An Awakening Consciousness: Underrepresented and Racially Minoritized Disabled College Student Experiences

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Abstract

There has been considerable research examining racialized experiences and disabled experiences separately in higher education. Disabled student experiences have been marked by having to navigate institutional oppressive racist or disabled structures to meet the educational needs required to succeed on campus. There has been minimal research examining the combination of racialized, disabled experiences in higher education. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to illustrate how six underrepresented and racially minoritized (URM) disabled students experience race and disability while navigating higher education. Disability Critical Race (DisCrit) framework guided the research and interpretation of the results. This study used an identity-first language approach to connect race and disability to participants and provide autonomy and control of individual and collective racialized, disabled experiences. Through semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups, this study found that students perceived racialized experiences more tangibly than disabled experiences, there was a lack of representation on campus needed to meet URM disabled students' needs, and building URM disabled students' community created asset-based perceptions of racialized and disabled experiences. These findings should help higher education administration, faculty, staff, and students create supportive programs, initiatives, structures, and strategic planning that dismantle inherent racist and ableist structures, prioritize URM-disabled students, and provide more equitable higher education experiences and outcomes.

Keywords: underrepresented and racially minoritized, disability, college students, race, higher education

Introduction

With the continued increase in disabled students enrolling in higher education, there is a need for research that examines disabled experiences within college campus environments (Kimball et al., 2016; Faggella-Luby et al., 2017). More importantly, greater attention must be paid to racial and disabled intersectional experiences in higher education. Research has typically been centered on white disabled experience. At the same time, underrepresented and racially minoritized (URM) students have had to navigate, negotiate, and pursue disability justice despite limited recognition or opportunities to tell their story through scholarship (Bell, 2011; Ramirez-Stapleton et al., 2020). To advance disability justice through scholarship, research must examine URM disability experiences while empowering URM students to tell their stories, highlight their voices, and advocate through scholarship (Bell, 2011; Miles et al., 2017). Diversity initiatives and programming need intersectional approaches that incorporate disability into discussions along with traditional identities such as race, sexuality, gender, and religion, among other identities students bring with them to higher education (Miller, 2018; Peña et al., 2016). Using intersectional approaches can help illustrate how students perceive their experiences with multiple identities on campus (Crenshaw, 1991).

Identity development occurs through environmental experiences and involves diverse identity characteristics (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). All identities that students bring with them to college have the potential to influence or inform their experiences at any given time. Disability identity development focuses on how physically and invisibly disabled people conceptualize themselves in the context of being disabled. Models have included various thought processes and

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beliefs about how disability identity develops. Disabled students use these categories to make intentional connections to their experiences. While race in the context of higher education has been highlighted in scholarship, there has been a lack of explicit identification of racism and racist structures, processes, and policies that directly influence the lives of URM students (Harper, 2012). For example, while higher education scholarship has examined disproportionate campus engagement by white students versus racially minoritized student populations, there has been less research on the racism encountered by racially minoritized students, including interactions with white faculty and racism in the residence halls that may influence their willingness and ability to engage with their campus (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Considering the newness of the disability identity model and the inconsistencies of the racial identity development models in higher education, it is essential to gain insight into how students make meaning of being a URM disabled student on a higher education campus.

Using intersectional approaches provides a greater range of meaning for multiple identities among college students daily (Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Griffin & Museus, 2011; Miller, 2018). Disability identity has been viewed in isolation, with minimal exploration of intersections of other marginalized identities (Shaw et al., 2012). This paper uses identity-first language to reclaim the disability identity while promoting the autonomy of existence (Botha et al., 2021; Dunn et al., 2015).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how URM disabled students perceived racial and disabled identities during their experiences on higher education campuses. This study can serve as an extension of discussions and conversations related to postsecondary education and first-year college experiences by focusing on how URM-disabled students make meaning of their college experiences. In this current research, I explored this topic through interviews with current URM-disabled students on higher education campuses. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do URM college-disabled students make meaning of their perceptions of racial and disabled experiences on higher education campuses?
2. In what ways do URM disabled students' self-perceptions about race and disability influence their higher education experience?

Racialized Higher Education Experiences

Higher education scholarship and institutions have, at times, intentionally omitted the systematic oppression of racist structures that have marginalized underrepresented, minoritized racial student populations on campus (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Harper, 2012). However, underrepresented racially minoritized students have been making meaning of racial experiences in their navigation of higher education campuses. Meaning has been made by combining previous racialized experiences and learning about race through academic and social experiences in higher education institutions (Johnston-Guererro, 2016).

