Racial Battle Fatigue: The Unspoken Burden of Black Women Faculty in LIS

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African-American women faculty are told that contemporary educational and professional institutions, particularly at historically White institutions (HWIs), are places where they can succeed. However, in these institutions, many Black women faculty are exposed to racial and gender discrimination and are subjected to Racial Battle Fatigue. This article explores experiences of Black female faculty and describes the challenges they endure in higher education.

The diversity of college and university faculty has been the focus of discussion and debate for several decades, particularly since the 1960s when equity in higher education became a national priority as a result of the civil rights movement. Despite these discussions, and despite numerous programs to advance faculty diversity, the national outlook is dismal. Today, the overwhelming majority of full-time faculty in the United States identify as White and approximately 20% are Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska, Native and multiracial (US Department of Education, 2017). The underrepresentation of women faculty of color in academia is well documented in the literature (Smith, 2002; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001).

Scholars have focused primarily on recruitment and retention and failure to earn tenure because of gender and racial challenges that women of color face (e.g. Chou & Pho, 2017; Chou & Pho, 2018; Cora-Bramble, 2006; Epps, 2008; Swanson, Tanaka, & Gonzalez-Smith, 2018; Weems, 2003). While it is important to highlight barriers that hinder the success of women of color, it is my contention that

KEY POINTS

- Black women faculty in LIS are often confronted with racial discrimination, which creates major challenges for them to thrive in academia.

- LIS program deans and directors should be cognizant of Racial Battle Fatigue when recruiting, mentoring, and retaining faculty of color.

- Universities should strive to create safe environments for faculty of color.

it is even more crucial to give voice to the experiences of women faculty of color in their everyday work life. Although previous research addressed the experiences of faculty of color with regard to campus climate, little if any research has addressed the experiences of African-American faculty in LIS with regard to Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF). This paper will explore this phenomenon and aims to contribute to a growing body of literature in this area.

Unleashing the burden

African-American women faculty like myself may find it uncomfortable discussing our challenges in academia because thinking through where we fit within the systems of advantage and structural disadvantage in the academy is daunting. I accepted the invitation to think about the ways in which social inequality is reproduced in our discipline, despite our collective support for diversity[1] and inclusion, and in doing that I found it important to consider this issue as it relates to Black women faculty in LIS. It is my intention to shed light on the stress that women of color face daily while performing the already demanding responsibilities of research, teaching, and service.

My revelation came early! I realized in graduate school that my journey in academia would not be rosy. Despite being selected as part of a doctoral cohort of predominantly people of color, there were several instances when I witnessed microaggressions. For example, I was aghast when a senior professor chastised a doctoral student of color by saying that she should be "put on a leash." My colleague and I interpreted that to mean that, as a woman of color, she could not be free to express her thoughts and ideas, and when she did, it was not in the way that this professor saw fit, so my colleague was silenced. This early experience quickly made me aware that even among highly educated people and those who purport to embrace diversity, racism was still pervasive. I continued to witness and experience both subtle and blatant acts throughout my graduate study, ranging from being told that "there's probably some school in the country that will hire you after graduation" to questions about my choice to do a dissertation exploring racism in the LIS profession. The lesson was learned early on in graduate school. And those who don't learn the lessons don't make it, and they become the statistic that Black people can't get a PhD.

These microaggressions continued while I was an assistant professor. Perhaps the most egregious were the frequent references about my physique. These commentaries ranged from asking questions about my shoe size to the clothes that I wear to my weight. I often wondered if my intellectual ability took a backseat to my physical appearance, since there was more conversation around that than the support I needed as junior faculty. Having learned the lesson earlier, I was reluctant to challenge my colleagues because I did not want to become the statistic of a Black woman in academia who didn't get tenure. I have come to realize that these microaggressions have a real-life impact of and the long-term

accumulation of these experiences can create a burden and strain that manifest in physical, mental, and emotional fatigue.

