

**THE COLOR OF THE RAINBOW PATH:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE INTERSECTION
OF RACIST AND HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION**

[Mitsunori Misawa](#), *University of Memphis*

Recent reports of bullying in postsecondary education show that there have been an increasing number of incidents of bullying. Although previous studies focused on bullying in general, the intersectionality of various types of bullying has not been extensively examined yet in postsecondary education. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand how racist homophobic bullying influenced gay male faculty of color in higher education in the United States. This article focuses on two themes, *relational marginalization* and *positional stigmatization*, and concludes with discussions and implications for practicing anti-bullying to protect sexual minorities of color in higher education.

In recent years, national news media in the United States have reported on numerous tragic and critical incidents of bullying, violence, and incivility in the workplace, and headlines have increasingly covered similar incidents in publicly funded K–12 schools and in postsecondary education (Tyler Clementi Foundation, 2014; Winburn, Winburn, & Niemeyer, 2014). These types of incidents are not new. Society has long witnessed and dealt with such violence (Leymann, 1996; Misawa, 2010a, 2010b, 2015a; Randall, 2001; Twale & De Luca, 2008; Westhues, 2004).

The study of bullying began in the 1970s with a focus on grade school bullying (Olweus, 1993, 2010). In the 1980s, the focus on bullying broadened out to include young

adulthood and adulthood (Leymann, 1990; Misawa & Rowland, 2015; Namie, 2003; Randall, 1997, 2001). The term *workplace bullying* surfaced through the work of Andrea Adams (1992) to describe various cases of bullying at workplaces in the United Kingdom. Since this introduction, bullying in adulthood has been expanded to include a number of disciplines, including higher education (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Keashly & Nueman, 2010; Misawa, 2010b, 2013, 2015a; Twale & De Luca, 2008). Bullying that targets adults is largely based on their various sociocultural identities such as race (e.g., Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Lewis & Gunn, 2007), gender (e.g., Jennifer, 2014; Simpson & Cohen, 2004; Williams, 2013), and sexual orientation (e.g., Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013; Rivers, 2011). While this work shows great promise, the “silo” approach, where identity markers (gender, race, *or* sexual orientation) are viewed in isolation from one another, can be self-limiting and not reflective of everyone being bullied. Workplace bullying in the context of higher education and through the lens of intersectionality represents an under-researched area in social science literature (Keashly & Nueman, 2010; Misawa, 2010b, 2015a; Twale & De Luca, 2008).

Higher education attaches great importance to diversity and social justice in an attempt to produce inclusive and democratic learning environments. In order for higher education to create such environments, it is crucial to understand the experiences of those who encounter multiple forms of oppression because of their sociocultural variance (Kumashiro, 2001). This understanding will provide insights into how various forms of marginalization, like identity, intersects between structural and social forms of oppression, and while “silo” approaches to social emancipation can be helpful, human lives are never so neatly contained into such identity-categories. Because such complexity exists in contemporary society, studies on social justice based on the intersectionality of identity categories become pivotal to create an equitable and

democratic environment and are needed. The purpose of this study was to fill the need by exploring the academic journeys of gay male faculty of color in higher education. The overarching research question was, In what ways does academic bullying affect gay male faculty of color in higher education? This narrative inquiry utilized queer critical (queer crit) theory to capture the voices of the participants who experienced the intersection of racist and homophobic bullying. The data analysis for this study implemented a constructionist positional analysis that examined how the intersection of race and sexual orientation appeared in the participants' narratives. The significance of this research was to demonstrate where academic bullying attached itself to racism, homophobia, and heterosexism and how the study participants navigated their academic careers in light of multiple forms of oppression.

A Brief Overview of Bullying

Bullying, which consists of repeated physical, psychological, social, or verbal behaviors and the systematic abuse of power, takes place during adulthood in educational settings, community settings, and workplaces. In her foundational work, *The Harassed Workers*, Brodsky (1976) pointed out that psychological, gender-oriented violence, and harassment were disseminated and prevalent in workplaces and that such malicious behavior negatively affected work production. At that time, harassment at work, although not identified as bullying, was thought to be an acceptable, unspoken tradition that was often passed on to new workforce generations (Brodsky, 1976).

Based on the investigations about harassment at work in the 1970s, researchers began to examine workplace bullying in the 1980s (Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1990; Reichert, 2003). For instance, Leymann (1990, 1996) adapted the concept from childhood bullying at school to

adulthood bullying at work. He researched how workplace bullying physically, psychologically, and financially impacted employees and organizations and described such phenomena as bullying, mobbing, “ganging up on someone,” or “psychological terror” (Leymann, 1996, p. 165).

