

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Narratives of Racial Duty: Competitive Reality Television Series as Sites for Studying Racialized Social Obligations and Black Group-Based Decision-Making

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(Received 6 December 2022; revised 20 April 2023; accepted 28 June 2023; first published online 31 August 2023)

Abstract

How do Black Americans practice a politics of racial group uplift while balancing their individual material interests? Traditionally, scholars have drawn on linked fate theory. However, more recent work argues that Black Americans remain politically unified because they feel race-based social pressure to conform more than a sense of linked fate. Employing a novel research design, I use the competitive reality television series, *Survivor*, to observe and analyze Black group-based decision-making. Through an inductive thematic content analysis of 13 *Survivor* episodes, I identified five themes in Black players' discussions of racialized social obligations when playing the game—what I call *narratives of racial duty*. Claims that emerged in this storytelling suggested that similar to the political world, Black *Survivor* contestants were keenly aware of the racialized social obligations for them as contestants in the game. For some, this reality felt like a burden. For others, it presented an opportunity. These reactions led some Black players to work together and others to construct a rationale for defecting from race-based alliances. I conclude by making the case that analyzing entertainment programs offers race and politics scholars a new site for identifying common scripts used to adhere to (and sidestep) racialized social norms.

Keywords: political storytelling; political behavior; competitive reality television; linked fate theory; racial social norms

Introduction

The Emmy award-winning competitive reality series *Survivor* has introduced audiences to a group of between 16 and 20 contestants twice a year since the show first aired in 2000. As part of the series, contestants are flown to a remote location for 26 to 42 days to compete for a million-dollar cash prize. Once contestants arrive, they are evenly split into what show producers refer to as “tribes¹” that can range from six to ten people. Sometimes show producers divide cast members based on shared characteristics or traits such as age, race, occupation, or gender. Other times,

tribe members are decided randomly. Whatever the case, on the first day tribes are sent to different campsites where they must build a shelter, start a fire, and search for food and water. They must also compete in challenges. Those who lose are forced to attend “Tribal Council” where they must vote out one or more members of their group.

Framed as a competition whose main objective is to “outwit, outplay, and outlast,” *Survivor* contestants must depend on one another to gather water and cook food, compete in physical and mental competitions, and forge alliances to avoid being voted off during Tribal Council meetings. At the same time, their life in the game is contingent on forming relationships that help them: skillfully navigate the group’s social dynamics, create bonds of trust to learn heavily guarded information, and form relationships to secure jury votes at the end of the game. Yet, only one person can win, which means that coalitions that form will be tested and contestants will have to make hard choices that may pull at their core values and commitments. From this perspective, shows in this genre are a microcosm of civil society where both group dynamics and politics are continually at play.

This paper will illustrate how communications and race and ethnic politics researchers can use the show *Survivor* to simultaneously advance work on theories of group-based versus individual-centered decision-making and media constructions of race. Specifically, I ask: when and how do Black contestants on competitive reality series practice a politics of racial group uplift in the context of being motivated to pursue their own individual material uplift? To answer this question, I examined Black players’ discussions related to what I refer to as *narratives of racial duty*. *Narratives of racial duty* are Black contestants’ expressions of feelings of racialized social obligations involved with playing the game.

In this study, I conducted an inductive thematic content analysis of Black players’ gameplay discussions in 13 episodes from five *Survivor* seasons. In the analysis, I uncovered five substantive themes in narratives of racial duty expressed by Black players in gameplay discussions. These rhetorical arguments revealed that Black players clearly felt a sense of racialized social obligation to other Black players and the Black community writ large when playing the game. However, they also felt a strong pull to maximize their own individual material interests. This meant that while Black players expressed a strong desire to *Play for the Culture* and even discussed feeling *Connected Through Kinship*, they also made decisions that undermined racial group uplift in order to maximize their own individual material interests and showcased their readiness for *Doing Me at the Expense of Us*.

The justifications Black players offered for prioritizing their individual material interests made it clear that they experienced an internal tug of war stemming from racialized social obligations. However, the rhetorical arguments contained in narratives of racial duty indicated that Black players could easily formulate reasoned arguments to adhere to (or deviate from) prioritizing racial group uplift. Thus, this study contributes to the existing literature by showcasing a novel approach to observing Black individual and group decision-making that could provide race scholars with a new site to identify common scripts used to adhere to (and sidestep) racialized social norms.

To date, research on theories of race-based group decision-making has developed separately from work in political communication and new media studies. Yet, we

know that media platforms are ripe vehicles for political expression, especially among otherwise marginalized groups (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Carney 2016; Kuo 2018; Steele 2018). From this perspective, synthesizing research on communications and race-based group decision-making should offer race and ethnic politics scholars a new site to test and extend theories related to group-based versus individual-centered decision-making that allow them to supplement traditional measures of Black political engagement such as vote choice, protest attendance, candidate evaluations, and policy preferences (Chong and Rogers 2005; Dawson 1994; Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016; Shingles 1981; Simien and Clawson 2004; White 2007; White and Laird 2020; White, Laird, and Allen 2014). At the same time, incorporating race and ethnic politics theories into new media research should offer communication scholars well-developed theories of identity and group behavior that will allow them to extend work on competitive reality television series that has, to date, primarily focused on how show producers reinforce racial stereotypes and ideologies via production decisions involving Black cast members (Bell-Jordan 2008; Boylorn 2008; Coleman, Reynolds, and Torbati 2020; Drew 2011; Hentges 2008; Holbert, Shah, and Kwak 2004; Orbe 2008; Pardo 2013; Squires 2002).

Group versus Individual-Centered Political Decision-Making

In his classic text *Behind the Mule*, Dawson (1994) argues that African Americans exhibit feelings of “linked fate” with the Black community. That is, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, African Americans often perceive that what happens to racial in-group members is a strong indicator of what could happen to them. This is thought to occur because media outlets, social networks, and Black institutions each reinforce the salience of racial interests and group status, which make these considerations more cognitively accessible in the minds of African Americans.

According to linked fate theory, high levels of political uniformity among African Americans may be at least in part explained by Black Americans’ belief that their individual self-interests are linked to the interests of the broader racial group. Dawson contends that this belief stems from African Americans’ historical experiences of discrimination and harassment in the United States wherein their life chances in the social, economic, and political realm “have been linked to the ascriptive feature of race” (1994, 56). Thus, a consequence of race determining one’s lot in life in the United States is that Black Americans can easily decipher what political and social policies provide the most individual utility via cues from trusted Black political leaders and institutions. He refers to this rational decision-making process as the black utility heuristic.

More recent work on group versus individual-centered political decision-making has questioned the continued explanatory power of linked fate theory. Scholars often begin by pointing to mushrooming ethnic and socioeconomic diversity among Black people in the United States today (Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016; Rogers and Kim 2023; White and Laird 2020; White, Laird, and Allen 2014). Then they argue that the social context and conditions that served as the starting point for Dawson’s canonical text have dramatically evolved and thus highlight the need to revisit core assumptions of the theory. Most recently, White and Laird (2020) point to the powerful pull of the threat of social sanctions from racial in-group members on Black political

decision-making. They argue that race-based social rewards and penalties, including threats associated with political defections, better explain Black Americans' decision to align with the Democratic Party than Dawson's concept of linked fate.

