

“Walkin’ on Eggshells”: Black Doctoral Women and Gendered Racial Microaggressions in Agricultural and Life Science Disciplines

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Introduction/Need for Research

Black women have been and continue to be severely underrepresented in graduate programs. Black women have experienced decades of socio-historical challenges that have impeded their success in graduate programs, such as isolation and exclusion from white peers. The overrepresentation of whiteness, along with the underrepresentation of Blackness, reinforces the norm that Black women do not belong (Anderson, 2015). As a result, Black women have reported the lack of Black women graduate students and Black women faculty as a deterrent from enrolling in a graduate program (Croom & Patton, 2011), continuing in a graduate program, or pursuing a career in academia. There is a gap in the literature that seeks to understand how and why Black women are so severely underrepresented in AgLS education at all levels.

Gendered Racial Microaggressions

Gendered racial microaggressions have been used to other and subordinate Black women in society; and therefore, higher education. They manifest in four major themes: 1) assumptions of beauty and sexual objectification, 2) silenced and marginalized, 3) strong Black woman stereotype, and 4) angry Black woman stereotype (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Lewis et al.'s (2013) focus group study revealed Black women in higher education are at risk of experiencing gendered racial microaggressions in their social and collegiate relationships, the academic environment, and in the classroom. Gendered racial microaggressions have been linked to increased psychological distress, increased depressive symptoms, and lowered self-esteem (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016), and cause difficulty in forging relationships with faculty, staff, and potential mentors.

Purpose of the Study

This study is from a larger narrative study which examined how intersecting oppressed identities shape the experiences of Black doctoral women doctoral candidates in Agricultural and Life Science disciplines at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) and how those experiences shape their journey into or away from the academy (Author, 2020). The current study will focus specifically on the participants' experiences with gendered racial microaggressions. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What were Black doctoral women's experiences of gendered racial microaggressions in agricultural sciences at an HWI?
2. What coping strategies did they use to deal with gendered racial microaggressions?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Intersectionality. Intersectionality occurs when two or more oppressed identities interact to influence the experiences of Black women in society (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Crenshaw (1989) argued that any analysis lacking intersectionality cannot sufficiently address the lived experiences of Black women. Employing intersectionality as a lens to examine the interaction of race and gender is critical to understanding power and privilege, and their influence on experiences of minoritized individuals in different contexts (Nuñez, 2014).

Methodology

Critical narrative inquiry was deemed most appropriate for this study. Critical narrative inquiry questions how narratives intersect with power, and their positionality (Allen & Hardin, 2001). Following IRB approval, participants were recruited from four 1862 land-grant universities. Potential participants were identified using key informants and snowball sampling. Six participants took part in the study, including the author. Data was collected via zoom interviews with three rounds of interviews. Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire and a personal narrative, where they answered two open-ended questions about their doctoral journey. Interview audio, interview notes, and observations were transcribed and checked for accuracy.

Analysis

I conducted two cycles of coding. Initial, simultaneous, and narrative coding were used during the first cycle. During initial coding, I read interview transcripts line by line for familiarity with the data. Simultaneous coding allowed me to assign multiple codes to content that may have more than one meaning (Saldaña, 2013). Narrative coding allowed me to explore intra- and interpersonal participant experiences and actions to better understand their lived experiences. During the second cycle of coding, I used focused coding to organize the data around the most salient categories (Saldaña, 2013), then used those categories and codes to develop themes for a written narrative about the participants.

Preliminary Findings

Following data analysis, I identified three ways gendered racial microaggressions manifest for my participants: Assumptions of Communication Style and Beauty, Angry Black Woman, and Silenced and Marginalized. These stereotypes were projected upon my participants, gendered racial microaggressions occurred, and subsequently, my participants were silenced and marginalized. Avoiding speaking up for oneself contributes to the vicious cycle of microaggressive behavior. The perpetrator has the privilege of either not being aware or not caring they committed a microaggression, and the victim is put in a position of rocking the boat by speaking up, which leaves room for the perpetrator to offend again.

Conclusions/Implications

The findings from this study can be used to reassess departmental and faculty practices regarding appropriate and prohibited interactions with Black women doctoral students that shape their doctoral experiences. By naming how white supremacy, racism, and sexism converge with practice, institutional agents can generate solutions to contribute to Black women's success not only in AgLS, but also in their general graduate school experience. Further, this study may contribute to practice by providing recommendations that can challenge and hopefully lead to changes in institutional practices and norms that negatively influence Black women's experiences and persistence in doctoral education.

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