Social Work Educators in PWIs: Betrayed and Triggered Regularly

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Abstract: This article chronicles some of the significant experiences I have dealt with regarding anti-black racism in the academy. I focused the article on the systemic ways I witness and experience the reproduction of whiteness and performative efforts by many of my White colleagues to give the illusion that they value racial diversity while simultaneously embracing and perpetuating whiteness in different ways in the academy. Given the pervasiveness of white supremacy within social work education, I focused my recommendations on guidance and strategies for Black faculty to survive anti-black racism and thrive within White academies to minimize stress and being betrayed and triggered regularly.

Keywords: racial battle fatigue, white racial frame, reproduction of whiteness

Prologue

I am inspired by the definitive title of Stacy Abrams' (2020) book *Our Time is Now: Power, Purpose, and the Fight for a Fair America*. I have been a social work educator for 20 years, teaching, doing research, and providing service in predominantly White colleges and universities dealing with everyday racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) and systemic anti-black racism. I do not want to spend the next 20 years of my academic career in such a toxic environment. The time is now to dismantle white supremacy and anti-black racism in social work education. The time is now for social work educators to critically examine how they are complicit in reproducing whiteness and anti-black racism in schools of social work (Bates & Ng, 2021). When I think about the obstacles to racial justice created by liberal White racism, a brand of racism that can lull me into thinking we are really making strides in achieving a "fair America," I grow weary and disheartened. I feel hopelessness creeping up through the middle of my inspiration, slowly ripping it apart.

Introduction

I became a social worker, my second career, in 1996 when I found out that the social work profession has a mission of social justice, and I could see some of my values reflected in the profession's code of ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). I was elated to be part of a profession with such an explicit and bold mission and an eloquently stated code of ethics to guide my interpersonal relationships and professional conduct. I started my first career as a young Black woman in the business world armed with my hard-earned degree in business administration and an eagerness to make my mark on the world as a financial analyst. After several years of seeing few reflections of myself, I had enough of being one of only a few Black women in a field dominated by White men then. I also got tired of deciding how to dodge, ignore, or confront what I experienced and witnessed, as routinized, racist, and sexist jokes or comments. It did not matter the location or circumstances. I could be in a board meeting, having an informal small group or individual discussion, or walking in the hallway between meetings. It

did not matter. I left the corporate world despite being promoted to senior financial manager a year earlier. Naively, I thought I was leaving behind a professional culture characterized by everyday race and gender-based microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Little did I know that, in some ways, by entering social work, I was jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

The Road to Social Work Education

A social worker herself, one of my best friends, who is like an othermother (Guiffrida, 2005), told me about the social work profession. In fact, she is the first non-White social worker I ever met, ironically, at the financing company we both eventually left. I served on a diversity planning committee that she chaired. We loved to go into the office on the weekends to work to escape the otherwise toxic White culture we each met in our respective departments during regular business hours in the work week. Although we worked on different floors, on the weekends, we would set up shop in her cubicle or mine to focus on our work, and during our breaks, she would tell me about her first career and love of social work. I listened to her with awe and fascination. I decided to go back to school and get an MSW. It was refreshing to be in graduate school again as an older student with classes where women professors were the norm and female students outnumbered males 10 to 1. This was a world far different than my experiences as an MBA student. Granted, most of the professors and students in my MSW program were White women. I thought it would be great to be in a profession with an explicitly stated mission of combatting systems of oppression that I have had to contend with for a significant portion of my life because of bigotry based on the color of my skin, my gender, my social, economic status, my sexual orientation … and now my age. I thought it would be wonderful to forge a second career with people who truly valued the dignity and worth of all individuals and recognized the importance of self-determination while simultaneously understanding the power of group advocacy and systems change.

