

Reflections from the Guest Editors: Practicing While Black

Patricia Antoinette Gray, Shakira A. Kennedy, and Nadjete Natchaba

Abstract: This final Special Issue of the trilogy in *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* on racial justice and anti-racism demonstrates that “practicing while Black” remains a critical issue today. In this Editorial Letter, we reflect on the harsh realities of microaggression, invisibility, racial diminishment, or exclusion in one’s daily existence, regardless of educational or employability status.

Keywords: Black narratives, microaggression, invisibility, racial diminishment

Introduction

The twin experiences of being Black and “practicing while Black” in America are exhausting but not new. Black people have to plan, respond, support, and provide for their community despite experiencing racism, marginalization, ostracism, and the effects of classism while practicing, working, driving, and living. Black people, professionals, and scholars have to arm themselves to bear witness to their struggles in the face of extreme hardship and catastrophe while being racialized in their backyard. These people do not have the luxury of expanding their bandwidth to counsel, share, educate, respond appropriately, and hold support spaces for other Black people.

The dual burden of being Black and “practicing while Black” in America is both exhausting and familiar. Despite enduring racism, marginalization, ostracism, and classism in all aspects of life, Black people continue to support and provide for their communities. Professionals and scholars in particular must navigate these struggles while also being racialized in their own spaces. They cannot often extend their energy to counsel, educate, and hold support spaces for others.

Patricia Antoinette Gray

As I grappled with my thoughts of being a Black professional and where I landed in “Practicing While Black,” I struggled as I thought about my authenticity in the academic space with colleagues, students, service users, and community stakeholders. My struggle did not stem from not knowing my work or worth but from those seeing my strength as a threat. My ability to accomplish complex tasks, expand programs, and collaborate with community stakeholders was unwelcome, leaving me pondering, “What happened?” I was labeled “angry,” taken out of departmental meetings, and brought to upper management under false allegations regarding my work. Often, I resorted to my ancestors’ colloquy, “*You see mi dine trial*,” just to give me patience not to answer or respond in a manner that would bring shame to my mother if she was alive. I resorted to singing and humming Delroy Wilson’s (1971) lyrics “better must come one day” (line 7) because no matter how hard I tried to become part of the system, the sense of belonging, trust, and respect was elusive. Waiting was the dilemma as I witnessed and observed how Black professionals must navigate various work, home, and community environments.

The articles published in this Special Issue demonstrate that microaggression, systemic racism, and racial diminishment remain rampant within all spaces. Allison (2008) shared that many Black professors on White campuses do not feel free to “be themselves” (p. 641) among students and colleagues. Our authors laid out testimonies to these phenomena on college campuses today. I concur, as I experienced the same feelings when working in these institutions. How colleagues respond to my intersecting identities of being a Black woman of a certain age who uses my patois intermittently in conversations, especially when I get excited or keep my “poker face,” remains par for the course. However, despite all the concerns faced while practicing while Black, the themes of resilience, strong work ethic, and having a solid community of friends and mentors remain critical for Black professionals. My race and gender undoubtedly affect how people see me. While I cannot change how people may see me, I continue to be determined.

Shakira A. Kennedy

Serving the dual role of author and Guest Editor has stretched me professionally. As a Guest Editor, I had the opportunity to shape an author’s work and provide detailed feedback while offering encouragement to hold fast to their experience—the pain and triumph of practicing. At the same time, Black is not lost on me. As a Black female manager navigating antagonistic spaces, these stories echo my experiences. The written expressions within this Special Issue provide a cathartic release for the author once their truth is written. These personal truths provide solace and space for those who may not have the words to name their circumstance. Thus, my role as a Guest Editor has been a badge of honor.

As a co-author, sharing my experiences as a senior manager within human services has allowed me to honor my growth as a Black female senior manager. Recognizing my fortitude in the face of adversity teaches me that my power comes from the struggle. My strength comes from the senior managers and executives in the trenches before me, the strong women within my family, and my ancestors, whose shoulders I stand upon.

The power of my struggle further comes from the contradictions of living in the United States of America while Black. This inconsistency can be seen as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) aspire for the “American Dream” of home ownership only to discover their homes have been devalued due to their Blackness—and similar to Maya Angelou (1978), still, we rise. The complexity of the struggle can provide clarity through reflective practice as we navigate anti-Black spaces and hold onto our conviction for a more equitable world. This could not happen without our willingness to talk, write, and have uncomfortable conversations about race and the impact of racism. As social workers, we understand that systems of oppression cannot be fought in isolation. Therefore, we decolonize these oppressive systems when simultaneously writing, speaking, and conversing.

Nadjete Natchaba

As an African-descendent woman living in America, I have committed myself to honoring the social debt owed by Black bodies, especially those of us with doctorate degrees. This commitment became even more pronounced after introducing the concept in my Afrocentricity course. When the opportunity to serve as a Guest Editor arose, I immediately recognized it as a meaningful way to fulfill my responsibility to my community. Being in a community with fellow Black authors, each on their journey toward healing and Liberation through writing nourished my soul. For far too long, individuals unfamiliar with the Black experience have written about us in ways that have either dismissed or distorted our realities, perpetuating the erasure of our brilliance. As Guest Editor, my role was to offer feedback that helped authors amplify their voices as Black professionals in racialized spaces and to reach other Black folk who may be silently enduring similar struggles.

