

In My Own House: Experiencing Racism and Discrimination as a Black Academic in a School of Social Work

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Abstract: Schools of social work often postulate that they are rooted in social justice and affirmed in the values and ethics of the social work profession. However, the lived experience of being a Black social work educator is oftentimes inclusive of working within an oppressive and toxic work environment, that is also a school of social work. My reflection describes the discriminatory practices exhibited in a school of social work faced by me as a Black social work educator and researcher within a research one institution. These experiences of discrimination include excessive critique, microaggressions, microinsults, and microinvalidations from senior colleagues, as well as a lack of action taken to address these discriminatory practices by administrators within the school. This piece identifies how emotionally overwhelming and mentally exhausting being a Black academic within a school of social work can be when colleagues and administrators demonstrate the actions of the oppressor.

Keywords: Black faculty, racism, discrimination, microaggression

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.

—Audre Lorde, *From a Land Where Other People Lived*

I have had many experiences with racism and discrimination throughout my life; however, the most disheartening experiences of discriminatory practices and inequities have been in schools of social work within the academy. As a Black social work academic at a Historically White Institution (HWI), my story is not uncommon, nor is it special. But it is tough. Though I attended a top tier research institution for my doctoral program, I was unprepared for what being a faculty member of color would be inside and outside of the classroom.

My first position as an academic was not a good fit. Not because of my colleagues or the students, but because I wanted to do more research and the institution had an emphasis on teaching. So, I transitioned to a top tier school of social work at a research one institution. Admittedly, I felt a sense of imposter syndrome when I first began working at the second institution for a few reasons. First, many of my colleagues had secured significant amounts of funding, and though I had received grants, I felt that I needed more of a substantial amount of funding. Second, I had spent two years developing a research agenda and solidifying my teaching skills; however, I knew I would need to shift my skillset at a research one institution. Despite these insecurities, I knew it was important to be in a more research-oriented space to secure substantial funding—and honestly, I was excited to be there. The school of social work was very different from my first institution because both faculty and students were primarily White and there were no Black faculty members other than myself. The school had one senior professor of color who was of Asian descent, and two biracial faculty members of Asian and White descent who were junior faculty. So basically, I was on my own.

What I mean by “on my own” was that there was no support regarding navigating the environment and politics as a person of color who was also a junior faculty member. Unbeknownst to me there were no identified mentors of color that had successfully obtained tenure; no potential spaces for a supportive community of other social work academics of color; thus, no ability to convey, process, or discuss discriminatory issues when they occurred because of the differing power dynamics between me, my colleagues, and the administration. *I was on my own*. And initially, I thought I could navigate those troubling aspects because I had successfully completed a doctoral program in a predominantly White institution. However, being a doctoral student is in no way similar to being a faculty member.

The toxic and discriminatory behavior demonstrated by faculty began during the first two months of my employment. During a job search process, senior colleagues were increasingly focused on diversifying the representation of faculty. Within the search interview process, demeaning comments regarding ethnically diverse applicants occurred. Comments such as, “Well, we need color on our website, so we need to hire someone, even if we think they won’t work long term,” and “He may not make tenure, but we can have him here for at least three years. A Black man can help other Black people feel more comfortable applying here,” were made in front of me. Sometimes these comments were made in my office. Senior colleagues would ask me, “What do you think would make someone Black accept a position?” I was not asked about the other eight applicants who were interviewed who were of White descent: only the two Black applicants. The questions and statements placed me in awkward positions. I felt uncomfortable with senior faculty members demonstrating microaggressions towards Black applicants, while also knowing that those comments were potentially reflective of their thoughts towards me.

Focusing on Black applicants within the hiring process and discussing candidates as commodities who would struggle to be successful in the space was reprehensible. The action of hiring people of color who represent marginalized communities in academic communities with the knowledge that those individuals would not succeed is a discriminatory practice. Further, to have these actions occurring in a school of social work that is supposed to be rooted in social justice, racial equity, and equality is inexplicably problematic. Senior faculty members placing a junior faculty member of color, who is the only Black faculty member, in a space to defend and support the acquisition of other Black applicants within the bounds of toxic and discriminatory practices, is beyond unjust. It was mentally taxing to see how my colleagues engaged within the search process, particularly given how new I was to the faculty and environment. In my mind I thought, these were the conversations they had about me. This was how they potentially viewed me. The experience was enlightening, and it provided a glimpse into my future within the school.

