

Addressing Issues of Race on Campus in a Couple and Family Therapy Graduate Program



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Before I begin, it is important to locate myself in position to you, the reader. I am a mixed-race, light-skinned, Filipino cis-woman. I am also a queer person married to a White, cis-hetero-man. I largely benefit from having an able-body but I struggle with some invisible disabilities, including hearing challenges and infertility. I recently became a mother to a healthy mixed-race child – one who has inherited the Nordic skin qualities of both of his parents, along with his father’s blue eyes. Even just a few months in, it is easy to see that it is not likely that his Filipino heritage will be visibly obvious to anyone looking at him. When I let myself stop to think about it, I feel a burden of responsibility to teach him how to be responsible with all of the privilege he has coming his way.

I grew up in a home with two married parents in North Dakota – the land of freezing temperatures and conservative values. My father was born and raised there, and my mother was an immigrant from the Philippines, here on a work visa working as a nurse when she met my father on his medical school surgical rotation. Our family was financially privileged, and I attended Catholic schools for 13 years. While I have left Catholicism and the Midwest far behind, the narratives from having grown up in those contexts have frontloaded my life with plenty of biases in need of unpacking.

I found my way to the West Coast for graduate school and became a couple and family therapist (CFT). Even after 6 years of higher education, I believe that my real learning began when I was accepted into a Minority Fellowship Program during my doctoral program. I was connected with a group of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) peers whose conversations and influence forced me to turn inward and start critically looking at myself and my own biases, privilege, and areas where

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I have experienced oppression, in ways I had never been required to do in any previous setting. Since then, I have had to unlearn a lot of things that my upbringing and my professional training taught me, and through that, I have come to understand this about myself – that I am an ambiguous mix of privileged and oppressed parts, and I often struggle with how to reconcile them. And I have come to be okay with that.

Now as the leader of a CFT graduate program in the Pacific Northwest, I have the privilege of guiding a team of faculty and students toward doing the most challenging and, what I believe to be, the most important work of our lives – learning about power and privilege and how to navigate that in a way that creates space, love, and respect for everyone.

1 Introduction

Following the murder of George Floyd, the members of the Black Student Union (BSU) on our campus came together and delivered a letter to campus administration, titled “Hear Our Voices” (BSU, 2020). The letter contained a list of concerns, demands, and requests directly addressing institutional racism that they and other BIPOC students had experienced during their time in their academic programs. The students described examples of disparate treatment of Black students at all levels of their university experience, from peers in and outside of the classrooms to interactions with the faculty and staff during the admissions process and in using student services. The letter also included the results of a survey of Black students on our campus that found that during their time at the university:

- 83% of participants had experienced microaggressions
- 33% of participants had experienced explicit racial discrimination
- 67% of participants had felt unsafe in the classroom
- 17% of participants had felt isolation.

These findings are backed in the literature. As racial diversity in higher education institutions increases, there has been a greater increase in racial tensions, manifesting through microaggressions, discrimination, threats, and even violence (Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012). A 2000 study on campus racial climate by Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso found that when Black students experienced racial microaggressions, including verbal and nonverbal attacks, they felt academically and socially isolated.

Furthermore, the BSU letter included a list of demands – like the development of a plan of action in collaboration with Black students to address racial inequity and lack of inclusion – as well as requests – such as additional funding opportunities for BIPOC students and an update to campus evaluations to include an assessment of faculty, staff, and administration’s attention to diversity issues at various levels of the system.

In the following weeks, our program faculty assembled with the objective to take a hard look at how our program is structured and what changes we can make to place anti-racism at the heart of our program. This chapter summarizes some of the

things we did in our program to directly confront institutional racism in our system. I will describe some of our processes, ideas, setbacks, and failures in the hope that some of our work may be helpful to you.

2 Redefining Our Program's Mission

One of the very first changes our CFT faculty put into place was the adaptation of our mission statement and the creation of a vision statement that could be used to guide the work and decisions in our program. We joined together in one of our faculty meetings and made a collective decision to amend our mission statement to directly state that we are focused on centering anti-oppressive teaching in our program. This was generally accepted by the faculty with some pushback from one of our program's leaders, but despite this, over the upcoming weeks we workshopped language for these updates that the majority of the faculty in our program felt captured the spirit and direction that we wanted our program to take.

Mission statement: *The mission of [our] program is to prepare and train knowledgeable, skilled, self-aware, ethical, and anti-racist couple and family therapists in a learning environment that centers anti-white supremacy and social justice in its academic experience.*

Values statement: *[Our] program supports anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices by confronting and rejecting white supremacy and systemic inequality through socially just and systemically oriented academic instruction. We will take an active stance against white supremacy, marginalization, dehumanization, and systemic oppression while teaching our students to engage in active resistance and advocacy in their work as individual, relationship, couple, and family therapists. We value self-awareness and cultural responsiveness of our faculty, students, and graduates and strive to create opportunities for these personal learning processes to happen across systemic levels.*

From there, we established a set of guiding principles from which we would work in developing our new anti-racist processes. These principles focused on centering voices of People of Color (faculty members, students, and staff), rather than white voices in decision-making and conversations.

