

Reflections on the Climb to Promotion and Well-Being: Confronting the Discipline, the Department, and Drama

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Abstract: This article offers the narratives of four Black women in a department of social work at a research-intensive university. Through their eyes, attention is brought to the types of racial injustice that can exist and how each found a way to successfully navigate the experience. Using narrative from a critical race perspective, the authors hope that readers, especially faculty of color, can see themselves and find inspiration to navigate their own departments and daily experiences.

Keywords: reflection, equity in academia, social work

Introduction

In the aftermath of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd, faculty of color across higher education are giving pause for reflection and introspection. While faculty in general celebrate our many accomplishments and contributions, we quickly realize there is much to be done as we still struggle for social and racial equity and in some circles for acceptance within our very social work and human services departments that are supposed to be upholding values of social justice, dignity, and self-worth, and integrity, to name a few.

The experiences felt by our faculty of color colleagues are exhausting. Yet, faculty of color continue to persevere by carrying the lessons of a generation before who taught us how to achieve equity, equality, and justice in systems designed to promote the opposite and challenge the nature of core being. The parallels of the types of racist behaviors and events between the greater society and higher education are too many to ignore. But where does one start to tackle and confront these challenges to produce viable change? Similar to Bonner et al.'s (2015) book, we use a critical race perspective along with counter-personal narrative to bring attention to the "truth" that exists within departments of social work when others want to often deny or gloss over the realities that often confront scholars of color. The authors subscribe to Ladson Billings' (1999) sentiments that "personal narratives and stories are important in understanding lived experiences and how those experiences may represent confirmation or counter-knowledge of the way society works" (as cited in Bonner et al., 2015, p. ix). Further, they emphasize Billing's ideas that "stories are used to analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdom that make up the common culture about race" (as cited in Bonner et al., 2015, p. ix).

The Climb

Academic duty resolves itself into a set of obligations that professors owe to others: to their undergraduate [and graduate] students, to the more advanced scholars they train, to their colleagues, to the institutions with which they are affiliated, and to the larger society. (Kennedy, 1997, p. 23)

When faculty of color, such as ourselves, entered the academy and the field of social work, we did so with the laudable goal of making significant contributions to dismantling systems and providing solutions for marginalized groups experiencing various kinds of social problems by contributing to the research, educating a future generation, and serving our community. Never did we expect to be met with the very antithesis of what the social work profession affirms in our daily experiences. This is further exacerbated by the unfortunate types of systemic oppression that exist for underrepresented faculty of color who enter into the academy. Racial stereotypes, isolation, occupational stress, institutional racism, the devaluing of research, and racial bias in recruitment, tenure, and promotion—does this sound familiar to our colleagues of color? Reflect briefly on our stories.

Reflection 1: Climbing from Field Director to PhD to Departmental Recognition: Power Plays & Pressure Days

The road from MSW field education director to PhD in social work was an arduous journey. Although it was rewarding, there were challenges and stressors that I was unaccustomed to as a clinical social work practitioner. I was an LCSW with over 10 years of clinical practice experience working in multiple settings with culturally diverse populations and over 5 years of teaching experience as an adjunct faculty. I felt professionally qualified to shift from practice to full-time teaching and starting a new role as the MSW field education director in the department. However, it at once became clear that I was ill-prepared on how to navigate and be successful in academia.

As a newly limited-term full-time faculty in the department, I felt powerless as a woman of color without a doctorate. After a couple of years as a lecturer, I became the interim MSW field education director and then permanent after one semester. While my role and responsibilities changed when I became the MSW field education director, the challenges and lack of respect intensified. My presence in the department was insignificant, and I had minimal involvement in the decision-making processes as the field director. I was voiceless and powerless, the norm for Black women faculty in academia. I experienced disrespect from students, observed micro-aggressive behaviors at departmental meetings, and recognized to have a voice and power in this department as a woman of color, I must obtain a doctoral degree. More specifically, a PhD degree, because any other doctorate would be discounted.