I have experienced these like-minded souls with a passion for justice and who share some of the same values that shape my actions. What I failed to see, however, is how the social work profession, despite its virtuous mission and code of ethics, is also a product of white supremacy and white privilege. As such, it is also a part of the system of racial oppression and anti-black racism specifically. The only difference between social work education and my business experience for me is that instead of being dominated by White men, social work education is dominated by White women. And herein lies the betrayal that I regularly experience when it comes to trying to confront anti-black racism within the social work profession that promises to work to undo racial injustice. Many White women tell me they are oppressed by some White men in a patriarchal system and that we are allies solely on that basis. They erroneously argue that our experiences of oppression are the same because they are subject to sexist treatment. In the 25 years I have been a social work practitioner and educator, I have known some White social workers I would describe as allies. They are the individuals who have worked to develop a critical racial consciousness and an understanding of the impact of their whiteness. These social workers are allies because they do not put me in the all too exhaustingly familiar position of teaching them about racism. They are the ones who have been willing to confront their White colleagues during a meeting instead of coming to me privately after the meeting to sympathize or commiserate with me about the racist remark(s) our White colleague(s) made, and everyone

heard but pretended that they did not hear. They are the social workers who promote my ideas and work without taking credit for it or promoting themselves like some White savior with a complex. They are the ones who consistently express a tone of genuineness with their compliments instead of exaggerating my accomplishments in a patronizing, shallow, self-serving tone that grates on my last nerve. Moreover, they do not try to impress upon me how good-hearted and kind their White colleague is when that person makes a racist joke or comment or commits a racial microaggression (Sue et al., 2008). They are, sadly, rare in my experience.

Inevitably, since I am typically the only Black faculty surrounded by White social work colleagues, and among few Black faculty in the whole university, I am frequently triggered by systemic anti-black racism through the relentless White racial frame (Feagin, 2013)—"which includes whiteness, white privilege, and institutionalized racism" (Arnold et al., 2016, p. 894). Yes, it is so routine that I have unfortunately taken it as a given that at faculty meetings, committee meetings, or any setting in which I am required to congregate with a majority group of White social work educators, I will become irritated, alienated, or ignored, especially if I bring up racism. I can expect that if I bring up racism that I will be exorcized, spoken for, and overzealously praised (read as patronized) for a minor contribution. I am expected to address diversity issues for the department, school, college, and university, to mentor the rare Black students in our program, and to smile and remain patient with the pervasive excuses used by White colleagues that they are still learning about white supremacy, white privilege, and anti-black racism. It is beyond exhausting (Brown, 2018). It interferes with my health, wealth, productivity, and creativity. Scholars describe the cumulative effects of these persistent and pervasive racial microaggressions as "racial battle fatigue … defined as the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses due to the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions" (Franklin, 2016, p. 46; see also Smith, 2004, 2009). Racialized sexism in higher education compounds racial battle fatigue for Black women (Chancellor, 2019). Others describe the burden of working while Black in the White academy as the "Black tax" that Black people must pay "in order to enter and participate in White spaces" (Burrows, 2016, p. 15). A prominent feature of working in this toxic White academic space is the assiduous and ubiquitous promotion and reproduction of whiteness (Anderson, 2003; Bates & Ng, 2021; Feagin, 2013; Leonardo, 2013).

Reproducing Whiteness in the Name of Diversity and Inclusion

One of the most pervasive ways I have experienced the reproduction of whiteness systemically is through implementing diversity and inclusion programs. Theoretically, diversity and inclusion policies have been touted as a mechanism for increasing the recruitment and retention of minoritized and otherwise underrepresented faculty, particularly in historically White institutions; however, in practice, they have become just another way to camouflage white power and privilege and undermine the inclusion and advancement of Black faculty, thereby, reproducing a climate of racial inequity, isolation, and tokenism through educational policies (Iverson, 2007). For example, when I was hired as a tenure-track faculty in the School of Social Work almost a decade ago, I became one of only two Black tenured or tenure-track faculty in the predominantly White and female School of Social Work. Since I have been at the institution,

