

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Department of Sociology

Master's Theses

2017

RACIAL INJURY OF GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOR AT MAJORITY WHITE UNIVERSITIES IN THE ERA OF POSTRACIALISM

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Abstract

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Recommended Citation: Dennis, Alexis M., 2017. “Racial Injury of Graduate Students of Color at Majority White Universities in the Era of Postracialism”. Master’s Thesis. Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin – Madison. (URL of permalink)

RACIAL INJURY OF GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOR
AT MAJORITY WHITE UNIVERSITIES IN THE ERA
OF POSTRACIALISM

by

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A thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

(Sociology)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2017

ABSTRACT

Colorblind ideology is the process by which race is considered a nonfactor in interpersonal interactions as well as in political and social processes. Meritocracy is the idea that individual talents and abilities, not race, should determine who is admitted to universities. Drawing on findings from two years of ethnographic observations in a graduate program at a major Midwest research institution, as well as interview data collected from current and former graduate students across the country, this paper shows how racial injury occurs within the context of colorblind ideology and meritocracy. Graduate students of color become recipients of acts of acute disrespect or micro-aggressions which significantly impede their progress, take up their time, and harm their psychological well-being. Micro-aggressions happen between graduate student peers; between white faculty and graduate students of color, but they also happen when graduate students of color assume positions of power vis-à-vis white students, such as while serving as TAs or running a committee. They are at their most damaging when they occur in the context of ongoing professional relationships which, because graduate school is a kind of “small town,” may have consequences for a student’s trajectory down the road and often overlap with intimate relationships. The final section of the paper talks about strategies for survival and overcoming, including building alternative communities, removing oneself from environments that harm them.

“I love that all of our excuses have been removed. African-American excuses have been removed. There’s no white man trying to keep you down, because if he were really trying to keep you down, he would have done everything he could to keep Obama down. Yes, there are racist people who live here, absolutely. But they’re not the majority anymore.” – Will Smith on the election of Barack Obama for President

The post-racial sentiments of Will Smith and other public figures following the election of Barack Hussein Obama as our 44th president in 2008 was one that seemed to be felt among many people across race and class in the United States. For these people, the election of America’s first black president marked an end to a particular kind of racism in America. It also marked the end to what many felt were the “excuses” Blacks were allowed to use as reasons for not succeeding, professionally, politically, socially, at the same rate as their white counterparts (Reed and Louis, Jr.: Pp. 99). While for some, Obama’s election served as evidence that institutional racism was no longer a problem in American society, his presidency failed to reconcile the underrepresentation and marginalization of Black Americans and other people of color in predominantly white institutions. Gines (2014) describes post-racial ideology as the idea of discarding racial categories or ignoring race as a method in eliminating racism (p. 79). This sentiment has the impact of disregarding the lived experiences of people of color with tenuous relationships to American institutions due to historical exclusion and marginalization based on race. Adopting instead, a merit-based ideology that attempts to reward those based on their talents and achievements. Park and Liu (2014) note that while there are competing definitions of meritocracy, “[v]alorizing the concept of merit suggests that everyone admitted to an institution “deserves” to be there because of her or his own accomplishments. It also implies that standards of merit can be objective, narrowly defined, and consistent” (Park and Liu, 2014: 42). Implementation of post-racial and meritocratic ideologies place the burden of dealing with both

institutional and interpersonal discrimination on people of color because they must navigate spaces in which they are not perceived as meritorious, often defending their right to be at such institutions, while also being constrained in their ability to talk about the discrimination they experience because of the prevailing attitude that ability and work ethic matter, not race.

In his 1991 article on anti-black discrimination in public places, Feagin (1991) defined discrimination as ““actions or practices carried out by members of dominant racial or ethnic groups that have a differential and negative impact on members of subordinate racial and ethnic groups.”” Anti-black discrimination, he noted, happens in both blatant and subtle forms (Feagin 102). Twenty-five years after Feagin’s seminal article, anti-black discrimination continues to be prevalent, even as we have entered what some (whites and Blacks alike) have called a post-racial era signified by both the election of America’s first African American president, as well as an ever-growing debate about the relevance of race-based affirmative action in institutions such as colleges and universities (Teasley and Ikard, 2010). Moreover, while there exists, even if only on the surface, a consensus that a post-racial era has taken shape in the United States, there remains increasingly professional and professionalizing spaces that offer fewer “protected sites” – sites where the probability of people of color experiencing discrimination is low (ex. friendship settings) - as aspects of public and private life become intermingled (p. 102). Further, as the professional and personal become more intermingled, not only are people of color faced with having to negotiate “unprotected sites” – sites where the probability of discrimination is higher (ex. the workplace where people of color have contact with familiars and unfamiliar) – they must also renegotiate relationships that form in such contexts.

In this paper, I work to unpack some of the ways in which such interactions have evolved and are fostered in contemporary American society. I focus on graduate programs as an

important, yet often overlooked, site of everyday interaction where forms of daily yet insidious racism occur between actors who share both professional and, because of the exclusionary nature of contemporary graduate study, intimate ties with each other. What role does the institution/profession play in producing/reproducing these kinds of outcomes? How do microaggressions change the course of relationships? How do microaggressions coming in a group of similar experiences add up to shape people's personal and professional trajectories? In the sections that follow, I argue that what have been traditionally referred to as microaggressions take shape in particular forms, and especially in environments that foster ideals of post-racialism and meritocracy in that the forms that microaggressions take are influenced by post-racial thinking which is a key feature of racial oppression in the 21st century.

I hope to add to an ever-growing body of literature in social psychology and critical race studies that have worked toward providing a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which changing and prevailing forms of racism have psychological, as well as social and professional consequences for people of color navigating institutions such as higher education and the workforce. Additionally, through systematic study of interactions between graduates and professionals of color and whites in graduate programs, we can gain further insight into how microaggressions function in several capacities in training and teaching, the arrangements of social engagement, and how the movement from one role to another in such an institutional setting can mediate and exacerbate the outsider-within status that many graduates of color experience.

Racial Incorporation of Blacks in Higher Education

In 1903, when W.E.B Dubois named the colorline as the problem of the twentieth century in, "The Souls of Black Folk," American political and social institutions were decidedly segregated. Despite having earned both his masters (1891) and doctoral (1895) degrees at the prestigious Harvard University, W.E.B Dubois experienced isolation, indifference, and blatant racism by his white colleagues and as a result of the political and social policies of that time: "While Harvard was his fantasy place to study, he couldn't even live in the dorms" (Gates Jr., 21 Oct 2011: The Harvard Crimson). "The white students did not accept him into their circles and social clubs...[However, having built a strong support network of Black scholars during his time at Fisk], [h]is sensitivity continued to guide him in steering clear of situations that might have resulted in unpleasantness" (Anderson, 1996: xii). Though DuBois remained on the margins of academia throughout his career, his study of Blacks in Philadelphia published in 1899 (The Philadelphia Negro) and his naming of the racial problem of American society in Souls (1903) would both be important influential works in shaping political and social discourse around the problem of racism in America. Scholars and activists alike used his work as a mobilizing tool for movements that would spark major political and social change leading to major racial incorporation projects in American institutions (Anderson, 2011).

The mid to late 1960s, which saw the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, was characterized by massive protests and movements across American college campuses against war, racism, and sexism: "It was in this context that the federal government passed far-reaching legislation that made black people full citizens while targeting to reform racially segregated workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and universities. These reforms, coupled with a prolonged period of economic expansion, set the stage for the historic period of racial integration

and incorporation, including the subsequent growth of the black middle class, which is now the largest in American history” (Anderson, 2015 p. 10). Indeed, this period in American history not only saw economic expansion but also prompted colleges to respond with programs and departments dedicated to African/African American and Latino/a studies, Women’s and Gender studies, and an increase in the hiring of faculty of color and women (Hall 2000). The predominating belief was that with the incorporation of people historically on the margins into largely white male-dominated institutions, America could correct its history of sexist, racist oppression. Blacks, in particular, would be given equal opportunity to compete for both the material and social gains that had previously been reserved for middle-class whites. Racial incorporation or -- the integration of Blacks into America’s institutions — would mark the end of the colorline legally but would begin a new era of racist practices and policies characterized by ideas of meritocracy and colorblind racism.

Colorblind Racism and Ideas of Meritocracy in American Institutions

Bonilla-Silva (2010) describes colorblind racism as an ideology that emerged as a response to massive social and political changes in the 1960s. Toward the end of the 1960s, colorblind racism became the dominant ideology whites used to explain “contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (p. 2). He describes four central frames of colorblind racism that occur in everyday interaction: (1) abstract liberalism which involves utilizing ideas of political liberalism such as “equal opportunity” and ideas of economic liberalism such as individualism and choice, (2) naturalization - the process of explaining away racial phenomena as natural occurrences, (3) cultural racism - relying on culturally based arguments to explain the standing of marginalized racial groups, and (4)

minimization of racism which suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor that affects a person of color's life chances. He argues that this frame involves regarding discrimination as "all-out" or overt racist behavior (Bonilla-Silva 2010: Pp. 28-30). Used together, the frames of colorblind racism keep whites from having to face the realities of racism in American society. In particular, whites' use of abstract liberalism heavily relies on the minimization of racism which leads to the use of cultural explanations (cultural racism) that utilize stereotypes and the pathologization of racially marginalized groups that serve as the basis for arguments such as lack of work ethic, lack of education, family disorganization, etc. as explanations for the social and economic standing of people of color rather than systemic racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010: p. 47-48). Such stereotypes, despite the enormous amount of work done by predominantly white institutions and individual white people to treat race as a nonfactor, are still used as tools to keep racially subordinated groups in their place in the workplace and in educational settings.

Patricia Hill-Collins (2005) describes the features of what she refers to as the "new racism" and distinguishes its features from the old racism - linking the manifestations of individual acts of everyday indignities based on race (micro aggressions) and the practice of colorblindness to the institutional contexts on which they are created and maintained. Specifically, Collins (2005) describes three main ways in which the new racism is new. First, due to patterns of corporate organization in the *global* economy, wealth and poverty continue to be racialized. Second, local, regional, and national governments no longer have the degree of power they used to have in shaping racial policies in that racial inequality can occur that does not appear to be regulated by the state to some degree. The second feature of the new racism is especially important because it speaks to the ways in which systems of inequality are held in

place even after the legality of them have been struck down by governmental bodies (Collins cites continued racial segregation in the US as an example). Finally, the new racism relies more on mass media, and their manipulation of the idea that racism no longer exists (post racialism). Mass media actively undermines antiracist protests and commentary on the persistence of racism in American society through the dissemination of archetypes of people of color that uphold stereotypes that, subtly and overtly, legitimate the continued oppression of people of color (Hill-Collins 2005: p. 54). The “new racism” reflects the relationship between the new and the old racism through, "in some cases the continuation of longstanding practices of racial rule, and in other cases, the development of something original” (p. 55).

