Microaggressions, Marginalization, and Stress: Issues of Identity, Place, and Home for Minority Faculty in Academia

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Abstract

Social relations between racial minority faculty and dominant group (white) faculty are chronicled by racial and ethnic minority faculty through their narrative accounts in the research literature of microaggressions they experience in academia. Treating these narrative accounts as archival data can serve as a research strategy for understanding the presence and voice of racial and ethnic minority faculty in colleges and universities. I examine the experiences of racial and ethnic minority faculty found in the research literature. My examination of their experiences frames the context for discussing the social relations between minority faculty and dominant group faculty. I argue that an examination of the social relations of racial and ethnic minority faculty with dominant group faculty serves as a window for observing institutional practices that situate the presence of racial and ethnic minority faculty in academia and which, as a result, produce social and psychological stress for minority faculty regarding questions of identity, place, and home in the academic culture.

Keywords

Microaggressions · Stress · Minority faculty · Narrative accounts · Identity

Institutions of higher education are contested terrain for minority faculty. The academic culture restricts the access of minority faculty to opportunity and the climate is uninviting for minority faculty (Aguirre Jr., 2000). The presence and prevalence of a dominant (White) group ideology in shaping academia's culture and climate transposes the presence and participation of minority faculty as *matter out of place* – transgressors in a culture and climate not intended for their presence. I have borrowed the term *matter out of place* from Mary Douglas (1966). For example, McKay (1995: 50) has noted that colleges and universities are "rooted in the premises that informed Western culture's white, male-dominated, closed intellectual system for hundreds of years … elite was this system that for centuries it excluded everyone outside of its designated knowers, including Anglo-American women." One might observe that given the exclusion of minority faculty from *presence-defining* activities, such as career advancement, by the academic culture, minority faculty are subject to microaggressions that situate them as *matter out of place* (Pittman, 2012).

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Is it possible to observe the types of microaggressions that target the presence of minority faculty in the academic culture? Aguirre Jr. (2000) and Aguirre Jr. and Martinez (2007) argue that the microaggressions minority faculty experience in academia are nested within the following indicators: the expectation that minority faculty will assume responsibility for advising minority students and teaching minority-focused classes; the overloading of minority faculty with service (community) activities that constrain the time minority faculty can devote to research and publishing activities (Tack & Patitu, 1992). Taken together, these indicators operate to situate minority faculty in a subordinate status relative to dominant (White) faculty in the academic culture – a subordinate status that could be viewed as a type of structural violence minority faculty experience in academia (see Hamer & Lang, 2015). One could also view the microaggressions experienced by minority faculty in the academic culture as a mechanism for buffering the privileged position of dominant (White) group faculty (Padilla & Montiel, 1998; Turner, 2003).

My purpose in this essay is to construct a descriptive profile of the types of microaggressions minority faculty experience in the academic culture. Sue et al. (2007) have identified three types of microaggressions or micro-insults minority persons experience in their interactions with dominant group persons: (a) overt racial interactions involving a racial slur, (b) labeling the presence of minority persons in professional occupations as an outcome of preferential treatment, and (c) invalidation of the minority person's social reality. I argue that the microaggressions minority faculty experience in their social relations with dominant group faculty tend to be subtle and are often dismissed by dominant group faculty as "innocent comments," as "slips of the tongue," or as "a misunderstanding." The social relations between minority faculty and dominant group faculty provide a window for observing the practice of microaggressions that target minority faculty in academia. To that end, I will examine the narratives of minority faculty regarding their experiences in academia available in the research literature in order to illustrate how they contextualize the microaggressions they experience.

Much of the research literature regarding the life experiences of minority faculty in academia is narrative in its methodology, consisting mostly of autobiographical accounts by minority faculty regarding their presence in academia (Bell, 2003; Delgado, 1995; Lorimer & Parr, 2014). I treat the narrative accounts of minority faculty as stories regarding their struggles to find an identity, place, and home in academia. Taken together, the stories are a vehicle for minority faculty to narrate to others about their struggle to promote a collective sense of belonging in academia; in a sense, these narrative accounts are transformative for the presence of minority faculty.

