Counternarratives for Racial Justice: Confronting Institutionalized Racism in Higher Education

Dianne Ramdeholl[1] and Jaye Jones[2]
[1]School for Graduate Studies, Empire State College -SUNY, New York, USA
[2]Division of Student Affairs, Lehman College – CUNY, New York, USA

Abstract
This research highlights findings from a recently published book documenting the lived experiences and struggles of racialized faculty at predominantly white institutions (PWI) within North America.
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Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Critical Race Theory [CRT] (Bell, 1992; Merriweather, 2019;), the concept of racial realism (Bell, 1992) and critical, feminist, and auto-ethnographic approaches, *Counternarratives for Racial Justice* centers the voices of racialized scholars, interrogating their lived experiences and struggles within academia by focusing on three questions: (a) how are the everyday, teaching, and academic experiences of racialized faculty at PWIs shaped by microaggressions, racism, and institutional culture? (b) how are racialized faculty (and their allies) responding to and addressing issues of racism and oppression at the individual, interpersonal and institutional levels? and (c) what specific actions must we take to create a more equitable, hopeful space in academia for racialized faculty?

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) highlights five tenets comprising CRT which are of relevance to work assessing systemic inequities in higher education:

1. The importance of counternarratives (stories centering voices of the oppressed),
2. Whiteness as property (the legacies of Black lives as white property),
3. Interest convergence (ways in which change seems to occur if it benefits non-racialized people),
4. The permanence of racism (because higher education ignores systemic racism upon which the US was built, diversity plans in universities can often reinforce and support institutional racism), and
5. Colorblindness (which allows society to ignore racist policies and laws).

By chronicling counternarratives, emerging scholars of color will learn how others before them resisted these practices. Knowledge of these histories also nurtures solidarity and supports anti-racist faculty organizing and reform that pushes against the superficial responses that lead to despair.

Methodology

Twelve mid-to-senior level adult education faculty members and administrators (8 Black/African American; 3 Asian; 1 Latinx) were interviewed virtually for this project. The semi-structured interviews focused on their experiences at the start of their careers; tenure and promotion as instructors, and strategies they used to navigate life at a PWI. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes. Theme focusing on institutional racism; teaching while Brown/Black; stonewalling and gaslighting; tenure and promotion; faculty organizing; self-care; white privilege and white supremacy and "what the university could be" allowed the verbatim

interview responses to be placed in conversation with each other. This was done, in part, to reflect the collective nature of these narratives and the unsettling similarity of people's experiences.

The findings below include excerpts (some abbreviated) from the interviews (all names are pseudonyms) organized around four key categories: institutionalized racism; microaggressions and teaching; tenure and promotion and self-care.

Findings

Institutionalized Racism

Racialized scholars are allowed to enter "spaces of whiteness" but never achieve full acceptance despite their achievements (Collins, 1998). Universities seem to believe that declaring an awareness of racism absolves them of any responsibility to substantively change (Ahmed, 2020; Brookfield & Hess, 2021; Johnson-Bailey, 2013). Overall, though diversity is used more, it often means less. In addition, racialized faculty are often mandated to take on the workload of two if not three people. This is how the university serves as a modern-day plantation for academics of color (Squire et al., 2021) where compliance, conformity, and fear prevail.

Fiona: *You know, universities were created for rich, white men. And the fact that they've diversified the people coming in doesn't change how it was set up, right? So we really need to rethink the whole process. There's also the challenge with trying to accommodate multiple stakeholders. I imagine that administrators have boards of trustees, alumni, and politicians if they're state funded. I can imagine they're trying to appease multiple people but at what cost?*
Beatrice: *I remember for my initial interview, it was interesting because usually a candidate traveled to the university, you stayed overnight, you met with the faculty of that unit, you're interviewed by other units in the college and you meet with the dean. And I remember the department head saying, well you live 100 miles away so you can just drive down every day for your interviews. And I knew that was different. And then one department refused to meet with me. They actually protested the fact that I was being interviewed because they said it was a targeted search. So right off the bat, I knew this experience was going to be different.*
Gladys: *There's a lot of structural racism built into higher ed that just permeates everyday activities, actions, and speech. I'm the only faculty of color in my program and it can get disheartening and hard. And the city where I am in the south is very segregated racially…but it's not overt. A lot of it is covert and there's a long history of much anti-Black racism here. So, for example, I'm the only woman of color and the lowest paid in the department. The department chair who had hired me and negotiated my salary told me later I didn't negotiate hard enough. Even though he was the one who had hired me and negotiated my salary. I get paid the lowest not just in the program but in the department. I also have over forty doctoral advisees and 4 master's advisees so close to fifty in total. Recently, I was told I'm spending too much time on advising, too much time teaching and remapping my courses when I shouldn't really be doing that. In that conversation, there was no recognition of the load I was carrying. It was all about how I was negotiating my load. If you just put it as an overall picture, that's what I mean by racism is structural.*