In 2015, I returned to school to pursue my doctorate degree full time and continued to serve in the role of field director and faculty member. In the role of field director and faculty member, I was excluded from the decision-making process as it related to my role and responsibilities as the field director. I would propose policies and procedures to enhance the program and was met with resistance from my white colleagues within the program. These experiences contributed to me feeling isolated, oppressed, and like an outlier. For example, at a field education meeting a white faculty member blatantly said he would help a student in filing a grievance against me because he did not agree with my recommendations for the student. During the meeting, I voiced my concerns about his comment yet no one else voiced any concerns about the comment and once again my voice was ignored. This behavior was demeaning, offensive, and oppressive and an example of the critical race theory tenet that racism is ordinary and not anomalous

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This was a clear demonstration of the power and privileges white men hold in academia. Furthermore, racism is usually unseen to people of the dominant group or those with racial privileges (Constance-Huggins, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). These experiences have reminded me that racism is a part of my everyday life as a woman of color, but they do not define me, and I will continue to speak up and challenge the status quo.

Although there were challenges and limitations in my role as the MSW field education director, my path from MSW field education director to PhD was also rewarding. It was valuable because of the mentorship, guidance, and support of the other Black faculty within the department. Their support and guidance were instrumental in my decision and accomplishment of achieving my doctorate in social work. Their leadership guided me in understanding the academic workplace, the importance of scholarly research, and the process to obtain tenure/promotion. The findings of Kelly and Winkle-Wagner (2017), in their longitudinal study of Black women in academia, also support my experiences in academia: They found when Black women can successfully assert their voice in their scholarship and receive support from their department and university, they remain in academia. After earning my PhD, I remained in the department. I am evolving because I am learning how to openly speak and share my opinions, so that I am heard, respected, and valued, in an environment where women of color are normally invisible and do not feel safe to thrive as faculty.

Reflection 2: Climbing from Assistant to Associate Professor: Stereotyping Microaggressions & Watch What You Wear!

Many years ago, I approached my first tenure-track position with a sense of confidence. I entered the academy having spent time at two larger institutions. They were both predominantly white institutions (PWI) and they had large, somewhat diverse faculties. My first full-time teaching position was offered to me while I was a doctoral student and, at the time, I considered this a compliment to my teaching and the energy I brought to my work. Since I was not tenure-track, I did not have to attend faculty meetings and I was able to avoid much of the academic drama that I later learned was happening in this department. I received mentoring and support, but also believe I was shielded from much of the racism that existed in this space, shielded by more seasoned professors and leaders guiding me towards building my career. This experience was analogous to Black parents trying to keep their young children from having to learn about the ugliness of racism when they are young because they know that the world will show them the harshness of navigating a racist world soon enough. We want our children to live their lives in bliss before society shows them their “ugliness.”

My next position was an opening at another PWI, and I was hired as a lecturer and asked to take over the position of Director of Field Education on an interim basis. This position was also one that included leadership by someone who supported my growth and had been a part of my development in my doctoral education. This position was not a tenure-track position and therefore my role posed no threat to those in tenure track or full-time professor faculty positions. There were no direct challenges to my role or to me because, in the hierarchy of academia, I was someone far down the food chain. A few years later, a position was posted at another PWI, one that was rapidly growing and making a name for itself in the state. The position was a tenure-

track position that seemed to be written for my skills. The Assistant Professor advertisement asked for someone with nonprofit experience, mental health— and health-related interests and someone wanting to work in community health. If offered the position, I would be joining a small faculty, a faculty working to build a young program at this university. The issues were obvious from the first faculty meeting.

The program was started by a small group of people, and the power structure and dynamics in the department were clear. I was hired as an Assistant Professor but competed for the position with a long-standing part-time instructor that the group clearly wanted to hire. I only have anecdotal information about how I ended up being made an offer, but my credentials and experience being equal with the job description had to make it difficult to justify not hiring me in a position that appeared to be written from my vita. It seemed from day one that I was stereotyped as an “angry Black woman.” If I disagreed with something in a meeting (usually related to misapplication of policy or something detrimental to a student), it was clear that people took offense. There was a focus on “tone” and when the Black women in the room disagreed, there was an assumption of “attitude” or an angry tone. Constantine et al. (2008) found that faculty members of color are more likely to have to be mindful of tone, facial expressions, and body language. I observed that the Black women on this faculty only had two roles: “bully”—those who disagreed with the white faculty and were labeled aggressive—or “compliant”—those who agreed with white faculty and remained quiet even when they disagreed.