Similarly, Adams (1992) also argued that harassment negatively affected many people. Adams’s research was based on personal stories from adults who had been on the receiving end of an abuse of power or bullying at work. Adams found that victims of bullying experienced extreme stress over a long period and that bullying had affected the physical and psychological health of the bullied. For instance, Adams listed the physical symptoms from bullying as severe headaches, loss of energy, stomach problems, and palpitations, and she also stated the psychological symptoms from bullying as depression, panic attacks, lack of motivation, and loss of confidence. Adams argued that organizational leaders should work toward creating healthier environments so that they can deal with bullying to eliminate such negativities and improve their productivity and effectiveness at work.

Contemporary research on adult bullying has mostly focused on workplaces in general and has begun to address adult academic bullying in higher education (McKay, Arnold, Fratzl, & Thomas, 2008; Misawa, 2013, 2015a; Westhues, 2006). For example, Twale and De Luca (2008) warned that academia has become as increasingly uncivil and hostile as have communities, workplaces, and society at large. Bullying indeed exists in higher education; however, it often is undetected, ignored, or even accepted (Lester, 2013). It is also thought to be a part of academic culture—the way that things have always been (Twale & De Luca, 2008). Recent research has documented how race-oriented bullying negatively affected victims and their organizations (Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Lewis & Gunn, 2007), how gender could be a contributing factor to bullying (Jennifer, 2014; Simpson & Cohen, 2004; Williams, 2013), and how homophobic bullying or

bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identities occurs in educational settings (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Rivers, 2011). As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Misawa, 2015a), race, gender, and sexual orientation shape the experiences of bullying for gay men of color who work as educators in higher education. I provided an operational definition of racist and homophobic bullying:

An incident of bullying that involves a victim who is a gay person of color and somehow less powerful than the bully physically, psychologically, or by their sociocultural position or who fits the bully's racist homophobic stereotype, and a perpetuated recurrent or singular; unwanted or unwarranted; intimidating, humiliating, offensive, threatening or excluding conduct on the part of the bully that sustains the bully's position of power and destroys the victim's well-being, dignity, and safety or is significant enough to cause the victim physical and/or psychological harm. (Misawa, 2015a, p. 8)

Overall, these studies provided some aspect of the intersectionality of identity-based bullying, and indicated that bullying could be dependent on perceptions of the sociocultural identity of the bullied person and on the work context.

Theoretical Framework

I approach the research presented in this paper through a queer critical (queer crit) theoretical lens. Queer crit theory contains and borrows from a broad range of disciplines and theories such as critical race theory, liberalism, law and society, feminism, poststructuralism, critical legal theory, pragmatism, and queer theory. In particular, queer crit theory was heavily influenced by critical legal scholars who dealt with racial and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Such multidisciplinary perspectives enable queer crit scholars to explain “the effects of multiple oppressions on queer people of color” (Misawa, 2010c, p. 194) and to explore and discuss the effects of the intersection of racism, homophobia, and heterosexism. Queer crit theory examines how race and sexual orientation are

intertwined and how they affect sexual minorities of color, and they advocate for critical examinations of both race and sexual orientation in society (Misawa, 2010c). Based primarily on critical race theory, the queer crit perspective emphasizes several elements.

First, queer crit theory recognizes the centrality of the intersection of race and racism with sexual orientation, homophobia, and heterosexism and criticizes how racism, homophobia, and heterosexism are ubiquitous and ordinary and have existed for a long time. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) stated that this intersection is “the conventional way society does business” (p. 7). The dominant groups (usually White middle and upper class men) have never raised (or wanted to raise) the marginalization and discrimination against sexual minorities of color as a societal issue.

Second, queer crit theory is based on the notion that racism, homophobia, and heterosexism are embedded in rules and regulations that shape the dominant group’s interests. Queer crit theory challenges mainstream ideologies of the dominant group that preserve racism, homophobia, and heterosexism in society.

Third, queer crit theory argues that race, racial groups, sexuality, and sexual orientation are socially constructed and “products of social thought and relations” that “society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 9). This means that there are many assumptions and biases towards LGBTQ people of color based on race and sexual orientation and that those assumptions do not tell all about who they are or how they should behave. Queer crit theory challenges such dominant ideologies about race, sexual orientation, and their intersections.