Collins asserts that under the new racism, colorblind ideology operates not only in relationship with ideas of meritocracy — a system based on an individual’s talents and abilities rather than economic status, race, etc. — but that meritocracy itself is a function of colorblind ideology in American institutions:

"Under the color-blind ideology of the new racism, Blackness must be seen as evidence for the alleged colorblindness that seemingly characterizes contemporary economic opportunity. A meritocracy requires evidence that racial discrimination has been eliminated. The total absence of Black people would signal the failure of colorblindness. At the same time that Blackness must be visible, it also must be contained and/or denuded of all meaning that threatens elites” (Collins 2005: p. 178).

In other words, colorblind ideology has helped produce the use of a seemingly unbiased system on which to admit and exclude, all while exploiting the presence of Black bodies in white spaces. Without Black bodies as evidence that these institutions operate without regard to race, colorblind ideology, an ideal that first came to define American institutions

toward the end of the 1960s, would fail. Hence, the shift toward the push for inclusion of diverse bodies in predominantly white spaces including educational institutions and the paid labor market.

In his essay on the experience of the Black graduate student at elite white universities, Davidson (1998[1970]) observes:

"Although they [Black graduates] enter the institution of higher learning already sensitized to racism, they are told to believe that no racism is found in those alleged bastions of liberalism known as colleges and universities. Yet they do find that there is racism, rampant racism, which is not at all mitigated by virtue of being covert rather than overt. That it is rampant and subtle makes it all the more insidious to the Black student" (p. 27).

He notes that *covert racism* — a term coined by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in 1967 to describe the way in which racism had become institutionalized (now often referred to as institutionalized racism) — is less identifiable in regard to specific acts but relies on the active and pervasive function of anti-Black attitudes and practices permeating the society on the individual and the institutional level (p. 27). Moreover, Davidson (1998 [1970]) asserts that the difficulty of “proving” that an individual is racist in the white university, “reflects the insidious nature of “civility” and “tact” in the American way” (p. 28). Civility, as Tracey Owen Patton (2004) notes, is important to the reproduction and maintenance of colorblind/covert/inferential racism for two reasons. First, there are both important political and social implications for maintaining civility (the preservation of the dominant racial order being the main implication discussed by previous authors in this section). Secondly, "to act with civility is also a moral issue, not just a matter of habit or convention: "it is morally better to be civil than to be uncivil"" (p. 65).

The end of the Jim Crow era and the massive racial incorporation project that redefined America in terms of race in the 1960s-70s was not just about doing away with fundamentally racist legislation and practices in American institutions but a move toward a new shift in behavior for American citizens; a kind of nationalist rhetoric of shared pride in American values, defined by how well Americans treated each other took shape during this time, as well. So, to act with civility, to practice racial tolerance, became a part of the narrative of what it meant to be American. Patton (2004) goes on to define what she refers to as hegemonic civility, a problematic form of civility that restates the problem that Davidson (1998 [1970]) first identified in 1970 with the difficulty of proving racism in the white university: “Hegemonic civility refers to normalized or naturalized behavior— appropriate behavior — even as the action can be uncivil or even silencing in order to uphold the hegemonic order. This is different from civility that supports a common good for inclusive collectivity. Hegemonic civility is an organized process which results in suppressing or silencing any opposition, in favor of the status quo” (p. 65). Patton (2004) notes that in the university setting, calls for civility can be interpreted as a strategy imposed by dominant groups to silence those who challenge the status quo and that civility in its execution, “may also serve to mask very real differences in power relations...civility may perpetuate servitude” (1. See McKerrow 2001 also) (p. 68).

Microaggressions in the Context of Institutional Racism and Colorblind Ideology

Racism is not just a set of policies that separate groups of people or incidences of name-calling. At the root of racist ideology is the devaluation, policing, and exploitation of particular bodies and bodies have and continue to be sites of social and political struggle. Racism, in all of its forms, is an embodied phenomenon. This is especially the case for

those who experience racial injury. Goffman (1963) examines work done on stigma which he conceptualizes as referring to "an attribute that is deeply discrediting... a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype" (p. 3-4). He describes three types of stigma: (1) abominations of the body - referring to various physical deformities, (2) blemishes of individual character - refers to perceptions of weak will, "domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty." This is inferred based on a known history of such behavior. Mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction are just some examples of this kind of stigma, (3) the tribal stigma of race, nation, religion. Goffman refers to this form of stigma as the kind that is "transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family" (p. 4). Those who do not deviate negatively from the norm or particular expectations, then, construct attitudes aimed at those with stigmas. The attitudes and assumptions formed by "normals" or the dominant group are used to justify various acts of discrimination that effectively reduce the life chances of the stigmatized individual. Stigma-theories (or, cultural explanations as Bonilla-Silva (2010) points to in his formulation of colorblind racism) are created to explain the stigmatized person's inferiority and account for the danger he/she represents, sometimes rationalizing animosity based on differences (Goffman 1963: p. 5). People of color are then saddled with two kinds of stigma.

First, the stigma of race which overwhelmingly is visible on the body (there are cases of racial passing but that will not be discussed here). Then, there is the stigma of blemishes of character (or culture). Individual Blacks, for instance, are assumed to possess the negative qualities that are assigned to their racial group that are often perpetuated in mass media. The two types of stigma converge to explain the social and political position of Blacks in American society. Assigned qualities, such as inferior intelligence, dangerous/violent/animalistic, and

hyper-sexual were used to explain both differences in physical appearance (which became the basis for arguments of race as having biological origin) as well as perceived differences in character and culture. These controlling images¹ are based on archetypes created during the era of chattel slavery that were used as justification for the treatment of enslaved Africans, were disseminated and used to justify the Jim Crow era shortly after the abolishment of slavery, and continue to be used as explanations for why Blacks remain underrepresented in institutions such as higher education and paid labor markets and over-represented in other institutions such as the prison industrial complex and ghettos (see Collins 2005: p. 57).

Anderson (2014) also discusses the embodied experience of racism when Blacks encounter predominantly white spaces:

"When the anonymous black person enters the white space, others there immediately try to make sense of him or her—to figure out “who that is,” or to gain a sense of the nature of the person’s business and whether they need to be concerned. In the absence of routine social contact between blacks and whites, stereotypes can rule perceptions, creating a situation that estranges blacks. In these circumstances, almost any unknown black person can experience social distance, especially a young black male—not because of his merit as a person but because of the color of his skin and what black skin has come to mean as others in the white space associate it with the iconic ghetto” (Anderson 2014: p. 13).

In this context, Anderson highlights the anonymity of the Black person being policed in the white space. But what about when the Black people aren’t anonymous to the white people who police and degrade them? As we will see later in the paper, when indignities happen between parties that are known to each other, making sense of what has happened and maintaining a dignified self becomes much more difficult.

Observing the historical shift both in American racial politics and the interactions of

¹Collins (2005) defines controlling images as, “the gender-specific depiction of people of African descent within Western scholarship and popular culture. The terms representations and stereotypes also describe this phenomenon” (p. 350).

Blacks and whites in newly integrated spaces, psychiatrist, Chester M. Pierce, coined the term *racial microaggressions* in the 1970s to describe the daily acts of racism that Blacks experienced in their interactions with whites in work and educational settings. He described these interactions as put-downs or insults made toward members of a marginalized/minority group, in this case, Blacks, by whites. For him, racial microaggressions were a psychological phenomenon whose properties were, “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal...” and were manifestations of beliefs about racial minorities as holding an inferior status. These put-downs, he argued, were harmless as isolated or singularly occurring events; the damaging impacts of microaggressions were the result of long-term exposure to them (Soloranzo 2000: Pp. 60). Stated another way, microaggressions were powerful because they occurred daily and were often subtle, ambiguous racial slights toward people of color. While social policy of the time could force integration, it could not as easily change the belief systems that were the result of a history of racial oppression.

A number of scholars in the fields of psychology and social psychology have since published extensively on the pervasiveness and psychologically damaging aspects of microaggressions. Among the most prominent, Derald Wing Sue (2010) in his work on microaggressions in institutional settings, expanded the definition of microaggressions into three interrelated categories that attempted to better explain how microaggressions operate: 1) *microassaults* – described as conscious and intentional actions such as racial epithets, symbols, and so on, 2) *microinsults* – characterized as both verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness, racial insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity, and 3) *microinvalidations* – defined as communications that subtly exclude, negate, or nullify the feelings or experiential reality of a person of color (p. 274). When considered together, these

interrelated categories of microaggressions, he argues, are not always unconscious and ambiguous but can sometimes be conscious with clear intent, can be both verbal and nonverbal, and they can happen at the hands of groups and individuals who hold and express divisive attitudes toward people of color (and other marginalized groups) as well as well-intentioned members of the dominant group (s). Moreover, while they may not be as explicit as the blatant racism of Jim Crow legislation in the US during the early to mid 1900s, they can (and usually do) have the same impact - sending messages of inferiority and drawing boundaries based on race and other categories of difference deeper into the fabric of everyday interaction in social institutions.

Sue (2010) argues that the most common forms of racial microaggressions that occur within institutional settings are microinsults and microinvalidations. Unlike microassaults, these daily indignities are usually subtle and frequent. Sue argues these categories of microaggressions are more complex because even, “while the person may feel insulted, she is not sure exactly why, and the perpetrator doesn’t acknowledge that anything has happened because he is not aware that he has been offensive” (DeAngelis, 2009: 3). This often leads to frustration and confusion. Most alarming, however, is that psychologists have found that microaggressions have been shown to produce significant psychological consequences for those who experience them including job and academic performance. Loss of interests, reduced productivity, strained relationships with peers and coworkers are just some of the short-term consequences for those who experience microaggressions (DeAngelis, 2009). Long-term outcomes may include increased internalization of inferiority or what is referred to as stereotype threat, defined as: “...a social-psychological predicament that can arise from widely-known negative stereotypes about one's group. It is this: the existence of such a stereotype means that anything one does or

any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one's own eyes. We...argue that it is experienced, essentially, as a self-evaluative threat..." (Steele and Aronson: 1995: 797). Stereotype threat, argues Steele and Aronson (1995) may explain at least some of the disparities between Blacks and whites in higher education: lower test achievement, lower representation of Blacks in educational settings, and higher attrition rates among Blacks (Steele and Aronson 1995: p. 798).

