I Am Not a Fraud: Reconsidering Impostor Syndrome in Black and Latinx Women Social Work Faculty

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Abstract: Social work education is guided by the Council of Social Work Education, which acknowledges the necessity of increased diversity in the curriculum, outlined in the second competency within their Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). However, these ideals are not always fostered in the academic professional settings that Black and Latinx women faculty occupy. Critical Race Theory will be explored as a framework to better understand impostor syndrome and challenge the oppressive structures that uphold white supremacist ideals in social work education. This manuscript will offer structural recommendations to US-based social work institutions, including peer mentoring and the creation of brave spaces to mitigate impostor syndrome for Black and Latinx women social work faculty. In addition, the personal narratives of three female faculty of Color—two Black social work faculty and one Latinx faculty—will be presented to exemplify experiences of impostor syndrome through their professional social contexts.

***Keywords*:** white supremacy, social work education, faculty of Color, diversity

Social work education is guided by the Council of Social Work Education, which acknowledges the necessity of increased diversity in the curriculum, as outlined in the second competency within their Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; Daniel, 2007). However, these ideals are not always fostered in the academic professional settings that Black and Latinx faculty occupy. Black and Latinx social work faculty are "othered," excluded, presumed incompetent, and discriminated against in the form of microaggression from supervisors, colleagues, and students (Flores Niemann, 2012). These experiences may result in *impostor syndrome*, or feeling like a fraud in an academic or professional environment (Clance & Imes, 1978).

Research indicates that men report feelings of impostor syndrome with less intensity compared to women, with women of Color being uniquely at risk (Chandra et al., 2019; Clance & Imes, 1978). The authors acknowledge that individuals of intersecting, subordinate identities not discussed in this article may also experience impostor syndrome exacerbated by their social contexts. Tulshyan and Burey (2021) contend that impostor syndrome is a cumbersome label to bear as it may criminalize feelings of insecurity and anxiety brought on by new experiences, particularly when these feelings are intensified by exclusion, bias, or racism. The term "syndrome" carries a medical undertone, implying that the individual experiencing success-related fear, doubt, and insecurity may likely have a disorder (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

While research defines impostor syndrome as an internal process, the authors propose that racist and hostile environments may generate and trigger feelings of unworthiness and not belonging (Feenstra et al., 2020; Kets de Vries, 2005; Sakulku, 2011) in Black and Latinx faculty. The personal narratives of three female faculty of Color—two Black social work faculty and one Latinx faculty—will be presented to exemplify experiences of impostor syndrome through their

professional social contexts. White supremacy in social work education will be discussed as a contributing factor in impostor syndrome. Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be explored as a framework to better understand impostor syndrome and challenge the oppressive structures that uphold white supremacist ideals in social work education. Since impostorship in faculty of Color has been under-studied (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014), this manuscript will offer structural recommendations to US-based social work institutions, including peer mentoring and the creation of "brave spaces" to mitigate impostor syndrome for Black and Latinx social work faculty. Peer mentoring and brave spaces offer opportunities for Black and Latinx faculty to dismantle oppressive practices that affect their self-perceptions and interactions with colleagues and supervisors.

What is Impostor Syndrome?

The term *impostor phenomenon*, also known as impostor syndrome, was coined by psychologists Clance and Imes (1978) to describe the "internal experience of intellectual phoniness, which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high-achieving women" (p. 241). However, the original definition did not consider the effects of systemic racism and oppression (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). High-achieving women and members of marginalized communities, such as Black and Latinx women, may experience feelings of fraud or phoniness in their academic or work spaces, irrespective of their notable accomplishments or efforts (Feenstra et al., 2020; Hawley, 2019; Peteet et al., 2015; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). These individuals may believe that their success was attained through luck, chance, or other external factors having little to do with perseverance, talent, proficiency, and high education levels (Chandra et al., 2019; Clance & Imes, 1978; Feenstra et al., 2020). Feeling like a fraud or impostor who may have fooled their peers, these individuals worry about being discovered, found out, or revealed by others (Chandra et al., 2019; Cohen & McConnell, 2019).