As a Black woman who holds roles as a professor, therapist, and C-suite executive, each article deeply validated my experiences, revealing our shared struggles, resilience, and aspirations. The pieces offered practical strategies for managing the psychological trauma that often accompanies living in a society built on white supremacy while also instilling a sense of hope. However, I cannot ignore the anger and frustration I felt in seeing how painful our everyday experiences are, affirming that the fight for survival is inevitable for Black people in these systems. Still, through it all, the writings reflect our collective determination to persist, resist, disrupt, interrogate, survive, and ultimately thrive, even within systems designed to oppress us.

Reflections Of Practicing While Black

This Special Issue of “Practicing While Black” discusses the shared personal experiences of institutional and systemic racism within all occupied spaces and through the COVID-19 pandemic. The everyday experiences with the daunting reality of racial oppression are undeniable, regardless of social class (Aymer, 2012) and are also reflected through painful academic encounters. The benefit comes from the positive experiences for the students, who see people who look like them and nurture their souls. Educational institutions recognize the importance of minority faculty presence on campus for increasing the number of ethnic minority students (Bower, 2002). Both the academic institution and students benefit positively from this transaction. However, historically, these institutions have not been capable of holding space for Black academics for their growth and development. I am who I am because of who we are, which is the spirit of *Ubuntu*, and speaks to the collective experience and impact as we work towards a more liberated practice (see also Hicks, 2016).

Conclusion

Readers should approach these expressions of bravery by asking themselves, “How can I be the change?” This reflective question encourages us to take responsibility for changing the world, one action at a time. Narrative therapy has proven effective in addressing racialized trauma (Garo & Lawson, 2019), emphasizing that healing begins with the acknowledgment of both past and present trauma. The authors of this issue have progressed from acknowledgment to healing

by sharing their lived traumatic experiences. As Guest Editors for this “Practicing While Black” issue, we aim to amplify these professionals’ voices while creating an urgent space for support, humanity, and love.

Highlights of this Issue

The authors in this Special Issue of “Practicing While Black” summoned their courage to discuss feelings, thoughts, experiences, actions, and shared humanity as they, too, witnessed and observed racism within academic institutions, communities, and environments while practicing. We accept that reflecting and sharing encounters that leave us perplexed, disappointed, hurt, and angry is difficult. However, the eight articles submitted in this particular Special Issue time and again share their stories, memories, and feelings and suggest recommendations to practitioners who continue to practice while being Black in a world where inequities, injustices, and unfairness live.

In the first six articles, the authors passionately remind us that regardless of gender, we bear witness firsthand to the injustices of our community; we are often called upon to be the voices of our communities, to represent and define Blackness, to educate our peers about racist tropes; we live viscerally through the pain, anger, frustration of witnessing and observing police brutality in kneeling on the neck and killing a black man in broad daylight—whether in the sea of white faces or the only one in an institution.

Young and Washington walk us through how our health as practitioners is compromised when dealing with the challenges of racial injustices against Black people. Payne echoes the feelings of paralysis with frustration, anger, grief, and outrage at what occurred to George Floyd. Ingram asks, “Do you see me?” as she recounted her lived experience in an academic institution where she was the only black clinician. Being Black female social workers during a time of crisis can be incredibly triggering, particularly when the crisis is race-related: In Chapple, Morris, Ladonice, Honeycutt, and Blakey’s work, the authors use their lenses as Black women and a white ally reflecting on countertransference in cross-racial and intra-racial therapeutic dynamics as they navigated multiple pandemics, including racial turmoil, COVID-19, global lockdowns, economic uncertainty, political divisiveness, and the aftermath of former president Trump’s election refusal, marked by the Capitol insurrection.

Simultaneously, the next two articles of these six focused on having a seat at the table, being the first, and finding support through other appointments. Battle discusses the issues encountered in accepting the duties and responsibilities as administrative head, department leader, and chair of an academic department in postsecondary education. Likewise, Roberts shares a deeply personal immigrant experience over two decades of service in a predominantly white institution, facing, coping, and dealing with racism. Both authors describe spaces where they thought they could thrive, grow, and support change beneficial to their institutions—but faced insurmountable challenges.

Lastly, the two final articles depict delegitimizing Blackness as an attempt to remove one's power or authority. The other articles support the need to continue to hone and develop skills to work effectively in the Black community. Tucker, Graham, and Kennedy reflect on the importance of the power of oneself to own their story, the power of children and families to understand their needs, and the power of managing and confidently stepping into their own Blackness while Gray, Natchaba, and Cole share their lived experiences about the importance of a lifelong commitment to learning and the importance of hope for the next generation.

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