Underrepresented and racially minoritized students at PWIs have had to navigate microaggressions such as deficit-based expectations by their professors by seeking alternative support systems on campus for their academics while addressing trauma caused by this racialized experience (Carroll, 1998; Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2023; Franklin, 2019; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Smith et al., 2016; Steele, 2003). Being underrepresented, combined with experiencing stereotypes, including deficit-based thinking, racial and ethnic jokes, and racialized hostility, can amplify marginalization (Hope et al., 2018; McGee, 2016; Yosso et al., 2009). URM students have also felt exploited by higher education institutions and seen as the racial "token" representing the campus' performative diversity initiatives and activism (Mills, 2020). For example, Black racialized experiences on PWI and HSIU campuses have been perceived as their expectation from faculty, leadership, and staff as not being able to succeed, which has resulted in limited opportunities for professional growth, with the only places of refuge and value for Blackness on campus being Black cultural centers (Harper et al., 2018).

While higher education has provided opportunities for URM students to explore their ethnic identities, some Latinx students have grappled with limited representation and colorism between the diversity of country origins or ethnicity and have, instead, chosen to reject white supremacy and embrace their Latinx identity, considering the dynamics related to their institution (Cole, 2009; Mena, 2022). Racialized experiences create opportunities for Latinx students to embrace their diverse ethnic identities while seeing the differences between different Latinx cultures (Von Robertson et al., 2016). Hispanic Serving Institution Latinx students have experienced linguistic and ethnic stereotypes (i.e., every Latinx student is Mexican) that created a campus perception that Latinx students were a monolithic population (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2023; Gooden & Martin, 2014).

Indigenous students are often tasked with the difficult decision of choosing to leave their communities to obtain degrees in professional fields at PWIs that can ultimately allow them to give back to their communities upon graduation (Cech et al., 2017). Indigenous higher education experiences have been marked by egregious institutional displays of demonstration, including campus celebrations of historical inaccuracies (e.g., Columbus Day observances) and representations of negative stereotypes, such as universities having Indian-themed mascots (Fish & Syed, 2018). While many Indigenous students have enrolled on higher education campuses, institutions still need to adequately support their matriculation through graduation (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003).

To combat racialized experiences, strategies such as Beasting and openly challenging racial microaggressions by emphasizing values from the Black community have been utilized to assert Black intellect and culture into discussions as a counternarrative to the dominant, white discourse in higher education (Morales, 2021). Another strategy has been to create and utilize social counter places as a way to create community, reaffirm race and ethnicity, and build a sense of belonging that can be beneficial to a thriving campus experience for underrepresented racial minoritized students (Robertson et al., 2016; Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). URM students are most successful when universities enable them to integrate their ethnicity and culture into their college experiences (Guillory, 2009).

Disabled Higher Education Experiences

The white Disabled Experience

While there has been a continued increase in disabled student enrollment in higher education, most higher education disability scholarship has focused on and been conducted by white scholars through the lens of the white, disabled experience (Newman et al., 2011; Miles & Forber-Pratt, 2017; Toutain, 2019). This has led to an evasive conceptualization of disabled experiences that ignores the historical impact of racist structures and systems and uses race neutrality to show laws and policies as normative, thus resulting in a white understanding of disability (Stapleton & James, 2020). In addition, limited numbers of racially diverse scholars and URM-disabled student participants have contributed to this failure to gain a more URM, disabled understanding of the disability experience. This white-focused disability research fails to grasp the importance that racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds have played in shaping their understanding of disability identity (García-Fernández, 2014). Pearson (2010) described the need for disability intersectional research to have the same rigor often applied to scholarship related to intersections of other social identities (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, sexuality).

White-focused disability research related to the disabled higher education experience has typically focused on academic achievement, social and peer interactions, and acquiring supportive services. The white, disabled experiences have been marked by feelings of inadequacy and the belief that they must work harder than their non-disabled peers to succeed academically on campus (Brewer et al., 2023; Kimball et al., 2016). Disability disclosure is a timely and laborious process that white disabled and URM-disabled students experience with different influences and desired outcomes (Samuels, 2003; Wilke et al., 2024). White disabled students have navigated disclosure through perceptions of how the campus responds to Disability (Wood, 2017). Hesitation may result from confusion of different messages from the campus climate about disability that may indicate stigma. Perceptions of unwelcoming places have included campus classrooms and dormitories (Aquino et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). It has been understood that perceived disability identity can be fluid and contingent on a multitude of factors, including how disability may be defined in the campus environment (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013). Therefore, it must be viewed as a continuous process that may be unique to each disabled student.

The URM Disabled Experience

URM-disabled students have taken significantly more cautious approaches to disability disclosure. Approaches have been from an internal cost-benefit analysis and self-advocacy perspective of disclosure that prioritizes self-preservation (Karpicz, 2020). Knowing the negative implications and consequences of how their racial identities were perceived by systems of power on campus have shown to create a cautious mindset predicated on survival (Banks, 2017; Connor, 2008; Hernandez-Saca, 2016). Disclosure for URM disabled students could risk causing psychological and emotional strain that could compound existing racialized microaggressions, such as minimization of life experiences and alienation from classroom activities (Banks, 2017; Connor, 2008, 2009; Dávila, 2015).