Self-Perceptions

Impostor syndrome, through the lens of white supremacy, offers a more accurate understanding of the resulting internal experiences, such as thoughts and feelings, of Black and Latinx faculty. Internally, impostor syndrome may be experienced as fear, anxiety, self-doubt, and insecurity, even in situations where the individual has accomplished success (Hawley, 2019). Research suggests that impostor syndrome may be associated with individuals having pre-existing perfectionism and differing perceptions about gender roles from their family of origin (Kets de Vries, 2005; Sakulku, 2011). While this concept stresses the importance of offering support to individuals who experience impostor syndrome, it does not take into consideration the social context's impact on the self-perceptions of people of Color. Feenstra et al. (2020) emphasize the necessity for exploring the social context in understanding impostor syndrome. This notion suggests that impostor syndrome may be first experienced externally, in the environment, and later becomes internalized. This process may be experienced when an individual works in a hostile environment that utilizes prejudice, racism, and discrimination. These dynamics in academic institutions may be internalized by Black and Latinx faculty and result in feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. Understanding the role of the environment on impostor syndrome

may help in supporting Black and Latinx women faculty and also in addressing structural oppressive barriers (Feenstra et al., 2020).

Relationships with Colleagues and Administration

Impostor syndrome can also be triggered by white supremacy that emerges in interactions with colleagues and administrators. Colorblindness and denial of racism and bias are harmful to Black and Latinx faculty who are often stigmatized in academia (Flores Niemann, 2012). Louis et al. (2016) indicate that "Black faculty members reported feeling invisible and marginalized when their existence on campus was ignored by white colleagues" (p. 458). Similarly, additional research states that Black and Latinx faculty's credentials are often challenged, and racism and hostility are experienced from white colleagues and students (Lewis-Giggetts, 2015; Pittman, 2012; Solórzano, 1998).

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, Black and Latinx faculty's confidence may also be impacted by the following institutional challenges: low numbers of faculty of Color at their respective colleges or universities, challenges in obtaining promotion and tenure, disparate demands to teach diversity courses and mentor students of Color, and negative sanctions of research agendas of Color (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014). Latinx and Black faculty are disproportionately taxed with supplementary roles, such as mentor or liaison to campus groups or activities of students of Color, as compared to white faculty. Such activities are typically undervalued by administrators (Constantine et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2016).

Impostor Syndrome and White Supremacy in Social Work Programs

Institutional racism in higher education can be analyzed through the lens of white supremacy (Franco, 2021). Hidalgo (2019) asserts that academia is a white supremacist and exploitative structure. White supremacy may be implicit or explicit in social work programs. If unaddressed, white supremacy becomes the standard that seeps into all levels of social work education, while excluding the experiences of faculty of Color. Despite recent interest by social work schools to adopt cultural humility and anti-racist/oppressive pedagogy, white supremacy persists in policies, curricula, and interpersonal relationships across academia. White supremacy can become a filter through which Black and Latinx faculty evaluate themselves, supervisors assess their performance, and colleagues interact. Black and Latinx faculty's experiences with microaggressions, systemic racism, exclusion, and bias can result in low confidence and fraudulent feelings (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

In his empirical analysis of education policy informed by CRT, Gillborn (2005) suggests that "the most dangerous form of 'white supremacy' is not the obvious and extreme fascistic posturing of small neo-Nazi groups, but rather the taken-for-granted routine privileging of white interests that goes unremarked in the political mainstream" (p. 485). A recent example is the proposal by many US-based academic institutions to ban the teaching and learning of CRT, arguing that it is "an omnipresent and omnipotent ideology, one that is anti-American, anti-capitalist and anti-white" (Wong, 2021, para. 1). This suggests a strong reluctance to accept and confront the United States' racist past and present history.

Critical Race Theory

Most scholars of anti-oppressive research define a *critical worldview* as one that: (a) deconstructs structures of oppression and their effects on subjects; (b) maintains historical perspective; (c) considers the experiences of marginalized groups at the intersections of their identities; (d) accounts for issues of power (e.g., distribution, consent), how power influences lived experiences of marginalized groups, and how one engages in the world are examined; and (e) provides liberating life possibilities, emancipatory social change, and strategies of resistance (Dixson et al., 2017). In terms of female faculty of Color in predominantly white institutions and their unique perceptions of and experiences in higher education, CRT was used to theoretically indoctrinate the experiences of these women and gain a better understanding about the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender.

CRT emerged from the civil rights movements of the 1960s and draws from a body of literature that extends to the area of law and seeks to study and transform the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It also considers the influences white supremacy has had on the American psyche (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT and its core tenets have been examined and applied across many areas of education for more than 40 years. The concept was first used as a legal scholar's defense for arguing civil rights cases, but according to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), the last three decades have witnessed its application to college campuses and beyond. For faculty women of Color to be safe on college campuses, equity still needs to be achieved. CRT provides an important historical context and basis for how present-day racial inequality and oppression should be analyzed. CRT also illustrates how the experiences of women of Color in predominantly white institutions are a consistent and persistent inescapable truth for them. Therefore, CRT captures how race is structurally embedded within institutional structures (Bell, 1992).