In the typical American university graduate program, the site of observation for this paper, researchers have found similar patterns when observing the interactions between graduates of color and those they come into regular contact. Lopez et al. (2010) conducted a study in which they collected the life histories of graduate students of color working as teaching assistants at predominantly white universities. They wanted to know how teaching assistants responded to racial microaggressions, the consequences of microaggressions for teacher assistants' future career plans. Lopez et al. (2010) found that teaching assistants of color were seen by their students to be pushing a "particular agenda" rather than acting in accordance with the values of the program, students would subtly invalidate or undermine instructors' of color expertise by challenging their knowledge and authority. One method that was used to do this was refusal to discuss aspects of the material through defiant acts of silence and constant questioning of their instructional decisions. Such questions and challenges usually occurred in response to teaching of topics involving race and ethnicity in the course (p. 1197).

Racial incorporation, meritocracy, and colorblindness occur in collusion with one another to create a context of racial injury. Graduate programs, as will be discussed in the following sections, are sites where we can observe the conflicts that arise as institutions attempt racial

incorporation under the guise of colorblindness and ideas of meritocracy.

Methods

“People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context. The term experience helps us think through such matters as an individual child’s learning while also understanding that learning takes place with other[s] ...in a community...” - Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 2

How I came to the topic and my position

When I first arrived in Madison, I was surprised that, despite meeting several Black women at visit day festivities, I was the only Black woman in my cohort of 19 graduates in the Fall of 2013. During the first week of classes, I was welcomed as a new member of my department along with the other 18 members of my cohort. Of the 19 of us, there are 3 Asian women (2 of which are international students), 2 Hispanic males; I am the only black person. The remaining 13 are white men (9) and women (4). Out of the 19 of us, only four (to my knowledge) self-identify as working-class or poor. The following year’s cohort, while slightly bigger (22 in total) has similar race/ethnic demographics. There are no Black people in the latest cohort (FA 2015). It is also important to note that while my department is one of the largest on its campus with approximately 70 faculty members with various types of appointments, less than 15% of them are people of color. Moreover, I know of only one African American woman faculty who holds an appointment within the department.

I took an apartment on the south side of Madison in an area that has the largest number of Black and Latino residents in the city. I would later come to find my new neighborhood to be a respite from my day-to-day encounters with people at the mostly-white university. I also began, as a kind of lifeline, to keep a journal. I would make a note of events that would happen each day

that I thought were interesting or unsettling. In the fall of 2013, after choosing to pursue ethnography as a way to continue inquiries into the journeys of Black women who pursue higher education as a means to upward mobility, I began to record my experiences more systematically for an independent study. Much like my journal writings, I kept track of my daily encounters with colleagues, students, professors and other members of the university and Madison community. I utilized the field notes collected during the fall and spring of 2013-2014 academic year as the basis for a larger project in which I collected the life histories of nearly 50 past and current graduate students.

Nearly two years and almost 50 interviews later, I realized through reading field notes and journal entries that the experiences I wrote about between me and a colleague or friend often related to other events in that would later shape future interactions we would have or could explain breakdowns in communication or behaviors that, on their own, did not provide much context. I also realized that I had been writing overwhelmingly about the daily forms of disrespect and indignities that I experience as a Black woman graduate student and instructor. It made me question how much of what is referred to as microaggressions are picked out and analyzed without any consideration for the relationships they ultimately define or change in some fundamental way. I began to think about microaggressions not just as individual and independent events (which is a legitimate way of analyzing microaggressions and deserve to be studied on their own in their own right) but as telling a larger story. A story about what it means to be a raced person in a world that aims to not see race, a story about interracial professional relationships and friendships, a story that spoke to the ways that people navigated difficult situations in a world where the professional and the private have become increasingly blurred. But, it also made me stop. For a while, my professional trajectory was uncertain. I found myself

grappling with how to move forward and before long it became apparent that if I was to do what I came to Madison to do, I had to deal with this part of my experience. So, it has become the mission of this project to not only affirm those whose lives are still shaped by racism by showing that racial microaggressions happen but to also highlight the relational context in which people of color experience microaggressions and how those relationships matter, as well.

The College Town Setting

“It’s like being in a bubble,” several folks have commented. The university is a vital part of the town. Indeed, to walk around the downtown area of Madison, Wisconsin, you would think the town developed around the university, even for it; and I suppose it makes sense given that many people construct important parts of their lives around it - work, study, fun. Most housing rentals especially within 2-3 miles in any direction of downtown are occupied by people who have migrated from other parts of the state, other parts of the country, and even other parts of the world. They have come here to claim membership to this community. Cafes, restaurants, and other businesses - chains and small businesses alike, located in the downtown and east areas near the Isthmus cater to the influx of people who use them as spaces for study, work meetings, or quick places to grab a drink.

Madison and other cities and towns like it are planned so that work, study, and play are easily and conveniently accessible to those who migrate here. Residency here is usually temporary. In fact, the transient nature of college towns set them apart from other municipalities. Each year, hundreds, even thousands, of people leave college towns to relocate to other parts of the world as others move in and begin the journey of negotiating spaces, familiar and newly assigned identities, and status.

On an average weekday morning, young people on bikes and mopeds ride alongside other motorists; others wait at designated stops for metro buses that will no doubt be packed to capacity, while others walk in clusters alongside each other on the sidewalks and in the streets. The sounds of eager conversations, the hum of buses and service trucks fill the air setting a soundtrack to the chaos of masses of people navigating public spaces, bus drivers and passengers negotiate how to fit as many as possible on already overcrowded buses, and graduates and other university workers strategize about how to avoid the crowds of undergrads. The students eventually make it to their first classes; graduates and workers make it to their offices in the various buildings that align most main streets in the area.

The physical constructs of the buildings vary widely. Some buildings are newly built with the latest of technology and décor while others remain reminiscent of the time in which they were erected over half a century ago. Most of the contemporary buildings line the avenues of University Avenue, Park Street, and other main streets while many older, historic structures sit atop hills, set apart from busy streets, like monuments that speak to a legacy that holds each of us, its members, accountable to it. To be a member of a prestigious university is to commit to goals much larger than the ones we typically set for ourselves. The prestige of the university is like a living thing. Some of us wear the reputation of this place like a badge of honor, touting it out when making distinctions between our qualifications or loyalty to the community. Still for others and, in particular, for people of color, the prestige of this place, its historic structures, its legacy acts as a constant reminder of our outsider-status even as we take on the roles of students, apprentices and instructors.

Participant Observation

The fieldwork began in the fall of 2013. I utilized the bus system as a way of

familiarizing myself with the parts of the city most relevant to me; my neighborhood and the university campus. I noticed how the #44 bus was occupied by mostly Blacks and Latinos at the transfer point in my neighborhood and how it became mostly white as we neared the university campus. I recorded my experiences working with other graduate students on teaching assistant (TA) assignments, my experiences with my students, as well as others I would encounter during the day. I kept notes on my phone and would mostly record dialogue after an encounter and would write more detailed notes about my experiences when I arrived home each evening. I took field notes systematically from fall of 2013 through summer of 2014. I continued to journal and use the university and, in particular, my department as a kind of "field site" afterward for nearly two additional years. However, I began to record events that I deemed especially relevant to how I made sense of my place in my graduate program, in my relationships with others, and my experiences generally as a black woman graduate student and instructor. Between the fall of 2013- present, I estimate having collected at least 100 hundred pages of field notes.

Some of those field notes are used in this paper and while the accounts are factual, the identities of people (including myself) and organizations (within the university/program) that might be implicated in the notes have been disguised as to protect, as much as possible, the dignities of the people and organizations involved.

Interviews

Two waves of open-ended interviews were conducted in addition to participant observation. The first wave of interviews were conducted between the summer and fall of 2014 and include 26 interviews with graduate students from poor and working class backgrounds across race and ethnicity. The second wave of interviews were conducted between the summer and fall of 2015 and include 22 interviews with the same demographic. I utilized graduate

listservs as well as enlisted my network of professors and colleagues at both UW-Madison and my undergraduate institution to forward information about the research study to graduates from poor and working class communities. Responses for the first wave of interviews was immediate and overwhelming. I received more than 40 responses and interviewed a total of 26 people in the summer and fall of 2014. Of the 26 participants, approximately 10 identified as being a graduate or professional of color. Interviews averaged about 1 to 1 1/2 hours.

Like the first wave, the second wave was also met with much enthusiasm. I utilized the same networks and listservs. Participants of the study reported having shared information about the study with their networks as well as several colleagues sharing the call for participants on various social media outlets including Facebook and Twitter. The call for the second wave of interviews garnered more attention than the previous. Potential participants were provided with more information about the study once they emailed myself or my advisor. I conducted approximately 22 interviews over the course of six to eight weeks. Interviews for the second wave averaged longer than those from the first and took about 2- 2 1/2 hours. Interviews for both the first and second wave took place sometimes face-to-face if participants were in the Madison area or Chicago area. Most interviews took place via telephone as most participants lived in other parts of the country. Two interviews took place via Skype. While most participants were US born or first or second generation immigrants and had experienced at least their graduate education in the United States, one participant lived and had completed all of her education in France. Nearly half of the participants identified as people of color. Participants were only excluded if they did not identify as coming from a poor or working class community and/or had never been a graduate student. Interviews averaged about 2 to 2 1/2 hours.

The goal of each interview was to gather as much information as possible about

how participants got to graduate school. I wanted to, as much as possible, gather life histories while keeping educational attainment, especially at the graduate level, centered. I wanted to know how they experienced their graduate education, how they cultivated communities that helped them to navigate the terrain of graduate school and if there were barriers to them finding communities to which they felt they belonged. Participants were asked to describe aspects of their family life such as the type of neighborhood (aspects of rural or city life), the type of work people did, the kind of work their family members did. They were asked to describe how their parents spoke of education to them specifically whether it was emphasized in their households, what a typical day for them was like as children, what type of student they were in high school, how they came to apply for college, then later graduate school. They were also asked to compare their expectations of college and graduate school to their actual experiences. Finally, they were asked to discuss their sense of belonging to both their collegiate and professional communities as well as their familial communities².

Some of those interview transcripts from participants of color are used in this paper and while the accounts are factual, the identities of people, universities, and organizations that might be implicated in the interviews have been disguised as to protect, as much as possible, the dignities of the people, universities and organizations involved.