the School of Social Work has hired five White tenure-track faculty—two White cisgender heterosexual women, two cisgender heterosexual White men, one cisgender gay White man, and two Black female cisgender heterosexual tenure-track faculty. Additionally, the School of Social Work has hired scores of mostly White females and a few White male clinical faculty, too numerous to count. White male and female tenure-track faculty are hired at 2.5 times the rate of Black female tenure-track faculty, and to my knowledge, the program has never hired a tenure-track Black male faculty in its 90-plus year history. Almost 10 years later, I am still one of two Black tenured or tenure-track faculty in the program.

In contrast, the White tenure-track faculty has grown by four faculty—a net ratio of 1 Black faculty to every 4 White faculty or 25 percent over the past decade. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2007) noted that "progress into faculty ranks is so slow that, at the current rate, it will take about a century and a half for the percentage of African American faculty to reach parity with [that of] blacks in the nation's population" (para. 1). Dismayed by the persistent consecutive hiring of White men and women, I asked the then-director of the program about what I perceived to be incongruence in our diversity and inclusion policy and the consistent hiring of White faculty. She told me that because the School of Social Work is a predominantly female workforce, hiring men is considered a diversity hire. I felt betrayed by my White female colleagues who consistently voted overwhelmingly to hire White faculty despite having, from my perspective, at least one qualified Black female faculty in each of the faculty search pools from which the White faculty are hired. My feeling of betrayal grew into sadness and anger that prompted me to isolate myself from my colleagues to protect myself from the pervasiveness of the whiteness that surrounded me. Since all the tenure-track hires over the past eight years met the DEI goals of the university and the social work department, according to what I was told, it would be fair to conclude that DEI is synonymous with the reproduction of whiteness and White domination as it is implemented at that institution.

Biased Privileging of White Candidates in Faculty Searches

I was constantly asked to serve on faculty search committees at one of the social work departments where I was employed. I believe it was because I was the token Black faculty, and the department wanted to appear racially inclusive to potential candidates despite the truth. Serving on these faculty search committees was a time-consuming service endeavor, and extensive research indicates that racialized faculty are disproportionately asked to perform service-related functions relative to their White peers in PWIs (Gregory, 2001; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2011). During one of these numerous faculty search experiences, the department invited Black and White female candidates to campus for a job talk. The Black female candidate presented first. She was poised, confident, and clear about her research and future. She had already met the requirements of her dissertation. However, she decided to conduct another study to gain a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of the population of her research focus. The second candidate, the White female, presented her research and future plans the next day. She explained that her findings were tentative in an apologetic, uncertain tone, inviting a very different response than the tone and line of questioning directed at the Black female candidate. The Black candidate was interrogated aggressively and presented with a series of "why" questions that could have easily invited defensiveness. However, the Black candidate

maintained a pleasant composure and responded directly to the series of rapid-fire questions she received. I would describe the tone of the questions as hostile and confrontative, not inquisitive or clarifying.

In contrast, the White candidate was barely questioned at all. Instead, she was offered generous suggestions about what variables and factors she should consider in completing her analysis. She received so many suggestions that she started taking notes based on the feedback she received and thanked the faculty profusely for the great suggestions she received after her presentation. I continued to reflect on the differences in how the faculty responded to each candidate. It is as if hardballs were thrown at the first candidate and, in contrast, softballs were tossed at the second candidate. To continue exploring what could account for the difference in the responses to the questions, I also considered the race of each candidate and the concepts of implicit bias, white rage (Anderson, 2016), and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018).