Promotion and Tenure Is Not the Same for Me

Because I had a previous tenure track position at another university for two years, I was able to negotiate bringing my years with me to my second institution, so I came in as a third-year faculty member. Initially, I thought coming in as a third-year was perfect because I would only be able to be judged on my work as there was minimal time to have any political issues or

problems with my colleagues. This thought process was naive on my part. My experience with the third-year review was one the most discriminatory experiences I have encountered professionally. Even without my naivete, I could not have foreseen how different the rules of promotion and tenure would be for me.

It is important to note that all promotion and tenure processes are stressful. However, it was naive of me to think that I could simply submit my materials and be reviewed equitably as a colleague. Upon submitting my materials according to the School and University policies, the committee requested extra materials that were not required for the promotion and tenure process within the School or the University. When I inquired about the request, senior faculty insisted that the extra materials would be used for context only because I was a new faculty member. I talked with other junior faculty (none of which were people of color) who had gone through the third-year review process in the previous three years, and none of them were required to provide extra materials. The request for supportive materials appeared to only apply to me. As I suspected, the extra materials were scrutinized and became the primary focus of the review.

During the meeting for the third-year review, I met with the promotion and tenure committee in its entirety, along with an assigned faculty mentor who was also a member of the committee. Prior to the meeting, my faculty mentor had made it clear that I was being treated unfairly in the review process, as a result of submitting extra materials, and that I should prepare to defend my materials. As I sat in the room with the committee, I thought I had prepared mentally for the discussion; however, I was unprepared for what emerged. I had provided the traditional elements for the review process required by the School and University policy, as well as over 100 documents of support to ensure there would not be any question regarding my productivity. I expected that there would be inquiry into my materials regarding providing more context for my research agenda or further explanation regarding my pedagogical space. However, questions regarding those topics were never asked.

Senior faculty asked me questions regarding grammatical errors on my personal curriculum vitae and made the following allegations regarding my scholarship: “The title of the journal where this article is published is not italicized. If you can’t pay attention to things like that, then how do we even know you wrote this?” “I think it is interesting that you were able to write and publish at a high level, given your previous institution’s teaching load. Are you sure you wrote and contributed to these publications?” “Would you mind if we contacted your collaborators on this piece and verify your contributions?” Regarding my funding section, comments were made such as, “You know, it’s interesting you were able to receive all this funding so far. Are you sure you led the studies and weren’t just added on to these projects?”

I had maintained an overall average 4.5 out of 5.0 for all 15 of the teaching evaluations provided, yet questions regarding my teaching evaluations were also similar to the inquiry regarding scholarship. “Why do you have a 4.8 for your course evaluation?” My answer was that in all courses, there is a student or two who may be unhappy with their grade or my teaching style and teaching evaluations can reflect that frustration. However, as evident by the high ratings, the overwhelming majority of the class provided positive evaluations for their course experience. A senior colleague then noted, “I think it’s interesting because most Black

professors struggle to have high teaching scores on their evaluations.” Another senior colleague noted, “I think we should all note that Dr. Coles is remaining calm during this discussion. Which can be difficult for Black women in situations such as these.”

On the inside, I was irate. Internally, I had never felt such disrespect from colleagues in my entire career. I was being gaslighted in a space with senior faculty without any ability to respond in a manner to address the concerns that would not have political implications for me in the future. I had to sit, be disrespectfully questioned, and answer to accusations that I had not completed the work represented on my curriculum vitae. Further, I was forced to endure comments regarding how my performance as a scholar and teacher were misaligned with how senior faculty viewed Black academics. And I had to do it calmly. Inside I wanted to cry, scream, and yell at this group of people; however, I sat calmly, received the excessive criticism, the demonstration of implicit bias, and overt racism from my senior colleagues. I had no other choice. My career depended on it.

It was then I realized, I was never going to be successful in the School.

Talk to Your Dean...