The narrative accounts of minority faculty are found in collections that focus on situating the life experiences of minority faculty in academia (e.g., Altbach & Lomotey, 1991; Padilla & Chavez Chavez, 1995; Valverde & Castenell, 1998). In this essay, I have chosen to give voice to the lived experiences of minority faculty in order to show the reader that their stories are valid representations of academic life and that there are competing perceptions of social life that can instruct us regarding the rich texture of diverse life experiences in the academy. In what follows, I first present an overview of the narrative inquiry approach for examining the lived experiences of minority faculty. I then proceed to an examination of the narratives of minority faculty to illustrate how they are marginalized by the dominant group.

Telling Stories in Academia

The use of narrative inquiry is an accepted methodology in sociology for studying how persons interpret their social interactions with other persons and their participation in social institutions (Bruner, 1986). Narrative methodology has assumed various representations in sociology: case histories, personal interviews, urban ethnography, and content analysis (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Maines, 1993; Richardson, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988). Regarding

narrative inquiry, Alvermann (2000: 2) notes that it consists of a "variety of research practices, ranging from those that tell a story of how individuals understand their actions through oral and written accounts of historical episodes to those that explore certain methodological aspects of storytelling." The use of narrative inquiry allows researchers to show that social reality is a layered phenomenon that requires subjectivity based on personal experiences and intuitiveness as interpretive guides for its study (Bell, 1999; Delgado, 1989; Richardson, 1990, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988).

The *subjectivity* of the personal narrative has caused some critics to argue that treating the *personal narrative* as social data is suspect because it does not fit conventional methods that could be used to evaluate its validity and generalizability. According to the critics, the personal narrative is suspect because the narrator or storyteller is perceived as a potential source of bias and distortion (e.g., see Baron, 1998; Cizek, 1995; Delgado, 1993; Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Maines, 1993). However, I propose that the personal narrative is a valuable, and powerful, method for understanding everyday life because it gives substance to the narrative and establishes intersubjective identification between a narrator or storyteller and another person's narrative or story of their lived experience, thus indicating a degree of validity that a narrative makes sense.

The critics also perceive the personal narrative as *taking a side*. The personal narrative is perceived as the product of a storyteller who has decided to take a side in telling a story (Bochner, 2001). The critics are working with the assumption that social science researchers do not choose sides in their work. However, social scientists take sides just like most other persons in everyday life (Becker, 1967; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). For example, the topic one chooses to study, the statistical procedures one utilizes for making inferences, and the language one uses for cloaking observations are products of choice. The choice a social scientist makes is, as a result, dependent on the side one takes to interpret the phenomenon under study. Ironically, despite arguing for the neutrality and objectivity of their research, it is not uncommon to observe that the social sciences are transformed into a contested terrain of competing interpretations as to what is neutrality and objectivity (Winter, 2000).

Living on the Margins in Academia

The journey into academia for minority faculty is an exceptional one. It is an exceptional journey because they have had to overcome obstacles in their social backgrounds, such as poverty, inadequate schools, and racism, in order to pursue a college or university education (Martinez, 1999; Turner & Myers, 2000; Washington & Harvey, 1989). Minority faculty are not simply survivors; they have overcome obstacles designed to be insurmountable. The journey minority faculty undertake in higher education is exceptional because it chronicles their ability to survive social forces and overcome institutional practices that seek to position them at the margin of an opportunity structure traditionally available only to dominant group faculty. For example, Kelly and McCann (2013: 29) note the following in their study of women faculty of color (WFOC) at predominantly White institutions of higher education:

> Although it is important to highlight barriers that impede WFOCs' success in the academy, it is also crucial to give voice to the challenges that WFOC experienced through successful tenure and promotion. In this way barriers and challenges are not falsely consigned only to WFOC who were not conventionally successful. Naming the barriers and challenges in stories of WFOC who surpassed the glass ceiling of tenure in predominately White, research extensive universities in the U.S. gives credence to the women's resiliency, to the core belief in their ability to earn tenure, and to how their socialization as newcomers could have derailed their success.

