A faculty Woman of Color and micro-invalidations at a White research institution: A case of intersectionality and institutional betrayal

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A faculty Woman of Color and micro-invalidations at a White research institution: A case of intersectionality and institutional betrayal

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Abstract

Faculty Women of Color should be able to thrive and grow at our best research and teaching institutions. Assuring their academic and professional success requires that an institution's academic culture shift from a White, male-dominated, meritocratic environment to a global enrichment campus, one that values the richness and diversity of talent that Faculty Women of Color can contribute as scholars. Using CRT and Institutional Betrayal Theory as a context for understanding their experiences, this paper presents a personal narrative regarding the micro-invalidations that Faculty Women of Color face at America's White research institutions. The outcome of this discussion offers systemic recommendations for eradicating institutional betrayal elements that plague Faculty Women of Color on a daily basis.

Keywords: faculty women of color, institutional betrayal, critical race theory

Special Note: The use of the asterisk (*) indicates where pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect the identities of individuals.

Faculty Women of Color – a significant presence in all types of universities and colleges, whether two-year, private, research, or global – have contributed to the advancement of the academy through their research, leadership, teaching, and service. Yet despite their sustained involvement in American institutions, these women remain unrecognized. Now, as ever before, their accomplishments have been marginalized (Turner, 2002), and the resulting talent drain is problematic for so many reasons, not the least of which are the shifting roles for faculty in the future and new learner demands from an ever-growing multimodal student population.

Selinger (2016) predicted that 21st Century faculty will experience new demands as a result of "seismic shifts that will transform the future of higher education" (p. 4). He has examined changing roles and models for faculty, due in part to (1) public policy demands for enhanced information about higher education's return on investment, (2) new ways of teaching due to the onset of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and (3) students' educational degree shift since 2011 toward "stackable" credentials (p.

3). Added to these recent trends are other organizational climate changes, including (a) a supply-demand mismatch, (b) a more diverse regionalized enrollment shift, (c) a graying of the professorate [but one that differentiates between research and teaching] and (d) innovative methods and models of learning, all moving away from competency-based education.

These future roles and environmental shifts challenge us to consider the ways in which Faculty Women of Color will be cherished and rewarded in tomorrow's academy. For these reasons, it is a survival imperative for institutions that they learn what practices are best for the hiring, retention, and promotion of Faculty Women of Color. Colleges and universities will not recognize such creative strategies and best-practice interventions unless their collective climate is sanitized of harmful, microaggressive administrative practices and educational policies.

Partly through autobiographical narrative, this discussion will illustrate the marginalization of Faculty Women of Color. I will describe these practices within a critical race context, one that is embellished with an understanding of how Women of Color have been betrayed by their institutions as a direct result of micro-invalidations. Furthermore, I shall offer practical strategies for supporting and nurturing the academic talents and rich assets of Faculty Women of Color across all areas of the college campus.

By way of introduction, I am a clinical practitioner, trained in counseling psychology and educated at some of the finest research institutions in this country. And yet, my academic credentials have been challenged as insufficient and inadequate when measured against White, male-dominated standards of meritocracy, even within women-dominated psychology and education disciplines. I will share my own autobiographical account of the ways in which I have experienced micro-invalidations at predominantly White research universities. Although researchers in the behavioral sciences, education, and beyond have noted the existence of such toxic, dismissive communication for decades (Baez, 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007; Turner & Myers, 2000), examples of these harmful behaviors persist. Moreover, they are reinforced throughout the academy. It is hoped, therefore, that the outcome of this discussion will lead to a strategic re-alignment of discursive practices toward an affirming climate for Women Faculty of Color so that they have equal opportunity to reach their full potential as researcher/scholars and practitioners. Thus, we will begin this journey by identifying the antecedents of microaggressions.