In a series of behavioral experiments, White, Laird, and Allen (2014) provide compelling evidence demonstrating that the mere presence of another Black person observing one's political behavior prompted African Americans to adhere to the racial group norm of Democratic Party identification. In subsequent work, White and Laird (2020) used data from the cumulative American National Election Studies between 1988 and 2012 to investigate how the race of the interviewer appeared to influence Black voters' reports of having turned out to vote and cast a ballot for the Democratic candidate for president. They found that being questioned by a Black interviewer rather than non-Black interviewers increased the likelihood of Black respondents overreporting having turned out to vote and casting a ballot for the Democratic presidential candidate.

As it relates to navigating racial group uplift versus individual material interests specifically, White, Laird, and Allen (2014) found that Black students were more likely to allocate financial resources they had been given to the Obama campaign rather than keeping the money for themselves when allocations were made in the presence of another Black person. Given this finding, they concluded that the fear of social costs associated with other Black people questioning one's Blackness stymies self-interested behavior among Black Americans and induces political uniformity, particularly alignment with the Democratic Party.

In this study, I further build on this research by identifying rhetorical discourses about racialized social obligations that are expressed by Black individuals when appearing on the competitive reality series, *Survivor*. I use these rhetorical discourses to better understand how Black Americans navigate racialized social pressures and individual versus group-based decision-making. I argue that Black Americans have constructed narratives of racial duty that describe the commitment or sense of duty they feel toward in-group members when making decisions in their personal lives.

The Study of Race on Competitive Reality Series

For the most part, political communication scholarship on race and competitive reality series has focused on how production choices reinforce existing racial conventions and constructions (Bell-Jordan 2008; Drew 2011; Pardo 2013). For instance, Bell-Jordan (2008) argues that race is constructed on reality television series by promoting politics of difference including framing race as a point of contention among cast members and incorporating dramatic scenarios that reinforce cultural codes and stereotypes. On the other hand, Drew (2011) contends that show producers edit series in this genre to champion particular racial narratives. Overall, work in this area has demonstrated that competitive reality series' producers can construct different interpretations of race and racism in the United States through their production and editing choices (Hentges 2008; Squires 2013). At the same time, Denham and Jones (2008) have drawn scholarly attention to how the *Survivor* casting process in itself can be a tool for reinforcing particular racial narratives as show producers seek contestants who exhibit certain stereotypes

that maximize the potential for “dramality”—or the “convergence of drama and reality” in their efforts to create “good television” (Haralovich and Trosset 2004, 6).

The aforementioned studies showcase how previous scholarship has devoted substantial attention to how production decisions can perpetuate racial stereotypes and existing racial hierarchies in the show’s final edit. Yet, work in this area has focused less on how contestants from different racial and ethnic backgrounds who appear as contestants might use their time on the show to respond and react to these social dynamics both inside and outside of the game. This oversight is curious given recurring themes in Black contestants’ complaints and reflections on the show over the last two decades (Deegans 2020; Perrett 2021).

While there are certainly individuals who primarily seek out competitive reality series for attention-seeking purposes, there is also reason to believe that people might at the same time view the opportunity to appear on these platforms as an opportunity to address the social and political dynamics in the world outside of the game. For instance, the 43rd season of *Survivor* featured the show’s first-ever contestant with an above-the-knee leg amputation. Noelle Lambert, a record-setting Paralympian, told reporters that her mother was a long-time fan of the show, which fueled her desire to be the first amputee to win the game. At the same time, she explained that she was “excited to represent the disability community in hopefully a positive way” (Ebben 2022).

In a similar spirit, in June 2020 former Black *Survivor* contestant, J’Tia Hart, created the Soul Survivors Organization. The mission of the organization was to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion on the *Survivor* series (Hart 2020b). The same year, Hart and other former Black contestants also created a petition for anti-racism action by the Survivor Entertainment Group (Hart 2020a). The petition urged CBS executives to commit to casting 30% Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) contestants each season going forward, devote equitable screen time to these contestants, and include their lived experiences as show storylines if contestants shared them in the context of their gameplay, among several other demands (Hauser 2020). In November 2020, CBS network executives announced their new policy requiring that at least half of the cast members of its unscripted programs would be people of color and other previously underrepresented groups. This mandate all but guarantees that there will be a critical mass of Black players on competitive reality series going forward.

Previous Black players’ efforts to mobilize around issues of race, racism, and racial equity outside the game suggest that it is not at all far-fetched to expect that Black contestants would engage in similar actions to shine a light on issues of race and racial equity when appearing as cast members inside the game. Given this reality, communications and race, and politics researchers can anticipate having robust opportunities to observe and learn more about the calculus between racial group uplift versus pursuing one’s individual material interests for Black Americans if they choose to use data taken from competitive reality television to study this topic.

Competitive Reality Television Series and Narratives of Racial Duty

Storytelling is commonplace in the American political landscape (Ricci 2016). By storytelling, I mean individual or group’s accounts of events with the goal of

communicating moral lessons. Existing scholarship suggests that political stories can serve as vehicles for public officials, interest groups, and political organizers to ascribe blame for policy issues, articulate shared interests, and evaluate proposed policy solutions (Mayer 2014; Polletta and Lee 2006; Stone 1997). Polletta and Lee (2006) argue that ordinary citizens similarly use narratives to highlight needs and priorities that are not being fully expressed during public deliberation related to political issues. In this context, individuals rely on narratives to shine a light on important considerations and illustrate the implications of specific ideas and arguments. Thus, storytelling is best understood as a vehicle that can be used by individuals and groups to bring attention to issues in need of further discussion, present potentially unpopular ideas, criticize existing values, and call for the inclusion of new issues to be discussed (Polletta and Lee, 2006, 96).

In this study, I explore how Black contestants on the competitive reality television series, *Survivor*, leverage the power of the narrative format when justifying their gameplay decisions. As Carter (2020) found in his analysis of discussions during Final Tribal Council where votes for who should win the game are cast, gameplay is a prized metric when determining who deserves to be crowned the Sole Survivor. In particular, a common theme among contestants participating in eight Tribal Council discussions was reflecting on contestants' strategic gameplay. Strategic gameplay refers to the decisions players made to advance themselves and survive in the game including voting out other players considered to be strong competitors (Carter 2020).

Without a doubt, strategic gameplay should be an important feature of both Black and non-Black players' actions when participating in competitive reality series. However, in this study I specifically investigate narratives of racial duty expressed by Black contestants in order to understand how Black racial norms specifically inform (or not) the strategic gameplay of Black *Survivor* players. I expect that narratives of racial duty will convey Black players' perception of the social obligations they bear when making decisions in the game. Specifically, narratives of racial duty should track Black players' sense of their obligation to play the game in a manner that furthers their racial group. Meaning, the social obligation to employ strategic moves that ensure a Black player—not necessarily themselves—is well positioned to win the game. This approach to gameplay differs from one in which Black players focus on advancing themselves in the game and securing the million-dollar cash prize.