The ability of minority faculty to overcome barriers from the margin of higher education has been referred to by some scholars as examples of "resistance from the margins" (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001) and as "instances of resistance and victory" (Allen, 1996). Despite undergoing an exceptional journey through academia, minority faculty face

challenges from dominant group faculty and dominant group students regarding their presence in academia. Regarding dominant group students, research has argued that they are likely to evaluate minority faculty based on racial stereotypes instead of their teaching performance in the classroom (Lazos, 2012; Menges & Exum, 1983; Williams, 2007).

Unsurprisingly, with the university often seen as a meritocracy, discussions focused on the presence and participation of minority faculty are often the basis for attacking affirmative action programs and initiatives in higher education (Aguirre Jr. & Martinez, 2014). The lingering controversy over affirmative action policies has resulted in a mindset among dominant group faculty that portrays minority faculty as invaders storming the gates of academia. In particular, for dominant group students and faculty, minority faculty are regarded as undeserving of presence and voice in academia (Aguirre Jr., 2005). The centrality of a mindset in academia that nested in microaggressions against minority faculty is a structural issue that tests academia's commitment to eliminating racist practices.

Consider Aguirre Jr.'s (1995) reflections on those moments in the classroom when he reveals to students his accidental journey into higher education. He points out in his narrative that his migrant farm worker background was certainly not a pathway that dominant group persons pursue as a traditional path into academia. He can see the confusion on the faces of dominant group students as they transform his presence into matter out of place, especially when they hear him say that his journey into academia was accidental. In their eyes, his presence is illegitimate, as it occurred during the civil rights movement, when dominant group status was openly challenged across all institutions; he is only present in the views of some students because a dominant group person was overlooked in order for him to enter academia. He has come to the realization that dominant group students, as well as many minority students, prefer that he construct a fable of his journey into academia as the outcome of a well-designed plan, especially a rational and goal-driven tale.

Minority faculty often ask, "What are the images dominant group faculty construct of us?" If dominant group faculty tend to regard the presence of minority faculty in academia as illegitimate, then how might they express their perception of minority faculty as illegitimate participants in academia? In my conversations with minority faculty over the past three decades, I have learned that it's a question they often ask of themselves. I've come to believe that minority faculty ask themselves the question in order to resolve the ambiguity they experience as a result of being reconstituted as "matter out of place" in the eyes of dominant group faculty. Ironically, minority faculty in academia are often transformed into that odd family member that a family tries to hide from view as much as possible, but is never quite able to make them disappear.

Resistance in Academia

For minority faculty, presence and voice in the academy, and in its sponsored activities such as research conferences, is a struggle that wears at them with greater costs than those experienced by dominant group faculty (Aguirre Jr., 2000; Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, & Galindo, 2009; Nair, 2014; Padilla & Chavez Chavez, 1995; Turner & Myers, 2000). White (2007), for example, recounts her experience at an academic conference in which the conference presenter forgot her name: "The setting was simple enough. I gave a talk and the master of ceremonies forgot my name. He could have looked at the program when he referred to me in subsequent remarks, but he repeatedly called me something other than 'Dr. Gray White.' … I, a [B]lack female academic with 'Dr.' in front of my name, was someone who was not supposed to be there. For them, I would be 'matter out of place,' and as usual, on some unconscious level I understood that I would have to prove that I was in fact in the right place—where I was supposed to be" (p. 5). In forgetting Dr. White's name, the master of ceremonies, a dominant group member, made her

invisible to conference attendees. Forgetting Dr. White's name in the introduction is a microaggression in that it serves to reinforce the Dr. White's positioning in academia *as matter out of place*. As such, minority faculty end up working harder than dominant group faculty because they need to overcome microaggressions that attack their presence and voice in academia (Bell, 1994).