Directly after the review, I scheduled a meeting with my dean. “Maybe they are just hazing you.” This was the response of my dean when I brought the concerns of racial discriminatory practices regarding my third-year review process. The experience within the third-year review was not the norm, and my White colleagues were not experiencing the same level of criticism. My dean had received feedback from senior faculty that the review process had been problematic and unfair; however, only two of the six faculty members believed there were any racially discriminatory practices undergirding the process. The inability to identify that engaging in differential criticism for faculty members of color is indeed a racially biased practice is a problem. Excessive criticism is not hazing when it only applies to faculty members of color; it’s racial discrimination. At the end of the conversation, my dean agreed that I had experienced discrimination with the School, and I left thinking some form of administration action would be taken, but nothing was done.

Over the course of my employment at the School, I met with the dean eight times regarding the racial bias, discriminatory practices, and microaggressive actions that were demonstrated by senior colleagues towards me, and no actions were taken by my administrator. The overwhelming obstacles that Black faculty face in academia regarding racism, lack of mentorship, and its impact to productivity are well documented (e.g., Aguirre, 2000; Allen et al., 2018; House et al., 2007; Schiele, 1991; Schiele & Francis, 1996). In schools of social work, deans and directors have a primary responsibility of maintaining the day-to-day high standards of an academic program, with a specific emphasis in the focus on the provision of education (House et al., 2007) for future social workers. However, deans are also responsible for leadership regarding the pursuit of common goals that are important for the safety and welfare of a group (Bargal, 2000) that also motivate and inspire others to execute actions that support the mission and goal (Thomas & McRae, 2016) of the school of social work. Thus, the lack of action by my dean, in addressing the wrongdoing of discriminatory practices being implemented

by senior faculty, reinforced and supported their actions. The inaction by my dean was another level of demonstration that not only was I alone, but I would continue to experience discrimination in the School because our lead administrator was afraid to take a stand with me against the faculty within the School.

In HWIs, White women are representative of the dominant status group, yet also maintain a protected minority status (Banks et al., 2018). Within the context of social work education, this provides a level of complexity that is compounded by power. Thus, the sustainability of power and privilege can also be rooted within the preservation of Whiteness (Banks et al., 2018) through the reinforcement of racism and discrimination in the lack of action to address discriminatory practice or the silence demonstrated by a dean. Most leaders of social work education protest to practice social justice and to lead through the lens of social work ideology; however, equality, equity, and justice cannot be addressed in spaces where leadership is silent regarding the discriminatory practices that Black faculty are experiencing inside of a school of social work. Efforts to address instances of social injustice cannot and should not be contextually dependent; wherever social injustice exists, it should be addressed, especially in cases where those in power have the ability to address it.

Understanding the Context of Blackness as a Faculty Member in White Spaces that Should be Socially Just

“We can get diverse faculty here, but we can’t keep them here.” This was how my dean commented regarding the issue regarding retaining faculty members of color within the School. First, the School had a history of racial issues within the collective faculty community that were felt by previous faculty members of color and the students within the program. In fact, there had been a history of discriminatory practices towards faculty members of color that had prevented the promotion and tenure of any person of color for over a decade. As a result of the negative experiences the faculty members had in the promotion and tenure process, they had all decided to leave the School, which colleagues termed “Black Flight.”

This history of discriminatory practices within the School was not something I was fully aware of prior to accepting the position. The experience of being scrutinized more harshly, devalued, and rejected more frequently is commonplace for Black faculty members in schools of social work (Allen et al., 2018). Literature has demonstrated that the racialized trauma experienced by Black faculty and Black students within HWIs has been present since the desegregation of higher education (Thompson, 2020). *Racial battle fatigue*, the consistent microaggressions, racial discrimination, microinsults, and microinvalidations that cause physiological and psychological strain on racially marginalized groups (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007; Thompson, 2020), causes increased amounts of stress and impairs emotional and physical distress.