In addition, queer crit theory suggests the recognition, acknowledgement, and emphasis of experiential knowledge of LGBTQ people of color (Misawa, 2010c). The life experiences of

LGBTQ people of color and their voices, which refers to *counterstorytelling* or *counternarratives*, provide a path to understanding and analyzing the intersection of race and sexual orientation based on life experiences.

Queer crit theory also challenges ahistoricism with contextual and historical analyses of social issues related to racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and the intersection of each (Misawa, 2010c). There are contemporary social inequalities and injustices that are linked to earlier periods in which a dominant group's intent and cultural meaning are treated as social norms and the any "other" intents or meanings are ignored or silenced by dominant discourse.

Last, queer crit theory works toward social justice for all in a quest to eliminate racism, homophobia, and heterosexism. Many forms of oppression can be experienced in tandem by sexual minorities or LGBTQ people of color on the grounds of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Queer crit theory strives to end all forms of oppression to create a democratic and inclusive social environment for all people.

Methodology

Using queer crit theory as the framework, the primary goal of this study was to gain an understanding of how racist homophobic bullying influenced the academic lives of gay male faculty of color in higher education. I used narrative inquiry as the research methodology to accomplish this goal. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to emphasize the importance of narratives and life stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and it also integrates counternarratives from participants. Narrative inquiry helps to understand the participants' life stories. This type of research attaches importance to capturing counternarrative stories on how racist and homophobic bullying affects them from a queer crit perspective.

For the purpose of the study, individual in-depth interviews were conducted as the data collection method. Using a purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 2015), which allows researchers to select specific research samples, 19 gay male faculty of color agreed to participate in the study. The purpose of the individual in-depth interviews was to capture the voice and stories (counternarratives) of the participants to better understand how adult academic racist-homophobic bullying influenced the lives of the study participants.

In addition, after transcribing the interviews, member checking was conducted with each participant to see if the transcriptions captured what the participant and researcher talked about in the interview, and to ensure that the data were trustworthy (Charmaz, 2006). The names in the data and in the findings section of this article are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and privacy of research participants. Also, because the participants used different terms to describe their racial or ethnic identities (e.g., Black and African American) in the interviews and this study's focus is also related to one's identities, those terms are used throughout the findings section.

After the member checking, a constructionist positional analysis was conducted. A constructionist positional analysis consists of the researcher recognizing that each person is born into the world with predetermined sociocultural positions such as race, gender, and sexual orientation (Kumashiro, 2001), and that those sociocultural positions influence how he or she is treated in society (Alfred, 2002). Positionality allows researchers to further study how intersectionality and positionality influence power dynamics and relationships among people with different sociocultural identities (Misawa, 2015b) in a specific context. The unit of analysis of this type of research is participants' counter narratives. A constructionist positional analysis, which is the combination of the constant comparative analysis

(Charmaz, 2006) and narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993), explores participants' life stories. A constructionist positional data analysis reveals the theme of ubiquitous bullyism in higher education, which will be addressed in the following section.

Findings

Gay male faculty of color opened up to me about their experiences in higher education. In their long academic careers, they expressed that they had almost continuously been victims or bystanders of bullying in higher education and had to learn how to manage their academic journeys while negotiating their own identities. Most of the participants discussed how their experiences of bullying began as graduate students. The main theme, *ubiquitous bullyism in higher education*, represents how participants in this study had to contend with traditions and conventional ways, manners, and behaviors that fed into the presumptions and biases of the bullies or perpetrators.

Two subthemes also emerged in this theme: 1) *relational marginalization* and 2) *positional stigmatization*. The subsequent sections will address those two subthemes.

Relational Marginalization

All 19 of the gay men of color in this study were exposed to bullying due to racism and homophobia, and they were relationally marginalized and were treated unfairly by their peers and professors because of their sociocultural identities prior to having become faculty members in higher education. Although their experiences were negative, their experiences actually informed them on how to better develop their own academic career plans. For example, Professor Leonard Hayes, a tenured Latino university professor had experienced a long career in

higher education. He described how his own experiences had shaped his own career path in academia:

Bullying happened in different ways and in different times for me. . . . Often times, things happened in a much more subtle way. I went to law school in the 1980s. I was the only openly gay person in the law school. And, there were no openly gay faculty members. . . . Some people [students and faculty] tried to do the typical homophobic thing. People were trying to take away your self-confidence, your self-esteem, your ability to concentrate and succeed. People were trying to use who you were against you. Basically fellow students. Mainly White American people. They insulted me, called me names, attacked me, all of that. Now 40 years has gone by since the Stonewall incident. There is less of the 1950s staff. But, yes, you have students who use the anonymity of the student evaluations to throw [hurtful rhetoric] at you. What does the institution do about it? Nothing. This is not unique. . . . It's much more subtle and much more sophisticated.