In addition to dominant group faculty making minority faculty invisible, dominant group faculty resist their incorporation into the organizational culture of higher education by not recognizing the legitimate status of minority faculty. Incorporation into the organizational culture is necessary for acquiring and establishing meaningful roles in the knowledge production process in academia. In a study of minority faculty focusing on their perceptions of the institutional climate in academia, Delgado (1988: 12) writes, "A young Hispanic professor teaching at a major school approached a senior [W]hite male colleague to discuss some issues she was about to cover in class. The professor appeared not to recognize her and asked her to please see his secretary for an appointment – the treatment he routinely applies to students." The failure to recognize a minority faculty by dominant group faculty is a microaggression in that it makes minority group faculty invisible and positions them in a subordinate position by lowering their status to that of a student.

Furthermore, dominant group faculty marginalize minority faculty by the language they use to characterize them. Blackshire-Belay (1998: 32) provides the following example regarding Black faculty: "While a [W]hite professor is said to be vocal or assertive, a [B]lack one is seen to be out of line or aggressive. While a [W]hite professor is said to be confident, a [B]lack one is arrogant. While a [W]hite professor is said to be a strong leader, a [B]lack one is looked on as combative." Accordingly, a Chinese-American professor observes in the selection process of applicants for a faculty position that dominant group and minority group job applicants are perceived and treated differently by dominant group faculty. According to the Chinese-American professor, "I think it's obvious to other people too that when you are of an ethnic persuasion you get treated one way and when you are of a different ethnic persuasion you get treated another way. … This [minority] person didn't get a tour of the campus. This person did not get a chance to talk to junior faculty where we had another [W]hite male candidate come in and he got a tour of the campus; he got to talk to junior faculty" (quoted in Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998: 332).

Perhaps the most noticeable manner in which dominant group faculty marginalize the presence of minority faculty is by resisting the incorporation of their ideas and research into the organizational culture of higher education. Moreover, the most prevalent form of resisting the inclusion of the ideas of minority faculty is by devaluing their scholarship (Ross & Edwards, 1998). Devaluing the scholarship of minority faculty by dominant group faculty serves both to limit resource opportunities for them and to exclude their knowledge from the organizational cultures of colleges and universities. For example, Trueba (1998: 80) notes that dominant group faculty experience discomfort when dealing with minority faculty because they are unsure how the incorporation of minority faculty into academia will "affect [their] [W]hite life-style and their control of educational institutions." The *discomfort* dominant group faculty experience with minority faculty is regarded as a factor that promotes an *anti-minority mindset* among them. This *anti-minority mindset* is used by dominant group faculty to construct and promote images that marginalize minority faculty in the academic culture. The mindset also promotes insensitivity and racist motives in the social relations between dominant group faculty and minority faculty (Brown, 1990). A result from the *anti-minority mindset* held by dominant group faculty utilizes *differentness* as a rationale for locating the research and teaching activities of minority faculty on the periphery of the academic culture, such as minority studies programs or minority research centers (Aguirre Jr., 2000).

Resistance in the Classroom

The marginalization of minority faculty by dominant group faculty might be replicated in the social relations between dominant group students and minority faculty. For example, a Mexican American law professor notes that a "[W]hite student from a wealthy family attempted to curry favor by telling me out of the blue that she 'thought in Spanish'" (Johnson, 1999: 136). Instead of currying favor, the student's remark can be interpreted as a subtle reminder to the Mexican American professor that they are situated at the margins of academia. The example illustrates how dominant group students perceive minority faculty as *different* and that their *identifiability as different* creates the opportunity for initiating social relations that do not recognize their inclusion in academia. Hamilton (2002: 33) provides an example of an African American professor's experiences teaching an introductory African American literature class: "White students began coming to his office hours – not to ask for guidance on raising their grades, as the Black students had – but to ask to be allowed to take the class pass-fail." In the minority professor's eyes, White students making this request were marginalizing his presence by asserting an "arrogance, the sense of entitlement … [that] they just get to check out."