The sense of duty Black Americans express via narratives of racial duty could be rooted in a desire to not only pursue individual gains but behave in ways that can uplift, inspire, or advance other in-group members (Cohen 1999; Jefferson 2023). In the context of *Survivor* specifically, this could mean Black players worrying about their decision to be deceitful in their gameplay reinforcing the stereotype of Black people as untrustworthy among their cast mates who they rely on to navigate the game *as well as* viewers at home. In this way, narratives of racial duty coincide with Polletta (2009) view that storytelling is a powerful tool at the disposal of those who seek to critique social and political dynamics. I am specifically interested in examining narratives of racial duty in this context because this rhetorical strategy mirrors ongoing debates surrounding the push and pull of racial group versus individual uplift in Black politics research. Most notably, as described above, these narratives map onto current debates about the continued explanatory power of the linked fate concept.

Motivating the Emergence of Narratives of Racial Duty on Competitive Reality Television Series

Given Black Americans' subordinate status in the U.S. racial order (Omi and Winant 2014), it is not entirely clear why they would necessarily construct narratives of racial duty describing their feelings of obligation toward their racial group in the context of competing for a million-dollar cash prize. Social psychologists offer some insight into why this dynamic might arise. Most notably, Tajfel and Turner (2004) contend that when members of subordinate groups are unable to draw positive comparisons between their in-group and higher status out-groups, in-group members often respond in three predictable ways: leaving the group, joining a more positively distinguished group and/or endeavoring to "make their existing group more positively distinct" (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 60).

Within the context of competing on reality television series, this work suggests that sharing narratives of racial duty could be a way that Black *Survivor* contestants reclaim power and status in response to their disadvantaged racial group status and, in doing so, foster feelings of group belonging.

Considering the broader social and political context in which the most recent Black contestants agreed to appear on the series—following the murder of George Floyd and CBS' 2020 diversity mandate—more recent work examining Black affective responses and decision-making suggests that Black Americans are more likely than their White counterparts to experience negative emotional responses to police killings of unarmed Black men (McGowen and Wylie 2020) and these feelings sometimes inform their subsequent decision-making ranging from running for office to donating to Black organizations and participating in political protests (Banks, White, and McKenzie 2019; Scott and Collins 2020). In fact, Banks, White, and McKenzie (2019) argue that when Black Americans become angry about issues related to race, they tend to "gravitate toward political solutions that center on expeditiously empowering the racial group by . . . [engaging] in racial group specific activities" (2019, 918). That is, Black Americans often turn inward to their group when seeking avenues to respond to racial injustice.

Drawing cues from both of these literatures, I expect that the desire for (and pull of) racialized social obligations for Black contestants competing on *Survivor* should be especially strong in the context of high-profile racial uprisings in response to systemic state violence against Black Americans. With that said, I do not mean to imply that competing on *Survivor* itself is a political act. On the contrary, there are myriad reasons (including several that are purely self-aggrandizing) why contestants would apply to be cast on competitive reality series. Nevertheless, once individuals have been selected, they have the opportunity to use the platform to craft and transmit messages related to race and racial justice to viewers at home. It is from this vantage point, that I endeavor to study trends in the articulation of narratives of racial duty by Black *Survivor* contestants.

Research Design

In this study, I observe the emergence of narratives of racial duty in a novel way: observing Black contestants making decisions as participants on the competitive reality series, *Survivor*. This setting forces them to compete for a million-dollar cash

prize in front of an average of five million weekly viewers (Mitovich 2021). In several ways, the *Survivor* setting mirrors the scenario in the experiment designed by White, Laird, and Allen (2014) wherein study participants appeared to feel racialized social pressure to behave in ways that aligned with the interests of the broader African American community especially when their actions could be monitored by other Black people. In the context of competitive reality television series that contestants know will be broadcast to millions of viewers on the weekly basis, I anticipate Black *Survivor* players may similarly feel pressure to represent their group including forging co-ethnic alliances that may require them to sacrifice their personal game to increase the likelihood that a Black player—not necessarily themselves—ultimately wins the game. Given this parallel, this study not only speaks to ongoing debates regarding racialized social obligations and the trade-off between individual and racial group uplift for Black Americans, it places race and politics and communications research into conversation in ways that advance scholarship in each tradition.

Study Data

Four sources of data were analyzed to investigate narratives of racial duty that emerged as a part of Black players' game strategy: (1) transcripts of select *Survivor* episodes, (2) audio from two online forums featuring former Black *Survivor* contestants, (3) audio from two *Survivor*-themed podcasts analyzing show episodes, and (4) the responses of former Black *Survivor* contestants to a 2020 *Entertainment Weekly* survey of former players. The *Survivor* episode transcripts were the primary data used to identify themes in Black contestants' storytelling about their feelings of racialized social obligation when appearing on the show. Below, I discuss how the other data sources were used for data generation and triangulation.

Data Generation

When initially designing the study, I was primarily interested in investigating the articulation of narratives of racial duty during the 41st season of *Survivor* because it was filmed not too long after the 2020 U.S. racial uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd while in police custody. I focused specifically on this season given Harbin's (2023) study documenting viewer backlash on social media to Black players' discussion of feelings of racialized social obligation when appearing as contestants on this season. With that said, I decided to include additional seasons in the analysis in an effort to better contextualize the findings from Season 41.

I turned to two online Black former *Survivor* player forums to identify additional seasons to analyze in the study. Both Black Voices of Survivor Roundtables were hosted by former contestant Rob Cesterino on his podcast, *Rob Has a Podcast* (Cesternino 2020a, 2020b). I used the audio of these roundtables to identify additional potentially relevant seasons. When former players discussed specific dynamics that arose in an episode, I watched the entire season and identified episodes where it was possible for Black contestants to have connected with one another because they lived in the same camp. While watching, I also learned about the *Survivor* wiki page. I reviewed this site myself and learned about the 2006 season

when show producers purposely grouped cast members by race in response to calls for greater attention to issues of diversity on the show.

In the end, I analyzed thirteen episodes from five seasons: Season 4—*Survivor Marquesas* (2002), Season 13—*Survivor Cook Islands* (2006), Season 14—*Survivor Fiji* (2007), Season 37—*Survivor David vs. Goliath* (2018), and *Survivor Season 41* (2021). Appendix A includes a table of basic descriptive information about each episode including the rationale for its inclusion in the analysis. As indicated in the table, most of the episodes included in this analysis aired prior to the diversity mandate. What stands out about these episodes is that they represent significant *Survivor* milestones. Most notably, episodes from the seasons where a Black woman and Black man each won for the first time are included in the study—*Survivor Marquesas* and *Fiji*, respectively. Moreover, *Survivor Cook Islands* was also the only time tribes have been formed around shared racial and ethnic group membership. The *David versus Goliath* season featured the second highest number of Black players cast at one time (besides *Cook Islands*) prior to the diversity mandate.

It is important to note that while the aforementioned episodes aired across a nearly twenty-year time span the show's basic premise and format has remained relatively the same during this period. Most *Survivor* seasons have ranged from 13 to 15 episodes and, except for the season premiere and finale, are one-hour broadcasts on Wednesday evenings in the United States. Except for during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, each year two seasons of the show air, one in the fall and another in the spring. Aside from the 2020 diversity mandate, the only substantial change to the show format since it first aired in 2000 was shortening the number of days contestants played the game from 39 to 26 days beginning with *Survivor 41*.