Another interesting experience as I navigated the tenure-seeking years, microaggressions were displayed in passive ways. Simple events that would not be remembered by most somehow became a benchmark for measuring the competence or evaluation of Black faculty. This was my “watch what you wear” experience. There was a long list of memories of inconsequential events. Typically, memories that were incorrect but sullied the image of the Black women. For example, at a meeting, someone commented on a white male faculty member being dressed “very casually” (in cargo shorts). I was not the person who commented, but the white male remarked “I’ve seen [author’s name] in workout clothes.” Interestingly, I was not even a party in that conversation but somehow became a victim of a “drive-by” microaggression. This person had seen me ONE time, in workout clothes, picking up my work clothes from my office, as I headed to the shower in our building after working out in the faculty gym! A one-time event became a long-lasting memory pocketed for use to discredit me later. He kept this memory long enough to bring it up when someone remarked on his casual dress. To what end did this serve? Underrepresented faculty can face unique challenges that question their competence, even with something as inconsequential as a dress (Constantine et. al, 2008; Lee, 2020; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008).

As I reflect on my tenure-seeking experience, I am not surprised that the time was riddled with instances of microaggressions and stereotypes. Black women are not given the space to have individual personality traits or even a variety of responses. Instead, we are saddled with a stereotype of being “angry” when we disagree or a “bully” when we do not follow the party line. Our well-being is reduced to follow the leader or be labeled the problem. I chose to be labeled

the problem and let my work tell my story. I refused to relinquish my power to others based on their use of stereotypes, and I still wear my workout clothes to my office before I shower!

Reflection 3: Climbing from Tenure to Practice Integration: Serving Two Masters

Earning my PhD in Social Work in 2007 was the culmination of a cherished pursuit. It enabled me to fulfill one of my passions—teaching and inspiring future social workers. I have always felt like I would have a role in teaching, but it was not until I became a social worker that I realized what my contribution would be. Working in the nonprofit sector, I met many social workers. Most were caring professionals but there were always a few who did not seem to grasp the core social value of respecting the dignity and worth of the person. As the founder of a small nonprofit providing housing and social services to homeless individuals and families, I was keenly aware of the harm that perpetuating stigma and oppression could have on our clients and other vulnerable populations. I hoped that I could bring real-world experiences to my students in real time that would give dimension to the lived experiences of those we are called to serve and help them see the importance of embracing those social work values (Feldman, 2007).

I was fortunate to secure a tenure-track position soon after graduation. Since my children were grown and on their own, I decided to try to manage both roles and not leave the nonprofit work that I loved. It is well known that many professors often have multiple pursuits so I did not think that my continuing my work with my nonprofit would be an issue, especially since I disclosed my affiliation before I was hired. In fact, I learned that other tenure-track colleagues in the department were doing the same thing. What I noted soon after, however, was that there was a difference in how we were treated by certain tenured faculty. After a comparison of experiences, it soon became clear that the most discernible difference in the way our external pursuits were viewed was that I was Black.

My third-year review commended me on my scholarship and teaching but spoke of “conflict of commitment” with no examples to substantiate the claim. My tenure review, though ultimately successful, began at the department level with recommendations for denial of tenure and promotion, not based on my record of scholarship which exceeded the threshold nor my teaching which included me being chosen “Professor of the Year” by our students, but by questioning why students were not allowed to intern at my organization—a potential conflict which from my perspective should have been obvious. Despite my prolific service at university and in the community, despite my never missing a faculty or committee meeting in five years, and my efforts to be a collegial, team player, there remained a few individuals who could not see me as a worthy colleague. My white female counterpart who was also operating a nonprofit agency never experienced the same treatment or characterizations. Her loyalty to the department and the university was never questioned. She sailed through the process.