In her book *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (2016), historian Carol Anderson systematically illustrates that white supremacist policies and practices developed and applied to stop and disadvantage Black people are white violent reactions to Black progress. She coined "white rage" to name the legacy of structural racism willed by white anger and resentment. As I continued to think about how my White colleagues fired questions at the first candidate, a confident Black woman, particularly in contrast to their reactions to the presentation of the White female candidate, I could not help but wonder if I was witnessing a sort of collective, unspoken hostility in the White racialized space of the academy. The Black candidate experienced what African American literature scholar Koritha Mitchell (2020) describes as "know-your-place-aggression" (p. 2), the white backlash to Black achievement. Did the Black candidate, in effect, challenge Eurocentric ideals of academic rigor with her plan to conduct research beyond the expectations of her dissertation? Was her audacity to think and dream big by conducting another study threatening, in some unconscious way, to our department faculty, a microcosm of the White academic power structure? Did her plan threaten the academic standards of an institution that so many value, embrace, and sanction in direct and indirect ways?

In her book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018), antiracist educator Robin DiAngelo characterizes white fragility by emotions of anger, fear, and guilt and by behaviors that function to reinstate white racial equilibrium and protect racial inequality. I experienced my White colleagues' reactions to the White candidate as a reification of the White academic space. They legitimized and affirmed the White candidate and her research process. In effect, the subtext of their behaviors sent an unconscious message that the White candidate "belonged" and at least was "worthy" and "deserving" of their support. In contrast, the Black candidate was an "outsider" to be feared, chastised, interrogated— "unworthy" or "undeserving" of white support.

As I continued reflecting on this experience, I wondered about the invisible and insidious nature of white supremacy and white privilege. I believe that, individually, my White colleagues would not engage in such racist behavior. I also know that they believe in the ethics and values of the social work profession to confront oppression. However, for me, there is no denying the

approach to questioning that occurred with each candidate. I also felt compelled to say something to the faculty about my observations of how they continue to promote and reinforce whiteness through the faculty hiring process in the department. To do this, I called on one of the two White female faculty I consider allies. I wrote my reflection (much of it included here) and asked them to share it with the faculty. I invited the faculty to critically explore the dynamics of what transpired through the lens of white supremacy and white privilege in the academy and the White racialized space of the department. As DiAngelo urges, the question is not if you are a racist but how is your racism showing up in this situation?

The faculty agreed to collectively read DiAngelo's (2018) and Anderson's (2016) books and brought in a Black male expert to discuss racism with the faculty. And then, in the subsequent two faculty searchers, they hired two White men and one Black woman. From my perspective, they essentially went through the motions of performing diversity (Davis & Fields, 2021), and then they continued their pattern of reproducing whiteness. I felt betrayed again and isolated myself from them emotionally, physically, and collegially.

"Diversity of Thought" and Collusion

The last straw for me in trying to hold out hope that my White colleagues would "own up" to their whiteness and how it shapes the way they show up in the department was broken when one of the newly hired White male faculty stated, "Well, I bring diversity of thought to the department." We were on a committee and considering adding a new diversity and inclusion question for the application process for students interested in our program to answer. I was puzzled and somewhat irritated by his declaration. I thought, "You know that ordinarily, being a White, cisgender, heterosexual male would hardly be considered diverse, so you had to come up with 'diversity of thought' to assuage your conscious? Wow! That is just pathetic." Later in the week, at a faculty meeting, the other White newly hired male made a comment about something, and a White female faculty lauded him publicly, explaining "how valuable it is to experience 'diversity of thought' among the faculty." "There it is again!" I thought to myself. "Where are they getting that from, and why now?" I thought, "It must be a thing," so I contacted one of my friends outside of the academy, and she looked it up. We found that it is a "thing." It is a thing that is used to maintain the status quo (Kim, 2018) and serves as a distraction from doing the actual work of breaking down racial barriers (Bastian, 2019). After I understood what was meant by this phrase, it felt like yet another alienating nail in the coffin for me in feeling betrayed. Par for the course in my department.