Given the twenty-year time span covered in the sample, my study should provide ample opportunity to observe narratives of racial duty expressed by Black players. Nevertheless, it is almost certainly the case that the study data are not an exhaustive list of every moment when Black contestants perceived themselves as navigating feelings of racial duty and responsibility. Despite this,

I feel confident that the data included in the analysis are representative of the way these dynamics most obviously emerge because they were typically signaled by Black players themselves. With that said, future work should identify *all* relevant interactions and use the findings from this study to construct measures tracking patterns in the emergence of narratives of racial duty and observe how this storytelling appears to vary by time and broader social context.

Data Triangulation

Data triangulation, or using data from two or more sources gathered at different points in time or context, is a strategy researchers can use to deepen their understanding of the phenomena they are examining in their research studies (Flick, Kardoff, and Steinke 2004). Toward this goal, I incorporated two additional data sources in the study to address potential validity concerns that might arise from solely relying on *Survivor* episode transcripts that were subjected to production edits to generalize about Black players' reflections on their gameplay. To address these concerns, I sought out supplemental sources tracking Black players' commentary that was subject to minimal production and editing. I began by reviewing audio

from two entertainment podcasts providing *Survivor* episode commentary, including interviews with former players: *Rob Has a Podcast* and *Purple Pants Podcast*. *Rob Has a Podcast* is hosted by two-time *Survivor* contestant, Rob Cesternino. Each week, Cesternino (2010-present) provides episode recaps and invites former players to dissect game strategy and various elements of the game for the audience. For this study, I listened to two episodes featuring one-on-one interviews of former Black contestants Jamal Shipman (Season 39) and Shantel Smith (Season 41), respectively. I used notes from these shows to contextualize interactions described in the study results and extrapolate about how common racial duty themes likely were among Black players.

Purple Pants Podcast is co-hosted by former African American *Survivor* contestants, Brice Izyah Johnston and Wendall Holland. Johnston and Holland, (2020-present) record weekly episodes that discuss issues of race, gender, and sexuality as elements in the game. For this study, I listened to two episodes that featured interviews with Black *Survivor* contestants, Shantel Smith and Danny McCray. Smith and McCray both appeared on the 2021 season (Season 41) that immediately followed CBS' new diversity mandate. Both players were also part of the season's all-Black alliance. While listening, I flagged Smith and McCray's discussion of the all-Black alliance and general reflections on how race affected their gameplay as well as their thoughts on how race has likely affected other Black contestants. I used these reflections to amplify and/or contextualize themes that emerged in Smith and McCray's gameplay discussions when on the show.

Finally, I reviewed Black contestants' responses to a 2020 survey administered by *Entertainment Weekly*. The survey was fielded during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and asked players about their proudest moments on the show, biggest regret, and one aspect of *Survivor* they thought should be changed and why, among other topics. Players' unedited responses were released in article format by entertainment and popular culture writer, Dalton Ross, between 2020 and 2021. At the time the survey was fielded, there had been 81 Black *Survivor* contestants. As of April 2022, responses from 35 former Black contestants had been released by *Entertainment Weekly*. For this study, I reviewed Black players' responses with special attention to their discussion of the ways that race influenced their gameplay.

Study Analysis

The unit of analysis in the study is individual *Survivor* episode transcript dialogue segment, which encompasses spoken words and statements that aired during each episode. Individual episode dialogue segments could range from one word to several sentences. Whatever the case, these segments track the flow of dialogue on the show, either in one-on-one testimonials or conversations between one or more players in the game. In total, there were 4,924 transcript dialogue segments from contestants on the show as well as the show host, Jeff Probst, across the 13 *Survivor* episode transcripts included in the study. On average, there were around 378 transcript dialogue segments for each episode.

Importantly, I only hand-coded the text of conversations about gameplay between Black contestants, in Black players' confessional interviews, and during Tribal Council meetings where Black players spoke candidly about their perceptions

of how race affected their gameplay with their entire tribe and *Survivor* host, Jeff Probst. Transcript segments were counted as gameplay discussions if they included conversations about perceiving threats in the game, coordinating votes against another player, working together to win the game, analyzing game moves made by other players, or discussing advantages in the game such as hidden immunity idols or extra votes. Show confessionals are one person interviews where players reflect on what has happened in the game. It is important to note that players are not privy to one another's confessionals but know that these reflections could be broadcast to viewers in the show's final edit. Given this reality, I assume that a willingness to articulate narratives of racial duty in this context speaks to the importance of this tension in their gameplay. I excluded all transcript segments during show competitions and conversations that only included non-Black players.

Ultimately, I coded 1,279 transcript segments for this study. I was specifically interested in Black players' expressions of racialized social obligations via narratives of racial duty. Toward this goal, I began the analysis by applying semantic and latent code labels to each dialogue segment in the transcripts for the 13 episodes included in the study. Semantic label codes "capture explicitly-expressed meaning . . . [that] often stay close to the language of participants or the overt meanings of data" (Braun and Clarke 2021, 57). In other words, these were contestants' direct accounts of how issues of race and racism cropped up during their time as contestants and affected their gameplay. However, because players might not always outwardly or explicitly communicate their thoughts and ideas about race and racial obligation in the game, I also applied latent label codes, which allow researchers to "read for meaning, take context into account, and identify the presence of themes" (Bernard, Wutich, and Ryan 2016, 249).

Following Braun and Clarke (2021), I began by reading each transcript word-by-word and tagged words and phrases that seemed relevant to racialized social norms and obligations in the data analysis software, MaxQDA. My expectations regarding expressions of narratives of racial duty were initially informed by Anoll's (2022) grounded account of the honoring ancestors' norm wherein individuals expressed "a prescriptive commitment to honor the sacrifices, struggles, stories, and traditions of those in the past, especially ancestral community members who paved the way for opportunities in the present" (42). However, as I reviewed the transcripts and watched the episodes, I listened to the ways that players uniquely articulated their ideas within the competitive reality series context and coded their remarks inductively. That is, each time I noticed a statement or phrase that seemed to infer Black players' belief that their gameplay was being influenced by commitments to the Black community, their family, or people like them who might be watching at home, I applied a tag that summarized the key takeaway of the statement. When different Black players expressed similar takeaways, I applied an existing tag rather than creating a new one. When players expressed the same takeaways in a different manner, I used these text segments as an opportunity to revise the coding label and settle on more precise language. I repeated this cycle until I had reviewed and tagged every possible dialogue segment in the 13 episodes included in the study three times. At this point, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) procedure for reviewing the diversity of meanings captured by the semantic and latent code labels I created. Once I felt confident that key themes appeared to be emerging across the code labels, I concluded the first round of coding.