That experience taught me that excellence in teaching or the number, significance, or impact of publications could be trumped by personal agendas (Constantine et al., 2008; Lee, 2020; Rockquemore and Laszloffy, 2008). I had more publications and had publications in more prestigious journals at the time we both went up for tenure but that was ignored to focus on petty differences. Fortunately, I had the support of the Dean and was ultimately successful in my

tenure pursuit. In the end, in 2013 I became the first African American to secure tenure and promotion in my department. While I am proud of the accomplishment, it is a sad testimony for a department whose focus is supposed to be centered in teaching social justice that it took that long. It also speaks to how challenging it is for Black women to live our truth while surrounded by those who only talk the talk about equality (Constantine et al., 2008; Lee, 2020; Rockquemore and Laszloffy, 2008). That said, my dream to pursue two passions was not deterred by racism or narrow-minded interests.

Our current challenges with the pandemic and the racial unrest that has been unleashed has given us more time and opportunity to reflect and to grow. I have a history of taking the “high road” and never letting others drag me to their level. Events of recent years have been a poignant reminder that although there is value in that approach, sometimes you must speak up and speak out. If I am truly loyal to the department—and to the social work profession!—I must call out colleagues who may not see their microaggressions and implicit bias for what they really are. It is ironic that I thought the only students I would need to teach about racism would be in the classroom, but my tenure journey has shown me many of my colleagues were also “students” in need of a lesson.

Reflection 4: Climbing from Assistant to Associate to Full Professor: From the President’s Office to Department Target ... Hazing that Never Ended

I never knew that changing jobs early career would feel like an ongoing hazing ritual. I left my tenure track job to pursue a new opportunity closer to home to link my love for administrative work with that of being a faculty member. Additionally, it was the right time to make such a move from my research one university given a myriad of reasons including just completing my third-year review, becoming a new mother, and having my then-current Dean retire from the academy. On my former Dean’s advice and recommendation, she encouraged me to dive into the water and apply for the position which would have me reporting directly to the University’s President on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion activities as well as serving as a faculty member on a reduced teaching load. I received the offer, and my mentor gave me advice on acceptance: This work can be challenging but without the support of leadership from the top it will be impossible.

On day one, I was well-received by most of the faculty and staff. The first few months went well as I became accustomed to the workings of the university. I was given my departmental workload which was doable. Yet I was told by senior leadership on my first review that although I am 10 percent time teaching—10 percent time researching—80 percent time in service (which includes administration), I would be expected to produce as if I was carrying the normal workload of faculty (with the weight being in research). How is that possible? So, we are now ignoring workload to “prove” myself worthy of being a faculty member? I also quickly discovered that I was the lowest-paid person on the President’s Cabinet by a significant margin. Wow—talk about equity issues, and it was my job to fight for equity for the entire campus. These challenges intersected with the emerging problem of a senior official not following search committee rules and being out of policy on a few issues affecting women on campus and a lack of university response. Caught in the middle, I began to surround myself with data to prove the

case and craft solutions. I infused best practices into my recommendations and quickly learned how to be my best advocate and lead with integrity. This led to a confrontation with the senior official and my ultimate request to change departments after he threatened to block my tenure and promotion to Associate.

In my new department, I once again began to “pledge” and pay my “cultural taxation” (Myers, 2000). I was well-received by the leadership in the college and the department due to my expertise in a niche area they were trying to grow. I felt I could be a benefit to the work being conducted given my knowledge and community connections. Additionally, I believed things could not be that bad given their focus on social justice and grounding in areas of cultural competence. I did not realize what an oxymoron this was. I eventually stepped down from my administrative position but kept parts of the administrative portfolio (this is a whole different story) which gave me a new workload of 30 percent time teaching–21 percent time researching–49 percent time service.

Again, I was told that I would need to overproduce myself to prove myself worthy among the senior faculty who in some respect did not appreciate administration coming in and “telling” them that I was joining their ranks. I was reminded on more than a few occasions that I was not “chosen” and I “did not interview like traditional faculty.” It felt like I was enduring a whole new “hazing” ritual, coupled with similar experiences of microaggressions and stereotypes of being “angry” because I followed policy.