The tenets of CRT are 1) the primacy of race and racism and their interconnectedness with other forms of subordination; 2) a questioning of the dominant belief system status quo; 3) a commitment to social justice; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and 5) a multidisciplinary perspective (Crenshaw, 2011; Solórzano et al., 2000; Zuberi, 2011). In terms of faculty women of Color, a central tenet of CRT is that racism is "normal," as a common, everyday experience for most people of Color, and ingrained in the fabric of American society because it influences the way in which society typically operates. For example, many women of Color are aware of social and structural problems that create the conflict they face within society. Thus, countless outdated social and structural issues must be addressed. For the social work profession, the tenets of CRT enhance social workers' strengths to recognize and remedy racism that permeates social institutions, structures, and systems in the US, while also providing a much-needed dialogue about how the role of race in social work practice and policy can lead to social action and change (Kolivoski et al., 2014).

CRT proposes that racism in systems may be "countered by the storytelling and narrative-making of those who are racialized in ways that exclude them from the dominant White narrative" (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019, p. 120). Counter-storytelling allows for sharing lived experiences of oppression, which can be liberating for Black and Latinx women faculty.

Counter-storytelling may also "inspire prudent exploration of how the academy at large, ourselves included, continues to fall incredibly short of inclusion" (Griffin et al., 2014, p. 1370). CRT's fourth tenet, the centrality of experiential knowledge, will be used to contextualize the lived experiences of two Black faculty and one Latinx faculty in social work programs, illustrated by the following personal narratives.

Personal Narratives

Narrative #1

Impostor implies someone is a fraud or sham. *Syndrome* implies having a condition or disorder. As a Black woman, I am not a fraud, nor do I have a disorder. I have always demonstrated strength, ambition, and resilience. My encounters with microaggressions and downright racism and sexism have been challenging. Unfortunately, impostor syndrome tends to put the burden and responsibility on women like me to deal with the effects.

There are many situations that I never want to relive. Some I have not, but unfortunately, some I have. Where do I start? What story or stories do I tell? That is difficult because coming to terms with what is called impostor syndrome has helped me cope as best as I can with what I have experienced for many years as a Black woman in the world of higher education and, specifically, social work education. Being a Black woman in academia adds a layer of racial microaggressions that I have endured but survived. Why do I need to be a survivor? I am the oldest child of a strong Black woman who was an English professor at an HBCU where I grew up and at a small liberal arts college in another state. Where I grew up, everyone looked like me. It is a city enriched with Black culture and history. I was safe. Then I went to a Predominately White Institution (PWI) to pursue my undergraduate degree. As the only Black person in most of my classes, at times I found the environment created several conflicting thoughts of self-doubt, inadequacy, and insecurity that were injurious to my well-being. I also did not have professors (well, only one) who looked like me. With being in the academy as faculty since 2005, why am I still dealing with the same thoughts? Why do I walk in a room and with the pandemic, a Zoom meeting, feeling overpowered by a dominant White presence? It is unsettling, so I must get my game face on. I already have enough to deal with as a Black woman in America. It is exhausting and tiring, but I must press on because my mother did what she always told me to do which is, "Take care of the business!"

When I practiced social work full-time after getting my MSW degree, I never felt the way I have since being in the academia. For many years, I wrestled with the idea of continuing to teach at PWIs and staying in social work education. Being a social work practitioner was much quieter. I kept asking myself, how is it possible for a Black woman to excel in an institution that does not adequately represent or uplift the experiences I come from? The past few years, I had a reawakening and understood the importance of Black representation and our voices. Experiencing anti-Black racism and sexism in academia means that running into impostor syndrome is inevitable. Therefore, learning to confirm those self-doubts has allowed me to reaffirm my value and never lose sight of the goal.

Being faculty as a Black woman in predominately White spaces is emotional labor. Serving on diversity, equity, and inclusion committees is great, but often, it does not lead to immediate change and my voice being heard. Then I try to help a diverse student population (specifically, Black students) navigate that same predominantly White space. Doing so is rewarding, but also taxing and takes a lot of energy.