Noted multicultural psychologist and researcher Dr. Derald Wing Sue provided college campuses with a simple, pragmatic description of racial microaggressions. He defined them as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). These comments manifest themselves in the form of daily routine snubs and insults; their intent is to denigrate an individual by virtue of race, gender, sexual orientation, or racial/ethnic background. Their intended outcome is to lessen the worthiness of that individual at that moment as well as beyond.

Gender-based microaggressions are calculated to insult Faculty Women of Color through the use of three social mechanisms: (1) gender-stereotypical assumptions, (2) sexual objectification, or (3) gender blindness (Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson, 2005; Nadal, 2009). These comments and actions are designed to undermine the legitimacy of their targeted victims, and, when combined with racialized microaggressions, their primary aim is to denigrate Faculty Women of Color – to reject and to quash them completely. Numerous studies have repeatedly shown that such scornful, offensive remarks and actions can exert a negative impact on individuals' emotional and physical health, affecting performance and productivity (Flores, Tschann, Dimas, Pasch, & de Groat, 2010; Lambert, Herman, Bynum, & Ialongo, 2009; Pieterse, Carter, Evans, & Walter, 2010; Wei, Alvarez, Ku, Russell, & Bonett, 2010). When Faculty Women of Color are confronted with such microaggressions daily, they envision themselves within an oppressive environment, one that neither respects nor protects them. The intersectionality of microinvalidations within a toxic campus environment is unproductive for Faculty Women of Color who possess talents and assets equal to those of others in their respective fields. As a result, their integrity as productive, contributing members of the community is threatened. This is tragic and unacceptable.

For Faculty Women of Color, race and gendered microaggressions are not experienced within a cultural vacuum. Rather, such insults normally occur on campuses infused with a cultural climate of oppression, political power domination, and race-based privilege. For this reason, it is necessary to view their lived experiences within a hierarchy of power, layered atop an oppressive campus climate. Pittman (2010) observed that oppression refers to both a system of obstacles (p. 184) as well as the individual acts that maintain the privilege and authority of the dominant group (Bankston, 2000; Jaggar and Young, 1998; Johnson 2000; Roth, 2005). While some Faculty Women of Color may encounter certain unique and/or discrete incidents at predominantly White institutions, the universal reality is that such an oppressive cultural climate is widespread. These women find themselves trapped like a bird in the cage at the entrance to the coal mine; and even if they enter the mine shaft, it won't get any better.

First Faculty Job Interview

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.
—Maya Angelou, "Caged Bird"

I once interviewed for a faculty position at a Southeastern urban research institution. Afterwards, I was to have dinner with Dr. Mika Jones*, the campus diversity coordinator. She told me to wait outside the classroom building while she retrieved her car. As I approached the foyer of the building where the entrance to the Law Library was visible, I noticed two campus police looking on as a slim, frail, and

disheveled African American woman, not much older than me, was handcuffed by officers. As she was then taken from the building, she saw me attired in my "power suit." We made eye contact. No words were spoken. The officers did not acknowledge me, but continued dragging her out of the building. I thought, "What am I getting myself into? Why have I come here? Do I really belong at this institution?" This was less than a month after the Rodney King verdict in April 1992 that generated protests and violence throughout Los Angeles and eventually the rest of the country. Realizing that the nation was still on edge, I again asked myself whether I belonged at this school. Later I told my host, Dr. Jones, what I had just witnessed. She could offer no explanation and simply shrugged it off.

I accepted the job at that Southeastern institution. However, I was on guard at all times. In my first quarter, African American students organized a takeover of the administration building. The new college president called all African American faculty together so that we could provide him with our feedback and suggestions for best managing this crisis. I was grateful that he deliberately, intentionally sought our advice. He valued our wisdom and cherished our creativity in resolving the issue. Yet on my way to the president's office, I noticed snipers atop the roof of the building.

The student protest elements were negotiated one by one in a classroom, with the students at one end and the college president and a dozen other African American faculty, including me, at the other. The student protest ended peacefully, with very few (if any) arrests. Student-protester demands were considered and acted upon judiciously. A first – if I must say so.