After several days of sulking about this latest experience, I decided to say something to my colleagues about their use of the phrase. I do not know what motivated me to act. Was it conditioning, disappointment, anger, frustration, or a desire to squelch the possibility of the phrase catching on with others in the department? Who knows? In any case, I emailed the two colleagues who had used the phrase "diversity of thought," the department chair, and the DEI committee chair and shared my thoughts and experience of hearing them use that phrase and what I found out. However, I first explained my intent in contacting them, stating, "Given the history of how my comments regarding DEI matters in the program have been received, I want to make clear that it is not my intent to undermine or dismiss the work of this committee, but it

is to get some clarity and raise critical questions for reflection regarding our collective efforts to create a more equitable work environment." Referencing the two instances in which I heard the phrase used, I stated, "I cannot say that I have heard it used and could not help but wonder if it is the coded language used to justify (of course not consciously or intentionally) the fact that the program continues to hire cisgender White males (and White females for that matter) at a disproportionately higher rate than it does racially minoritized faculty?" I continued with, "I also wondered if the DEI committee has identified hiring for 'diversity of thought' as a top priority and if, unconsciously, of course, the program's faculty think non-White individuals cannot contribute 'diversity of thought' quite in the same ways White faculty, particularly White male faculty, can?"

Looking at my correspondence now, I believe I was motivated mainly by recognizing that we are all in different places along the learning curve. However, I was also angry and disappointed. I couched my anger and disappointment in sarcasm. I told them, "I am reading Isabel Wilkerson's (2020) book *Caste* about the arbitrary hierarchical divisions in this country that have placed and maintained cisgender White males at the top of our society for centuries and research that suggests that this hierarchy is so engrained in our psyche that we have internalized it and find ways to maintain it without realizing it." I decided to risk sharing the impact of the phrase on me. So I told them, "The phrase disturbed me so much (as it did when I first heard it from a colleague) that this evening I also decided to do an internet search of the phrase to see if there is something I am missing or not truly understanding about the use of it. I shared three articles with my colleagues that I found informative and affirming regarding the use of the phrase 'diversity of thought.'" I explained to them, "I share them in the spirit of recognizing that we are all on a learning curve in undoing white supremacy and patriarchy (I hope) and with the hope that one day the program will truly reflect racial diversity." By the end of my email, I was less angry and wanted them to think critically about what they were communicating.

Both of my colleagues responded graciously and professionally to my email correspondence. One colleague thanked me for my "insights, wisdom, and honesty" and said they "learned a great deal" from the articles I shared. The colleague acknowledged that they were "not aware of the impact of those words and practices" and committed to doing "more research and exploration into this topic and related topics" and assured me that "diversity of thought" was not a hiring priority. This colleague stated that they "plan to read *Caste*" and thanked me for the recommendation; although, I had not recommended the book, I just informed them that I was reading it. This colleague concluded their response with, "I share your desire that the program will truly reflect racial diversity." The other colleague whom I had first heard use the phrase responded that my correspondence "served as a welcome reminder that [their] internal biases are always lurking and for the need to challenge them more consistently." This colleague had been on a hiring committee and shared that they had immediately recognized when a candidate used the phrase "diversity of thought" when suggesting that the candidate's conservative ideas would contribute to the diversity of the program and that candidate became a no, for my colleague, right on the spot. My colleague continued their correspondence with, "Today, I sit amazed at my ability to easily see how this phrase can be so used by others to offer some sort of faux contribution to diversity or helping produce equity while having so blatantly disregarded that same behavior from myself. The mental/rhetorical gymnastics one uses to distance oneself from

complicity in perpetuating the status quo of white supremacy are often difficult to admit. So again, I appreciate you taking the time to question the notion of 'diversity of thought' as a legitimate contribution to diversity and to share your thoughts, as they are absolutely something I needed to hear."