Once our conversations shifted toward strategies for centering the voices of People of Color, dynamics began to shift among faculty. For example, a white faculty member who raised mild concerns about the shift in mission statement became even more vocal about their concerns about the changes that explicitly decentered White voices. This – unsurprisingly – was not well-received by the other faculty members, especially the faculty members of color. While the changes we made to our mission and faculty expectations were accepted by the campus and university administration, it did start the process of creating fractures in faculty relationships with one another.

3 Faculty Development Efforts

From there, we took a look at our faculty. We wanted to consider and recognize how our faculty members may have been contributing to oppressive systems at our university. The letter from the Black Student Union described that only 37% of Black students who completed their survey indicated that faculty “actively create safe spaces by countering harmful anti-Black stereotypes if and when it occurs in the classroom”; 25% reported that they felt faculty did not do this at all. These numbers did not sit well with us.

3.1 *Recruitment and Retention of BIPOC Faculty Members*

At this point in time, only five of our fourteen faculty members were people of Color. In order to truly center BIPOC voices, we knew we needed to do better about representing them on our faculty. We established a hiring committee that was tasked with reviewing and developing faculty hiring strategies that were aimed at recruiting and retaining faculty members of Color. We also doubled down on our efforts to recruit more faculty of Color for adjunct positions as well.

Recruitment and retention of faculty members of Color is a challenge in higher education across the country for a variety of reasons, including overlooked unique emotional burden experienced by faculty with marginalized identities when faced with challenges of confronting the unspoken normative principles of whiteness in academic institutions (Hayes & Juárez, 2009; Turner, 2002). In an effort to address these issues in our processing, our hiring committee engaged strategies including ensuring BIPOC representation on hiring committees, including BIPOC student representation, curating job descriptions, postings, and interview processes to attract applicants of Color as well as those who prioritize and value anti-racism and anti-oppression work in their teaching.

We found that focusing on these things during the recruitment process allowed for applicants to get a sense of what our program was about and also prepare them for our students who take their roles as “therapist as activist” seriously in the classroom. Through the interview process we were able to better differentiate those who had a more integrated value of anti-racism work versus those who may have less experience doing so.

Various faculty members experienced personal challenges with these changes in the process, reflecting that their own interview experience did not focus on anti-racism in a similar way. These shifts brought to the surface insecurities from various faculty and staff about whether or not they were doing a “good enough” job at upholding these new standards themselves, and this anxiety influenced dynamics in a variety of ways, from willingness to participate in conversations to rejection of certain decisions being made among the faculty.

3.2 Standardizing Classroom Expectations

We developed a workgroup that was tasked with standardizing faculty expectations for centering anti-racism and anti-oppression in the classroom and in interactions with students. This group, co-facilitated by BIPOC and white faculty members, came up with the expectations of the CFT faculty members, which included providing faculty trainings and processes about handling challenging conversations centered around race, including use of small caucus groups in the classroom; utilization of land acknowledgements and emotional labor statements in each syllabus; asking faculty to socially locate themselves with their students each quarter; and diversifying course materials to center the work of BIPOC authors, researchers, scholars, and artists.

3.3 Faculty Evaluations

In an effort to monitor and assess how our faculty were doing at following through with these commitments, we reviewed and integrated diversity competencies into faculty evaluations. We added items for students to rate their instructors on their inclusion of course materials that represent contextually diverse perspectives and also the instructors' inclusion of classroom discussions regarding diverse perspectives and experiences. Additionally, the end of year faculty evaluation process includes a required self-evaluation reflecting on what it means to them to be a faculty member in the context of the University's commitment to being an anti-racist institution.

3.4 Communication with Students

We co-authored a written statement explicitly rejecting racial supremacy, anti-Blackness, and the hate-filled racist ideology of intolerance that is used to oppress People of Color. We stated our commitment to driving forward for as long as it takes to force systemic change in our institution and in our CFT field. We committed to engaging in open dialogue around important policy and systemic issues, in an effort to make radical changes to laws that continue to perpetuate destructive patterns in our country.

Alongside this, we took a look at our relationships with our students – particularly our Students of Color. In order to examine this more closely, our program reached out to the Black Student Union and the Counselors of Color Student Support Groups on campus to develop a process for dialogue and feedback. We met with the leadership of the student groups and asked for their input about how we can better support them throughout their programs. They let us know that they needed to feel

more centered and heard by our program faculty and they requested a faculty liaison – also a Person of Color – to be their point of contact with the program to be able to feel safer and more supportive in giving the program direct feedback. We also created a standing invitation for the student groups to address the CFT program during our quarterly community meetings.

4 Student Support

4.1 Recruitment and Retention of BIPOC Students

Faculty engaged in discussions on how to incorporate more inclusivity practices throughout our program, beginning with the admissions process. One of the pieces of feedback that had been outlined in the BSU letter was a complaint by one of our Black students about the admissions process to our program and the utilization of what they had perceived to be oppressive practices.