Shortly thereafter, I learned that my position title had benefitted from a salary enhancement to promote and retain faculty of color. Such a reward, however, was not greeted well by my department chair. "Why should *you* be the only one to get this salary enhancement when others are deserving?" he snapped. It was clear to me that his mention of the word "others" applied to my White colleagues. To add insult to injury, a White male tenured professor was appointed to our department, and I was later assigned to co-teach practicum with him. On the surface, it all seemed benign – except that my new teaching partner was actually a former dean of students who had been the target of racial protests because of his biased policies regarding African Americans. As one who was selected to work with him, I felt marginalized and unsafe.

My story illustrates a conflicted campus culture that used one hand to cuff and restrain one African American woman – like a "caged bird" – yet used the other hand to offer promise to me. It was a campus that permitted African American students to protest peacefully, yet forced me to work with an individual whom students had called "the oppressor." To have refused to work with him would have been academic suicide, as I was one of only two untenured faculty in the department.

I have recounted the preceding narrative in order to illustrate that women of color on campus, at least the few of us who exist, face challenges involving the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in ways White faculty can never experience or understand. With regard to the treatment of Faculty Women of Color within institutions of higher education, the current literature reveals patterns of racial and gender inequality (Aguirre, 2000; Allen et al., 2002; Gregory 2001; Pittman 2010). The overall context that frames

my own narrative and those of other Faculty Women of Color rests with two theoretical approaches that intersect (if not collide) – Institutional Betrayal Theory (Freyd, 1996) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Each is reviewed here briefly and their intersection is considered thereafter.

Institutional Betrayal

Faculty Women of Color speak openly of uneasy perceptions that the institutions they work for cannot be trusted to support them. What they experience might well be considered betrayal by many within the academic unit. When they need support, the academy cannot be relied upon to help. Smith and Freyd (2014) have observed that when trusted and powerful institutions, such as schools, churches, the military, and governments, act in ways that bring harm upon those dependent on them for safety and well-being, these experiences are referred to as *institutional betrayal* (p. 575)*. This practice may refer to "wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g., sexual assault) committed within the context of the institution" (Freyd, 2014). The term is derived generally from sexual assault, sexual harassment, and interpersonal violence literature; its framework comes from *betrayal trauma theory,* which sets forth a situation where a victim of abuse deliberately chooses to remain silent (or even unaware) of the episode, especially when the perpetrator is a caregiver (Freyd, 1996). This model extends the research on social contracts by noting that individuals are keen or precise in their ability to recognize betrayal in humans. Freyd (1996) argues that, in some instances, victims are reluctant to reveal betrayals because it is counterproductive to their own survival. Betrayal trauma occurs when the people or institution one is dependent on for survival significantly violates that person's trust or well-being. Childhood physical, emotional, or sexual abuse perpetrated by a caregiver are chief examples of betrayal trauma (Freyd, 2008).

As Smith and Freyd (2013) pointed out, institutional betrayal can (and does) occur anywhere, regardless of the type of agency, and such betrayal is independent of the private or public status of said institutions. Furthermore, as Freyd (2014) stated, "Some situations may appear to be easily identified as involving institutional betrayal, whereas others may be less obvious at first glance, but still constituting institutional betrayal" (p. 577).

Freyd (2001) has observed that traumatic events differ along a continuum in degree of fear and betrayal, depending on the context and characteristics of the event. Freyd and Smith (2013) portrayed institutional betrayal along a two-dimensional continuum (Figure 1). The horizontal dimension asks to determine whether the incident was located on a continuum from "apparently isolated" to "apparently systemic." The vertical axis ranges along a continuum of institutional action from" omission" to "commission." The placement of an institution's actions regarding an incident or event determines their subsequent placement along the continuum of institutional betrayal. It portrays the role of two dimensions of institutional betrayal that may impact how easy it is to identify the role of the institution. Although perhaps less obvious, institutional betrayal can be at the center of events that seem to be isolated when those events occur in an institutional context, and similarly it can be responsible for harmful acts of omission.