Another way by which dominant group students marginalize minority faculty is through course evaluations. Accordingly, Robinson (1997) provides an example based on his experience as an African American professor of law. He notes that some White students marginalize minority faculty by expressing their unwillingness to accept an African American in the role of intellectual or professor by providing negative and angry comments on their teaching evaluations. Robinson writes that some "[W]hite students who have never experienced us as institutional authorities or as intellectual role models … react on many unseen, but expressed levels, one of which is anger and jealousy" (p. 172).

Dominant group students also marginalize minority faculty by assuming that they do not possess the linguistic capabilities possessed by dominant group faculty. For example, an Asian woman faculty observes how dominant group students marginalize her presence in the classroom via the comments they make in their teaching evaluations (Han, 2012: 34). A dominant group student writes in their evaluation of her performance in the classroom: "There was a disconnect between the instructor and us. She [Dr. Han] is very smart, but I can't say I learn[ed] much or anything at all in her class. We were unable to understand some of her directions because of her broken English." Reference to the minority professor's English proficiency by dominant group students is a reflection of the privilege they exercise in reinforcing the minority professor's "otherness."

Perhaps the most egregious practice dominant group students exercise is to question the academic qualifications of minority faculty members. For example, an African American female law school professor offers an account of a conversation she had with an African American law school student who recounted a conversation with a White student (Harris, 1992: 346). According to the student providing the account, she was talking with a White student in the library about Professor Harris's class. The White student asked the African American student about her views regarding Professor Harris's teaching ability. After offering her views, the African American student asked the White student for her view of Professor Harris. The White student proceeded to say "Professor Harris is pretty good," but that this was unexpected since, as a Black woman, "she probably wasn't qualified." Ironically, Coston, Berry, Ross, Heard, and Jenks (1999) note in a discussion of how minority status affects the perception of dominant group students that Black faculty are not "real" professors but rather are "Black entertainers" in the classroom.

Dominant group students resist the presence of minority faculty in academia by exhibiting interpersonal behavior to communicate their perception that dominant group faculty are the only ones with privilege in the classroom. A Latina professor of education notes, for example, that White students in her classes "exhibit body

language, verbal reactions, facial expressions, disengagement, judgmental attitudes, and a subtle resistance. I feel as if they had put up a glass wall, including low expectations, to impede my reaching them" (Torres, 2002: 89). Despite having satisfied the requirements for joining academia as faculty, minority faculty encounter obstacles from dominant group students and faculty to have presence in the classroom.

Similarly, a Chicana professor of psychology observes that when she subtitled a psychology course she was teaching as "a study in alienation, domination, and the psychology of oppression," the "[W]hite students, both male and female, quickly dubbed the course 'Oppression 151.' It was my impression that they subtitled it in reference to themselves – their own oppression at being forced to turn the magnifying glass on themselves, and I – a Chicana (rarely seen teaching at UCLA) – became their 'oppressor'" (Romero, 2000: 309). One can argue that the resistance exhibited by dominant group students toward minority faculty is an outcome of their privileged position in the classroom. From another perspective, the resistance exhibited by dominant group students toward minority faculty members reflects a nested context of racist attitudes and feelings in academia (e.g., see Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Harlow, 2003; Jackson & Crawley, 2003; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996), one that is embedded in and part of the increasingly overt racism found within the neoliberal culture in academia (Martinez, 2016).

Summary Remarks

I have utilized the research literature in order to compile narrative accounts that illustrate how minority faculty describe the resistance they encounter from dominant group students and faculty in academia. The narrative accounts portray minority faculty as involved in a constant struggle of introspection that seeks to answer basic questions of being and presence in a privileged social institution, academia, they were not expected to enter. It is a search for legitimacy, for voice and belonging, in a group struggle that has occurred across academic settings since the 1960s, when the civil rights movement opened the doors slightly to the academy for members of minority communities (Martinez, 1991). Minority faculty perceive the academic culture as marginalizing their presence and treating them as undeserving participants in academia.