The Disabled Experience

Requesting accommodations, once enrolled in higher education, has become a challenge for both white and URM-disabled students who may not

have had any responsibility and control in requesting or utilizing accommodations in their secondary education experience (Anctil et al., 2008; Newman & Madaus, 2015). Higher education institutions have historically provided limited information about available accommodations, which makes it harder for disabled students to identify accommodations to request and impacts their ability to build self-determination skills (Fleming et al., 2017; Hong, 2015).

Many higher education faculty and staff are also not equipped to work with disabled students in general due to a lack of disability-related knowledge and understanding of students' needs and experiences (Evans et al., 2017; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2006). White disabled higher education students are often met with deficit-based attitudes from faculty who are hesitant to provide reasonable accommodations and often attempt to persuade students to enroll in alternative courses or majors that may be less challenging considering their Disability (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Hong, 2015; Perry & Franklin, 2006). URM disabled students, often being met with resistance for their racial identification, are aware of the further limitations, educational access, and blatant resistance that will come from faculty with any requests for additional classroom support (Hernández-Saca, 2016; Petersen, 2006; Wright, 2012).

With the plethora of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to create more equitable higher education experiences, the disabled experience of both white disabled and URM disabled students, and disability in general, has been left out of many diversity-related conversations on campus (Baker et al., 2016). Campuses should focus on creating environments and developing personnel who see racial, disabled, and cultural accessibility as a priority and strategy for increasing campus enrollment (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Harper et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2003; Zehner, 2018; Vaccaro et al., 2015).

Considering the plethora of white, disabled higher education scholarship, in addition to how color evasiveness has allowed racial and disabled identities to be studied in isolation, this study seeks to provide a nuanced examination of racialized, disabled student experiences on higher education on campuses. Race and disability have been historically marginalized in higher education settings and the target of multiple forms of discrimination, such as microaggressions (Annamma, 2016; Stapleton & James, 2020). Race can add to the already complex understanding of disabled experiences, including decisions of disclosure (Karpicz, 2020; Owens, 2015; Shakespeare & Watson, 2001). This study provides insight into how racist and ableist systems in higher education are experienced by URM-disabled students (Annamma et al., 2013; Dolmage, 2017). This knowledge can be pivotal in creating systems and policies that support URM-disabled students and offer opportunities through interaction with key stakeholders (Patton et al., 2016).

DisCrit

This study employed Disability Critical Race (DisCrit) as an analytical lens to examine how URM disabled students make meaning of disabled and racial experiences while navigating racist and ableist higher education systems and practices to develop counternarratives (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit is comprised of seven tenets that can be used to support its use as a framework (Annamma et al., 2013), as follows:

1. DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normality.
2. DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability class, gender, and sexuality.
3. DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.
4. DisCrit privileges the voices of marginalized populations, which are traditionally not acknowledged within research.
5. DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.
6. DisCrit recognizes whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have primarily been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.
7. DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.

DisCrit examines how race, racism, disability, and ableism are intertwined into the interactions and structures of higher education (Crenshaw, 1991; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). This study utilized Tenet Two to emphasize the complexity of negotiating multiple marginalized identities and the role of stigma and segregation (Annamma et al., 2016). Tenet Four was also used in this study to prioritize URM disabled student stories and how they navigate their world. This

approach shifts the discourse to an asset-based one, with URM-disabled students having the autonomy to tell their stories while being centered as creators of knowledge and scholarship (Annamma et al., 2014; Connor, 2008; Ferri & Connor, 2010).

Research Design

A phenomenological research design with a constructivist approach was employed for this study. Phenomenological research explores the everyday experiences of individuals surrounding a phenomenon to make meaning (Bhattacharya, 2017). Using a constructivist approach allows URM disabled students to socially construct and translate how they make meaning of disability and race while on a higher education campus. This research design and worldview approach broadens the focus on disability and race while also taking into consideration other factors, such as environment and personal interactions that influence perceptions and the complexity of identity development (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peña et al., 2016; Smith-Chandler et al., 2014).

Positionality

As a Black-disabled male with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, this study emerged from my firsthand experiences as a student in higher education and my professional experiences as a doctoral faculty member. In conversations and discussions, it was easier to make sense of racial experiences as a Black male. Conversations related to disability were more complex and were met with skepticism and accusations that I was requesting accommodation to gain an unfair advantage. It always felt like being Black was the most salient of my identities, and being disabled was something I had to add on. It was challenging to consider the impact of both identities in college. Being an insider in this research resulted in a safe environment for participants to be authentic in their reflections and descriptions of navigating higher education through race and disability identities. Interviews provided participants with opportunities to make sense of how racial and disability dynamics shaped their experiences. While I was in these spaces as a researcher, there were reciprocal learning moments where new ways of thinking about race and disabled identities emerged that will be valuable as I continue to prioritize URM disabled voices in higher education research and practitioner spaces.