The student protests at the Southeastern institution regarding racial inequities could be placed in the lower right-hand corner, as illustrating a lack of respect for the civil rights of students who felt oppressed by their undergraduate learning conditions at the time. It represents an initial apparent problem. The assignment for me to work with the former dean of students was an institutional action, one approved by the new university president. It also required me to work with an individual, a high-ranking tenured professor, whom students perceived as racially biased. While the arrangement satisfied the student/protesters, it placed me in an untenable situation and forced me into an unsafe work environment. The lack of safety and security I experienced placed that action in the upper-right corner of Freyd's continuum – a deliberate action (commissioned) that was systemic in nature (as part of a negotiated settlement among students and the president). My chairperson placed me in that unsafe role to team-teach with the offending administrator without regard to my emotional well-being or safety since I was the only faculty woman of color in the department. Giving me a salary incentive so that I might co-teach with a racially biased administrator was no incentive at all. At best, it was a sign of disregard; at worst, it was an unsafe maneuver. As a result, I felt undervalued, shut out, and, professionally at risk. I could not trust a campus and a department that would subject me to an oppressive, offensive situation.

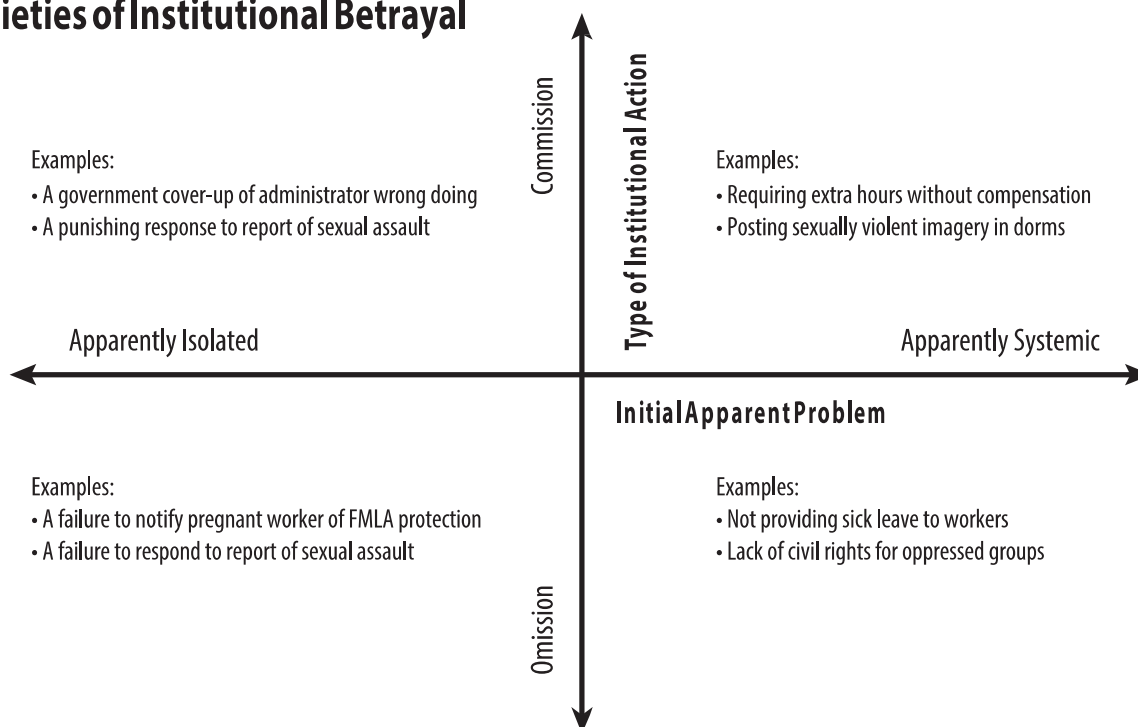## Varieties of Institutional Betrayal

Type of Institutional Action

Commission

Examples:
• A government cover-up of administrator wrong doing
• A punishing response to report of sexual assault