Microaggressions and Teaching

Microaggressions/microinvalidations, are defined as "commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate

hostile derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). They can manifest in the forms of snubs, insults, etc. and are intended to denigrate an individual by virtue of race, gender, sexual orientation, or racial/ethnic background (Carroll, 2017). Their intended outcome is to lessen the psychic worthiness, wholeness, or intactness of that individual. Microaggressions experienced by racialized faculty demonstrate the many slights and put downs intended to disparage, diminish, and deflate. Racialized women faculty, in particular, must be mindful of their emotional reactions lest they be perceived as "angry" or "overly sensitive" - responses that can make it even harder for them to be taken seriously by both students and faculty (Johnson et al., 2021).

Magda: *I always bring my whole self to any environment. So I show up as a Black woman and that's really important to distinguish. I show up as Black first then woman second fully recognizing the intersectionality…but my blackness always precedes my gender and my experiences have really reflected that in terms of them being right or wrong, or in justifying my choice of curricular options or readings or lecture material.*
Fiona: *Yes, I'd say especially white students tried to challenge my authority in the classroom in ways that I think they wouldn't have for white women colleagues or men of color colleagues and certainly not white men. So that gender, race, age, intersection makes me seem more relatable but also less respected. I feel because I teach classes in social justice and diversity, often students don't see the rigor in that work. Definitely more so now because I'm in a PWI.*
Magda: *When these types of incidents happen, they're essentially telling me that our competency and our experiences don't count and if they do count they don't count as much as our white colleagues' experiences. They devalue our experiences.*
Rafaela: *You know I'm a first generation college student myself. I've had students tell me I use my hands too much but then on my evaluations, I'm passionate. I even had a student come up to me after class and say I shouldn't use my hands so much. It's not just distracting but it's unprofessional. At the time, I thought, you know, it takes a lot of privilege and self-entitlement to be able to do that. That happens a lot, that kind of questioning of my authority, my credentials, even the way I talk and teach.*

Tenure and Promotion

Racialized faculty are expected to have accomplished more yet their tenure and promotion files are always scrutinized through certain deficit lenses of "presumed incompetence" (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Those who make a clear commitment to bridge the academic and the activist as they make their way through the tenure process can also find themselves at a crossroads while working to disrupt the status quo (Few et al., 2007). They often end up making sometimes difficult adjustments so as not to jeopardize their ability to share their knowledge through teaching, to mentor students and finally, and obtain deserved permanency (Matthew, 2016). Racialized women faculty face additional challenges and scrutiny in the tenure and promotion journey as a result of their gendered and raced identities (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017; Téllez, 2013). Indeed, they may be expected to defer their ambitions or be perceived as "difficult" when they push back against unwritten standards that are clearly privileging the career advancement of white women, white men and/or men of color.

Magda: *I think it was(D.W) Sue who talked about these micro aggressive moments as being a 1000 little paper cuts. I like the imagery that it's 1000 little things that eventually cause you to bleed out. That's why we leave the profession because we just don't want to have to deal with*

this crap any more. It's not worth the benefit of the gains versus the losses. These just aren't enough to make it tenable.