In the words of Black scholar and poet Audre Lorde, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." (Lorde, 1988, p. 97). While self-care is necessary, it is not enough. I need to be in better working and learning environments because all too often, systems and environments such as social work education have been performative about anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The older I get and longer I stay in social work education as a Black woman, I will unapologetically be myself. I am NOT an impostor. I belong here just like anybody else.

Narrative #2

First-generation is a term used to describe one who is first in their generation to accomplish something, such as becoming a citizen in a new country or attending college. In my case, this means having to navigate the intersection of being Latinx, a woman, and a daughter of immigrants. In my family, I am first-generation everything. I am the first in my family to complete high school and graduate school. I am also the first Latinx woman in my family to occupy predominantly white academic spaces as faculty and experience microaggressions related to this identity. These microaggressions trigger impostor syndrome, making me question if I have the right for my voice to be heard.

My parents' "American Dream" of witnessing their daughter accomplish higher education and a career did not come without obstacles. For example, while I am proudly bilingual, comments by colleagues such as, "Oh, you have an accent, where are you from?" make assumptions about my intelligence, race, ethnicity, and place of birth. In my own reflections, I frequently affirm that an accent is nothing to be ashamed of. An accent is evidence that I can express myself in more than one language. This is when impostor syndrome asks: Should I have to explain that I was born in the United States? What do I need to prove? Am I being presumed incompetent and assessed through an evaluative gaze?

There are other microaggressions that happen less explicitly, but still contribute to impostor syndrome. My passion for anti-racism and anti-oppression in social work education and practice also results in being sought to "discuss DEI topics." While this is a seemingly harmless request, faculty of Color are disproportionately burdened with having to present about these "topics" and teach colleagues. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are processes that impact everyone. Are these values implemented in the culture and climate of the workplace? I have not always felt included when I am interrupted in a meeting or excluded in decision-making processes. Am I here to merely tick a diversity compliance box? While I do not have the answers to these questions, I draw from my inner strengths and from the support of other social work women faculty of Color with similar experiences.

Narrative #3

Unfortunately, in my experience as a Black woman in academia, racism and microaggressions can be a common occurrence. Due to the nature of these events, impostor syndrome can become very real. The word "impostor" implies not being authentic in who you are or the position you hold. White women in academia, specifically in social work, seem to have been the source from which this phenomenon has occurred in my life.

The primary mission of social work is to enhance human wellbeing and assist with meeting the basic needs of everyone with an emphasis on empowerment (NASW, 2021). The core values in social work should be the platform from which we serve. In social work academia, racism and micro-aggressions would be the last experience one would expect.

Living abroad due to the military, I have had the opportunity to live, work, and experience life with people from diverse cultures and countries. However, returning to the US and working with some white women in academia, I found myself having feelings of insecurity, doubting who I am and what I am created to do. Being micromanaged and questioned about my work are what leads to these feelings of impostor syndrome.

While there have been several occurrences, I will share one experience where I was questioned about my work, accused, and attacked. These actions were shocking to me, especially in social work. In this one instance, I was told why I am not supposed to do a certain thing and was reprimanded for it, even though I never did the alleged act. When I told the white woman that I did not do what she was accusing me of, she still felt the need to give me a long dissertation of the reasons why I should not do it. I just humbly listened until she finished talking. Once she finished, the phone went silent, and I asked her if she had finished speaking. She stated that she was, however, she was still holding the phone. I asked again if she was waiting for me to say something, and she said yes. I then told her I had nothing to say because I never did what she was accusing me and that I already knew the protocol she was discussing.

This type of behavior from this white woman is one of the behaviors impostor syndrome thrives on to cause you to doubt your expertise in your profession. I believe these behaviors are rooted in racism and one's worldview of the intellect of a Black woman.

I then remembered who I was as a Black woman and regained my sense of confidence to push through these feelings knowing that I had a right to be at the table. I worked long and hard to earn my doctorate, just like everyone else. I am one of the most authentic people you will ever meet in social work academia who happens to be Black.