Examples:
• Requiring extra hours without compensation
• Posting sexually violent imagery in dorms

Apparently Isolated   **Apparently Systemic**

Initial Apparent Problem

Examples:
• A failure to notify pregnant worker of FMLA protection
• A failure to respond to report of sexual assault

Examples:
• Not providing sick leave to workers
• Lack of civil rights for oppressed groups

Omission

Figure 1. Varieties of Institutional Betrayal

Institutional betrayal remains as vibrant today as it was more than twenty years ago when I was working at that Southeastern university. Yet colleges and universities fail to take responsibility for their complicity in such betrayal. Additional research and administrative best practices are desperately needed to uncover all elements involved with systemic breaches of trust.

Microaggressions and Institutional Betrayal

Gomez (2015) posited microaggression as a form of institutional betrayal. She considered its long-range implications in her research on mental health utilization. Arguing that institutional betrayal is a breach of institution-individual trust, Gomez offered several transformations that must accompany within-agency changes. Her recommendations have immediate relevancy for colleges and universities dealing with institutional betrayal issues. She advised the following: (a) societal advocacy for equality, (b) relationship-building with professional allies, (c) creation and advertisement of concrete changes in the structure, policy, and professionals of organizations, (d) historical and cultural education (in relevant professional programs), and (e) the recruitment and retention of professionals diverse in background and expertise into the field (Gomez, 2015, p. 131-132). While these recommendations were contextualized to address systemic mental health utilization inadequacies, they are equally applicable to higher education institutions as they seek to redress systemic microaggressions, especially those used against Faculty Women of Color, and reaffirm the relevancy of examining microaggressions within the framework of institutional betrayal contextualized by critical race tenets.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its core tenets have been examined and applied across many areas of education for more than 40 years. The concept was first used as a legal scholar defense for arguing civil rights cases, but according to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), the last three decades have witnessed its application to college campuses and beyond (p. 6). They identified five core tenets of CRT. I am introducing them here to provide an important context for this discussion relative to institutional betrayal.

1. **Racism is ordinary and occurs daily.** Racism is difficult to cure. It is an integral part of our society and the way we conduct business in American society. Administrators must move away from naïve notions that racial incidents are isolated from one another. Rather, they must come to understand that race and racism are endemic to their organizational structures, including those occurring on predominately White college campuses.

2. **Interest convergence**. Although many of them would deny it, Whites in powerful positions have benefitted from racism (materially), as have those of the working-class (psychically) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8). Interest convergence, or material determinism, advances the interests of both White-privileged, or those in power positions (materially), and working-class Whites (psychically). For these reasons, there is little incentive to eradicate racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8). CRT challenges claims of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity, asserting that these claims camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege

of dominant groups. Interest convergence elements on college campuses weigh into their inaction or institutional unwillingness to change such egregious behavior.

3. **Social construction thesis**. Race and racism are products of social thought and social relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As such, they are socially constructed concepts, created and sustained by members of society, who invent, manipulate, or retire race whenever it is convenient for those in power. Dominant society racializes individuals and groups and later endows those racialized characteristics as permanent for the purpose of responding to labor market demands.

4. **Intersectionality and anti-essentialism.** Everyone on a college campus has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances. The challenge for college administrators is to identify these overlapping entities and find ways to acknowledge and respect them, especially as they apply to Women of Color and others whose intersecting identities are marginalized.

5. **Unique voices of color.** Because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, African American, Native Peoples, Asian American, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their White colleagues matters that Whites are unlikely to know. This concept highlights the necessity and importance of marginalized individuals and groups speaking out so that their voices and their stories are heard, prized, and valued throughout the campus or community (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

These tenets of Critical Race Theory will likely intersect with institutional betrayal. If colleges and universities can become aware of the exact nature of that intersectionality, they can engage Faculty Women of Color in respectful ways that affirm their talent and professional skills. Moreover, this will open doors for a new discussion about systemic oppressive elements across the campus. Such dialogue and actions are affirmative and positive for Faculty Women of Color.