How the Stories are Told

Communication of how events unfold are as important to the methodological process as the events themselves. Critical race scholars have noted the importance of narrative as a useful tool for challenging hegemony. Forms of narrative such as counter-storytelling can be used as a, “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” including

² See Appendix for generic interview schedule.

people of color, women, gays, and the poor (Soloranzo & Yosso 2002: p. 26). Chase (2005) asserts that contemporary narrative inquiry can be characterized as “amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods — all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (p. 651).

“A narrative may be oral or written and may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a naturally occurring conversation. In any of these situations, a narrative may be (a) a short topical story about a particular event and specific characters such as an encounter with a friend, boss, or doctor; (b) an extended story about a significant aspect of one’s life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, an illness, a trauma, or participation in a war or social movement; or (c) a narrative of one’s entire life, from birth to the present” (Chase 2005: p. 652).

Narratives, while told from the perspective of one party, has the ability to highlight most effectively for the reader, the social context in which the individual experiences the event in question. What follows are accounts written from the perspectives of the people who lived them, the sense they make of those events after the fact, and my attempt to lend some historical, sociological context to them.

Findings

Drawing on data from the experiences of graduate students of color at majority white universities, the following sections make three interventions into the work on microaggressions:

1) personal and professional relationships overlap in academia to make the consequences of microaggressions particularly damaging psychologically, socially, and professionally, which I call *the small town effect*, 2) microaggressions in graduate school take three forms - between colleagues/friends, between faculty and graduates of color, between graduates of color acting in the capacity of teaching assistants and their students; 3) microaggressions have long-term impacts microaggressions on the self, ongoing personal and professional relationships and

career trajectories 4) grad students rely on 5 strategies to survive and overcome them: communities of choice, evasion, assimilation, resistance, termination, and the possible implications of these strategies for graduates' of color professionalization. Finally, I discuss recent and past institutional attempts to remedy the occurrence of microaggressions by graduate students and the possible implications of such attempts.

The Small-Town Effect

When we think of small towns, we often imagine communities similar to that of Stars Hollow, a fictional town depicted in the popular series *Gilmore Girls*, in which life moves at a slower pace than that of large cities, relationship ties between community members are more significant, communities where we can leave our front doors unlocked, emphases on local traditions and history, local economies that depend on one or a few main industries, and higher and more intimate levels of engagement by community members in local politics and social life. Indeed, these characteristics are highlighted as attractive aspects of small town living and many people from small towns or those who migrate to them, often cite, both in my interviews with grads from poor and working class communities and in popular media, one or more of these characteristics as being pull-factors in their seeking and/or valuing their own membership.

Just as there are attractive aspects to small town life, there are aspects to small town life that can be unpleasant, even threatening. When something happens that harms members of the community – people can have difficulty trusting each other, when rumors or second hand talk gets back to the person being discussed, when small towns are forced to allow people who would not necessarily be members otherwise, become members (here we can think about forced integration of workplaces, schools, Affirmative Action that forced institutions to not make

admissions or hiring decisions based on racialized belief systems), when the institution itself is either economically suffering or faces growing scrutiny for their lack of racial/ethnic, class diversity and so is forced to admit, coalesce, and compete with others exposing the institution and its members to outsiders. Living, collaborating, competing in such proximity to one another means that when trouble (racism – either overt or covert – by members and/or the institution) does occur, it is much harder to retreat because the town still obligates you, your membership hinges on your ability to act in the roles assigned to you. In this way, everyone has a kind of conditional status in communities like graduate school. Those who carry a stigma burden, however, find their membership to always be at risk in a place where they are historically, demographically, and culturally on the margins.

I use the metaphor of the small town to situate the significance of the relationships that form in the context of graduate life, to emphasize the significance of the opinions, belief systems, attitudes and actions of the towns people (graduates, faculty, admin, students and other community members), and to illustrate how these belief systems, attitudes, and actions come together when towns people take on multiple roles in the community and in relationship to each other - friend and colleague, teaching assistants/lecturers and fellow students in a classroom, committee members and then drinking buddies, to the person who is your emergency contact on a medical form. Everyone plays a role, commonly several roles; helping to keep the engine that is that small town going - the engine being the values and everyday practices (from the seemingly dull to the especially important) that sustain the community.

Graduate programs are key sites of microaggressions for three reasons, together comprising what I am calling *the small-town effect*:

- First, the cohort system and the isolation individuals experience in graduate programs

means that there are very few students of color from which to draw a community of care and support.

- Second, graduate programs involve small groups of people who for better or worse will collaborate together as students, teaching assistants, research assistants, and later as colleagues in the field for many years, meaning that once a microaggression has been committed, the people involved will likely spend concerted time together for many future years, and have great difficulty avoiding each other.
- Third, the size and structure of graduate programs means that ties between graduates are both personal and professional: they are intimates, colleagues, co-teachers, committee members and competitors; indeed, many of the worst microaggressions exist at the nexus between the personal and the professional.

As a graduate student, regardless of the burden you may carry, your membership requires you to do more than take classes, teach, and do research. Indeed, a great deal of professionalization happens *outside* of these functions. Most professionalization is obtained during social events such as conferences, research presentations, committee and other service work (and in many ways, the committee and other service work is compulsory – meaning, it is not just suggested but expected that graduates will participate in some form or another, committee work or volunteer their time during peak moments for their respective departments (hosting prospective graduates, sitting on welcoming committees, or participating in gatherings aimed at creating a community atmosphere for new cohorts are just some examples), departmental functions, through advisor/advisee and mentor relationships, and communities and events designed for students to gain more professionalization (writing groups, preliminary exam study groups, reading groups etc. allow for graduates to collaborate sometimes across cohorts, subfields, or departments and

affords those that participate the opportunity to network and form relationships informally which is encouraged).

While people of color at the undergraduate and graduate level both experience marginalization, graduates of color are presented with a distinct challenge in comparison to undergraduates due to the differences in size of the communities in which they participate. For instance, consider that in 2015-2016³, the total undergraduate population at UW-Madison was 29,580 with African Americans making up a little less than 5% (or 616) of the undergrad population, while the total graduate population was 9,247 with African Americans making up a little over 2% (or 221) of the graduate population. More importantly, there is a marked difference in status between undergraduates and graduates. Graduates, because of their roles as teaching/research assistants, committee members, and students, find themselves transitioning from one role to the next, daily.

College, in some respects, is the big city of academia: undergraduates find many opportunities for supportive communities as well as opportunities for collective resistance. Compared to other parts of academic life, college student life involves a relatively large population of students, classes, and departments to choose from. By contrast, graduate programs are like small towns, in which the pool of friends, mentors, and classes are limited, it becomes important to know everyone and create, if only on the surface, a collegial community, and to sell one's self as a legitimate member, particularly for those who hold subordinated status. All these aspects become vital in day-to-day negotiations in a graduate program for networking, classroom dynamics both as a graduate student and instructor, and professionalization opportunities.

³ See Data Digest 2015-2016, UW-Madison, Academic Planning & Institutional Research, Office of the Provost, (full citation located in references section on pg. 60 of this document).

Marginalization within the graduate program then, I argue has even greater consequences for people of color because it not only has the consequence of negatively impacting the interactions that graduates of color are likely to experience with their peers, faculty, and other members of the university community, because of the relative smallness and structure of the average program, it makes difficult interactions nearly impossible to avoid and once they do happen, participants of those interactions must figure out a way to maintain face as a legitimate member of the community, colleague/student, and professional.⁴

Levels of Interaction

Graduate culture has both generalizable features – those that we see in nearly all professional and professionalizing spaces such as a set of values that govern behavior, provide advice, and is a space where both practical and theoretical knowledge is formed (Hughes, 1963: p. 655-66). It has some unique features, as well – the ways in which graduate education is organized means that professional ties, friendship ties, training and practice happen in a bubble with relatively small groups of people through the use of cohort systems and relatively small departments.

Participant observation in the graduate setting revealed at least three levels of interaction that are significant to every graduate student:

1. Professional/semi-professional spaces – spaces such as conferences, informal job talks, meetings, and other events that are seen as sites of networking, professionalization. It is here where the term colleague can be used fairly loosely. These spaces allow for interaction with colleagues that may or may not be within a person's cohort, program, or university. They are often promoted as both ideal spaces for networking across

⁴ See Erving Goffman's *On Face-Work Psychiatry*, 1955; 18, 3; ProQuest pg. 213.

departments, programs, and sometimes disciplines.

2. The classroom (both undergraduate and graduate) – while the classroom can be considered a professional/semi-professional space, I like to think of it as its own domain. The classroom is a space where graduates generally are likely to:
 - experience a clear distinction of the roles they play as authority figures in relation to their students and as someone without authority in relation to professors both as students and as workers,

Graduates who hold marginal status specifically are more likely to:

 - grapple with being in a position of authority, have their authority and legitimacy questioned by their students and their competency questioned/judged by their colleagues

3. Friendships and other nonprofessional connections – these are the relationships that form and may develop over time as a result of cohort systems, meeting at professional conferences and informal talks, shared teaching assignments, and attending departmental functions.

These three levels of interaction intersect with one another at various points in the graduate career and are sometimes difficult to distinguish from one another. For instance, when in professional/semi-professional spaces, one is expected to be able to differentiate, understand, and respond professionally to the criticism of someone who is both a peer in the classroom, a workmate in the meeting, and a friend/acquaintance at the local bar. For people who find themselves on the receiving end of microaggressions, it is no wonder that they question themselves, feel guilt, and experience confusion when such forms of disrespect occur.

Louise’s Story: Micro-aggressions at the nexus between intimate and professional relationships

What follows is a story about a form of microaggression that takes place frequently in professional spaces and in educational settings – the use of bodies of color by predominantly white spaces to symbolically communicate institutional investment in diversity. Louise’s story, however, places such microaggressions in the context of friendship/camaraderie. Through her story, we can see the difficulty that arises for people of color in forming intimate bonds and maintaining professional relationships with white people in small, predominantly white, graduate communities:

Louise is a first-generation college student and an African American woman. She met Anne the way many graduate students meet -- at a departmental function. As a new graduate to the department, Louise was shuffled from one graduate function to another during her first semester, meeting other graduates and faculty, listening to speakers as they doled out advice about how to succeed in graduate school, and attending teaching assistant workshops. Anna, an older graduate in the program, had welcomed Louise and offered to act as a kind of guide if she needed help. Anne is a working-class white woman; Louise is a working-class woman of color. They bonded over shared experience of being working class graduates. Louise and Anne saw each other often and talked casually but sincerely about their lived experiences. The spring semester rolled around and Louise and Anne would often attend the same department function. She and Anne became friends.