In the second coding phase, I followed Dirikx and Gelders (2010) and used the literature on linked fate and racialized social norms described above to generate a list of questions to systematically analyze and apply code labels to transcript dialogue text segments addressing Black players' feelings of racial duty. A response was coded as a theme related to narratives of racial duty if the answer to any of the following was true:

- 1) Explicit reference to the players' thoughts about the influence of race and racial identity when playing the game?
- 2) Explicit reference to the players' perception of the expectation to represent their racial group while playing the game?
- 3) Explicitly refers to players' feelings of camaraderie or kinship with other Black players, especially relative to non-Black players?
- 4) Explicit reference to the players' awareness of a tension in playing the game for oneself versus the broader racial group?
- 5) Explicit reference to the players' view of the distinct challenges/advantages that Black players face when formulating a game strategy and/or playing the game?

Ultimately, I identified 254 episode transcript dialogue segments as exhibiting evidence of narratives of racial duty. These texts also include transcript dialogue segments where Black players responded to expressions of narratives of racial duty. That is, of the 1,279 lines of dialogue wherein Black players discussed their gameplay during one-on-one confessionals or with other players in the game, 20% focused on some aspect of how Black players' racial identity and/or shared culture affected their gameplay. Importantly, when coding I adopted what Saldaña (2013) describes as a "lumping approach" to coding—that is, when players were involved in a conversation with other players, I focused on capturing the broad meaning and significance of players' commentary within a given conversation and applied the relevant label code(s) accordingly to all episode dialogue segments involved in the spoken exchange (22–23).

Prominent Themes in Narratives of Racial Duty

Rhetorical arguments related to narratives of racial duty emerged in every season except Season 14—*Survivor Fiji* (2007). In total, I identified five substantive themes during my hand-coded inductive thematic content analysis of the 254 transcript dialogue segments that exhibited evidence of narratives of racial duty. These five themes, summarized in Table 1, were: Doing it for the Culture, PWB (Playing while Black), Connected Through Kinship, Doing Me at the Expense of Us, and Breaking the Code.

As indicated in Table 1, the most common theme that emerged in the analysis was "Doing it for the Culture," which captured Black contestants' feeling that they represent much more than themselves when appearing on reality television and playing the game. Among the 254 transcript dialogue segments that were identified as exhibiting evidence of narratives of racial duty in the study, the "Doing it for the Culture" theme label was applied 72 times—or on 28% of the transcript dialogue segments included in the study. The least common theme to emerge in the analysis

Table 1. Prominent themes that emerged in the analysis of narratives of racial duty

Theme Name	Theme Description	Main Concept	# of Text Segments w/ Theme Label Applied (% of labels applied)
Doing It for the Culture	Black players' reflections on being a representative of/for Black people when playing the game and therefore feeling pressure to make gameplay decisions with their broader racial group, not just themselves, in mind.	Black contestants' feeling that they represent much more than themselves when appearing on reality television and playing the game.	72 (28%)
PWB (Playing While Black)	Black players' accounts of the social and psychological challenges they face because of their race, especially feeling obligated to comport themselves in ways that mimic White dominant culture and downplay elements of Black culture.	Black contestants' sense that they must become attuned to the preferences and comfort levels of their non-Black counterparts in the game and comport themselves accordingly in order to avoid being voted out.	51 (20%)
Connected Through Kinship	Black players' expressions of feeling connected to one another and a sense of responsibility to look out for one another because of their kinship as Black people.	Black contestants' feeling connected to other Black players when playing the game because of their shared experience of marginalization and subordination in society as Black people.	41 (16%)
Doing Me at the Expense of Us	Black players' statements about feeling conflicted about/resolved in pursuing their individual material interests over prioritizing racial group uplift when playing the game.	Black contestants' resolve to make decisions inside the game that prioritize themselves as individuals rather than themselves as members of a larger group.	38 (15%)
Breaking the Code	Black players' commentary on the possibility of/decision to defect from alliances formed with other Black players when playing the game.	Black contestants' understanding of the social consequences associated with defecting from other Black players inside the game both for their future gameplay as well as when they return home.	36 (14%)

was “Breaking the Code,” which tracked Black players’ commentary on the social consequences associated with defecting from other Black players inside the game both for their future gameplay as well as when they return home. This theme label was applied 36 times—or on 14% of the transcript dialogue segments that were hand-coded for this study. In the subsections that follow, I describe the specific claims championed in each narrative, provide illustrative examples from the episode

transcripts, and conclude with a takeaway about what Survivor players' storytelling reveals about how they interpret the impact of racialized social obligation on their everyday lives and decision-making in the game.

Doing it for the Culture

The most prominent theme in narratives of racial duty was *Doing it for the Culture* (28% or $n = 72$). This narrative theme reflects Black players' understanding of themselves as exemplars or representatives of their racial group while playing the game. This theme emerged both in Black players' discussions with other Black players, in one-on-one confessional interviews, and during Tribal Council. The main idea in the *Doing it for the Culture* narrative theme is that Black contestants represent much more than themselves when appearing on reality television. Given this, Black players must consider how their gameplay choices not only affect themselves but the broader Black community.

The *Doing it for the Culture* theme emerged during *Season 13—Survivor Cook Islands* and *Survivor Season 41*—that is both before *as well as* after CBS' diversity mandate. During season 41, this theme emerged in a discussion between alliance members, Shan Smith and Deshawn Radden. In their conversation, Smith discussed the importance of "Doing it for the Culture" from her perspective as a Black woman and activist centering the broader political moment. She juxtaposed this discussion with her individual reality of having recently experienced living in her car and desire to achieve greater financial security by winning the million-dollar prize. For Radden, he described his own desire to respond to the political moment by working with the other Black players in the game rather than centering his concerns as a medical student saddled with education debt that he could easily pay off with the prize money. In short, for both Smith and Radden, "Doing it for the Culture" symbolized placing the benefits accrued by their racial group in the forefront of their minds when making gameplay decisions rather than centering their own individual material interests, particularly their shared desire to improve their financial health and degree of economic security.

In a confessional interview that aired in episode 10, Smith recounted a conversation between her and DeShawn Radden where they both shared that they "really wanted to give the Black community back home something to celebrate because we know that 2020 was a hard year (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021)." In her testimonial, Smith was referring to the outcry and global protests following the murder of George Floyd in police custody. The Floyd case involved one of the arresting officers, Derek Chauvin, kneeling on Floyd's neck for eight minutes—an interaction that was caught on video. After the video went viral on social media, protestors filled the streets in nearly every major city in the United States. At these rallies, protestors chanted, "Black Lives Matter!" and demanded that Black people be treated with dignity. They also demanded justice in the Floyd case as well as several other cases involving the death of unarmed Black Americans in police custody. Thus, Black players' reflections on *Doing it for the Culture* in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and immediately following CBS' diversity mandate centered on the importance of representing the Black community and giving them something to celebrate in what might otherwise be a difficult time.

The tone of Black players' commentary on "Doing it for the Culture" was much different during Season 13—*Survivor Cook Islands*, where tribes were divided along racial and ethnic lines but CBS had not yet instituted its diversity mandate and there were no ongoing racial uprisings. In this context, Black players expressed feeling a burden or pressure to represent their group. For instance, Stephanie Favor, a Black woman and nursing student from South Carolina, described feeling the "pressure to represent . . . to represent us, our people, the African American culture (I Can Forgive Her But I Don't Have To Because She Screwed My Chickens, 2006)." Rebecca Borman, a make-up artist from New York, was more specific about the nature of this pressure. She explained that being divided in tribes by race meant that "now we have to step up to the plate and show that, yes, Black people do swim. Yes, Black people do know how to get on a boat and paddle . . . we don't just run track (I Can Forgive Her But I Don't Have To Because She Screwed My Chickens, 2006)." These comments suggest that Black contestants who appeared on the show when there was no broader social movement around race and racial justice saw "Doing it for the Culture" as an obligation to challenge stubborn Black racial stereotypes and provide a positive portrayal that would increase esteem for themselves and other Black people. This focus was much different than Black players appearing on *Season 41* who were focused on boosting the morale of Black people back home through their gameplay.

