

Reflections on Racism Against Women of Color Faculty in Academia

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Abstract: In this article, we utilize autoethnographic methods and a literature review to report on themes regarding female social work faculty members who identify as women of Color (WOC) and their experiences with racism and White supremacy within predominantly White institutions in the United States. These experiences are not unique to any particular institution or university, but rather reflect systemic racism and the upholding of White supremacy in higher education throughout the United States. We highlight the differential vulnerability faced by WOC women in academia, which are often unaddressed in the pursuit of what is seen to be an egalitarian or colorblind merit review. Utilizing autoethnographic techniques and bearing in mind our own positionalities, we share personal narratives regarding our own marginalization within White spaces and the emotional labor that we are often asked to carry for the institutions within which we work. Themes include experiences of tokenization or assumed intellectual inferiority. Given the current sociopolitical moment and the heightened awareness of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts within universities, institutions of higher education must move beyond simply hiring more people of color or conducting diversity trainings to ensuring that WOC are more fully included in their roles within universities as faculty, administrators, staff and students.¹

Keywords: racism, academia, faculty, women of color, tenure, promotion

1. Introduction

Disparities regarding the treatment and pay of women have been well documented in scholarship on higher education in the United States (U.S.; Burke et al, 2005; Porter et al, 2008). Campuses have been depicted as having a “chilly professional climate” for women (Sandler & Hall, 1986, p. 3). Women are less likely to be tenured or promoted compared to male faculty and also earn less than their male colleagues (Winkler, 2000). Men are more likely to hold higher academic ranks and administrative posts and will therefore occupy positions that evaluate, reward, and punish women (Barbezat & Hughes, 2005; Bellas, 1999).

Similarly, women of color (WOC) faculty also have experienced hardships in recruitment, hiring, tenure, and promotion within universities. Systemic racism entails recurring and unequal relationships within institutions (Feagin, 2013). Political agendas within institutions may engage Black and Brown bodies implicitly as property, enforcing what has been called “a direct model of plantation politics” (Dancy et al, 2018, p. 187).

University administrators may claim that the lack of diversity within faculty is caused by a dearth of qualified minority candidates. Yet, according to the National Science Foundation (2015), in the past decade enrollment in doctoral education by U.S. citizens or permanent residents who are Black has increased by 31% and enrollment by those who are Latinx has increased by 71%. As Gasman (2016, p.1) noted, “The reason we don’t have more faculty of color among college faculty is that we don’t want them. We simply don’t want them.”

Higher education in America is largely reflective of a deep commitment to the degradation of people of color as fundamental to the maintenance of a colonial or imperial order (Dancy et al, 2018). Notably, universities in the U.S. were initially created to educate the offspring of colonizers and may implicitly still serve to recreate the settler colonial state (Thelin, 2004).

Black and Brown faculty are more likely to be treated unfairly in the areas of training opportunities and promotion; are more likely to be targets of workplace discrimination; and are more likely to have difficulty in accessing informal professional networks (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). These social connections and networks help to shape, fund, and advance scholarship, making it easier for some faculty to navigate and succeed in academia.

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WOC women faculty within predominantly white institutions (PWI) experience additional tensions in academe (Rideau, 2019) as institutional oppression is based on both axes of race and gender. While the overall number of female faculty has increased within institutions of higher education, the number of WOC female faculty has remained a small proportion (National Research Council, 2013). WOC women account for only about a tenth of faculty members at four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Implicit assumptions of superior intellectual and professional competency are automatically assigned to White men and women (Turner & Gonzales, 2011). WOC women faculty are the lowest paid demographic among faculty, earning less per dollar than White men (67 cents), White women (81 cents), and men of color (72 cents; McChesney, 2018).

Drawing from Crenshaw (1991) and Collins' (2000) conceptual framework on intersectionality, we analyze how positionalities of race, class, and gender shape multiple dimensions of lived experience for WOC women who are faculty in the U.S. We draw from one of the central tenets of critical race theory (CRT), which argues that racism is an everyday American experience (Razack & Jeffery, 2002). As Bell (1995) argues, CRT recognizes that revolutionizing a culture begins with a radical assessment of it. In this vein, we attempt to offer a radical assessment of the racism and White supremacy in institutions of higher education in the U.S.