Setting and Participants

This study utilized purposeful sampling procedures to obtain participants. Email solicitations to disability services offices, student organization lists, and social media announcements were used to recruit participants. To be included in the study, students had to be full-time college students, identify as Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, or multiracial, and identify as disabled in the following categories: Health-related (e.g., irritable bowel syndrome), learning (e.g., Learning Disabled), or socioemotional (e.g., Anxiety). Students who volunteered in the study received compensation for their participation with their choice of a $20 Amazon or Starbucks gift card code that I purchased from my funds. Students did not have to be affiliated or registered with their disability services office.

Six students participated in this study. Students represented one public and two private predominantly white higher education institutions (PWIs) in the Northeast, with enrollments ranging from 7,000 to 24,000 students—five students identified as female, and one participant identified as male. Four students were out-of-state residents, and three were first-generation students. Four students had contacted the disability services office at least once since arriving on their college campus. All the students had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) at some point in their high school education. Three students were currently using accommodation from disability services at college. These accommodations included extra time for assignments, separate testing, modified class schedules, locations, residence hall locations, and priority registration. Table 1 shows participant demographics for this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two individual, semi-structured interviews and one focus group interview. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility and the opportunity to consider alternative methods and explanations participants use to explain how they make meaning of their experiences that are not directly related to the scripted interview questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Interviews were conducted via Zoom or Google Hangout and were scheduled based on the availability of the participants. The duration for each interview and focus group was 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded using audio devices, and electronic audio files were transferred to DropBox for file storage before being sent out for transcription.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Race	Disability	College	Class Standing	Major
Janice	Black	Learning Disabled	Private	Sophomore	Sociology
Rhonda	Black	Lupus	Public	Junior	Education
Jordan	Black/White	Anxiety	Public	Sophomore	Business
Kele	Indigenous	Anxiety	Private	Sophomore	Undecided
Aja	Black	ADHD	Private	First-year	Undecided
Juana	Latinx	Bipolar Disorder	Public	Sophomore	Pre-Med

The first interview was designed to obtain background information from students and gain deeper insight into their understanding of their racial and disability identities. There were questions related to racial and disability self-identification, in addition to questions about how they felt during experiences with race and disability. This initial interview was in alignment with DisCrit Tenet One that focuses on the forces of racism and ableism that circulate interdependently, often in invisible ways, in the lives of URM-disabled students (Annamma et al., 2013; Johnstone, 2004). From there, I asked questions about the perceived feelings associated with both identities.

A second interview was conducted with participants that focused on their experiences and interactions with race and disability on campus. Participants were asked how campuses met needs and how URM-disabled students sought or advocated for racial and disability support on campus. They were asked about disclosure and perceived responses by peers and other stakeholders on campus. Aligned with DisCrit Tenet Three, this interview examined the impact of being labeled with racial and disability identities on a college campus.

Four of the six participants were able to attend a focus group interview. This interview was audio recorded and centered on collective experiences and what it meant to be in conversation and community with other racially diverse and disabled college peers. The group generated recommendations for better awareness of and shifting the narrative about URM-disabled students in higher education. A conversation about the greater disability community, including URM physically disabled students, occurred. Like Tenet Four, this focus group highlighted the voices of the URM disabled students who have been absent from traditional scholarship (Annamma et al., 2016). It also served as a mechanism to champion disability as a community (Johnstone, 2004). After completing the twelve interviews and the focus group, audio files were emailed to a transcription service.