Racial battle fatigue

Racial Battle Fatigue was conceptualized by education professor William A. Smith, with an initial focus on African-American male students and university faculty. His article "Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue: The Campus Racial Climate in a Post–Civil Rights Era" (2004) provides a detailed explanation of the context, function, and impact of RBF on the African-American university faculty member. He contends that RBF is likely to occur when a person of color reacts to the disturbing conditions in dealing with racism in their everyday work life. Symptoms of RBF can be physiological, psychological, or behavioral in nature, including but not limited to tension headaches, constant anxiety, ulcers, increased swearing and complaining, insomnia, rapid mood swings, difficulty thinking or speaking, and social withdrawal (Smith, 2004; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006). RBF is also the physical, mental, and emotional manifestation of racial microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle, unconscious, layered, and increasingly spoken and unspoken insults directed at people of color based on race and other distinguishing characteristics that cause unnecessary stress upon Blacks while benefiting Whites (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2006; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Over time, these racial microaggressions can cause various forms of mental, emotional, and physical stress. For African Americans and other people of color, the continuous exposure to and accrual of racial microaggressions cause RBF. The constant threat of racial microaggressions can cause RBF to remain activated, and symptoms can occur in anticipation of a racist event: rapid breathing, upset stomach, frequent diarrhea, or urination (Smith, 2004). Not only does the constant battle with racial stress disrupt the lives of people of color, but the subsequent psychological and physiological symptoms of RBF can also be fatal when it goes unnoticed, untreated, misdiagnosed, or dismissed (Smith et al., 2006).

RBF is a useful model for analyzing the constant exposure to stress from encountering everyday racism on the university campus (Smith, 2004; see Figure 1). Additionally, this theoretical framework aids in our understanding the perceived professional role expectations of faculty of color, (including Black faculty) and (White) women due to the increasing numbers of White women and students of color, and the corresponding need for women and people of color in the faculty ranks (Corbin, Smith & Garcia, 2018).

Black women faculty

Women of color—Asian, Black, Latina, and Native American—constitute a crucial yet small proportion of Library and Information Science (LIS) educators. According to the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), the pre-eminent association for Library and Information Science educators, these ethnic groups comprise approximately 20%
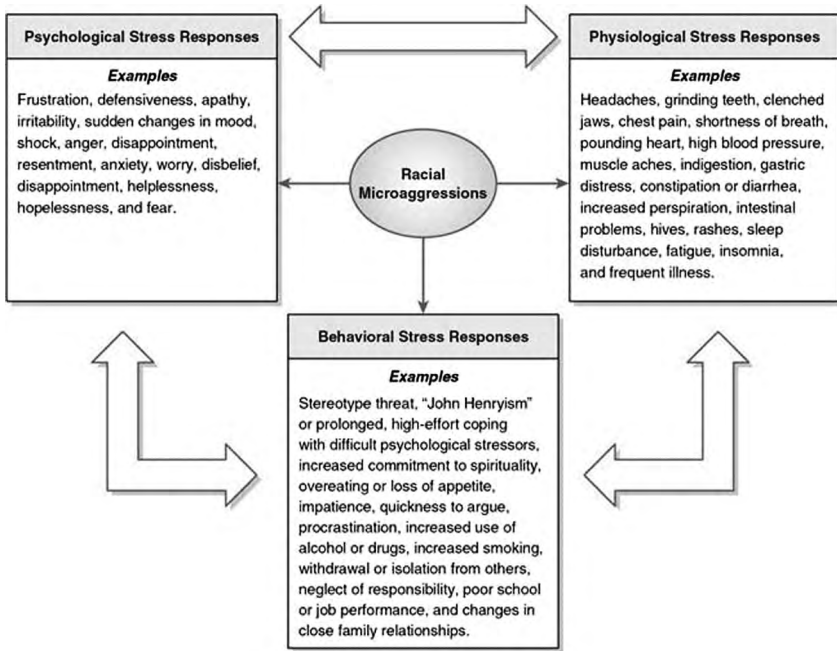
Figure 1:

of full-time faculty (ALISE, 2017; see Table 1). Black faculty make up 4% of ALISE membership. The gender disparity is far more equal with 50% male and 50% female (ALISE, 2017). Unfortunately, Black women faculty are far scarcer. This trend among LIS faculty of color mirrors what exists in other disciplines and stems from a long history of exclusion. In fact, it wasn't until the 1960s that northern universities began to provide a place for African-American professors. For Black women, faculty employment

Table 1: Ethnicity of Full-Time LIS Faculty

Ethnicity and Race of Full-Time Faculty in LIS	
Asian	13%
Black or African-American	4%
Hispanic	3%
Native American	0%
International	1%
Unknown	10%
White	63%

Source: ALISE (2017)

was virtually non-existent (Evans, 2007). At the turn of the twenty-first century, there were 176,485 tenured full professors in the nation's public and private research universities: 72% White men, 17% White women, 8% men of color (Black, Hispanic, and Native American combined), and 2% women of color (Evans, 2007).