2. Methodology

Our methodology in this paper is autoethnographic and a literature review (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography can be conceptualized as both process and product. It is an approach to research that describes and systematically analyzes personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographic investigations follow from a postmodern perspective that challenges positivist paradigms of objective truth. Autoethnographers recognize the ways in which personal experience influences the research process by determining when, where, and how research is conducted (Ellis et al., 2011). Rather than assuming that the emic anthropological perspective is inherently biased in gathering empirical information, autoethnography instead focuses on the importance of the researcher's perspective as a fundamental means of collecting and understanding lived experiences.

To be fully transparent about the ways in which our own identities contribute to how we view social constructs regarding race, class and gender, we also wish to explain our own positionalities. Given that these identities may have influenced our research process, we engage in reflexivity regarding our own backgrounds, not in an attempt to silence our own perspectives, but rather to recognize and appreciate their influence on our social and cultural views. The first author identifies as an Indian, Muslim American woman, who has primarily worked in social policy and clinical social work practice pertaining to HIV, mental health and addiction treatment, as well as for city and state public health departments. The second author identifies as a southern African American/Black Christian woman, wife, and mother who has practiced in the following areas: medical social work, counseling in a psychiatric hospital within the department of corrections, child protective services, and clinical counseling with sexual trauma services.

While the two of us differ in our racial/ethnic identities, household compositions, religions, and institutional affiliations, our experiences as WOC women social work faculty remain unquestionably similar. We dissect these experiences as WOC in this paper. We do not seek to analyze these experiences from a deficit-based model that solely envisions people of color as being perpetually at a disadvantage. Instead we argue that operating from a bicultural perspective equips WOC with skills that aid them in critically examining their institutions and moving beyond white-dominant notions of educational leadership to more culturally responsive approaches.

It may also be helpful to first define how we are using the acronym WOC. We have explicitly chosen to use this acronym in this paper as it refers to a wide swath of women, including Black, Indigenous, Latina, and Asian and Pacific Islander women. The term WOC also holds political relevance as a means of creating solidarity among culturally and ethnically diverse communities. In the following sections, we will review themes from our autoethnographic experiences and from a review of the literature on the treatment of WOC faculty members in institutions of higher education. We arrived at the following themes from an analysis of the evidence base on race and gender-based disparities in higher education, as well as incorporating our own perspectives and personal experiences with these issues.

3. WOC women carry the university's emotional labor

There are several ways in which WOC women carry additional emotional labor for the university. WOC women professionals have reported feeling that they must transform themselves to be welcomed and accepted in the workplace; additionally, they may feel perpetually judged for their appearance, personal decorum, communication skills, and emotional regulation (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). WOC women often suffer from “race fatigue” (Harley, 2008, p. 19) as a result of being overextended and undervalued in the areas of teaching, research, and particularly service. WOC women are sought out by administrators as instructors, mentors, and stars for diversity brochures. Padilla (1994) refers to this phenomenon as cultural taxation, or the additional service that falls upon WOC women faculty to serve their institution's needs.

Faculty of color also spend more time than their White colleagues in mentoring students (Rideau, 2019). Teaching and service generally entail substantial amounts of emotional labor, but this labor is not seen to be a valued skill and is therefore poorly rewarded by the academic merit system (Bellas, 1999). Students of color also seek out WOC women faculty for advising and educational/career counseling. WOC women faculty are often strongly committed to supporting students of color. As WOC faculty ourselves, we often agree to take on additional mentoring roles (and their associated risks) as we see it to be “paying it forward” for those mentors who helped us navigate our own way through academia. However, caring for marginalized students is another method by which we experience identity taxation (Rideau, 2019). The added burden of supporting marginalized students can also entail assuming added risks (Rideau, 2019) within university systems.

Since the pandemic, WOC pretenure faculty have carried additional emotional burdens from supporting students of color who are distressed, honoring requests for guest lectures, and providing consultations regarding current events. But of course, that added labor goes unreflected in our annual merit reviews and remains unrewarded by tenure and promotion processes. There is also no way to quantify the pain we feel when hearing about the struggles of our students who are WOC because often those struggles are our own. Advocating for these students of color often involves the kind of advocacy we wish we had received ourselves as graduate students. While WOC faculty are often asked to “step up” to support marginalized students, we may need to “step back” to ensure that we are able to meet our own research, teaching and service obligations at the university (Ventura & Wong, 2020).