Now, one would think that a school of social work would be a socially just environment. After all, schools of social work promote that social justice, equity, racial justice, and equality are the foundation of the teachings implemented throughout the social work curriculum (Schiele, 1991). However, I would argue that this is not the lived experience of Black social work faculty

members and other social work faculty members that represent marginalized groups. Faculty members of color are experiencing multiple marginalities within their intersectional identities (Hirschfield & Joseph, 2012). In education fields that are largely dominated by women, such as social work, women who are double minorities face issues such as isolation from collegial networks, lack of institutional/departmental support, forced positionality into the role of mentorship for students of color, and increased visibility and bodily presentation concerns (Allen et al., 2018; Hirschfield & Joseph, 2012). Then, on top of the increased marginalization, Black women in social work education are subject to an environment of racial discrimination that, in many ways, mirrors the larger culture which we teach our students to adamantly fight against ... a paradoxical situation having substantial implications for Black women in social work education fighting for social justice.

Anti-Racist Social Work Education? Highly Doubtful

Racism exists in academe (Coleman, 2005; Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). This was something that I knew to be true; however, I never considered what it would mean for me that racism exists in social work education. Being a Black faculty member within an HWI that is a top school of social work and having to engage with social workers whose actions reflect the oppressor I thought we all fought against was not an experience I viewed as possible. I was wrong.

Social work education promotes the importance of social justice and serving humanity (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). As a result of the increased racial violence and racist narratives in society, social work education has made statements regarding its dedication to increasing antiracist pedagogy and methods (Council on Social Work Education, 2021). The revival of antiracist pedagogical practices in social work education are ironic, given the fact that oftentimes those same faculty proposing to utilize these strategies of teaching can also potentially perpetuate racist practices with their colleagues of color. Schools of social work continue to perpetuate increased burden for faculty members of color and have not devised strategies to ensure that faculty members representing marginalized communities are safe from discrimination in school policies and practices. Consequently, how can social work education engage in antiracist pedagogy, yet engage in discriminatory practices towards faculty members of color?

Where Do We Go from Here?

Systemic racism is not just a concept perpetrated within society; it is alive and well within the processes, practices, and work environments within schools of social work. Faculty members of color communicate the experiences with leadership, and performative practices such as mandating faculty to attend diversity, equity, and inclusion training may occur. However, what happens when the individuals receiving the training are the ones developing the training content or even conducting the training themselves in other spaces? How do you educate social work faculty members regarding their oppressive behaviors and practices towards their colleagues of color? And what does this mean for those faculty members of color who are impacted by the strain of discriminatory practices on a daily basis?

We have real issues in schools of social work. Was it naive for me to think I could work in a school of social work and not experience racial discriminatory practices? Yes it was. Racial discrimination exists everywhere, but it is more painful to experience the cycle of racial bias and discriminatory practices in schools of social work. Though education is not social work practice, those faculty members demonstrating racial bias in their policy practices towards faculty members of color within schools will not acknowledge that they too are oppressors. But how can they, when administration and other faculty members who are aware of these practices are complicit through silence? Schools of social work cannot fight social injustice and perpetuate practices that disenfranchise faculty members of color.

Thus, until leadership and faculty members in *all schools of social work* can take a critical step in acknowledging that there are indeed practices that perpetuate the cycle of racial bias and discrimination within their own walls, we cannot purport to be a just profession. In conclusion, let me be clear: Faculty members of color are experiencing racism and discrimination on a daily basis in schools of social work—no matter what school you are in. And as long as these discriminatory practices are present, reinforced, and not addressed by leadership or other colleagues, schools of social work contribute to the oppression of faculty members of color on a consistent basis.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I decided to leave the School. The resources. And the racism. I should not have had to quit my job and take a hit to my career for my own ability to survive. I should not have had to experience the stress and trauma that racial discrimination brings to any person of color. I should not have had to experience oppression within a school of social work from those “fighting” for social justice. But I did. Faculty members within schools of social work need to be held accountable for their actions and administrators must take the initiative to address any discriminatory practices that occur within the school. If faculty members of color are unsafe from discrimination within schools of social work, imagine what is occurring in the classroom for students of color. These issues of racial discrimination need to be at the forefront of being addressed within social work faculties. Enough is enough. Social work faculty members of color should not have to fight injustices in the streets and within our own house. Though this was my story, it is not unique and it not special. This is the experience of being a Black doctoral social work educator in a school of social work.

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