Taking in my colleagues' responses, particularly given that they could have ignored my email altogether, I was appreciative but leery about whether their gracious and acknowledging words would translate into anything more than that. In fact, since that email correspondence, my colleagues have never broached the subject with me, nor did I initiate another conversation with them. I also noticed that they rarely say anything in our faculty meetings anymore. I will not take credit for their decisions to remain virtually silent throughout our faculty meetings. I also do not think I allowed myself to get too hopeful that one email exchange would result in any tangible changes in our department's White hiring practices. By the way, the chair I included in the correspondence did not respond … so much for leadership with a vision of racial equity.

Conclusion

After 20 years of watching many White social work educators' complicity and complacency in perpetuating anti-Black racism, I have concluded that the reproduction of whiteness in social work education is a "thing" that Black faculty will experience in White universities and colleges. It will not be dismantled or eradicated anytime soon, especially if White faculty are unwilling, incapable, dismissive, in denial, or only gracious and acknowledging how they routinely reinforce and perpetuate white supremacy in the academy. Therefore, the best solution for Black faculty is to prepare for the reproduction of whiteness and strategize around it to achieve their career goals. It is exhausting and self-defeating for Black faculty to spend their precious limited time, psychological and psychic energy, and emotional and physical labor trying to eradicate a White structure operating precisely as intended. Instead, my recommendations are offered to support Black faculty surviving and thriving despite the structural and individual barriers and traps designed to limit Black progress and achievement. Therefore, my recommendations are directed to Black faculty to support their survival and efforts to achieve their professional goals.

Recommendations

This list of recommendations is intended for Black faculty, especially Black female faculty in predominantly White social work education programs. They are recommendations I practice now, and I find them very helpful in maintaining my sanity and sanctity in the academy. I realize now that I am not responsible for what my White colleagues know or do not know about race and racism, and I was not hired to teach them how to be anti-racist. Now I focus my time and energy on my scholarship and structure my life so that I am minimally involved, or not at all, in service-related events and activities beyond what is required based on my workload percentage. I feel more energized and focused when I do say "yes," and I get "more bang for my buck" because now I only say "yes" to activities that benefit my research or my teaching as well. I am less inclined to do it if I do not get anything from the service activity to advance my scholarship or teaching. It feels healthy and wise to take care of myself this way, and it

minimizes the department, college, and university from exploiting and tokenizing my labor, gender, and race. I have a few White allies that I trust, and we support each other and have candid conversations about anti-black racism, white supremacy, and how they can challenge the program in promoting racial equity and stop the reproduction of whiteness in the program's DEI and hiring practices. Here are my recommendations:

1. Do not waste your time teaching your White colleagues about racism, anti-black violence, or anything about your experiences with racial microaggressions or trauma. It is an exhausting waste of your time and energy needed to focus on your productivity.

2. Do take the time necessary to observe which of your White colleagues might be true allies. They can help you navigate the White culture and avoid common pitfalls, like teaching White faculty about anti-black racism; overextending yourself regarding service projects; or saying "yes" to too many invitations to serve the department, college, university, or community. They can also confront their White peers when racial microaggressions are made in group settings and save you the emotionally exhausting work of doing this alone.

3. Once you believe you have a true ally among your White colleagues (it can take a long time for this to happen), talk to the person, be explicit about what being an ally means to you, and find out what it means to them. Have explicit conversations regarding how you would like them to support you as an ally providing specific, likely scenarios, and tell them explicitly what you would not like them to do.

4. Keep track of your service work at the beginning of the academic year. Once you meet the requirements of your department for service, start saying "no" to requests unless it can benefit you in other areas of your career, like teaching and producing scholarship or publishing.

5. Read or listen to *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience*, edited by Tarana Burke and Brené Brown (2021).

6. Other resources to consider reading:

   a. Gregory, S.T. (1999). *Black women in the academy: The secrets to success and achievement.* University Press of America.

   b. Bell, M. P., Berry, D., Leopold, J., & Nkomo, S. (2020). Making Black lives matter in academia: A Black feminist call for collective action against anti-blackness in the academy. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(S1), 39–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12555

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