Additionally, women often bear the brunt of family caregiving responsibilities (Neufeld & Harrison, 2003). Women faculty, and particularly WOC faculty, are no exception to this gendered norm (Hart, 2016). Prior to and through the COVID-19 pandemic, many WOC women faculty have been responsible for childcare, homeschooling of children, or caretaking of aging family members, a responsibility that differentially impacts the productivity of women over men (Krukowski et al, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, distinctions between work life and home life have been blurred as faculty offer online Zoom classes and participate in service committees from their living rooms, sometimes while also providing care for family members or coordinating their children's online schooling at home. Interestingly, even in those instances where WOC faculty may begrudgingly take on additional service responsibilities through peer or institutional pressure, the narrative of the interaction may be recreated to portray women as naturally more giving, more altruistic, less concerned with their own career advancement, and more committed to collectivistic causes. These reductionist renderings of gendered roles and racialized expectations equate WOC to be the *mammies* (Collins, 2000) or the *maids* (Harley, 2008) of their universities, upholding moral virtuousness and “cleaning up the mess,” as it were, but not necessarily demonstrating academic prowess.

4. WOC women are tokenized

A common thread for WOC faculty is the awareness of working within contexts that explicitly or implicitly promote the socially constructed myths of White male superiority. As Anderson (2015) noted, some spaces, including much of American academia, are perceived to be White spaces, which are informally off limits for people of color, and even more so for WOC. When a WOC woman enters a White space, others try to make sense of her, to determine whether they need to be concerned (Anderson, 2015) or threatened. Without regular contact with communities of color, stereotypes regarding WOC become the norm, estranging us from our work settings and from our peers. Others describe us as hostile, aggressive, confrontational, entitled, argumentative, angry. Yet we do not notice the same critiques made of even our most outspoken White peers. Both authors have experienced exclusion from networks that not only teach unwritten cultural rules, but also help faculty build connections with other colleagues, university administrators, funders, and community members.

An implicit bias permeates our interactions within university settings, depicting us as perpetually threatening or foreign to the existing social order. Both authors have been mistaken for secretaries and been asked to make photocopies for other professors. The second author has walked into academic spaces and been mistaken for a custodian and asked to dump the trash. Both authors have been told by multiple people, with genuine surprise in their eyes, how articulate we are or how well we speak English. Both authors have experienced moments when students are surprised to find that we are their instructors. A student has tersely told the second author to move her belongings on the front desk in the classroom to a different location to make way for the professor, only to be surprised to find that she was already speaking to the professor. The second author has had several incidents of students being taken aback with referring to her by the title of “Dr.”, while the same students do not express issue with referring to White faculty in the same manner. The first author has experienced multiple instances of sexual harassment at academic conferences, where senior faculty and search committee chairs wave job openings at their institutions as proverbial carrots on sticks for their unwelcome sexual forwardness. The first author has also had other scholars refer to her research as “exotic,” reflecting the perpetual Orientalization and fetishization that often permeates studies conducted in Asian contexts and particularly those involving women (Azhar et al, 2021; Azhar et al., 2020; Aziz & Azhar, 2019; Said, 1979).

WOC faculty are also disproportionately asked to serve on committees (Bellas, 1999) and assigned greater clerical or administrative tasks within those committees. Committee service entails the need for communication skills and interpersonal skills, which often promote an emotionless notion of professionalism. Particularly when serving on diversity and inclusion committees for our institutions, we became painfully aware of how we may be perceived by others and may need to soften our criticisms of systemic flaws, lest they be misconstrued as entitled, privileged, or ungrateful. WOC faculty, administrators, and staff are often interrupted, ignored or unrecognized in meetings. Over time, this may lead WOC who choose to remain in academia to either move from one academic institution to another to avoid systemic discrimination or resign themselves to dysfunctional racialized and gendered dynamics among university faculty and employees at multiple institutions. If they do remain at institutions for the longer term, they may continue to be shut down and their actions may be minimized by their White colleagues.

5. WOC women are seen as complainers

WOC women are discouraged from speaking out about these instances for fear of retaliation from faculty at their current institutions or from being blacklisted from potential employers at other institutions. “This will ruin your career” and “It’s a small world in academia” are mantras that have been used to instill fear in voicing a complaint and encourage silence. The fear of an unknown future is used to justify uncomfortable or unfair working conditions. When WOC do in fact make a complaint or vocalize a grievance about inequitable treatment, their issues are often dismissed.