Analysis

Data transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose for analysis. An inductive coding approach was used to ensure that the study was flexible and open to what the data were saying (Miles et al., 2014). First, in vivo coding was used in the primary analysis to extract meaning from the literal words spoken by participants (Strauss, 1987). Then, several preliminary themes (e.g., "new understanding") were generated during this process. Next, a focused coding approach was applied to highlight the most significant codes to generate the most meaningful categories from the data (Charmaz, 2014). For example, the codes "disclosure," "peer acceptance," and "uncertainty" were related to encounters URM disabled students had on their college campuses. Finally, the codes were clustered together and renamed "Peer Relationship Development," which was more helpful in making analytic sense of the data (Saldaña, 2021). I attempted member checks with all participants to confirm the data interpretation and to see if any new developments had occurred in their experiences since data collection. Three participants responded to the inquiry. Their feedback was received and compared with the data to determine if it was supported. Participants indicated that they had met virtually as a group two times since the study and had formed a group chat.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included that students were enrolled at PWIs, but the findings may be transferable to URM disabled student experiences at colleges with other designations (e.g., HBCUs, HSIs, community colleges). This study captured the perceptions and experiences of predominately URM-disabled students with sophomore class standings during one moment in time and did not capture initial URM-disabled student perceptions of college or changes in perceptions over time while on campus. Only three of the six students in this study were registered with disability services, so I do not know the extent to which being affiliated with disability services influences URM disabled student experiences. This study does not capture the full range of disabilities, and there must not be an attempt to generalize racial and disabled experiences on all college campuses. Other diverse college experiences encompass other identities besides race and disability that were not captured in this study. I could only reach some participants for the follow-up member checks after data collection to inquire about updated experiences and review data interpretation and analysis.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the influences of racial and disability identities of students of color with disabilities on higher education campuses. URM disabled students' perceptions of race and disability yielded the following emergent findings: Race was a more tangible identity for students to perceive than disability, and higher education campuses lack representation and support to meet URM disabled student needs and engage in disability community-created asset-based perceptions of race and disability.

Students acknowledged they needed to embrace disability like they did race, but they had difficulty synthesizing racial and disability experiences. Participants quickly expressed college experiences with race while having difficulty discussing disability experiences beyond medical model thinking, which views disability through the lens of medical intervention, rehabilitation, and cure (Shakespeare, 2006). For some students, while college represented a new educational experience, it also shed more light on how disability identity was present to them than prior experiences. The findings from this study align with DisCrit to provide counternarratives of disability and race perceptions in higher education experiences from the students' perspectives.

Race More Tangible than Disability

Students in the study were familiar with race's role in their everyday interactions and lives. Due to attending PWIs, students were very aware of how their racial identities were marginalized. Some students were also from predominantly white communities and were hypersensitive to racism and racist structures in education; they could identify stereotypes and microaggressions encountered on campus and at home. This awareness resulted in students seeking refuge in spaces or programs specific to racial groups (e.g., Latinx Students United), which they believed would help them succeed and remain on campus (Baker & Robnett, 2012).

Aja came to college from an urban environment and lived in an apartment complex with predominantly Black and Brown residents. She went to school with very few white students, so college was a culture shock at first. She said, "I had to think if I wanted to go through with going to college here with all these white people." While Aja had heard stories about racism and seen incidents on social media and television, she had rarely interacted with white people. Through her experience as a participant in organizations for people of color before college and during her first semester, she learned how building community could help fight against inequities. Aja was a part of several student-of-color mentoring programs throughout high school. She vividly recalled how those experiences led to her seeking community with people of color upon entering college:

> There were no white people in my hood. I do not know where the white students in my school came from. So, it was crazy that in my first class, a white girl talked about my hair to her friends. I do not know what she said, but I knew I needed to be around my people, so I joined the Black Students United organization that day. After joining this group, I found out others went through this.

Jordan and Lana grew up in suburban environments and were used to being marginalized in educational settings. Both of their high schools were predominantly white. Although Jordan identified as biracial, he felt his school identified him as Black. He said, "I just feel like I am more in touch with my Black side and have been seen as Black by others my whole life." When he came to college, he found community more easily with Black students and other students of color. With them, there was never any discussion of him being multiracial, and Jordan felt more at ease and accepted by other Black and Brown peers in the community.

> I felt very isolated in my neighborhood. My mom was Black, and my dad was white. In school, people would ask me why Black people were good at rapping and assumed that my skills in sports were because I was Black. I remember being asked by my teachers in school what I thought about Barack Obama being the first Black president. I could not wait to get out of there. Here, I fit in more with Black and Latinx people. I find we have more in common, and I like being around them. I joined the Black student group and multicultural posse, and it feels like I have always known everyone in the group. It feels like I found my home.

Lana experienced some similar incidents growing up and believed federal legislation and immigration debates contributed to the racist experiences she had in high school and college. She said, "They talk like they know what being an immigrant is, and then you hear other white people use what they say on TV to say why people that look like me should not come here." She described how coming to college and joining the Latinx student organization made her comfortable and eased the transition to college:

> During high school and my first year here, white students in my classes or the student center would ask me if I was a dreamer and would yell that I was taking away college from American students. I was born in America, and I do not speak Spanish fluently. When I saw the flyer inviting me to join the campus Latinx student organization, I was initially nervous. After attending the meeting, I immediately joined and benefitted from the support of all the members. I joined other student cultural groups and believe our school has a strong foundation of students of color leaders.