This came to a head during my actual tenure and promotion process, where I met the standards but for one member voting I did not. While granted tenure by unanimous vote on the department level, I incurred a split vote on promotion. I found out later that the vote was not reported accurately and even though this was disclosed to the chair of the department, nothing was done to change the record as my portfolio went up through the ranks until the Dean’s level where he disagreed with the department vote.

Now, as I prepare for the journey to full professor, I find myself at a crossroads of once again having to prove myself worthy. Although some of the players and leadership within the department have changed for the better, there is still an undertone, among the same senior faculty, of the need to prove oneself worthy. This is evidenced by the same colleague (you remember—the one who did not report my vote accurately the first go-around) announcing in an open departmental meeting that he would “vote how he wanted regardless of what the tenure and promotion guidelines say.” I do not think those in the majority realize the kind of tone this sets for minority faculty like myself who contribute and give of themselves day-in and day-out. I ask myself, when does playing by the rules become enough? When does being smart enough translate into acceptance instead of a type of jealous passive aggression?

My solutions to dismantling the departmental system were to dismantle the system that caused strife to faculty of color by writing a new set of promotion and tenure guidelines for future colleagues and to continue to lead with excellence. Although I will not benefit from the work, the clarity in the new policies will help my future colleagues and hopefully lead to systems of greater accountability for those voting. My father always taught me to be “excellent” in all that I

do. Even though others may not want to accept me, they will not be able to speak ill of my work produced and the contributions made. The work leads to change and time continues to be my greatest ally.

Conclusions and Implications: Our Collective Lessons Learned

As more narratives such as these emerge, faculty members and administrators need to seriously reflect upon them with a goal to increase the dialogue around these issues for organizational and departmental change. These dialogues will not be easy and can require a shift in the ways we traditionally think about the “academy.” These shifts include the need to update promotion and tenure guidelines to allow for diversity of thought while also upholding, protecting, including, and strengthening racial diversity, and ways to disseminate information both in the classroom and in research—and moreover, to examine department culture and hold colleagues accountable for their use of language, lack of respect, and unspoken power dynamics and differentials that manifest themselves due to rank and other factors.

Survival for us meant adopting the very advice given by Frierson (1990, as cited by Turner and Myers, 2000): “Current [B]lack faculty members [must] support one another and create professional networks” (p. 53). Amongst ourselves, we were able to share narratives, compare injustices, and discover that through a study of university policy and procedure, we could create more intentionally ways to call for change and be better positioned to advocate for ourselves. Our internal network was extended to other allies including staff and faculty. Our new informal network allowed for the emergence of a “new collective and supportive voice” to generate opportunities for the voiceless (e.g., staff, junior faculty) to speak up when confronted with microaggressions. Black female faculty and other women of color in the department began to be empowered in a system where they were once silent for fear of retaliation retribution. The resounding message is one that calls for institutional and departmental action where the “presence of racism should be acknowledged as a reality and addressed forthrightly when it is raised as an issue” (Turner & Myers, 2000, p. 53). Inaction on our part cannot be tolerated if change is to occur even when we know our actions will first be met with consternation and probable inaction by those in authority who either do not share or recognize our perspectives as being authentic or are afraid to call for change given their personal need for preservation. Nevertheless, we continue to place pressure on the system and make incremental change to policy as we find the opportunity.

Institutions of higher education reflect society to itself, and at the same time challenge that self-image by asking different questions: What have we become? Why don't we do things differently? Not surprisingly, the university thus sometimes finds itself seemingly at odds with society, especially during a period of rapid social change. (Kennedy, 1997, p. 265)

This reality is heightened in departments of social work given they operate within an elevated cadence characterized by the profession's values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (National Association of Social Workers, 2021) When faculty of color experience these types of social and

racial inequity by colleagues who consider themselves to be upholding these very principles, it is not only perplexing but, exhausting. Yet, the yearning to remain “above” the fray and commit to overcoming barriers are what keep us invigorated and vigilant in our academic and personal duty.

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