The role of gender in academia provides unique experiences and challenges for women (Hill, Leinbaugh, Bradley, & Hazler, 2005). Since women have entered the academy, promotion and tenure, leadership positions such as provosts, deans, and directors, and inequities in salary have all been discordant issues between male and female faculty. In LIS, the average salary for male assistant professors is $84,561 per academic year compared to $74,659 for women (ALISE, 2017). Since the numbers of women faculty of color, and specifically of Black women faculty, are smaller, it can be surmised that they not only make less than their male counterparts but are also in fewer positions of leadership. However, salary and leadership aren't the only areas where Black women faculty have had to battle for equality; they often have to deal with the double burden of racism and sexism as well. Kerry Anne Rockquemore and Tracey Laszloffy (2008) argue that there is a fundamental difference in the experiences of Black and White tenure-track faculty because of the disparate positions they occupy in the larger social order. Natasha Mitchell and Jaronda Miller (2011, p. 193) assert that "for women of color there is an additional layer to their struggles that is predicated on the impact of race and ethnicity, all synergistically affecting how women of color enter, negotiate, and are retained within academia. Themes around the issues that require women of color to subjugate themselves to succeed and find acceptance in academia." Cathy Trower (2003) says that faculty of color experience unwelcoming and potentially hostile classroom environments in Predominantly White institutions, and these result in overt and/or covert racism, including being stereotyped and pigeon-holed:

- they are marginalized and find that their research is discredited, especially if it concerns minority issues;
- they bear a tremendous burden of tokenism, including feeling like they must be exemplars of their entire race and work twice as hard to get half as far;
- they feel obligated to represent their race or ethnicity on multiple committees that help the institution, but not necessarily the individual, and to mentor and advise many same-race students—a huge hidden workload that goes unrewarded in the promotion and tenure system; and
- they suffer from negative, unintended consequences of being perceived as an affirmative action or target-of-opportunity hire.

Furthermore, Gloria Thomas and Carol Hollenshead (2001) found five areas where Black women faculty believe they experience disadvantage

relative to their White colleagues: (1) organizational barriers that disproportionately rely on them for student mentoring activities and other types of work that are not rewarded in department evaluations; (2) a colder institutional climate that devalues their presence and contribution to campus life; (3) less respect for and recognition of their research from colleagues and the larger administration; (4) a lack of knowledge about the unwritten rules that govern university life; (5) and lack of access to career support from knowledgeable mentors.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to bring attention to the experiences of Black women faculty in LIS. As the ALISE statistics specify, Black female educators comprise only 3% of the LIS professoriate. Although there are shared experiences among all women educators, it is important to identify the challenges that women of color face. Racial Battle Fatigue offers a useful framework for understanding the experiences of Black women faculty in LIS.

The twenty-first century is a time of shifting demographics, where we see the former minority steadily become the majority. The new millennium has ushered in a heightened awareness of the importance of global and national understanding of cross-cultural perspectives. Such trends and transitions contribute to the shaping of American higher education. The racial and ethnic diversity of faculty is driven by the increasing diversity of the student body (Cook & Córdova, 2006; Cora-Bramble, 2006). In fact, Paul Jaeger and Renee Franklin (2007) examined how a lack of faculty of color in LIS programs results in a lack of students of color in library science. In other words, without diverse faculty, there's little hope of increasing diversity within the field. This is a systemic problem for the profession that has consequences beyond individual people (Totten, 1992). There needs to be further exploration of the role that race and racism play in our pedagogical interactions.

American author and playwright Ntozake Shange says, "to be Black, a woman and an academic is a metaphysical dilemma" (Williams & Hardaway, 2018). This profound statement describes the reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses. I hope this paper has shed light on the experiences that Black women faculty encounter in their everyday lives. We really do have our work cut out for us!

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Note

1. Diversity is defined here as the *Difference Among Us* (Lee & Chancellor, 2011), as cited in the ALISE Diversity Statement, 2012.

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