When discussing experiences with being disabled, students were less clear about their identity and provided more prescriptive accounts of experiences. They perceived disability as an identity through medical model lenses that they needed to fix their impairment. URM students described their disability identity as a part of them that needed a remedy so they could continue to live life and do well in class (Asch & Fine, 1988). Kele described her disability identity the following way, "I have anxiety issues and tend to get nervous in places with many people or when I have to take exams. I go and talk with a counselor to get rid of my anxiety so I can do what I need to do in class or with my student groups." Janice came from a predominantly Black and Brown neighborhood. While she knew of Black and Brown disabled students from seeing students in special education classes in high school, it was not something she thought about in college. She did not view her disability like other peers in her special education who may have been identified with a learning disability or emotional disturbance. She said, "Teachers could not help me in school, so those special classes or whatever would not work for me." Janice perceived her disability as personal and something that needed medical surveillance and intervention to get her through challenging days.

> I have lupus, so I may miss some classes if I have flare-ups with rashes, if I am sore, or if I get fevers. I am on meds and can talk to or go home to see my doctor if I need to. My doctor helps me get my lupus to the place where I can function. It ain't that big of a deal. It is not like autism or something like that.

Janice's experience highlights the diverse range of perceptions of how disabilities are manifested in people's lives. Janice seemed to be aligned with the medical model, thinking that she and her lupus disability would be fine if she were able to see a doctor and get the medicine to alleviate her symptoms. This thinking embodies the belief that disabled people must assimilate to the normative standards of society instead of the disability informing and creating Janice's societal and college experience and expectations (Drum, 2009).

The dominance of racialized experiences was prevalent and explicit in student recollections of experiences in higher education. Racial identity is often more polarized and connected to diversity and equity discussions in education than disability. URM disabled students were quick to use terms such as "racist," "racism," and "discrimination" during conversations about race. They utilized race-related student organizations to build community and culture on campus. Disability, on the other hand, proved more difficult to grapple with. Explanations and descriptions came more from a medical model mindset. URM disabled students used terms such as "help," "fix," and "overcome" what was wrong with them. Prioritizing race while medicalizing disability may be related to students' hesitation in actively disclosing an additional marginalized identity.

Lack of Representation to Meet URM Disabled Students' Needs

When discussing experiences on campus, it was clear that institutions were perceived as having deficit views of race and disability, with more support provided for racial identities. These views resulted in students being selective in disclosing their disabili-

ty for fear of experiencing additional marginalization and microaggressions. Disclosure was viewed as only required for students needing help with academics or social situations and only in one-to-one private spaces. Kele said, "When I know midterms and finals are coming, I will make an appointment to talk with my counselor to schedule times to meet before I take my tests." Anticipating potential negative consequences from educational interactions and performance often drives disability disclosure decisions (Samuels, 2003). For the students in the present study, these consequences included undesirable interpersonal interactions, bullying, disbelief, and other potential adverse interactions. Students wanted to do anything to avoid unnecessary stress in their higher education experiences.

Juana believed that she had found support for her racial identity on campus. As a pre-med major, she believed that disclosing her disability would result in peers and others thinking that she was unfit for the medical profession. She said, "I did not want to give them another reason to think I could not do the work." Juana already had seen the lack of Latinx students in the pre-med major and thought that disclosing her disability would provide more ammunition for further marginalization of Brown students. She described her reasoning:

> There are very few Latinx students majoring in pre-med. I already know they see me as less than the white and Asian students. If I told them about my bipolar disorder, it would give them another reason to see me as lower than they were. It is an everyday fight just being a Latinx and female student. I do not see how telling them about my disability would benefit my situation.

There was also a lack of URM disabled students on campus who disclosed invisible disabilities. It was easier to align with peers and friends with the same racial identity. However, disability was not a common topic of discussion unless physically disabled peers were observed or part of peer groups. Rhonda said, "If we look alike, then I know we have that in common, but if someone got ADD, they are going to have to tell me." They did not know how to approach talking about it, and since it was invisible, they believed they could alleviate any unnecessary stress and anxiety by not talking about it. Due to the tendency for invisible disabilities to be subjectively perceived by others, a dilemma and potential reluctance to disclosure may occur (Evans et al., 2017; Evans & Herriott, 2009). To address this dilemma, greater focus must center on knowing how to "rightfully" describe it so peers understand. Participants believed others in their racial groups may have identified as disabled, but they did not know who they were. Kele discussed how she knew many Indigenous students, but conversations related to disability never surfaced.

> I do not know if there are any other Indigenous students with anxiety on campus. It is not something that we talk about. I do not go to our student organization meeting and say, "Who has a disability?" I have a friend from home who is Indigenous and in a wheelchair. That is the only way I could tell. She does not know I have anxiety, either.