It was nearing the start of Louise’s second year in her graduate program, and similar to her first year, Louise was thrust into welcome events for new students, TA trainings, class prep, and teaching. During the first week of the semester, she received an email from Anna, asking her to participate in an event to address diversity issues for an organization where she volunteered:

"I'm going to be frank - our most active black woman member graduated last spring. I am really sad and ashamed about how white our [organization] is. I have been pushing to reach out to grad students of color and the multicultural graduate community event is super important. I am hoping that you'll come with me to help convey the message that the organization is for ALL students, and that we want to be on the front lines of fighting white supremacy on our campus."

Anne emphasized, again, her disappointment that the organization she represented was predominantly white and hoped that Louise's presence at the event would convey that the group cared about racial diversity. She concluded her email to Louise with, *"But I need you."* Louise read the email several times before forwarding it to someone she trusted who advised her not to respond to Anne.

Analysis:

Anne's request, on one hand, had a formality to it that the women rarely used in conversation with each other. In this way, it was evident to Louise that the request was from a representative of an organization, not a friend. On the other hand, Anne was able to use the trust she had gained with Louise to request her help in solving her organization's diversity problem. The intimacy formed between the two women over time allowed Anne to *"be frank"* about what she was requesting from Louise, even admitting that she would not have asked had the one active Black woman member of the organization not recently graduated. In admitting this, Anne made it clear to Louise that she was not only using her racial status to benefit Anne's organization, it was clear that she did not see anything wrong with such exploitation.

In her discussion of intimate sabotage, Jennifer Lisa Vest (2013) notes that:

"Intimate sabotage occurs when someone who has gained your trust, uses your trust to engage in acts of career sabotage against you. In the same way that intimate sexual and physical abuse tends to leave longer lasting scars than abuse by strangers, intimate relationships of sabotage feel more hurtful than the sabotage of disinterested racists and sexists. The betrayal of allies leads to self-doubt and second-guessing. This is especially the case when we assume that allies who share axes

of oppression (gender, sexuality, class, race, etc.) with us can be trusted because they too know what oppression is” (pg. 505).

In Anne’s case, she may not have meant to intentionally harm Louise or to place her in a difficult situation, but the harm was done, nonetheless. Tokenism, or ““the policy of making only a perfunctory effort or symbolic gesture toward the accomplishment of a goal, such as racial integration; . . . the practice of hiring or appointing a token number of people from underrepresented groups in order to deflect criticism or comply with affirmative action rules” (*American Heritage Dictionary* 2000, “Tokenism”)” (Niemann 2012: p. 449). Tokenism has become a norm in professional settings so much so that it is not uncommon for universities to Photoshop people of color into recruitment materials,⁵ or for graduate programs to use people of color at events similar to the event Louise was invited to, or for programs to utilize people of color to sell the department as diverse and welcoming to prospective students. In such a context, it is not surprising that when operating within such institutional settings, members of the dominant group not only make such requests but may not readily recognize them as being harmful. Or, if they do recognize them as being inappropriate, may still be able to subvert the accusation of being or acting racist because of the routine practice of using people of color as symbols in the institution justified by the postracial rhetoric that pervade such spaces.

Asking a Black friend to serve as a racial token for an organization is an act of intimate sabotage. We often do not think about such incidents as existing between people who are intimates (friends in this instance, but can extend to other intimate relationships). After all, how can people who share lived experiences, bond over shared axes of marginalization (both Anne and Louise are women from working class/poor communities) or other commonalities act in

⁵ See the example of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and Diallo Shabazz: (<http://www.npr.org/2013/12/29/257765543/a-campus-more-colorful-than-reality-beware-that-college-brochure>), (<http://archive.jsonline.com/blogs/news/237991911.html>).

ways that are racist to their friends of color? There is a common belief among progressive professionals, especially those who study racism, that racism exists out-there-somewhere, rather than within the boundaries of their own personal and professional existence. The degree to which we are committed to believing that the cure-all to racism is to become friends or be friendly is further evidenced by the lack of focus given to how racism manifests in intimate relationships – the degree to which interracial bonds often minimize race similarly to the institutions under which they form.

Moments after reading Anne's email, Louise knew that something between her and Anne had shifted. She avoided talking to Anne about what she understood to be a request for her to perform Blackface for Anne's organization. She expressed later that she was both angry and hurt, avoidant yet confrontational. She wanted to confront what had happened and how she had been made to feel but did not want to hurt someone who she had trusted. More importantly, she didn't want to be further marginalized in her department.

Louise recounted the relationship that had been cultivated between the two women and her disappointment that after having sat, "on more than one occasion, [and] talked about the issues that I was having with colleagues in the program, the work that needed to be done to make this a program and university that truly embraced diversity," Anne would exploit their friendship by requesting to use Louise's blackness to promote her organization. Louise and Anne did not speak again for nearly a year (how the two women managed to avoid each other, the negotiations that Louise would later make about the spaces and communities she would participate in, and the consequences of those choices she was compelled to make will be discussed later in the paper).

Eventually, Louise and Anne saw each other in the hallway. By that point, others knew

about the incident and Anne knew of Louise's understanding of what had happened. Louise did not know of Anne's. Anne had not attempted to contact Louise to talk about the incident in the year since it had happened. Louise thought that maybe Anne didn't know what to say, either. Louise walked over to her and the two women spoke. They hugged and swore to email each other soon to catch up. They have had at least two conversations since. But they haven't spoken about what happened. According to Louise, "We avoid talking about it. Our friendship, our relationship as colleagues won't go back to what it was. I don't think I trust anything she might have to say about what happened."

Maria's Story: Micro-aggressions and Perceptions of the Self

What follows is a story about the heavy burden of racial stigma. Maria, a first-generation, non-traditional student and second-generation Latina woman, discusses being frequently invalidated in her interactions with her colleagues. While they refuse her offers to share knowledge of the program and the subject matter, they often rely on her to teach them about historically subordinated groups. Below, Maria contemplates her initial graduate school experience and recalls her relationship with her colleagues and program more generally:

"I did not think about the social aspects of graduate school. When I came for visit day, I did not see any people of color. I thought they were just having a particularly white day. I asked where the Mexican people were and was told that all of the Mexicans were in the next town over."

But she felt the people she met were nice, very welcoming. The program itself pursued her rather aggressively. She was invited to apply and was offered a three-year research fellowship. The people she met in the program seemed, at least at first, to really be invested in her as a scholar. But after the start of her first year, Maria came to feel as though, "the only reason I was there is because they wanted to add more diversity to their campus."

Maria came to feel this way after a) realizing that the campus was not having a particularly white day when she came to visit but was indeed a very white campus and b) after a series of incidents, some of which she could not bring herself to talk about. Remembering an incident that took place between her and a faculty member at a departmental function, she paused seemingly to brace herself and noted, “I remember feeling particularly upset and leaving afterward...[but] I try to leave all that behind. Otherwise, I’ll go crazy.”

Maria found the research she did on fellowship exciting. But as she began to have more interactions with colleagues, recalling, offering help to incoming graduates or to share resources with colleagues, she realized that “being a person who offers help is not well received.”

“I feel like what I have to offer isn’t valued. So, why would anybody want my help? I’m not talking about offering help to students of color because there are none. I mean to white students. It’s not valued unless, they’re looking to learn something about a minority student. Then, I’ve got the goods. I don’t have anything they want unless it’s specifically about an urban experience or specifically Latina experience or anything to do with class.”

“I was very open about my working-class background. I think I may have outed myself a little too much and now I think the people (not everybody) generally think, “Oh well, she’s had a subpar educational experience. So, there’s nothing she can possibly contribute unless we’re studying undocumented students or something.” Then, I got it. They’ll come to me because, of course, I know about that.”

Maria decided after completing only one year of her three-year research fellowship, to give it up, in favor of managing a diversity center on campus. There she can get professional experience managing a center and act as a support system for under-represented racial minority undergraduate students while also finding some respite from what she refers to as a very strong white culture:

“I can sympathize with them when they talk about feeling like the only one and being asked to represent their culture in the classroom setting. I get a lot out of just being around them.” She often

refers to her job working with students of color as a lifeline.

Analysis:

Maria's experience of marginalization as a Latina woman in a predominantly white department is in keeping with reports from other scholars. In her essay, "*Telling Our Stories, Naming Ourselves: The Lost Maria in the Academy*", Christina Gomez (2012) writes of her experiences on the job market and later of her academic career:

"Oddly, my research was little discussed during my interviews, which puzzled me, and in some cases I wondered if my file had been thoroughly reviewed. Was this normal? If I were not a minority woman, would the interview be any different? Was I being recruited for my research and what I could bring as a scholar, or was I recruited because I was Latina? The one question that caused me the greatest concern was asked by a senior scholar: "I notice your name is spelled with an 'h.'? Why is that?""

Gomez (2013) goes on to explain what she is expected to know or have expertise about in the eyes of her colleagues: "I am often expected to write about Latino/a topics and nothing else. My other identities and expertise are vanished from the page. I become one-dimensional" (p. 58-59).

Vest (2013) also observes this treatment of women of color in the academy when interacting with colleagues and other community members,

"Women of Color Faculty [and graduates] find themselves in the bizarre position of having no epistemic credibility. What they say they know is always open to doubt and questioning. What they claim is real is undermined by their lack of epistemic authority to know. They are not deemed "knowers." Their access to knowledge is marred somehow by their race and gender as if these aspects of themselves create blindfolds, separating them from the true nature of things. This phenomenon is similar to what is described as microinvalidations, defined as ""characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color"" (p. 506).

Maria often finds herself thinking about and even offering other possible explanations for her experiences with the people in her program. She has contended with the idea that she

“revealed” too much about herself when becoming acquainted with people in her program. She has also described it as just being, “. . .cultural differences. Like, for instance, people greet each other differently here. . . It’s not bad. It’s just different.” Toward the end of her explanations, however, she conceded,

“I think a lot about how I feel in the program but I can’t always analyze it. I don’t know why. It’s just a feeling. Sometimes, you have to trust your feelings, when something is just not right.”

Renee’s Story: The relationship between graduates of color and their students

What follows is an account of what Renee, a Black woman graduate student, experiences with her students in her capacity as a teaching assistant in a predominantly white classroom setting. Renee is a Black woman graduate student teaching a course on race and ethnicity. The subject of the week was race and interaction. The class was having a follow-up discussion of Erving Goffman’s chapter on “ On Face-Work” and Renee asked students to consider some processes that may shape interactions. It was a discussion in which they talked about whiteness versus white privilege and forms of racism that shape how individuals see themselves in relation to others. Each class period, Renee required students to record their thoughts of the material in a journal she would give to them each class period. She encouraged students to record their thoughts about material, ask questions they may not feel comfortable with asking in class, and other comments that they have about the topic for the day.