Connections to the Literature

While the authors differ from each other in their intersectional identities, as Black and Latinx social work faculty they share similar experiences with oppressive and hostile environments in social work education. These dynamics have contributed to impostor syndrome in the authors. This article makes connections between the academic work environment and negative impacts

on Black and Latinx's self-perceptions and relationships with colleagues and administration. Our personal narratives exemplify this impact on their self-perceptions. For the authors, microaggressions and lack of representation of women of Color in social work professional environments led to feelings of one's voice not being heard, feelings of inadequacy, self-denial, self-doubt, and being assumed unintelligent because of an accent. Microaggressions experienced by the authors also resulted in strained relationships with colleagues and administration through feelings of exhaustion and emotional labor; incidents of being verbally attacked, accused, and micromanaged; and being disproportionately burdened to serve on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committees and present on "topics" related to DEI. Social work professionals must ensure that the teaching and learning environment is equitable and safe in order to mitigate barriers that result in impostor syndrome for Black and Latinx women faculty and other faculty of Color.

Recommendations

Impostor syndrome in Black and Latinx women faculty can be mitigated by addressing the culture and climate of the work environment. According to Tulshyan and Burey (2021), toxic and biased environments would benefit from being intentional in addressing systemic racism and oppression. Addressing racism and microaggressions in social work programs may contribute to an increased sense of safety and belonging for Black and Latinx women faculty. This would require an authentic and intentional exploration of the work environment, culture, and climate by social work programs, including all faculty and administration. It would also require a conscious de-centering of whiteness and white supremacy. However, exploring and dismantling white supremacy in schools of social work may present challenges. Lewis' (2004) sociological research on race suggested white people are often hesitant to discuss their own racial identity and at times deny that their white identity carries any power in society. CRT's tenets offer a lens for dismantling structural racism in social work programs. Faculty and students need "brave spaces" where they can learn how they may benefit from unearned privilege. While there is no prescribed way to organize brave spaces, these may include community members across universities to courageously talk about racism and injustice (Bliss, 2020). In these spaces, white supremacy can be addressed by exploring power inequality between oppressor and oppressed. By addressing relational positionality in all academic spaces in schools of social work, faculty and students may be able to locate themselves in relation to marginalized and oppressed populations and analyze the "us-them" polarization that occurs within "othering" (Abrums & Leppa, 2001). This process may increase self-awareness in interactions among colleagues and peers and aid in identifying steps in making institutional change.

Brave spaces offer opportunities for university community members to explore their own relational positionality and contribute to a more inclusive and safe work environment. In addition, one-to-one support, in the form of informal mentoring by and for faculty of Color, may help in lessening impostor syndrome in Black and Latinx faculty. Individuals experiencing impostor syndrome may face self-doubt and questioning of their skills. In keeping with CRT tenets, spaces that support counter-storytelling may "serve as an invaluable outlet for faculty who represent marginalized identity groups to expose the omnipresence of multiple oppressions

in their everyday academic lives" (Griffin et al., 2014, p. 1370). Mentorship may provide opportunities for counter-storytelling. Mentorship may also be helpful in reducing stress, tension, and alienation while providing support, encouragement, and guidance (Chandra et al., 2019). Mentors can be instrumental in helping mentees identify unrecognized skills and potential, in addition to aiding in assessing and understanding feelings of impostorship (Chandra et al., 2019; Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014). A study by Lawless and Chen (2015) revealed that mentorship should be built into academic settings to help develop a more positive climate on campus. One woman in Lawless and Chen's (2015) study indicated that "new female immigrant faculty should have two mentors—one who helps you through the tenure process and one who helps you understand microaggressions and day-to-day discriminatory practices that women of Color experience on academic campuses" (p. 46). Similarly, Louis et al. (2016) recommend that university organizations composed of senior faculty of Color help by offering peer mentorship to help cope with microaggressions.

Conclusion

Impostor syndrome is prevalent among Black and Latinx women social work faculty because they feel diminished, oppressed, and disempowered by prejudiced dynamics on campus (Louis et al., 2016). The authors propose that additional research is needed on the role of the social context in impostor syndrome in Black and Latinx faculty. Extant literature focuses on students' of Color experiences with racism, developing and improving training programs to address racism and microaggressions, and race in the social work curriculum and social work practice. While this literature is still in its nascent stages, studies that explore the lived experiences of faculty of Color with impostor syndrome in social work programs would build on this growing body of knowledge.

In keeping with social work values, social work programs would benefit from re-assessing the culture and climate to ensure that it aligns with social justice actions. Mentorship and the utility of brave spaces can help mitigate impostor syndrome in Black and Latinx faculty by addressing and dismantling racism and oppression rooted in white supremacy. As stated by Hackett (2017), "The term white supremacy labels the problem more accurately. It locates the problem on whiteness and its systems. It focuses on outcomes not intentions. It is collective not individual. It makes whiteness uncomfortable and responsible. And that is important" (para. 21).

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