and mental health experiences, Husto discussed how he feels “erased” in favor of racialized and gender perceptions of him.

I feel unseen a lot. I feel, students on campus are good at talking about certain issues but not good at interacting with those issues on an activist level. Experiences being erased, of constantly feeling racialized [as] a man of Color a[mong] White folks on campus while men of Color can

do harm it's often perceived. I'm often racialized as aggressive by White folks here and have been racially profiled in class.

Similarly, Tiana pointedly referred to the way White students will appropriate a narrative of marginalization and signal that they feel displaced on campus by students of Color.

I overheard this White boy behind me talking about how he didn't get into his top choice because he was White. A lot of White students feel displaced by people of Color. It made me want to, like, I guess be invisible. And not prove that I belong here but show that race is not the only factor in college admissions and maybe you didn't get into your school for other reasons.

The erasure of racial identities on campus is a function of both individualism and paternalism.

This belief is an omnipotent, normalized way of being and thinking on campus and results in conceptualizing problems—including students' experiences of mental health and wellness—through the lens of Whiteness. Such a belief leads to prescriptively hyper-individualized solutions. Importantly, for the study's participants, the focus on individualized solutions occurs both on campus and at their homes, signaling a broader cultural narrative that mental distress or Disability for people of Color disrupts individual success, and should be handled individually or not at all.

Subverted Truth 1, (Re)defined Identities, Knowledge, and Competence: Mental Health is an Intergenerational and Communal Experience that is Shaped by Language

Importantly, students surfaced generational differences in approaches to mental health and wellness. Their generation's willingness to engage in discussions around mental health plays an important role in destigmatizing it for themselves and their families. Students resituate mental health struggles as an isolated and individualized deficit to an experience likely present across generations in their families and peer groups. By discussing mental health as something they experienced in themselves and their relationships, they highlight how their generation's respectful language and attitudes influence their elders. For example, Tiana noted the following:

I have a parent that has, like, severe mental illness so I grew up around it. My mother goes to mental hospitals a lot so I became an activist as

a kid. I had more of an awareness of it growing up and as I grew older, seeing it in myself or my friends. We've been educated on intergenerational trauma and how being a minority affects your mental health, especially being singled out. I like how this generation is more open to talking about it and addressing it [like] physical illness, which I think is really cool. The rise in social media and Gen Z voices helped me realize my experiences were not normal, but I wasn't alone. That helped me a lot in realizing it was okay to need help and not be okay sometimes.

Paulina agreed, expanding on the discomfort but necessity of communicating her mental wellness to her parents:

I appreciate that our generation today is more understanding, more progressive about mental health compared to my parents' generation. It's my goal to tell my parents, "Hey, this is mental health. This is how I'm taking care of myself." I told my parents recently that I went to therapy and they were like—I already knew they were gonna say this (laughs)—but, "I thought you were okay, happy, alright." Even though parents and older generations don't [always] listen to younger generations, don't be shy to tell them, "Hey, this is what I'm doing [to take care of myself]."

Terrible Sticky Truth 2, Disablement and Exclusion: Bio-meritocracy as Rigorous, Natural, and Necessary

As students discussed their understandings and approaches to mental health and wellness, they noted a need to ignore mental health concerns in favor of "just dealing" with hardship linked to their families' sociological markers, particularly as "poor" or as immigrants. Importantly, this notion reflects "bio-meritocratic" (Taylor & Shallish, 2019, p. 9) logics that view inability to succeed as an individual shortfall, leading to exclusion or failure in the broader environment. Coupled with Okun's (2001) White supremacy cultural markers of Individualism and Worship of the Written Word, this focus on isolated experiences of mental health and wellness as a shortcoming ignores the broader, systemic oppressions that often compound the disablement and exclusionary TST experiences of historically marginalized people. A meritocratic attitude of "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" situates immigrants within broader narratives of belonging and overcoming. For example, Mia explains the pressure to have it all together.

I relate to that a lot. At my high school we had four deaths in two weeks. It was very hard on everybody and the teachers kind of just ignored it. My math teacher [said], "This won't work in college, you need to get it together." And somebody that died was my friend. He was like, "You need to get it together." And you can be an advocate for... "If, guys, if you need any help please let me know." But then he would tell me, "This isn't like you," because I've always been [a] straight-A student and ended up getting a D in that class. He try a tough dad talk, but you need to show kindness in those types of situations.