Taken together, the *Doing it for the Culture* narrative theme suggests that Black *Survivor* contestants perceived themselves as racial exemplars when playing the game. As a result, they sometimes felt obligated to not only consider themselves when making decisions in the game but also how their actions would be perceived by and affect other members of the Black community. Black players' discussions inside the game revealed that the notion of "Doing it for the Culture" can be viewed as both a source of power but also a social burden. From this perspective, *Doing It for the Culture* was understood by players to be a resource for positively contributing to the Black community *as well as* a profound burden to shoulder as an individual who ultimately needed to think and behave as individuals in the game in order to win. Whether players primarily viewed "Doing it for the Culture" as an honor or burden provides some context for why some might choose to forgo efforts to work on one accord as Black players.

As it relates to the world of politics, the *Doing it for the Culture* theme mirrors Anoll's (2022) discussion of the articulation of the honoring ancestors' norm in *The Obligation Mosaic*. According to Anoll, this norm "shape[s] attitudes about the value and meaning of political participation (Anoll 2022, 41)." She argues that this norm "captures a prescriptive commitment to honor the sacrifices, struggles, stories, and traditions of those in the past, especially ancestral community members who paved the way for opportunities in the present" (Anoll 2022, 42).

For Black Americans especially, Anoll found that this norm influences their behavior because they feel an obligation to claim rights that were once denied by their group. From this perspective, Black players' discussions of "Doing it for the Culture" inside the game reflects how thinking about the significance of one's actions being impactful to the larger racial group comes naturally for many Black Americans. Thus, it is not surprising that this theme was the most prominent in narratives of racial duty expressed by Black players inside the game both prior to and following CBS' diversity mandate. Similar to Black Americans contemplating

the decision to engage in the political process and contribute to Black interests being represented in the political landscape, Black *Survivor* players appear to think about themselves as representing something larger than themselves and have spoken candidly about how this dynamic affects their gameplay.

PWB (Playing While Black)

The second most common theme that emerged in the narratives of racial duty analysis was *Playing While Black* (20% or $n = 51$). These gameplay discussions highlighted the additional social and psychological challenges Black players perceive that they face when playing the game because of their race. These barriers, players explained, created a pressure to comport themselves in ways that mimic White dominate culture and downplay elements of Black culture. For instance, in a heartfelt discussion between *Season 4—Survivor Marquesas'* two Black cast members, Vecepia Towery and Sean Rector, Rector lamented that it wasn't fair that Black contestants have to play "a whole other mental game" to which non-Black contestants are completely oblivious (Nacho Momma, 2002). He explained,

When you're a person of color and you're the only one, you have to play, and that's something they don't even have to worry about. See, everybody can just be themselves. We have to be ourselves, but then hold back a little bit (Nacho Momma, 2002).

These sentiments echoed concerns expressed in the Black *Survivor* Forum panel (Black Voices of Survivor Roundtable Live 2020). In short, contestants explained that participating on the show as a Black contestant comes with an additional layer of gameplay for Black players who are forced to code switch and hold parts of themselves back in order to relate to and be accepted by their non-Black peers.

Rector's concerns signaled a broader issue that he argued can arise when participating in a competitive reality series as a Black person: non-Black players will assume that Black players are working together as Black people and not acting as individuals. During their tenure, Rector and Towery had to fight against the assumption of their non-Black tribe mates that they were in a secret alliance stemming from their shared race and culture. When confronted with the accusation of colluding based on race directly, Rector explained "from day one [we] never had a pact. Although some people thought 'okay, there's the Black couple'" (A Tale of Two Cities, 2002). Towery added, "You know, we haven't walked around saying, 'we're the two African Americans. We're sticking together'" (A Tale of Two Cities, 2002).

Despite being truthful about not being in an alliance, Rector and Towery's non-Black tribe mates remained steadfast in their assumption that they were colluding as Black players. After a lengthy exchange where Towery and Rector pleaded with their tribe mates to view them as individual players not Black players colluding with one another, their white female cast mate doubled down: "I think the bottom line is there's a little alliance. You know, there's a small one: you guys made a pact. I'm not saying it's wrong. I'm just saying it throws a screw in how we progress (A Tale of Two Cities, 2002)."

In sum, the *Playing While Black* narrative theme suggests that Black contestants were negatively affected by racialized social obligation inside the game. Interestingly, this setting revealed that the pressure of this expectation need not even come from in-group members—to the contrary, in the case of Towery and Rector, their white tribe members assumed this would be their strategy and refused to believe that the two Black players could and would play a non-race-based game when there was the possibility to work with another Black player in the game. Consequently, Towery and Rector expressed feeling like they had little freedom or agency to craft non-race-based gameplay when competing on the series. They lamented the assumption that they had to prioritize racial group uplift because it meant that opportunities to foster rapport and authentic connection with other non-Black players were thwarted before they were even able to have meaningful conversations during their season.

As it relates to the world of politics, the “PWB (Playing While Black)” theme aligns with Tatum’s (2000) work on how individuals’ identity—especially if their primary identities are historically advantaged or disadvantaged, often affects their behavior as they attempt to navigate power dynamics created by socially-constructed identities like race and gender. For instance, similar to Towery and Rector’s account of how they felt obligated to play a double-layer game because they were Black and needed to fit in with their white cast members who were in the majority, Tatum describes how dominant groups often “hold power and authority in society” and consequently “set the parameters within which the subordinates operate (Tatum 2000).” In this way, the game of *Survivor* depicted in the “PWB (Playing While Black)” narrative theme suggests that the *Survivor* show dynamics are a microcosm of U.S. society-at-large.

Connected Through Kinship

The third most common theme in the analysis was *Connected Through Kinship* (16% or $n = 41$). These gameplay discussions referenced the feelings of connection that Black players felt toward one another as well as the responsibility they assumed in looking out for one another in the game because of their feelings of kinship as Black people. Consider an example. During Season 37—*Survivor David vs. Goliath* (2018), Jeremy Crawford and Natalie Cole clashed based on their strong personalities and direct communication styles. Despite personally disliking one another based on their outspoken personalities, both Crawford and Cole referenced feelings of kinship based on their shared racial identity, which helped them forge common ground in the game. For instance, when it became clear that Cole was oblivious about how she was being perceived by her tribe, Crawford pulled her aside and before providing negative feedback stated, “Hold on, listen. Let me just say this. I am Black. You are Black. I have a kinship to you, to make sure that we look out for each other as much as possible (The Chicken Has Flown The Coop, 2018).” Despite Crawford’s sentimental disclosure, Cole rallied against him and successfully led the charge to vote him out at the next Tribal Council.