The experiences of Professor Hayes were not uncommon to the other participants' experiences in higher education. The gay male faculty of color in this study repeatedly experienced verbal or physical, direct or indirect, subtle or overt homophobia and racism in their academic careers. All of the participants, including Professor Hayes, stated that bullying and mobbing based on racism and homophobia are prevalent and continue to occur in their lives at every point in higher education.

Professor Brian Lee, an Asian adjunct professor and administrator, shared his experience of having been a law student in the early 1990s where he experienced homophobia and racism in law school:

When I was working at a part of gay and lesbian student group trying to publicize speaker events, like people were coming in, judges to talk about being openly gay judges. There were either graffiti or the flyers were torn down. "Fag" was written on the graffiti. . . . It was just the way law school was. . . . It was something that did not happen to the other many groups that were posting flyers.

Most of the gay male faculty members of color in this study (18 out of 19 participants) reported that they had encountered racist and homophobic classroom situations when they were

students. Fellow students would find ways to alter the classroom dynamics so that they were against the gay male graduate students; professors could also alter classroom dynamics in this way. Professor Melvin Kelly, a Black associate professor, talked about his negative experiences in the law school where he had to deal with his professors' racist remarks and attitudes:

You know, when I was in law school, there were a lot of situations that would raise racial issues. . . . I once had a professor who referred to Native Americans as naked savages. . . . And . . . there were a couple of Native Americans in the classroom, so Black students wrote a letter to the professor saying that you're entitled to your belief, [but it] would not be appropriate to use that kind of language to students [in class]. Of course, there are Native American students, too. So then he wrote a letter back saying that they were naked savages that they didn't write *Gulliver's Travels*, didn't do all these other things that Europeans had done, so he was perfectly, you know, justified in using that language in class.

In addition to the racist remarks, Professor Kelly also experienced a different kind of racism in another class:

I was in a property class, and the class was about the law . . . that takes . . . consideration of neighborhood values in terms of whether or not certain people should be excluded or included in a particular neighborhood. And, at one point, the female teacher said, "Well, this is what the law says and that's what we have to follow." And, I said, "You know, there was a point of law says that I was or people like me were three-fifth (3/5) of a person. And, certainly we wouldn't be expecting to follow something like that." . . . And then, the teacher became hostile.

The participants in this study also described how difficult it was for them to have a good relationship with their professors. They reported that they had to be careful in dealing with race and sexual orientation as students in class in higher education. One example of that appeared in a story from Professor Fredrick Smith, an African American assistant professor. He talked about one of his experiences in graduate school where race was a significant factor of his virtual invisibility:

There were a lot of times I just felt like I wasn't being called on in class or asked to state my opinions about things. Then, I always had to be a little bit

more forceful to be heard. In class when there was no African trade perspective or multicultural perspective, it was always like, I felt like I was the one who always had to do that, to raise the question and raise the issue. And, so some faculty members did not like it. And, it just, I think it just sort of never made us close.

The above narratives presented how the gay men of color were marginalized because of their sociocultural identities. They expressed that they wanted to have good relationships with their professors and colleagues but that they were unable to make a good connection due to behaviors of bullying and marginalization. Eventually, the gay men of color accepted such behaviors and eventually isolated themselves or gave up trying to associate with their professors and colleagues.

Positional Stigmatization

This subtheme represents how the gay men of color in this study were stigmatized and bullied by their professors and peers in higher education because of their sociocultural identities. All of the 19 participants talked about how the ubiquitous “bullyist” culture made them ashamed because their professors and peers stigmatized them. For instance, Professor Anthony Young, a Black tenured university professor, encountered many situations in higher education where people tried to stigmatize his profession, which had been dominated by White females:

You know, there are very few Black men that are in nursing. . . . There’s always little subtle remarks and things that people make. You know, nursing, they definitely assume that you are gay or you’re a sissy anyway.

Similarly, Professor Oscar Martin, a Black associate professor, talked about his experience of being a nursing student and described how positionality had impacted the interaction between him and a nurse at the hospital:

As an undergraduate nursing student, there were only two men in my nursing class, myself and a Latino male. . . . And, the nurse that I would have to report to was very, very sexist. Well, I went to her and I said, “You know, the patient has not voided in the last 12 hours, and this is problematic.” And, she kind of

dismissed me. She said, “Oh, well, she is not peeing because you know she does not want to pee around you because . . . you are a man.”