Ali shared how she understood her own dad's experience to include narratives of gratefulness that do not have room to include the hardships that come with mental health experiences.

Like my dad immigrated here from India and went through a whole bunch of shit when he was growing up. He managed to do very well for himself and become a doctor. He feels like he can't complain because he's doing well.

Tiana also described an experience of mental health that is specifically related to her family's racial identity.

I grew up a very anxious child and I never realized that was not normal. I would hear my parents arguing about money and [it made me] anxious about money. Their response w[as] always, "That's not your problem to worry about," but I [was] not sleeping because of it. I always thought it was normal and I didn't understand that my friends also weren't, like, freaking out. It took me a long time to realize that there were resources because no one really talked about it. My grandmother had obsessive-compulsive tendencies but never got help.

Similarly, Khadijah explains how she ignored her mental health because she had to work hard to get to college. She compares her perspective on mental health before attending a selective PWI.

I always had that sense of mental health [and] wellbeing but I ignored it because I never had that support system a lot of people have. My parents didn't speak English. I knew that I had to get into college [without spending] money because I'm poor and I can't afford it. So I ignored my mental health to get where I am. At college [I] noticed the wealth disparity and how some students cope bet-

ter with mental health because of their resources. I got involved with student government and ingrained the [importance of] mental health aspect of (college).

Subverted Truth 2, (Re)valued Identity and Community: Educating Each Other is Non-Competitive and an Act of Critical Care

Educating and Advocacy for Self and Family

In direct contrast to a hyper-individualized experience of education, students described experiences in which they educated others. Husto contextualized this type of education as an act of “critical care,” emphasizing that activism, specifically related to mental health and wellness, but also broadly, can be kind and stretches beyond an individual’s own interests. Khadijah followed up by explaining the following:

I think, kind of going off of that, and being, like, a Brown woman who has a Disability and first-gen immigrant, my advocacy came from a forced place. I often had to advocate for myself and my family to get a better education and have my Disability acknowledged in the school system.

John shared a similar story.

Similarly, my father [and] my whole family on my father’s side was refugees, and none of them received college educations. My advocacy or activism, activism [focus on] first generations and low-income families because I saw my family struggles to help me thrive and achieve a good education [to] support the family in the future.

Paulina agreed, explaining that educating and advocating goes beyond her own interests.

To echo on that, I’m a second gen immigrant. Both sides of my family immigrated from the Philippines and my grandparents work[ed] on the sugar plantations. It was really hard for them to provide for my mom and her, and siblings. I’m a huge believer for equity as a minority and a woman, I want everyone from all backgrounds have the opportunity.

Activism Can Be Kind and Rooted in Radical Love and Critical Care

Interestingly and importantly, student participants noted the degree to which their activism— enacted within larger scale demonstrations as well as within interpersonal relationships—can be kind. And that

this kindness is, in itself, a radical act that is rooted not in pleasantries or even niceties, but rather dependent on the labor required for honesty about their experiences. They conceptualize this labor as an act toward a greater good. Husto begins this conceptualization of activism through kindness, radical love, and critical care by emphasizing the significance of centering each other’s humanity in their activism.

There’s this conception that we need to be critical because we’re a field (Race, Ethnicity, and Migration Studies and Feminist and Gender Studies) that hasn’t traditionally garnered a lot of respect. But what is activism without kindness and humility and humanity centered? Activism should always be critical, but we should never kind of sacrifice the fact that we’re human beings first.

Ali agreed, adding the following:

Like, activism doesn’t always have to be, in my opinion, so aggressive, but, little acts of kindness would show somebody that you’re an advocate for them.

Mia acknowledged that as individuals, we are often thrown into situations in which we do not always act on what is right because inequities persist at societal levels. She emphasized, however, the significance of kindness and “grace” in the activist spaces we occupy.

Sometimes activism can be difficult because individuals don’t fully realize exactly what we’ve internalized. I fully agree that kindness is so important. But I also think that it is possible [that] my actions don’t always fully line up with what I know, I truly believe. Reflecting on it you realize this is what society has put into me. Society doesn’t want us to be activists. It’s not set up for us to push for change, it’s set up for us to accept this is how life is. It’s an important perspective to look at everything that we’ve internalized, but grace is important too. Because no one’s perfect all the time, including activists.