During *Survivor Season 41* (2021), expressions of *Connected Through Kinship* similarly emerged but with an entirely different gameplay outcome. In this context, the two Black women in the game, Shan Smith and Liana Wallace, described the bond that can instantly form when people of color enter into shared spaces. As

Wallace put it, people of color have a “shared experience” that translates into an immediate bond (Ready to Play Like a Lion, 2021). She explained to viewers at home, “You’re like, oh you’re the only one in your classroom that looks like you. Me too. And so you have this bond and this connection right off the bat (Ready to Play Like a Lion, 2021).”

In the context of participating on a competitive reality television series, the bond described by Wallace can prompt unbridled trust and devotion. This occurred during *Survivor Season 41* (2021) when Liana Wallace sacrificed her individual game to protect Shan Smith who she described as having connected “over our moms and our blackness and our womanhood (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021).” Indeed, when the two other members of the all-Black alliance decided to turn against Smith and invited Wallace to participate in the blindside, she cried in a confessional interview and explained,

There’s nothing in this game, more precious to me than the moment when me and Shan were on the summit . . . And I was like . . . I love you, Shan. And even if that means, you know, it’s idiotic of me to sit next to you in the end. I really don’t care (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021).

As Wallace makes clear in this quote, her conversation with Smith where they both shared their experiences as Black women who were close to their mothers provoked feelings of camaraderie and kinship that left her willing to forgo the million-dollar cash prize by sitting next to Smith at the end of the game.

As illustrated in these two examples, the *Connected Through Kinship* narrative theme showcases how Black contestants often experience feelings of kinship that provoke an affinity toward one another in the game and a willingness to show care and trust even when unearned in terms of other Black players’ gameplay. The rhetorical claims embedded in this narrative theme were used by players in the midst of conflict to provide cushion to hard conversations. They were also used to establish connection between people who were otherwise unfamiliar with one another or had experienced personality clashes. However, these feelings of affinity provoked very different gameplay reactions in the season that was filmed during ongoing racial uprisings across the United States. During season 37, Cole remained steadfast in advancing her own individual gameplay despite Crawford’s gesture to connect over their shared race and culture. In stark contrast, during Season 41 when racial uprisings were taking place, Wallace happily prioritized racial group uplift over maximizing her own individual material interest.

As it relates to the world of politics, the “Connected Through Kinship” theme speaks to Laird (2019) concept of inclusive political messages, which draws scholarly attention to the fact that one’s racial group attachment can vary with time and other contextual factors. In her work, Laird studies how racial group attachments can vary by exposure to different kinds of political messages crafted and expressed by political elites. Specifically, she argues that political messages that discuss an issue of concern to the broader racial group through the lens of a subset of the larger group and also frame the issue in systemic rather than individual terms, increase the likelihood that Black people view their individual interests as being tied to the larger racial group. Rhetorical arguments that emerged under the “Connected Through

Kinship” theme showcase how ordinary Black people can also formulate inclusive messages that influence the thoughts and actions of other Black people in their family and broader social network, including increasing the salience of other’s racial group attachment when making decisions in a game where they are ultimately competing against one another for a million-dollar cash prize.

Doing Me at the Expense of Us

The fourth most common narrative of racial duty theme was *Doing Me at the Expense of Us* (15% or $n = 38$). Rhetorical arguments in this theme reflected Black players’ awareness of the conflict that can arise when attempting to pursue their own individual material interest and fulfill their commitment to championing racial group uplift. For instance, *Survivor Season 41* (2021), alliance members DeShawn Radden and Shan Smith frequently disagreed about who the all-Black alliance should target in the game. For Radden, Smith’s gameplay was haphazard and impulsive and he expressed a desire to abandon the alliance they shared. In a confessional interview, he explained that Smith was “a bulldozer when it comes to her strategy” and that he “came here to play” and did not like people telling him what to do in the game (Who’s Who in the Zoo, 2021). Yet, because their alliance was forged around their shared racial group membership and desire to work together in solidarity following the recent racial uprisings, Radden experienced intense inner turmoil at even the thought of leaving the alliance.

The final showdown between Smith and Radden painted a clear picture of the stakes of alliance members playing the game for themselves versus the group. With ten players remaining in the game, Smith worried that Radden would defect from the all-Black alliance. Growing more nervous about the possibility of a defection by Radden, Smith decided to speak candidly with him. She began their discussion with the statement: “honestly, at this point, you gotta do what’s right for your game and I gotta do what’s right for mine. Yea, I feel like that’s where it’s at (Who’s Who in the Zoo, 2021).”

During the conversation, both players shared their core reason for wanting to pursue an individual game rather than racial group uplift. Radden explained that he was crushed with student loan debt. A medical student, he described how the million-dollar cash prize could really help him alleviate financial stress. Given this, the question for him was ultimately “Do I do it for my ability to pay off my student loans? Or do I do it for the bigger picture (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021)?” On the other hand, Smith described having been homeless as recently as a few years ago. Recalling this difficult time, she asked herself aloud, “So, I’m like: do I do it for the culture or do I do it for a home? You know what I mean (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021)?”

Danny McCray further echoed Radden and Smith’s thought process regarding the conflict between pursuing one’s individual material interest versus prioritizing racial group uplift during an interview on the *Purple Pants Podcast*. He explained,

It would have been nice [to do it for the culture] but I wasn’t there to give anyone a million bucks. If I thought that one of the four was playing better than me . . . I was willing to do what I had to get them out so I could win (Survivor 41 interview with Danny McCray 2022).

In other words, while McCray agreed to be a part of the alliance, he also entered into the game knowing that he would eventually have to refocus his energy on winning the cash prize for himself and his family.

Taken together, the *Doing Me at the Expense of Us* narrative theme that emerged among Black players appearing on *Survivor* mirrors the tension of balancing the desire to remain committed to racial group uplift but also pursue one's own individual material interest described by race and ethnic politics scholars studying the world of politics. Similar to White and Laird (2020) whose work argues that expectations regarding Black political behavior have materialized over time in the electoral arena, the rhetorical arguments that emerged in the *Doing Me at the Expense of Us* narrative theme showcased Black players awareness of racialized social obligation. However, different from the electoral context where Black individuals frequently acquiesced and supported Democratic candidates, in the *Survivor* setting Black players did not always concede their individual material interests for the sake of racial group uplift. For example, in the end Radden defected and was the only player from the all-Black alliance to make it to the final vote—though he did not win the game. Thus, analyzing Black *Survivor* players' commentary and actions inside the game provides more corroborating evidence for Laird's (2019) work highlighting the dynamic nature of expressions of linked fate among Black Americans.

Breaking the Code

The final theme that emerged in the narratives of racial duty analysis was *Breaking the Code* (14% or $n = 36$). These gameplay discussions centered on the implications of the decision to deviate from other Black players in the game while competing in the game as well as after returning home. This theme emerged most prominently during *Survivor Season 41* (2021). Most notably, this theme emerged in response to alliance member Shan Smith revealing DeShawn Radden's secret plan to target Smith's non-Black friend in the game, Ricard Foyé. Danny McCray discussed "all bets being off" with regard to the members of the season's Black alliance continuing to make gameplay decisions through the lens of what was best for the group. For McCray, the original objective behind forming the alliance would no longer be at the forefront of his mind when making decisions in the game because Smith had revealed herself to be more loyal to her non-Black ally in the game than alliance members (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021).