A student, white and male, wrote the following excerpt:

“Examples of micro aggressions:

- Assuming hispanic-looking person speaks spanish and/or not English
- Thinking that a successful Black person must be extra hard working

-Assuming an Indian person is hindi and knows all about hinduism

Most microaggressions I think are not intended to be aggressive, but end up hurting and isolating people nonetheless by perpetuating and accenting stereotypes

—> *One comment I have on your teaching style, and I mean no offense by this, but you talk more than you need to. Sometimes the discussion section feels more like a lecture.*”

Renee, when reflecting on her student’s comments about her teaching style:

“I found it ironic that on a day when the discussion was about micro aggressions and how they, tend to have negative consequences for those who are the recipients of them, a student would then make a remark that served to both undermine my instruction on the topic while simultaneously silence me by expressing that I talk more than I need to. Just how much does an instructor need to talk?”

Further, while the student noted that he meant “no offense,” Renee was convinced that had she been a white man offering instruction, the student would not likely have felt as comfortable making such commentary. The double marginalization of being Black and female came to bear regularly in her interactions with her students but especially with white males. Renee, noted that, “every semester, I can count on having one of these kinds of students.” By this, she meant students who would either openly challenge her knowledge or offer pedagogical advice and other criticisms of her teaching.

Patton and Catching’s (2009) review of the literature on Black faculty in predominantly white institutions notes that, “[Black women faculty] often endure the effects of racism and sexism simultaneously (p. 714), and that:

“In the classroom, African American faculty report that their authority and knowledge is challenged by students (Bower 2002; Stanley et al. 2003; Vargas 2002). Focus group interview findings with 10 African American faculty at a large PWI indicated that White students were more ready to ‘(1) critique their classroom effectiveness, (2) challenge their authority, (3) have a lower level of respect, and (4) report their concerns and critiques to the professor or to his or her superior’ (McGowan 2000, 21). African American faculty also experience resistance from students regarding issues of diversity in the form of students’ critiquing the validity of their work (McGowan 2000), sharing their dissatisfaction on course evaluations (Bower 2002; McGowan 2000; Stanley et al. 2003; Tusmith and Reddy 2002; Vargas 2002), expressing dissent through

public venues such as the Internet or student newspapers (Stanley 2006), or utilizing silence and color-blind ideologies to resist the intellectual efforts of African American faculty (Williams and Evans-Winters 2005)” (p. 715).

After weighing the possible consequences of engaging the student, Renee wrote the following response:

“Dear Jonathan,

-When presenting new information to the class, it is worthwhile to spend time breaking down that material as to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to understand the material. As the instructor of the section, I reserve the right to do this as is necessary. I might also add that the vast majority of your time in this class is spent doing group work and receiving instruction on assignments.

-Did you have something to add or ask about today’s material? If so, you should have as you were asked and encouraged to do so throughout the discussion.

-Usually, when one precedes a comment with, “I mean no offense,” what follows after is more times than not, offensive. I strongly encourage using what you learn both in [class] and lecture (be it by group members or instructors) to better understand the topics discussed and if you have insightful comments about the material to share them with your classmates.”

The student did not respond to Renee.

Tamara’s Story: Collaborating and being Undermined by White Colleagues

What follows is Tamara’s account of working with two white colleagues on teaching assignments in her graduate program. She describes her interactions with the TAs that she works with (both white, American, one male, one female). Describing the task of coordinating weekly lesson plans she says:

“The students had taken their second exam. We all met in the supervising professor’s office to discuss grading and the lesson plan for the following week. As we discussed how to format the final exam, one of the TAs suggested, “I think that there should be questions for the final exam that are cumulative. They should say, “Throughout the course, we have discussed...”” I agreed with her and began to talk about how we need to connect specific material to larger themes and vocabulary discussed throughout the course and I may as well had been speaking another language. The other two TAs glanced at each other as if to

ask the other if they were thinking the same thing. I noticed and felt a little discouraged but finished my statement. I was often made to feel incompetent from the way the other TAs behaved. They would take over tasks and change course of action without talking to me about it. I, however, was often reminded that I needed to let them know whenever I did something differently with my students. For instance, I required my students to see the writing lab for their first paper assignment. I was told by the female TA, “Oh that’s a good idea. Next time, it would be good if we all are on the same page.” I thought to myself, “Yeah, it would.”

Tamara noticed that the white female TA would often do much of the administrative work.

While the white male TA seemed unbothered by her leading every initiative, it had the impact of subordinating Tamara who already felt alienated by her colleagues:

“From the beginning, the white female TA took up the charge of doing much of the administrative work. Everything from drafting the syllabus to writing up the student paper assignments, she completely dominated. While it was not work that I relished doing, it is work that I am capable of doing. However, she and the other TA treated me as though my contributions were unwanted and illegitimate. Like, one time we met to prepare the next paper assignment. The white female TA, as usual, took charge. The white male TA sat across from her. While, I sat at the end of the table. They got so caught up in each other’s ideas that eventually I stopped trying to interject and just watched them which by that point, had become a common practice. Finally, the white female TA stopped talking, turned to me and said, “I’ll do it. I’ll just write it up and send it to you.” By that point, I was so over it that I just nodded in agreement. When things like this happen with the people in my department, it makes me think about the construction of knowledge. Whose knowledge is seen as legitimate, whose isn’t. My ideas often fall on deaf ears with my colleagues. So, I have learned to sit in silence. I just left the table feeling empty.”

Tamara went on to describe another incident in which she felt her colleagues’ behavior would prove detrimental to her relationship with her students and impact her negatively on student evaluations:

“One time, I found out both of the other TAs had tossed out the lesson plan we put together and had been doing exam review - a practice that we all (including the professor for the course) agreed we would not do - for the exam. I felt as though my students had been cheated. What is more, I remember worrying at the time that when/if they found out that I was the only TA who refused to provide a review session for the exam, it was going to reflect negatively on me. Neither one of my colleagues bothered to tell me that they

were switching gears for the week. Instead, they communicated only with each other which, that too, was quite common. I only found out because I happened to ask the male TA one afternoon how his teaching for the week was going and he said:

“Oh, it’s been fine. They just have a lot of questions about the exam. Lots of review.” I responded, “Oh really, my students haven’t had too many questions about the exam. They have wanted to do the exercise.”

He laughed and said, “Yeah, I haven’t done the exercise and (the female TA) stopped doing the exercise and just decided to use the class for review.”

By that time, I had already taught some of my classes and felt I had missed an opportunity to help them prepare. It tore at me. Admittedly, there are implications for all TAs who do a crappy job with students. However, there are far more implications for Black women TAs who do a crappy job with students. It made me look incompetent and lazy. Had it been me who decided to veer off course that way, I would have been set straight (as I have been in the past). So, I ended up creating a review document for my students and sent it to them the following day.”

Analysis

Tamara later noted that when grading her students’ exams, she felt responsible for those students who did not do as well, “I [was] hesitant to begin grading them. I felt as though their failure reflected my failure. For their final exam, I decided to do review sessions.” The following semester, Tamara read her student evaluations and noted that more than a few students criticized her refusal to do exam reviews.

In their study of Black women’s experiences in corporate leadership, Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015) contend that exclusion in activities and work-related meetings are just one way in which Black women in professional environments experience microaggressions. One of the participants of their study explains:

“One has to do with not being included at the table when your expertise would be relevant or when the subject matter is relevant to your own development. That you’re not top of mind when a decision is made about who should participate. And therefore, you often join a discussion, a project, a situation in the middle and you’re having to simultaneously catch up and participate in the moment at the same time, which can affect your performance,

which oddly enough, or interestingly enough, reinforces any sentiment that maybe you're not up to speed but it's not because of your own doing" (p. 171-172).

The other TAs had also been able to exert their own agenda during their teaching assistantship with Tamara, not only because they were the majority but also because of their status in the program. They had been in the program longer than Tamara and were known and well-liked by others. Tamara was new and in the position of having to learn the rules and make a positive impression on colleagues and faculty. Being in a position of having to prove oneself as a legitimate member through juggling the role of student, colleague, and teacher prevented Tamara from voicing a grievance with either the professor of the course or her fellow teaching assistants. She knew that she would likely experience further marginalization if she said anything. So, she remained quiet.

"Academics, armed with intellectual resources, employ microaggressions, insults, and assaults in a sophisticated way in their exercise of power" (Vest 2013: p. 493).

Lane's Story: Being a Teacher, Colleague, Graduate: Multiple Levels of Isolation

Lane is a South Asian woman who immigrated to the United States for graduate study. Below she discusses her experiences navigating her graduate program, the challenges and eventual alienation she came to experience by both colleagues and faculty as well as how she came to view graduate education:

"In my culture, these kinds of printed, bright colors (she points to her skirt, a mix of Earthy and vibrant hues) is everyday wear in my culture. We wear bright colors, things that are colorful. But I never noticed grad students here doing that."

Lane's friend, another South Asian woman who had immigrated to the U.S. for her graduate

career a year earlier, told her some of what to expect once she arrived to the U.S. and to the university:

“She said you are not supposed to be really dressy and all of this. You are supposed to be a graduate student. You’re not supposed to be all flashy with the way that you dress. I was like, “But, I love colors and I like the way that I dress.” I actually went and bought down muted type clothes to not appear like I was not serious about my studies while I was [t]here. That was weird for me. My mom was like, “What is that? What are you taking with you? Are you going to a funeral?” I was like, “I don’t know. This is what you are supposed to wear to appear to be serious as a graduate student.””

“So, I tried that really hard for my first year. By the time the second year rolled around, I was really sick of it.”

Lane, reflecting on her first year, spoke about some of the ways in which she experienced isolation in her program:

“I got very sick of hearing people talk about philosophers or thinkers in the class I had never heard of that were not part of the reading. I was like, “I am only sitting here feeling stupid because I just didn’t read this person and they didn’t assign this person to read. Now, if I should have already read this, they should have written that as part of the prerequisite of the course so I could have sat during the summer and gone through this stuff...I just felt like the ground was very not level at all and if that was going to be the case, I should have gotten enough heads up.”

“At times, I felt like I needed to just say something in class to appear smart, not because I had a question and sometimes, not even to make a point. But if I want[ed] to get attention [t]here, if I want to get any kind of inroad, I need[ed] to say something.”