Delilah*: With my white colleagues, it's just a slide through, it's just like check, check, check, check, check. Yes. She's fine. Nobody questions. But with me, it's really hard. We have to quantify everything. How much has she really written? And I just feel like there's this extra scrutiny that other people don't get. Like they have permission to be mediocre, but not only can't I be mediocre but I can't be mediocre in any area at any time. It has to be perfection across the board or nothing I did matters. I just don't see those rules that apply to everyone.*

Self-Care

The trauma of racism can have physiological implications that have a longstanding impact on the health of people of color. As racialized people, trauma lives in the head and also in the body and can contribute to stress-related disease. Ahmed (2020) defines trauma as holding a history in your body; this history means you can be easily shattered. In a recent examination of Black women, those who faced more racial discrimination had a proportionately greater neurological response in threat, attention and emotion centers in the brain (Fani et al., 2021). Scott (2014) points out the importance of the collective aspect in healing. She says we cannot develop these new racialized healthy habits alone. They must be developed in community with other people of color who are politically like-minded. In these communal spaces of trust, solidarity, and vulnerability, the social imagination is revealed.

Fiona: *I do see self-care as political and necessary. I think of that Audre Lorde quote about political warfare ("Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare"). Being connected to self-preservation rings true. And how have I tried to listen to that? I think it's hard because we're such a capitalist grind culture. So, self-care is certainly something I value out and have a hard time practicing. I think that became clear in the pandemic about how to focus on what matters most like sleep and not neglecting relationships. So, sleep and then relationships like family, like connecting on human levels and not putting work before everything else which is what we're often encouraged to do, right? Regular Zoom meetings with girlfriends. That's been part of it.*

Shabana: *Yes, definitely, that village aspect is really important. I am part of different groups with Black women. Whether it be a writing group (I'm in two writing groups actually). And that's been very helpful in terms of just community, especially during the lockdown phase. So that's been really helpful in building community and having a space to talk. I think I have also reconceptualized service during this pandemic, because you quickly realize how much easier it is to be at home and participating in things versus having to travel places and the fatigue of the airports. Having not done that for a while, I know that I won't go back to doing things that way. I think that people are now open to virtual keynotes and things are now possible in ways that they weren't before. So I think the demands will be less in that way too.*

Recommendations & Implications

Risam (2018) points out scholars of color challenge, reimagine, and reinvent scholarly practices to survive, and in doing so, transform universities.   As insurgent academics, this work draws upon a long history of practices by scholars of color that form the unrecognized basis of strategies for re-envisioning higher education. However, while representation is necessary, being racialized does not automatically mean subscribing to progressive paradigms. Racialized

scholars committed to structural change must be committed to collective victories. Activist counternarratives can guide us toward transformative, communal triumphs that enrich us all.

Gladys: *We also absolutely have to hire more faculty of color. And when I talk about faculty of color, I think in terms of representation, but also in terms of politics because that's how you form the movement, right? When you're alone and isolated, it's hard but when you come together that's when you can make change. I think we have to find ways to work with progressive white academics and administrators in higher ed. I think there's a way that we have to come together in solidarity and do some coalition building, because it's not enough to say, I'm your ally, I'm there. We need that support enacted. And administrators can do this through DEI now, diversity inclusion and equity. By intentionally making spaces, providing resources and encouraging faculty who are actually doing the work instead of hijacking it. And I think these committees that people are participating on as a response to BLM; that administrative community and committee level work, I'm not seeing it translate into real change. It's more putting out statements. The work has to be done on the ground.*
Rafaela: *That resonates with me, Gladys. We need affinity groups that are not just only race and ethnic and gender based. For example, social justice is a good way to bring people together who believe in human rights. At my institution we developed a minor in Human Rights. And I got to meet the most amazing faculty I would never have known outside of my little bubble. So, I guess another support would be to have interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary collaborations outside of your department. It can help to enrich your work and your teaching.*
 Magda: *…We need allies, advocates, and accomplices in this work. We need support systems of people that we can go to and who will stand with us in our corner. I think we also need people who are willing to engage leadership differently and simply make innovative decisions that are out of the normative practices. If we keep doing the same thing as the saying goes, we're going to keep getting this same thing, right? So I think leadership needs to move out of the way to create space for others to really be involved in meaningful ways…*

Why should anyone care about racial justice in higher education? One part of that answer is the same reason we should care about racial justice outside of higher education in our larger society. Complicity engenders moral responsibility to act. Non-racialized people have collectively benefited from the systems and structures inside and outside of higher education in this country since its inception. Racialized people have not had access to or equal opportunity in those systems. Transforming ourselves means transforming the world and transforming the world means transforming ourselves, there is a dialectic. A different future must be envisioned.

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