The research literature conceptualizes microaggressions as statements, actions, and behaviors that target marginalized groups such as a racial or ethnic minority (Constantine, Smith, Rodington, & Owens, 2008; Sue, 2010; Whitfield-Harris & Lockhart, 2016). Microaggressions cause insult or injury to their targets. For example, forgetting a minority faculty's name by a moderator at a professional conference may be treated as an innocent mistake by dominant group faculty. However, it operates as a microaggression because it robs the minority faculty of their identity and makes them invisible. Microaggressions may also cause stress in a minority faculty's interpersonal interactions with dominant group faculty. It could become a personal struggle for minority faculty to figure out when they will be seen by dominant group faculty as belonging or not belonging in the academic culture.

While my review of the research literature has been rather modest, there is an abundance of literature that identifies the barriers for minority faculty and in academia (e.g., see Altbach & Lomotey, 1991; Dade, Tartakov, Hargrave, & Leigh, 2015; Kelly & McCann 2014; Nivet, 2010; Rodriguez, Campbell, Fogarty, & Williams, 2014; Turner & Gonzalez, 2008; Washington & Harvey, 1989; Valverde & Castenell, 1998). Despite the modest review of the literature, I argue that the narrative accounts identify microaggressions that typify the social relations between minority faculty and dominant group faculty. The prevalence of microaggressions that target minority faculty suggests that biased perceptions of minority faculty are foundational to the social structure in academia. The similarity in microaggression experienced by minority faculty across academic disciplines reinforces the notion that microaggressions which target minority faculty are not anomalies but rather they are expected

outcomes in the social relations between minority faculty and dominant group faculty.

The microaggressions minority faculty in academia experience are indicative of academia's resistance to the incorporation of minority faculty. If one accepts the premise that most organizations in US society were designed to serve dominant group interests, especially maintaining their access to valued resources, then the presence of minority faculty results in behaviors or actions (e.g., microaggressions) that not only resist the presence of minority faculty but also their access to valued resources (see Alderfer & Thomas, 1988 ; Alvarez, 1979). The academic culture uses the identifiability of persons based on their status characteristics, race, and ethnicity for minority faculty. As such, the identifiability of minority faculty serves as a penalty that limits their access to valued resources and their representativeness in the academic culture. One valued resource for faculty in the academic culture is attaining tenure and promotion. For example, if the presence of minority faculty is marginalized in the academic culture by dominant group faculty, then their research and publications will also be marginalized in the tenure and promotion process. In the end, rather than examine the practices of a dominant group hegemonic structure in academia, the academic culture blames minority faculty in their efforts to attain tenure and promotion.

What is disturbing about the resistance minority faculty experience regarding their presence in academia as an outcome of biased perceptions promoted by a dominant group hegemonic structure is that *minority* status itself becomes a structural barrier to inclusion in academia. Academia portrays itself as a haven for faculty to debate ideas and promote enlightened views of society. In a sense, academia is often viewed as a paradise set away from the inequalities and inequities of everyday life. What then is the basis for the resistance minority faculty experience in academia? Is it because dominant group faculty are unwilling to share the fruits of academia with them? Is it because dominant group faculty perceive minority faculty members as undeserving of the opportunity to shed themselves of the inequalities associated with their minority status? Or is it that dominant group faculty are engaged in defending their privileged position in the university against the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities? I argue that the resistance minority faculty experience in academia is an outcome of dominant group faculty using the privileges rooted in their dominant group membership to remind minority faculty that they are distant relatives but not members of the family.

Finally, after almost 40 years of studying minority faculty in academia, I have arrived at the observation that in order to understand how microaggressions affect the lives of minority faculty, one must focus on how minority faculty contextualize the microaggressions. The microaggressions experienced by minority faculty robs them of voice, erases their identity, and questions their social reality (e.g., academic qualifications). The microaggressions result in minority faculty experiencing social psychological stress in their identification with the academic culture, their access to valued resources, and legitimacy in the classroom. More importantly, minority faculty experience social and psychological stress in their efforts to answer questions of identity, place, and belonging. Perhaps the next step in understanding what it means to be a minority in academia is to examine those issues, processes, and practices that minority faculty contextualize as preventing them for having an identity, place, and home in academia.

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