Affirmation bias permeates the social structure of the work environment for faculty who are WOC. Formal complaints by WOC are likely to be deemed irrational, hypersensitive, and emotional. WOC women faculty are subtly reminded that we should just be happy to have “a seat at the table,” but refrain from desiring full inclusion. Our justified emotions of frustration are heralded as the hostile and aggressive rants of angry WOC (Duncan, 2014), reinforcing old and damaging tropes. Defensiveness may also ensue as faculty members and administrators assume that by making a critique of systemic oppression, we are individually accusing them of racism. A lack of differentiation, indeed the ecological fallacy at play, is made between saying, “This university system is racist” and “You, individual White faculty member, are racist.”

Beyond explicit discrimination, our more common experiences with racism are everyday microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as race-specific interactions with themes of criminality and incompetence directed toward African Americans and themes of perpetual foreignness and invisibility directed toward Asian Americans (Sue et al, 2008). In academic settings, microaggressions may take the form of White faculty confusing the few WOC faculty or students with one another through seemingly naïve comments like, “You look just like [insert name of the other woman of color in the department].” It is demonstrated when the achievements of WOC women are intentionally or unintentionally absent from group recognition. Even the very usage of the term *microaggression* may serve to minimize the scale and impact of these perpetual insults against us because the usage of the prefix “micro” may be misinterpreted to refer to the magnitude of the interaction, rather than the frequency and routineness with which these insults occur.

During moments of crisis, like the current pandemic, inequitable service expectations are also often conferred on WOC women faculty. Refusing to accommodate these service requests can be misconstrued as a lack of desire to be a “team player” or to be seen as ungrateful for one’s privileged place as a faculty member of color in a PWI. Diversity, equity and inclusion trainings are increasingly popular in the current moment, but typically only occur in one time and at one place, serving as the implicit justification for ongoing acts of systemic racism. More importantly, these trainings have largely been proven to be ineffective at changing racial attitudes and behaviors within institutions in the long term (Cocchiara et al, 2010). Their presence is more likely to serve institutional interests in protecting liability from workplace discrimination than actually fostering an environment that promotes race and gender equity.

Additionally, many institutions of higher education have created what have been termed “safe spaces” or “brave spaces” (Palfrey, 2017) for people of color to more freely discuss those issues that impact them. But a rebranding of the name of the space does not make it any safer nor braver. Unquestionably these spaces can serve as a refuge for students of color in an environment that can be perpetually hostile. But as Ahmed (2012) notes, the very creation of these relegated spaces serves as the rebuttal for the fact that social exclusion and marginalization permeate all other social interactions for people of color. Indeed the creation of an anti-racism task force is the validation that systemic racism does in fact exist within the university.

6. Discussion

In the final section of this paper, we provide a brief set of recommendations for meaningful social change in academia and provide action-oriented suggestions for how to work towards accomplishing these goals.

Table 1: Recommendations to address racism in academia

Assess the Institutional Climate
Encourage Critical Reflection and Counter-Storytelling
Encourage Institutional Support and Mentorship of WOC Faculty and Students
Reconsider Faculty Workloads and Tenure Expectations
Give Space for WOC Women Faculty, Students and Staff to Grieve and Recover

6.1 Assess the institutional climate

In order to analyze the structural conventions that uphold White supremacy and marginalize faculty, staff and students of color, academic departments, schools, and universities need to conduct an assessment of their institutional climate. Part of this critical assessment would require examining recruitment, hiring, mentoring, retention and promotion efforts, and the extent to which these efforts include WOC students and faculty members. Such assessments must also involve honest evaluations of leadership and the ways in which institutional management has potentially contributed to the maintenance of White supremacy. Following an assessment, the next steps would include examining how Whiteness plays out in the school’s strategies for program marketing, admission criteria, and graduation trends for students of color.

6.2 Encourage critical reflection and counter-storytelling

A function of education is to promote critical thinking, which should include efforts to decenter Whiteness within institutions in order to promote diversity, difference, and inclusivity. The adoption of counter-storytelling, or the practice of using alternative stories regarding communities of color, can also be an effective tool to challenging dominant narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). A diverse faculty strengthens any institution through the adoption of a richer curriculum and deeper engagement on race and gender in faculty committees and meetings (Gasman, 2016). A diverse faculty can hold the university accountable in ways that uplift people of color (Gasman, 2016) and decenter Whiteness. University leaders need to critically examine how racism, sexism, and gender-based oppression are reproduced within institutions and have often been the historical precedents to the very creation of these institutions.