Tiana relayed a story of a White classmate telling her how “articulate” she is, and described her response to this student as an act of both education and advocacy: that taking up space educates White students, but is also important for advocating for herself and for other students of color.

After we’ve been reading this book about women of Color, there’s one section saying, not to call a

woman of Color “articulate.” Well she did that. I’m aware of how White of a school this is, but to be singled out, “Wow, it’s really surprising that, like, you know what you’re talking about.” There’s still so much work to be done from an activist standpoint because people and things get better over time. Maybe. That made me really realize how important it is to take up space in academic settings to show that not only I can but I should.

The way Tiana frames her own acts of taking up space in academic settings as important for her own growth and learning, but also important for her White classmates’ growth and learning requires an important consideration for how Tiana’s intentionality in taking up space has effects beyond her own experience. Through her initial shock of her White classmate’s comment, Tiana actually reinforces her own worth and positions her embodied experience as part of “the work that needs to be done,” presumably not only for herself and her classmate in that isolated interaction, but broadly and over time in the campus community.

Discussion

Complicating TSTs as deficit-oriented cultural narratives that can inform the construction of personal identity, we incorporate TSTs and STs to analyze the relationship between personal identity and cultural understandings of mental health, wellness, and, ultimately, Disability by analyzing the narratives of Black and Brown students at a PWI. Our exploration supports preceding research that has troubled the idea that Disability justice can be achieved through the granting of an individual right, rather than an effort in collective access. This notion emerges in discourse to represent individual accommodations not as an authentic representation of Disability justice, but rather as an emphasis on meritocracy—and bio-meritocracy—perpetuated within (neoliberal) cultural narratives around Black and Brown people, as well as within Disability law and policy. These emphases rely on beliefs about individualism, paternalism, and the significance of the written word, and support the terrible, sticky, rhetorical logic of pathologization, disablement, and exclusion (Cannon, 2019).

Talkin’ Back to Individualism

Importantly, by bridging Dolmage’s (2017) conceptualization of individualism as a discursive catalyst for the consideration of Disability accommodation as an “abeyance structures” (p. 77) and Okun & Jones’ (2001) framing of individualism as an element of “white supremacy culture,” we consider how stu-

dent participants reframed their individualized experiences away from isolation and instead situated their experiences as relative to their families and peers. We name this as participants’ “Subverted Truth” of *(Re)defined Identities, Knowledge, and Competence: Mental Health is an Intergenerational and Communal Experience that is Shaped by Language*. Participants animate this truth in the ways they talk about their own experiences as they relate to those of their peers and families. For example, even though Tiana may not have directly “talked back” to her White classmate who commented on how “articulate” she is, Tiana situated her reaction—though internal—in the work of the Black women she was reading in her class and her commitment to “taking up space” as part of a broader, collective action. Relatedly, John, Tiana, and Paulina contextualized their generational discourses with mental health and wellness as part of their families’ intergenerational learning around mental health and wellness as contextually informed, not only a sign of individual deficit. When Paulina mentioned that her parents reacted to her seeking therapy as she “thought they would” by contrasting the need for therapy with being content and happy, she illustrates the generational conceptual shift in thinking through the need for mental health support as a need that derives not from a lack of mental wellness and fortitude, but rather as a need that can coexist and promote mental health and wellness.

Talkin’ Back to “Paternalism” and “Worship of the Written Word”

In connection with how students consider their experiences as communal and part of broader, collective understandings around mental health and wellness that are shifting away from individualized deficits are the ways in which participants also consider their roles in critical care for themselves and both their White and peers of Color. “Paternalism” is directly related to “Worship of the Written Word” because if we rely on legally afforded, individual rights as proxies for Disability justice, then we, as a society, tacitly endorse that idea that Disability justice can be afforded to us through laws and policies often developed well outside of individual, relational networks, and that justice can be achieved by the adherence to or compliance with these laws.

We frame the ways that student participants “talk back” to paternalistic, individual rights-centered conceptualizations of Disability justice through a “Subverted Truth” of *(Re)valued Identity and Community: Educating Each Other is Non-Competitive and an Act of Critical Care*. During the focus group, Husto discussed the ways in which his racialized and gen-

dered experiences on campus often lead to a feeling of being both hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. Because his actions, beliefs, ideologies, and general embodiment are perceived by his peers as being “radical,” he feels as though there is not also space for him to tend to or care about his own mental health and wellness for fear that when he does, his experiences are wrapped into the narratives of “aggression” that already surround him.