During the focus group, students discussed how white people conduct formal discussions and conversations about disability at their campuses. They were cautious in their conversations with white people because they believed they could not understand their experience. During the study, multiple students commented about how this study and talking with a Black disabled researcher allowed them to have more authentic conversations about their perceptions of race and disability. Janice said, "You being Black and having a disability makes it easier for me to talk about being Black and having my issues with lupus." Jordan discussed how having himself or the researcher engage in conversations about disability while disclosing could help more men, especially Black and Brown men, disclose and have asset-based dialogues about disability. He said, "I just feel that many Black and Brown men, including my boys, fear any conversation about disability and see it as a weakness. If you and I could talk about being Black and disabled with them, I think it could help them."

Community-Created Asset-Based Perceptions

A significant finding of this study was the power of being in a community and engaging in dialogue with other URM-disabled college students. During the focus group, students began reconsidering how they viewed their disabled identity and shifted toward more asset-based thinking. Lana said, "Maybe having a disability may help me to understand better future patients I could have." There was a desire to embrace this identity like they embraced their racial identities. They discussed seeing their disability as a uniqueness of their identity that strengthens their experiences. Although still fearful of the potential double marginalization, they sought ways to create more platforms and safe environments to highlight URM disability on their respective campuses. After the study, I followed up with three of them to ask about their progress. All three had indicated that it was still a work in prog-

ress, and they were trying to be strategic in their exploration and wanted to identify URM individuals in administration and faculty disability co-conspirators who could serve as mentors and supportive structures in pursuit of achieving this goal. Higher education institutions must utilize intentional approaches, using URM disabled students, to create campus spaces conducive to disabled student narrative sharing and community building while also considering power and privilege dynamics (Breneman et al., 2017).

Rhonda discussed how comfortable and relieved she felt being able to talk about her disability in the same way she talked about her race. She always wished she could have had conversations like during our interview and the focus group but was hesitant to discuss being disabled with her Black friends for fear of rejection. Knowing other URM disabled peers increased her confidence and willingness to approach future conversations. Rhonda stated:

> An enormous weight has been lifted off my shoulders in this conversation. I needed this space, and now that I know there may be other URM disabled peers, I am going to try to be more open about my disability to my friends and educate them.

Juana discussed how dialogue with other URM disabled peers made her reframe her thinking to see potential vulnerabilities as strengths. She believed this experience would allow her to be unapologetic in her racial and disabled identities moving forward. She said, "Look at us! Black, Brown, Indigenous, disabled, and beautiful. Like, my bipolar makes me who I am as much as being a Latina if people cannot understand that it is their loss."

After participating in the study, the students interviewed generated strategies and ideas for continuing to be in the community. They thought about forming a URM disabled student alliance across institutions. They believed that creating a safe space would potentially create more URM disability disclosures and more pathways to obtain support for both identities. Kele was very vocal about the power that this community could have moved forward.

> If this is powerful, imagine what we could do if we could have a group like this with more of us. We could do so much work and help people, and our schools celebrate and support disability like they do Indigenous, Black, and Latinx students. We could truly make a difference.

It became evident that participants began to see the potential power and influence their community could have by creating safe structures with opportunities to champion URM disabled college student experiences that could ultimately lead others to disclosure and community.

Discussion

Higher education institutions must prioritize and ensure that disability is included in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives designed to support historically marginalized populations. During the interviews for the present study, it became evident that URM disabled students were able to find a community on campus to support their racial identities but had more difficulty finding similar supports and representation for race and disabled identities. This finding is consistent with Shallish (2015), who found that colleges need more intention in incorporating disability into diversity by using the term "disability" and defining it instead of using terms like "inclusion" or "inclusive" that may only infer welcoming of disability. Institutions must be explicit within their disability plans, policies, and procedures to fully meet the needs of disabled students on campus. In addition, disability, like race, should be intertwined within the campus and not relegated in isolation between disability services offices (Harbour, 2008; Korbel et al., 2011).

Like with other studies (e.g., Brewer et al., 2023 Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2023 Franklin, 2019; Kimball et al., 2016), this study found that URM disabled students experienced race and disability by deliberately withholding disability disclosure in academics as protection against professors or peers trying to dissuade them from pursuing their majors. The URM disabled students in this study, while already feeling marginalized by professors with lower expectations due to race, did not want to give their professors any additional opportunities to marginalize further, lower expectations, and suggest alternative majors by disclosing their disabled identity (see also Annamma et al., 2013; Patton, 2016). They understood the potentially traumatic outcome that could be caused by race and disability stigmas. URM disabled students actively utilized cost-benefit analysis approaches influenced by their campuses when considering disability disclosure as a way to prevent any further marginalization from peers or faculty. This finding concurs with previous research that found that racially and disabled minoritized students examine their higher education environments to inform them on what information to share that will have minimal discrimination (Hope et al., 2018; Wood, 2017; McGee, 2016; Yosso et al., 2009).