6.3 Encourage institutional support and mentorship of WOC faculty and students

WOC women faculty need unique support and resources that are designed to address the isolating effects of being the only person of the color in the room, on the committee, or in the department. Providing support to WOC faculty and students also requires an appreciation for mental health disparities among racial/ethnic minority students. Recent research has shown that people of color are at increased risk for both experiencing

discrimination and experiencing mental health issues (CDC, 2020; Ruiz et al, 2020). Black and Latinx people report higher rates of depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms as a result of the pandemic than White people (CDC, 2020). Similarly, greater than 30% of Asian-American adults say they have experienced interpersonal racism since the pandemic began (Ruiz et al, 2020). To address these disparities, we must conduct mental health outreach to racial/ethnic minority students, including doctoral students. These students must also be provided opportunities to be actively involved in the design and change of school policies that directly impact them.

6.4 Reconsider faculty workloads and tenure expectations

Expectations for tenure/promotion reviews must consider structural inequities by gender and race/ethnicity. Recent discussions regarding one or two year extensions to the tenure clock acknowledge the challenges to productivity elicited by the pandemic, but only do so by delaying the decision of *when* faculty will be evaluated. These extensions may provide extra time to adjust research efforts, but may affect faculty and administrator perceptions of whether faculty are “on track” for academic success. Ultimately, the standards by which faculty are assessed for tenure and promotion decisions remain the same, albeit delayed. If faculty take the additional year in their tenure review, this essentially equates to a pay cut as junior faculty are prevented from assuming the salary increase associated with receiving tenure and promotion, typically following the seventh year of university service in the United States. This too may arguably serve to maintain standards that ultimately uphold White male supremacy as universities are unable to adequately respond to the differential burdens that the pandemic has placed on WOC women, and in particular WOC women who serve as caregivers. Additionally, several universities do not offer affordable childcare services to faculty, staff and students, again creating a greater burden on women who are parents, particularly of young children. Perhaps a better way to adjust work expectations is to adjust tenure expectations by a year, such that women can still be promoted on time and without being forced to sacrifice a promotional salary increase. Efforts should also be made to identify and reduce pay disparities across faculty rank by race and gender. Such discussions are often laced with hesitation, shame and desires for confidentiality regarding income, so should be approached in a guarded manner.

6.5 Give space for WOC women faculty, students and staff to grieve and recover

In the midst of one of the most tumultuous social and political years of our lives, it is important for university faculty and administrators to give WOC faculty, students and staff opportunities to grieve, rest, recover, rejoice. Experiencing joy is an act of resistance against the narratives that tell us that we are destined to fail, fated to be oppressed, and condemned to subjugation. Allow for the expression of joy in the classroom, joy in the field, even joy in the committee meeting. This is not to say that we simply smile and withstand our agony. But we “must include feelings of pleasure such as laughing and experiences of joy even within the traumatic existence of exploitation” (Shimizu, 2016., p.319).

7. Conclusion

In sum, a more inclusive university will require intentional shifts in power dynamics that create pathways for women of color to thrive within academia. Ultimately, as social work faculty members, we are deeply committed to the pursuit of social justice, which we define here to be equity and fairness in the distribution of social resources (Fouad et al., 2006). Social justice refers to how advantages and disadvantages are distributed to individuals in society (Miller, 1999). Operating from a perspective of social justice emphasizes structural issues, namely equity, interdependence, and social responsibility (Bell, 1997). Given that the notions of equity and fairness are highly subjective within institutional settings, operationalizing these terms can be challenging. But we must stand ready for this challenge. And we must stand ready to face the institutional obstacles and risks that advocating for these changes will inevitably entail.

As we have already outlined, one of the fundamental ways to help create a paradigm shift is the development of critical consciousness amongst our faculty, staff and students regarding the nature of power relationships within society and how these dynamics shape individual perceptions and biases (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999) within university settings. It would be irresponsible for social workers to ignore the ways in which we may act as agents of social control, rather than agents of social change (Saugeres, 2000). Social workers working in mental health, criminal justice, and child welfare settings need to confront the ways in which juvenile justice systems, jails, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, homeless shelters, and foster care systems have contributed to racial disparities in health, education, housing, and employment. We need to move beyond giving credit for our good intentions

to acknowledging our bad consequences. In order for us to engage in meaningful and lasting social change, social workers must come to terms with the ways in which our profession has participated in historical systems that have normalized and institutionalized racism and White supremacy, often blaming racial/ethnic minority groups for their own poverty and social marginalization. Our commitment as social workers has always been to the most vulnerable within society. To ignore the centrality of intersectional racism and sexism in determining social inequity would be a disservice to ourselves and to our beloved profession.

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