According to McCray, Smith's decision to *Break the Code* was a betrayal. In this context, "Breaking the code" was sharing information about blindsiding another contestant in the game with someone outside of their alliance when they had not yet made it to final four. In a confessional interview, he explained, "Shan is the one who broke my trust. We put a lot into the four of us making it to the final four. And the fact that Shan is willing to throw that away because of some 19-day friendship doesn't vibe with me" (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021). McCray's reaction makes it clear that he expected he and Smith's discussions about the importance of playing with the broader Black community in mind to elicit a greater sense of loyalty to members of the all-Black alliance. However, now that it was clear that Smith was, at

best, conflicted in her loyalties, McCray's sense of racialized social obligation evaporated and he was fully on board to vote her out of the game. He reasoned "You broke the code. That's on you. If she went back and told [Ricard], that's under the bus, that's out of bounds and that breaks whatever the hell we had (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021)."

Ultimately, as discussed above, Radden and McCray defected from the alliance and teamed up with other players to blindsides and vote out Smith during the next Tribal Council. In response, Smith and Wallace expressed their own take on Radden *Breaking the Code* by helping organize the vote against Smith. After being voted out, Smith turned to Radden and stated, "Ricard, you have my vote for a million dollars, DeShawn, you're a snake (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021)."

In a confessional interview the next day, Wallace expressed similar feelings of contempt for Radden. She explained that DeShawn had smashed the "beautiful picture" of she and Shan that was in her head with his "snake move" and she wanted "revenge" (Baby with a Machine Gun, 2021). This name-calling and accusations prompted extreme distress within Radden. In a tearful confessional he lamented, "I was kinda pissed . . . because it's like, you [Ricard] were even more close with Shan. You were her number one ally and you backstabbed her as well but she didn't call you a snake. Like, huh (Do or Die, 2021)?"

In sum, the *Breaking the Code* narrative theme suggests that some Black contestants reacted strongly and negatively to other Black players' decision to defect from the group in their Survivor gameplay. Even in the context of competing on a million-dollar game, these players perceived the decision to prioritize one's individual gameplay as being selfish and disloyal. For others, prioritizing racial group uplift in one's gameplay was not an obligation, rather a context-driven agreement that could reasonably be deviated from if it meant that one was naively sacrificing their individual gameplay. Nevertheless, the social implication of doing so proved stressful for Black players—especially when they perceived themselves as being held to a higher standard than other non-Black players in the game.

As it relates to the world of politics, the commentary surrounding the impact of "Breaking the Code" among Black players during Season 41 speaks to Laird's (2019) argument that Black Americans not only vary in the malleability of their expressions of linked fate based on the type of political message but also their position within the larger group. In particular, she argues that the malleability of linked fate expressions is informed by the status of one's subgroup. She contends that the most and least privileged subgroups within the Black community are the least likely to be affected by inclusive appeals. Indeed, it is only among "moveable Blacks" where shifts most frequently occur. From this perspective, Smith, Radden, and McCray who were all transparent about their individual levels of privilege as a medical doctor, former NFL player, etc. yet also disclosed how winning the money would be life-changing for their family, suggesting that they each likely fall into Laird's concept of "moveable Blacks." They are neither chronically included nor excluded. Therefore, their thoughts and actions inside the game are indicative of ebbs and flows in racial group identification that can occur and make some Black people more (or less) receptive to appeals to coordinate around shared racial group identity.

Discussion

In this article, I asserted that using the competitive reality series, *Survivor*, as a site to study Black decision-making could be advantageous to both communications and racial politics scholars interested in advancing scholarship in each tradition. Toward this goal, in the current study I conducted a thematic content analysis wherein I identified prominent arguments related to narratives of racial duty or Black contestants' expressions of feelings of racialized social obligation involved with playing the game. I focused on the expression of narratives of racial duty on competitive reality television series because this context mirrors the conflict between racial group uplift and maximizing one's individual material interests described by Dawson (1994) and White and Laird (2020) in traditional political settings.

In the analysis, I uncovered five substantive themes in narratives of racial duty: Doing it for the Culture, PWB (Playing while Black), Connected Through Kinship, Doing Me at the Expense of Us, and Breaking the Code. Claims that emerged in each of these themes suggested that Black *Survivor* contestants were keenly aware of the racialized social obligations that existed for them as contestants in the game. For some, this reality felt like a burden. However, for others it presented an opportunity. Black players perceived racialized social obligations as beneficial when they fostered bridges of commonality and served as a heuristic when communicating thoughts and expectations. However, when racialized social obligations were perceived as constraining, they provoked stress in Black players and prompted moral dilemmas.

These findings can be used to extend White, Laird, and Allen's (2014) work on racialized social pressures and Black political decision-making. White and Laird study the effect of simply having a co-ethnic confederate in the room when making political decisions. Yet, we know in the real world, when friends and family endeavor to persuade, they do so with rhetorical arguments. From this perspective, the current study can be used to begin identifying common scripts used to adhere to (and sidestep) racialized social norms.

Future work can use the narrative themes identified in this study and leverage the show's two decades of episodes to systematically study how the articulation of narratives of racial duty varies over time and based on the broader social context. For instance, how do Black Americans' storytelling regarding the balance between maximizing racial group uplift and pursuing their individual material interest vary across events exogenous to the show such as the election of the country's first Black president and a wide-scale economic recession? Future studies could leverage the observations gleaned from this qualitative evidence to identify potential mechanisms that explain shifts in quantitative measures of Black political behavior over time. Much of the latter work has been conducted in a survey or lab setting, which means that an additional benefit of conducting research on competitive reality series is that these entertainment programs will offer scholars a new research site to study perennial questions related to race in American politics.

Work in race and communications could also explore how in-group versus out-group audience members react to narratives of racial duty. For instance, this research could explore whether there is a rallying effect of mediated narratives of racial duty in this context. Finally, communications or race and politics researchers could adopt an intersectional approach and study how gendered systems of

oppression manifest and inform racialized social obligations. Each of these potential avenues of future research showcases the ways that analyzing entertainment programs in this genre offers race and ethnic politics scholars a new site for studying Black decision-making.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at [<https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2023.17>].

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who provided feedback that improved the manuscript. I would also like to thank Tiffany Ford, Sakiera Hudson, Aerielle Allen, Daphne Penn, and Stacey Greene who read earlier versions of this work and provided feedback.

Note

I It is important to acknowledge from the outset that the show's use of "tribe" and "Tribal Council" is an example of how U.S. media and popular culture often invoke language and symbols of Native and Indigenous groups and uses them in a distorted or decontextualized manner that contributes to the misrepresentation of Native and Indigenous people and their way of life including in television series and movies (for more on this see Kiyomi 2000; Ono and Buescher 2001).

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Cite this article: Harbin MB (2023). Narratives of Racial Duty: Competitive Reality Television Series as Sites for Studying Racialized Social Obligations and Black Group-Based Decision-Making. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* **8**, 324–349. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2023.17>