In graduate school classroom environments where professors and colleagues seemed to be racist and homophobic, Professor David Green, an African American assistant professor, as a student, felt that he was in an unsafe learning environment, and he struggled to survive there for the first two years:

Being Black, being a person of color in particular in a White dominated place that is the body matters for me more because being gay for me people can conceal that the way that you cannot conceal your different body color or tint you cannot conceal it. . . . So, in graduate school, I had to figure out how to get around my own anxieties and challenge other people’s perspectives. And often I had to deal with race and sexuality, even you know, often having had interacted together. And, so grad school was very challenging.

Professor Shane Edwards, an African American associate professor and associate dean, talked about two of his experiences where positionality impacted his interactions with his professor and colleagues:

In the PhD program, one of my Black colleagues . . . took me to lunch. . . . I don’t do a lot of socializing. . . . I got taken to lunch by this guy and he said, “Well, you know, several of us, (he was referring to other Black students), we were just wondering if you were gay.” And, he prefaced by saying, “You know it’s not really a big deal to me. But, several of us were having, we were wondering if you were gay.” And, it kind of stumped me for a minute. . . . And, I switched the conversation to weather. And, I refused. That’s how I left the conversation.

The gay men of color in this study repeatedly experienced verbal or physical, direct or indirect, subtle or overt homophobia and racism in their early academic careers. Like some of the participants mentioned, bullying based on racism and homophobia continued to occur in their lives at every point in higher education.

Discussion and Implications

The participants talked about how their early exposure to bullying based on racism and homophobia had actually helped them develop their own careers. Their early exposure to bullying had provided them with helpful understandings of how their positionality as queer people of color was perceived in higher education, and they would bring that understanding to their careers and job searches.

This article strived to answer the following overarching question: In what ways does academic bullying affect gay male faculty of color in higher education? It is clear that bullying had a negative cumulative impact on gay male faculty of color—it necessitated that they live their academic lives in defense of their psychological well-being and careers. Literature on minority faculty members in higher education shows how they are treated differently compared with their White colleagues (e.g., Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008). In conventional and elite institutions of higher education in the United States, norms that were developed by and for White male heterosexuals have been ingrained into policies and regulations (Twale & De Luca, 2008). In academia, minority faculty members are in danger of being degraded and disrespected and having their authority or their credentials questioned.

In this study, all of the 19 gay male faculty of color expressed that they had been repeatedly questioned about their credibility in higher education regarding the validity of their credentials by their colleagues and their administrators. Due to these repeated experiences, study participants maintained silence about what they were experiencing as a means to maintain their employment. In this case, positionality seemed to be detrimental to the gay male faculty of color's professional and personal lives.

In addition, their experiences appeared to be relational in nature when they talked about the influence bullying had on their academic careers. In this study, all of the 19 gay male faculty of color talked about how their relationship with their surroundings had changed because of racist homophobic bullying and how their perceptions of themselves, their colleagues, their departments, and their institutions had changed. Changes in self-perception and perception of careers frequently appear in scholarly literature on minority faculty members in higher education (Twale & De Luca, 2008; Westhues, 1998). After such negative experiences, the participants in this study did not feel that they were accepted in their departments or their institutions. They were made aware of the dominant values controlling the institutional systems they were dealing with, and how their colleagues perceived them. All participants had to re-examine how to pursue their academic careers for success. Ongoing problems with bullying for study participants will likely continue throughout their careers unless the culture in higher education changes to being more inclusive of plurality.

Conclusion

In examining how racist homophobic bullying can influence gay male faculty of color in higher education, this study suggests that the effects of bullying had a negative cumulative impact on gay male faculty of color. It was apparent that the gay male faculty of color in this study had to deal with racist and homophobic people in higher education. Literature on minority faculty members in higher education described similar situations to those facing the participants in this study in which they were questioned about their knowledge by administrators, colleagues, and professors (e.g., Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008; Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005). The participants of this study reported that they knew that they were perceived as outsiders in

academia and that they were not getting the same treatment as White *and* heterosexual colleagues, making it harder to manage their psychological well-being. To create a more inclusive and safer environment in higher education, administrators will need to acknowledge and be willing to understand the complex experiences of sexual minorities who are also people of color.

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