Analysis

Lane (as well as Maria) at one point in their stories express feeling duped by their programs. There was an obligation, they saw, on the part of professors, administrators, etc. to be more upfront in their recruiting and more explicit about the rules of graduate school. For Lane, she felt intellectually inferior to her peers in the graduate classroom because she had not been told that there was a breadth of knowledge she was expected to know beyond the requirements of the class to engage meaningfully with her colleagues. For Maria, who at one point in talking

about her experiences noted, *“I just wish the program I ended up in would have been more honest,”* at least some of her isolation derived from her program not living up to its initial impressions of being committed to real diversity. Maria seemed to measure her program’s commitment to diversity by whether initiatives and resources aimed at addressing the needs of graduates of color and first-generation graduates existed. According to her, they didn’t.

By the end of her first year, Lane notes that she was sick of the intellectual isolation she was made to experience by her colleagues and professors in the classroom and sick of being unable to connect with her culture through dress while performing the role of graduate student and teaching assistant. When, in the second year of her graduate program, she began asserting her culture, there were consequences:

“I feel that perceptions of how I was changed. I definitely know that they changed based on how I dressed. I went from the whole trying to look like a graduate student thing into, “I’ll do whatever the hell I want to do,” and I dressed very colorfully. I put a lot of makeup on, wore jewelry, big hoop earrings, all that. And I definitely feel I didn’t get taken seriously. My students commented about my clothes in my reviews...that I d[idn’t] dress professionally. I didn’t think that. I didn’t think that my professionalism should be based on how I dress[ed]. My job had nothing to do with what I was wearing. It was interesting too because I wonder if a male TA, white guy, wearing a sweatshirt and jeans would be considered more professional than me. The tricky part came when I taught race and ethnicity. That was very very difficult.”

"There were [male peers] who I understood to be largely judgmental towards how I dressed up. It was perhaps not so obvious in their attitudes. But from conversations and things they had to say to other people...cause I also TA’d grad students. [At least once] somebody was like, “Oh, such and such person, they were saying this...” I thought, “Wow, they share an office with me and they had some comment to make about something I was wearing.” I was really shocked. Really shocked. I didn’t realize that a person at that level — training for a doctorate — would even care to comment on somebody’s blouse or skirt or what part of the skin was showing or not.”

Analysis

“Women of color can be very vulnerable to student’s verbal violence towards them, including constant and unwarranted criticism of their teaching.”

- Yolanda Flores Niemann, *Presumed Incompetent* (p.466)

Lane acknowledges the marked difference in how she was perceived by her students and colleagues, but she also observes the differences made between herself as a woman of color and her white male colleagues. Indeed, many white men can take their choice in day-to-day attire for granted in the academy. While there are no (from my own observations) official rules for how a graduate is to dress in their roles as teaching assistants and instructors, there are unspoken expectations for how graduates dress. This is especially the case for women and those who hold membership in racially marginalized groups. It also becomes clear that comments made to others in such small communities (the small town) travel and can have the impact of causing harm to relationships both professionally and interpersonally. Lane, before hearing through gossip about the comments made by male colleagues about the way she dressed, only sensed them in her interactions. To have those suspicions confirmed — that someone who shared her immediate workspace and that she, prior to learning this news had a friendly work relationship with, compounded her feelings of alienation.

When reflecting on her experiences with faculty she spoke of the way in which they used body language and other tactics that either worked to silence her or discouraged her from attempting further contact with them:

“I remember one time, and I am not going to name a person, but I went and I talked to them. I was trying to get a sense about what classes I should be taking and I remember that the entire time they were sitting like this [Lane repositions her body so that her arms are crossed] and I was sitting like this [she moves her body so that she is seated with her back straight, arms uncrossed and leaning a bit forward] and I was very uncomfortable. It was very uncomfortable for me. I went specifically to this person because I was told, “go and talk to this person, this person is so awesome and wonderful” and I didn’t feel like they were awesome and wonderful. I felt very not smart after that. Like, either my ideas [were] extremely horrible or I am asking totally rudimentary questions. Then

I thought, "even if I am, so what. I'm supposed to... I should be able to do that." But that was very disheartening for me and it has happened more than once and with different people. Where they either just chucked my questions, or just didn't show any interest in what I was saying."

Lane, when thinking about how she eventually came to manage her interactions with colleagues and faculty - what she came to think of them, her graduate program, and its impact on her - concluded:

"I became more and more thick-skinned over the course of time. I also began questioning things like, "Why am I here? Why am I doing the PhD? Do I really want to do a PhD?""

"I had these really idealistic notions about what an academic department would be like. I realized that while some people - their papers - talk about racial injustice and classism or sexism, they may not be the champions of gender equality or racial equality or justice as one might wish the case to be. So, the idealism kind of faded away after a while... I just didn't [care] anymore...I didn't care to pretend anymore."

Lane would eventually choose to leave her graduate program.

Strategies for Surviving and Overcoming:

Participants in this study used diverse strategies to navigate, survive, and in some cases, overcome the difficulties they experience in their graduate programs. This section follows five women as they work to reduce the harm of micro-aggressions in their lives and succeed in their programs. Cultivating or joining other communities (*communities of choice*), evasion, assimilation, resistance techniques or various forms of activism are but some of the ways that participants report navigating difficulty with colleagues, faculty, students, or as a response to the dominant white culture in their programs. Additionally, it was common for them to use a combination of these strategies to navigate their departments and other spaces as they moved from one role to another or over the course of time (so there is a temporal element to the strategies that graduates use).

Communities of Choice, Resistance, and Evasion: Louise

Louise became less willing to interact socially with many of the people in her program. Specifically, she did not know when she would be expected to be the token Black person for her colleagues, when she might be expected to do or be the diversity for the people around her. She did not see that as being her job and didn't take pride in being one of only a few Black people in her department. Anne's request was not the first incident in which Louise's Blackness became more salient in her interactions with people in her department and in the larger community (be it the university or the town itself). It was, however, a more significant moment for Louise because Anne had been someone who helped her to navigate the terrain of her department and in many ways acted as an ally, having held a marginal status herself as a working-class woman.

Louise spent nearly a year avoiding a possible confrontation with Anne and worked to avoid situations in which she felt she might be expected to perform or be the Black face in the crowd. She became more insular. She also sought out support from graduate of color networks and would eventually take on leadership roles in some of those communities, attending and organizing professionalization events aimed at addressing the needs of graduates of color.

Loss of trust in colleagues and her department, avoidance of spaces where she believed she might be expected to perform or be tokenized, and seeking professionalization outside of her department or from other marginalized spaces in her department had consequences. Avoiding spaces where she might need to confront Anne or might encounter similar issues meant that she did not attend events that may have benefitted her professionally. She networked less and over the course of the year, her ties with most colleagues in her department were few.

Louise's story is also one that vividly describes what happens when difficulty arises between members in the small-town context. Louise found herself navigating both her

relationship with Anne through evasion and having to compromise the places and people they had in common. She worried about the consequences to her professionally if she brought up the problematics of dominant members using other members' marginalized status to benefit the "town." She worried that she would be labeled a troublemaker or overly sensitive and how such labels might limit opportunities for cultivating the cultural capital necessary to matriculate through her program. She worried about gossip. She worried about her capacity to have friendships/supportive networks in the graduate/professional context where she spent most of her time. It resulted in further isolation and marginalization in an already isolating situation.

Communities of Choice and Resistance: Maria

After a year on her 3-year research fellowship, Maria chose to give it up and accepted a position as director in a cultural affairs center where she provides support for under-represented minority undergraduate students at the university where she is completing her doctorate. While it comes with setbacks, she sees the tradeoff as a mostly positive one, referring to her work with the students she supports as a "lifeline." She has also been able to receive important professionalization skills as she has decided to be a practitioner rather than a professor. While reflecting on her job at the community center she notes: "I know what they go through. We share that in common."

The choice to give up her fellowship has come with setbacks including taking longer to get through her program, "It makes it a bit harder to get through the academic stuff...doing research allows you to have your own schedule. Managing a program, you can't do that. But I love it. I will continue to do this work."

Maria has also engaged in some aspects of what Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015) refer to as *armoring*. They define armoring as an "adaptive protective mechanism" used to deal

with racial microaggressions in the workplace (p. 173). Characteristics of armoring include: 1) pride in self, family, and culture, 2) promoting abilities and strengthening determination, 3) having a sense of personal excellence and validation, 4) creation of a work persona, 5) acquisition of knowledge (p. 170).

As a response to the strong white culture in her department became more notably ethnocentric – taking pride in her culture more than she had prior to arriving to her program: “I’m not the most ethnocentric person I know. Like, I don’t wear braids or embroidered shirts. But, I’ve since become way more ethnocentric as a response to such a very strong white culture; to mostly the absence of awareness.”

Now in the dissertator stage of her program, Maria started her academic career with a GED. She notes that the graduate phase of her education has changed her perception of the role of the education system: “[It’s] something so beautiful and enlightening - to study. Our educational system has turned something that beautiful into an abusive relationship.”

Resistance in the Classroom: Renee

Having endured challenges to her authority, general knowledge, and expertise by students, Renee spent more time preparing for her teaching assignments. She observed that she spent more time preparing for her classes, more time grading and commenting on student work in anticipation of challenges from students. In addition, she would spend a lot of time replaying events with her students. She often reported feeling emotionally drained after she taught, preventing her from being able to put much energy toward the development of her research and course work. In a conversation with another colleague of color who’d expressed concern about his own negative course evaluations from students, Renee recalled:

You know, we have to be twice as prepared as our white counterparts. We have to be ready for the challenges that we know are going to come our way. We all may be aware of the possibility of receiving negative feedback but some of us *know* we will receive it no matter what we do, what we say, or how accommodating we try to be with students. This just comes along with being a person of color in a position of power and some of the students, working off what they have been raised to believe, resent that we are there in front of them. It doesn't work with what they have been taught.

Renee's response to her student who suggested she spoke more than she needed to can be interpreted as a form of resistance. Rather than simply internalize her student's comments or dismiss them, she chose to challenge them knowing the possible risk to her professionally (the possibility of the student filing a complaint, future noncompliance or disruption/disrespect from the student in class, possible negative evaluation from student).

Moving from Assimilation to Resistance: Tamara

Tamara, in her experience with her colleagues, noted that her, "ideas often fall on deaf ears with my colleagues. So, I have learned to sit in silence." The invisibility and dismissal of her intellectual contributions in meetings and during administrative tasks led to her being silenced resulting in her not participating in aspects of her training as an instructor. Tamara, by eventually giving in to her colleagues' dismissal of her and stepping into the subordinated role that her colleagues had designated for her through their acts of exclusion, assimilated.