Intersection of Institutional Betrayal and Critical Race Theory

Since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954), colleges and universities have spent at least six decades wrestling with ways to promote equity of access for racial and ethnic minority students. Yet there is still work to be done in order to fulfil that dream of access for marginalized and underserved communities across the nation.

Similarly, there is still a mountain of equity to be achieved in making the campus community safe for Faculty Women of Color and students. Such actions require that colleges and universities find equitable resolutions for managing the multitude of micro-invalidations and other forms of microaggressions that assault Faculty Women of Color endlessly. Within this context, one must ask, "What is the best way to change the climate of institutional betrayal? How can institutions alter and improve the campus environment in ways that will break the 'cycle of institutional betrayal' forever?" I contend that institutions committed to this change must see and acknowledge the intersectionality between institutional betrayal and critical race theories. To this point, I offer for consideration these five guidelines

for systemic change that are essential for the future of colleges and universities and for the growth and promotion of Faculty Women of Color.

1. **Institutional betrayal is endemic to American colleges and universities.** Institutions must be brutally honest about institutional betrayal and realize how their campus environments have promulgated a "betrayal climate" for Faculty Women of Color and other underrepresented groups. Just as Delgado and Stefancic (2012) applied critical race theory to argue that racism was endemic to institutions, colleges and universities must first acknowledge their own climate of betrayal in ways that marginalize Faculty Women of Color.

2. **Institutional betrayal must be understood within the context of interest convergence.** Applying interest convergence to matters of institutional betrayal, administrators must consider how interest convergence applies to institutional betrayal. How is institutional betrayal sustained by the status quo? And who benefits from maintaining a betrayal culture on campus?

3. **Institutional betrayal must be viewed as a harmful social construct.** CRT posits racism as socially learned and constructed within our own institutions and schools. While social construction is an important feature in critical race theory, it is also present within institutional betrayal. Thus, social constructions, along with their contribution to abusive climates for Faculty Women of Color, must be managed using the same rigor with which racial biases in schools and institutions must be exterminated. Institutional betrayal as a social construct provides CRT practitioners with a strong rationale and context for developing institutional interventions to address both race and betrayal elements on college campuses.

4. **Intersectionality and anti-essentialism are essential ingredients for any intervention that seeks to remove racism and betrayal components from a college campus.** The necessity of intersectionality is obvious to Faculty Women of Color and other disenfranchised college groups. Institutions committed to eradicating institutional betrayal and racism will recognize and embrace the inevitable intersectionality that impact Faculty Women of Color daily.

5. **Promote Faculty Women of Color's unique voices.** Faculty Women of Color have different college campus life experiences from those of White women. For this reason, we must allow Faculty Women of Color to share their personal and professional life experiences in ways that affirm their cultural richness and preserve their academic integrity and personal dignity. Their voices must be heard by all administrators and must remain uncensored if their stories of betrayal are to be heard and validated.

Summary

Faculty Women of Color must be able to thrive and grow at our best American research and teaching institutions, for they have a prominent role in the future of higher education in changing the ways in which new student demands are met. Assuring their academic and professional success will require an

institutional culture shift from a White, male-dominated and meritocratic institution to a global enrichment campus – one that embraces the diversity of talent that Faculty Women of Color bring to the campus in support of their diverse learners and scholars. Colleges must be proactive in destroying the systemic culture that sustains racist and betrayal practices. They must forge the transition to a climate of talent, inclusion, and respect for difference, a transition that begins with one student and one faculty member at a time. This change must be sustained within a climate that nurtures and values diverse learners, faculty, and professional staff, all working and learning within an inclusive climate that embraces Faculty Women of Color and promotes their academic talents to their fullest.

We have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society.
— Angela Y. Davis

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About the Author

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