Because taking care of his mental health and wellness are inseparable from the ways in which his embodied experience is marginalized by race and gender, Husto communicated that he has to be extremely intentional in the way he not only takes care of himself, but also in his interpersonal relationships across campus. Incredibly, and perhaps unfairly, Husto also emphasized that activism should center kindness, humility, and humanity. John, Mia, Khadijah, Paulina, and Tiana all agreed, sharing varying instances of how their own experiences have had to require “grace,” whether with their family or with their peers and the broader campus community. Positioning their activism as acts of critical care that are non-competitive even though they exist in a competitive academic setting subverts the idea that accommodating mental health and wellness is a only a top-down effort, administered by academic offices. Instead, student participants aptly, if not beautifully, described networks of care that occur through their racialized, gendered, and (dis)abled embodied experiences.

Implications: Accessible Education Service Community of Practice

In this section, we answer Research Question 3: In what ways can collaborative and communal educational practices, including intergenerational teaching and critical care, be implemented to foster collective access and well-being for Black and Brown college students with and without identified disabilities?

As we acknowledge the necessity of individualized accommodations for Disabled students, we must also recognize that these accommodations are narrowly based on Disability diagnoses and the limitations individuals face in their daily functions and while they are in an academic setting. If we broaden Disability justice to include collective approaches to Disability, then Disabled students should not only receive protection from discrimination through legal accommodation, but should also receive support in the forms of collective, critical care. A collective, critical care approach to mental health and wellness on a college campus, for example, talks directly back to the TSTs of pathologization (individualism), dis-

ablement, and exclusion that often undergird student experiences of discrimination.

Accessible Education Service Community of Practice (AESCoP)

Mental health advocacy and activism rooted in kindness, empathy/critical understanding, grace, and the critical care of students of Color extends beyond a mere challenge to discomfort, and instead names and critiques the ways in which Whiteness operates to define mental health and wellness challenges, as well as prescribes the meritocratic efforts necessary to overcome them. By surfacing the logics of Whiteness and White supremacy culture within Disability law, we highlight the pitfalls of an overly individualistic and exclusionary approach to accessibility in postsecondary education. This finding necessitates a critical shift from individual accommodation to a more comprehensive pursuit: equity through *communal engagement*. In her role as the director of accessible education services in higher education, Mercédès Cannon has developed a framework for an Accessible Education Services Community of Practice (AESCoP). Within this community of practice, a consortium of students, staff, faculty, administrators, and external supporters collaborate to establish relationships between accessibility services offices and other administrative, student-facing offices on postsecondary campuses. Members of the AESCoP transcend standard ADA-compliance-focused services by invoking Mia Mingus’ (2011) concept of “access intimacy,” emphasizing ongoing personal connections, shared responsibilities, and the acknowledgment of vulnerabilities in providing accessible educational opportunities. This approach to accessible postsecondary education moves away from individualized accommodations and toward Interdependence in Action, treats everyone as equals, supports diverse needs, and fosters genuine belongingness, thus forming a nurturing environment for all stakeholders involved.

Furthermore, AESCoP integrates the principles of Disability justice, challenging ableism—centering not only Disabled students but also Disabled students of Color. In this model, members of accessibility service offices prioritize the voices of Disabled students of Color as connected knowers whose perspectives on inclusivity, equity, and accessibility are valued and respected. This active integration of access-intimacy, interdependence, and Disability justice principles enhances the work of collective access, collaborative and communal accessibility services, and critical care for Disabled students of Color and challenges the endemic inequities individuals face at the intersections of race, gender expression, and ability. Through this

transformative approach, AESCoP centers belongingness, where companionship, affiliation, and connectedness redefine the educational experience for all involved and align with the values and goals of Disabled students to fundamentally change the landscape of inclusivity in higher education.

Practitioners must reevaluate their methods for engaging Disabled students of Color and question how their practices might align with an AESCoP approach. Critical questions include: Are our interventions truly fostering equity, or are they merely superficial accommodations? How can faculty be encouraged to adopt a collective approach, ensuring access is not just an obligation but a shared responsibility? Practitioners must consider how to create meaningful educational experiences that prioritize collective access by fundamentally reevaluating pedagogical approaches. This transformative shift will redefine educational opportunities to learn and grow and pave the way for a genuinely inclusive higher education landscape.

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