One might be inclined to think of assimilation as simply adopting the belief systems and behaviors of the dominant group through imitation of dominant group members' behaviors. But in this case, Tamara's assimilation was to accept the dominant anti-Black ideologies expressed in her colleagues' behavior. Whether intentional or not, her colleagues' behaviors -- excluding her from decision making that would impact her professionally, shared bodily expressions that conveyed her otherness, and subtle admonishments -- all acted in accordance with dominant ideologies about the legitimacy of Black people in predominantly white institutions, namely

ideas about Blacks as being intellectually deficient. These behaviors exhibited what often happens in settings where members of stigmatized racial groups, experience. To sit in silence, to accept subordination was both a form of survival on Tamara's part as someone who holds subordinated status, and an example of hegemonic civility, which conveys the strategies that members of dominant groups often use to exert their power over those they believe to be deficient or stigmatized in some way.

Later in her story, Tamara expressed deciding to do exam review for her students and preparing study materials for them. This can be interpreted as an act of defiance/resistance. Choosing to offer study materials and review for her students without the knowledge and/or after learning of her colleagues' actions, Tamara worked to be, at least in verbal agreement with her colleagues while also attempting to get in front of what she perceived as an act of professional sabotage caused by her colleagues. Tamara found herself both working to be seen as both a equal among her colleagues, to be seen as competent and compassionate with her students which meant combating stereotypical ideas of African American women (angry, lazy, incompetent), as well as learn the terrain of the small-town environment where the rules, mores were not universal. But instead, only applied sometimes, to certain groups of people.

Assimilation, Resistance, and Termination: Lane

Based on reports from her friend who had migrated to the US a year prior and learned how graduate students were to be, Lane upon arriving to her program engaged in a form of assimilation. Through altering her appearance by wearing, "down muted clothes" to appear serious about her studies, she tried to blend into the dominant culture as to not be seen as an outsider to her colleagues. Her concern of how she might be viewed led to the suppression of aspects of her own culture that she, otherwise, celebrated.

After the second year of her program and reporting growing tired of the dominant culture and behavior of some of her colleagues and professors, she began to resist. She resisted by dressing up and wearing “the big hoop earrings” and colorful clothing that was everyday wear for her culture. She became more vocal about things she didn’t understand and her annoyance with people who insisted on speaking of philosophers and thinkers who were not a part of the course readings,

“I actually started saying things. I stopped pretending.” Lane being vocal about her frustration, for example, of classroom dynamics – other graduates using their knowledge of readings and writers that were not assigned to take up space in the classroom and exclude others – led to at least one professor in her department prohibiting students from “showboating” in class.

While Lane did experience some support from a small circle of women in her department, she nevertheless experienced further marginalization in her department by colleagues (especially male colleagues) and professors and, had her professionalism undermined by her students in teaching evaluations. Increased isolation, growing frustration with the contradictions between her colleagues’ work on social justice and their acts of injustice, micro-aggressions, gossiping, would all be factors in her decision to terminate her program, “I just became so tired of it. Maybe one day I will do it...but right now I have [children] who need me. That’s more important.”

We see in the efforts of these five women a variety of creative strategies to work with, survive, and overcome the microaggressions and resultant marginalization that confront them:

- Choosing other communities – cultivating or seeking membership in other communities for professional and personal support
- Evasion – strategy that includes avoidance of situations, events, where difficulty may be revisited, taking time away from the source of difficulty
- Assimilation – Adopting or attempting to adopt the attitudes, manners, appearances of

- the dominant culture
- Resistance/activism – speaking out, refusals to conform to dominant culture
- Termination of program – to leave graduate program

Policy Implications:

In 2015, graduate students at the University of Washington named microaggressions as a form of assault and moved to classify them as a grievable offense in their contract agreement with the university. While the move toward institutional recognition and action against discrimination was prompted by subtle and explicit forms of gender and sexual discrimination, the contract language and definition of microaggressions provided by the union, aimed to address other forms of discrimination, as well:

““everyday exchanges –including words and actions – that denigrate or exclude individuals based on their membership in a group or class”) and that such workplace behavior is grievable under the contract” (article 19: section 6) (pg. 34).

The most interesting language in the contract, however, is the recognition that these behaviors, from a business model, do not further the university’s goals and harms employees’ wellbeing. It acknowledges that such interactions are harmful to the recipient regardless of the intent of those who commit the offense.

The graduate union, in declaring microaggressions a grievable offense aimed to ignite, ““the next level of discourse in this country around racism, sexism, and homophobia,”” argued the union’s spokeswoman (Lamb: May 11, 2015). By attempting to further the conversation about continued and revitalized forms of discrimination as well as create a space where knowledge of these actions and how to prevent them would be required as a form of workplace

competency, the graduate union ignited discussions about first amendment rights and the role of higher education institutions.

Counter arguments for the violation of the protection of free speech, threats to the rights of those who hold dominant-group membership, and the politically-correct culture were made in response to the union's actions. Eugene Volokh, a law professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, is noted as accusing his institution of "using the concept of microaggression to try to exclude ideas from the classroom. "I'm happy to say that I'm just going to keep on microaggressing,"" (Schmidt: July 2015). Greg Lukianoff, president of the conservative free speech advocacy group, Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) argues, "It is becoming almost too easy to say the wrong thing on campus. If we create too many rules about how we talk to each other," he says, "it becomes difficult to talk at all." (Schmidt: July 2015).

The University of Washington graduate student union stated regarding its contract negotiations with the administrations that the university remained unconcerned about the issues of micro-aggressions, "They do not believe definitions and protections belong in a bargaining agreement and they are not open to training despite the preventative and proactive benefits of training" (Lamb: May 2015). According to Matt Lamb (2015) of The FIX, "Negotiations reached a low point...An email dated April 17 [2015] shows the union responding point-by-point to a "misinformation campaign to intimidate workers," in which the school had warned student employees they don't have the right to strike under state law" (Lamb: May 2015).

Discussion

There are several problems that predominantly white graduate programs are increasingly having to tackle. First, attrition rates are extremely high. Nearly half of all doctoral students quit.

As retention (and recruitment) of graduates of color becomes more difficult, graduate programs are asking why and what they can do to remedy this issue. Further, the more diverse higher education institutions appear to be, they signal, at least on the surface, an understanding of the role of higher education on the changing demographics in a society.

Second, there is an investment in the concept of diversity in higher education. The investment in a more ethnically and racially diverse graduate body, however, conflicts with historical and current practices and policies. The significance of the University of Washington case is, in part, that it illustrates on both the micro and macro interactional levels, the issues that arise when historically marginalized groups, in the context of colorblindness and meritocracy, point out the contradiction between ideology/policy and institutional/individual practices and ask for accountability in cases where they experience neither the benefits of colorblindness nor the ability to take part in the meritocratic system for which full members are endowed.

Lastly, in an informal conversation with other women of color graduates, one of the women argued that there is an interest problem. She mentioned that for universities to feel moved to do something about the forms of discrimination that takes place on their campuses, they'd have to, "care about graduates as people." Universities would not only have to move beyond the business model of viewing graduates as apprentices but acknowledge that investment in other forms of the experience are vitally important, as well. Starting from a place of acknowledgement that predominantly white, male, heteronormative institutions are hostile places for people who hold marginal status and requiring knowledge and training of faculty and administration, of the history of these hostilities can present an opportunity in starting a much-needed dialogue while also moving away from only symbolic shows of progress. In other words, American institutions, universities/graduate programs, must move away from policies and

practices that refuse to deal with its legacy of oppression and instead choose to see race and all the ways in which has endured.

Conclusion

Feagin in 1991 discussed the increasing significance of race and the forms of subtle and overt racism that Blacks, in particular, experienced in public spaces. He argued that while public spaces such as the workplace, where Blacks encountered both acquaintances and strangers, offered less protection from subtle and overt forms of racism, protected sites offered more protection. This paper illustrates that as the public and private have become more intermingled, especially in spaces such as graduate programs, people of color must negotiate both public settings and intimate settings more often, and create strategies for which to deal with subtle forms of disrespect by their colleagues, faculty, and students, and friends.

I hope that my work has shown, in some way, that as we move to models of professionalization that, whether by accident or design, meld the personal with the professional (increased use of social media resulting in more exposure of ourselves to our colleagues and them to us, increased time spent at work and school that makes these relationships more significant to us than they likely were in 1991 when Feagin wrote about the continued significance of race), that we can begin to more closely examine the harm done to those who must negotiate multiple axes of marginalization as well as use the increased exposure and intimacy that these changes have created as an opportunity to begin a new, and increasingly important, discourse.

APPENDIX

Generic Interview Schedule (generated from initial observations of graduate and other university community spaces during the Fall and Spring semesters of 2013-2014 academic year):

1. Tell me about the community you grew up in. What were your communities like back home?
 - a. Where is home (i.e. a city, small town, rural area)?
 - b. What did your parents do for work?
 - c. Describe a typical day for you growing up?
2. Can you describe the race and class make-up of the communities you belong to back home?
 - a. Did you live around mostly people of color, mixed neighborhood, predominantly white? What types of jobs did people in the neighborhood do?
 - b. To your knowledge, were there activities in your neighborhood (or other communities you belonged to back home) that addressed social issues? If so, what social issues did these communities address?
3. Are you a first-generation college student?
4. How did you make the decision to attend college/graduate school?
5. What was it like for you leaving home to attend college/graduate school?
6. Before arriving, what did you imagine college/graduate school to be like? What did people in your communities tell you about college/graduate school? What did you anticipate?
7. Can you remember your initial reactions or thoughts to the university and town once you arrived? If so, what were they?
8. Can you describe the race and class make-up of your college/university? Department?
9. Can you tell me about your initial interactions with peers and faculty once you arrived?
10. Were you awarded an assistantship when accepted to graduate school or perhaps later?
 - a. If so, what type of assistantship?
11. Tell me about your experience being a graduate assistant.
12. In what ways does your work in the university differ from the work people in your communities do back home?
 - a. How is your work perceived to the people in your communities of origin?
13. How have your experiences as a graduate student and worker at the university changed over time?
14. Do you feel supported by your department, colleagues, and/or other graduates?
15. How do you find community at your college/university? Can you tell about your communities at the university?
16. When you think about your work now and the kind of work you want to do in the future, where do you see yourself?
17. When you think about home, where is it now? Are you settled?
18. Are there questions or issues that you wish I had asked during this interview but did not?

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