This study revealed that creating a community that embodies racial and disability diversity can lessen the stigmas, stereotypes, and deficit thinking (see also Banks & Hughes, 2013). The community was seen as an opportunity to build connections and form a new counternarrative to support higher education racialized and disabled experiences on respective campuses, a finding consistent with other research (e.g., Von Robertson et al., 2016; Yosso et al., 2009). This group experience helped URM disabled students realize that they were not alone in their journey and that similarities with other participants could be an influential asset to their success on campus (see also Morales, 2021; Whitaker et al., 2021). Like Joseph (2018), community involvement allowed students to evolve their understanding and perception of race and disability through other perspectives.

This evolution can result in new individual and collective ways of thinking. For instance, in the present study, new ways of thinking allowed URM disabled students to generate strategies to organize and resist racism and ableism embedded in higher education practices (see also Dolmage, 2017; Petersen, 2009). There is a greater need for an equitable education that prioritizes interconnections in planning and programming between race, disability, racism, and ableism, thus creating a "collusive symbiosis" that dismantles policies in higher education that have historically centered whiteness and able-minded and bodied thinking (Annamma et al., 2022).

Recommendations

Colleges that desire to create socially just campuses must prioritize race and disability in diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, processes, and structures (Nunes, 2021; Sheef et al., 2020; Whitaker et al., 2021). Institutions may need to implement more flexible, URM disabled student specific initiatives that focus on addressing their needs to have a successful student experience on campus, especially considering the current attack on DEI in higher education and the elimination of DEI-related offices and initiatives in some states (Friedman & Vlady, 2023; Mireles, 2022). This approach will help create an asset-based perception of disability throughout campus, providing support and programming regarding racial, gender, and other identities within DEI (Leake & Stodden, 2014).

Creating this environment can also result in institutions allocating more funding to provide adequate disability support and resources to make the campus accessible while lessening the need for disability disclosure and self-advocacy (Karpicz, 2020). Higher education institutions should implement mandatory training and professional development for administration, faculty, and staff related to Universal Design to create a campus that offers students many ways to access their education (Dwyer et al., 2023). Implementing this training can create a more equitable higher education environment for URM disabled students that can catalyze increases in the allocation of financial resources for support that may substantially lessen the need to utilize self-advocacy skills (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016; Karpicz, 2020; Pendakur et al., 2019).

A socially just higher education institution will also have to find ways to ensure accountability measures are implemented for URM disabled students to provide a range of diverse and individualized accommodations throughout campus (Bernard-Brak et al., 2010; Herbert et al., 2020; Marshak et al., 2010; Stein, 2013). URM disabled students' successful navigation of campus requires this support for any chance to receive access to an equitable education. This mindset can also help in creating an asset-based perception of disability on campus while providing support and programming with other historically marginalized racial and gendered identities often associated with DEI initiatives (Leake & Stodden, 2014).

URM disabled students in the study had difficulty conceptualizing how both racism and ableism showed up in their lives. Increasing URM disabled representation in students, administration, faculty, and staff on college campuses can help to build support in the development of self-advocacy and a more informed understanding of how racism and ableism operate to constrain the progression of URM disabled students at college (Annamma, 2013; Karpicz, 2020; Mckinney et al., 2021; Vargas et al., 2020). In addition, increased representation could provide an opportunity to highlight and create programming with implicit focuses (due to DEI-focused higher education bans) on racial and disabled student and employee needs in higher education that can, in turn, develop campuses that are more conducive to URM disabled members of the campus community (Agarwal et al., 2014; Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Banks, 2013; Cory et al., 2010; Harbour et al, 2017). URM disabled students will be able to connect with both racial and disabled identities while successfully attempting to matriculate through higher education. This connection may help them in their search to establish a community by allowing them to build relationships with other URM disabled students who can be pivotal in their overall health, well-being, and success on higher education campuses (Stapleton, 2015).

Conclusion

Providing research that focuses on how URM disabled students make meaning of both racial and disabled identities adds voice and definition to higher education, race, and disability research. This study demonstrates how URM disabled students conceptualize and navigate racial and disability identities in higher education. It also demonstrates the power of being in a racialized and disabled community and how collective voices and experiences could be the catalyst in moving higher education institutions to address ableism in addition to racism in their practices, thus working toward an actual socially just higher education experience (Mingus, 2018; Patton et al., 2016). More research and work are needed to accurately represent the impact of racism and ableism on students in higher education scholarship (Abes, 2019; Harper, 2012). More specifically, there is a greater need for more "activist-oriented" scholarship that centers on the voices of URM disabled students (Annamma et al., 2013). This research will reflect a commitment to addressing the intersectional nuances and complexities that include race and disability within the entire higher education experience (Lester & Nusbaum, 2018). This knowledge and critical understanding can help move higher education research and institutions toward recognizing the depth of complexity of perceptions and experiences URM disabled students bring when they enroll on campus.

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