The practice they were referring to was a recent shift to us using video clips as points of discussion during our group interview process. We had previously used written case vignettes to facilitate group discussion during the prospective student interviews and had recently decided as a faculty that we wanted to create a more experiential activity as the prompt for discussion in the program. Additionally, we wanted to explicitly infuse both diversity in representation of the case vignette and conversations about racial injustice and white fragility into the interview experience.

In an effort to achieve this, we assembled a faculty work group made up of some of our Faculty Members of Color to develop this project. The final curated product was a series of clips from a feature film in which racial dynamics, power, privilege, and injustice are highlighted. In the interview activity, students are presented with five video clips from the film; each clip is then followed by a discussion question. The questions included prompts asking students to discuss personal reactions, attunement to power and privilege dynamics, as well as systemic reflection of a family system. The aim of this activity was to encourage prospective students to express themselves naturally and allow interviewers to review each prospective student against the values and qualities that the program desires in a student, which include values of anti-racism, inclusion, and self-awareness.

After initial implementation, we received feedback from the Counselors of Color student (CCS) support group that a Black student who participated in the interview process said that viewing the clips during the interview process felt unsafe as it mirrored personal experience to her. Additionally, it came across as if the process was developed by white faculty for white students; this made sense to us, as oftentimes the facilitators of the interview groups were white faculty members.

Of course this was not our intention in creating this interview protocol – far from it! But we realized that the process that we implemented left room for this to be experienced this way. In response, we made the decision to produce a more nuanced,

edited video, which included an introduction given by a group of faculty members of color sharing with the interview group the objective of this portion of the interview (to bring challenging topics to the table for experiential discussion) along with a short explanation of the development of this process (faculty groups had worked in consultation with faculty of color to select the clips and develop the discussion questions) along with a brief content announcement before each clip was played (important because some of the clips included gun violence). Following the video clip, the discussion prompt was read by the same faculty members of Color on screen, rather than having the faculty members in the room read the questions, in an effort to provide continuity in the facilitation of the process, grounding it clearly in mission and purpose. We brought these changes back to the student group that had raised the concerns for their input, received their approval, and implemented the updates the following quarter.

5 Curriculum and Program Requirements

Our faculty work groups took time to reflect on our program's structure from top to bottom, including the academic schedules, use of course sequencing and tracks, and of course our curricula, in an effort to create an emotionally safer community in classrooms and in our department.

5.1 Curriculum Review

We reviewed all course syllabi and curricula to ensure that requirements include infusions of social justice through readings, class activities, and assignments. We decided to require that at least one course objective directly addresses intercultural competencies, inclusion, and racial awareness relevant to the course material, and that this needed to be stated clearly in the course syllabus. Here is an example of how this section looks in a syllabus for one of our Internship Case Consultation courses:

Anti-racism Objectives

- *How anti-racism and anti-oppression will be addressed in this course:* discourse through inclusion in course assignments and discussion about subjects of racism and oppression and their intersection with clinical work at internship sites.
- *Topics/content that will be discussed:* Some examples of the direct content of reflection incorporated into student assignments are:

Capstone Project Reflection: Perspectives on Multiculturalism and Social Justice (e.g., How do you integrate social justice, multicultural responsiveness, and anti-racism and anti-oppression frameworks into your clinical work? What is the role of the therapist in addressing oppression as it occurs indirectly or directly in your clinical work? In your community?)

Case Conceptualization sections on power and privilege reflections.

- *Anti-racism objectives for the course:* Reflect on and incorporate social justice, anti-oppression, and anti-racism frameworks into clinical work.
- *Readings/materials/resources used:*

McDowell, T., Knudson-Martin, C., & Bermudez, J.M. (2017). *Socioculturally Attuned Family Therapy*. Routledge. ISBN: 978-1138678217.

5.2 Teaching Anti-oppressive and Multicultural Curricula

A foundational course in our curriculum, “Multicultural Perspectives,” also received a significant overhaul. This course has traditionally focused on cultural identification and acculturation, different worldviews, and their impact on therapeutic relationships. Desired outcomes included a student’s vigilance regarding cultural differences, basic knowledge of minority groups, and a sense of cultural humility and curiosity. In recent years, however, Bergkamp et al. (2020) described a shift in the approach to teaching these courses, stating that the following:

The past decade has brought additional calls to extend the encatchment of these courses to address social justice, including issues of power, privilege, and oppression. This move is distinct, in so far as it begins to call into explicit focus the way in which cultural and identity differences have been historically co-opted into a contemporary and pervasive system of resource allotment. This moves cultural differences to power differences. It names issues of racism, sexism, and other major forms of oppression. It acknowledges the legacy of historic colonization and the ever-present colonial mentality...It gets political... It brings issues of power and privilege into the classroom...And, if done well, it gets messy. (p. 1).

While teaching courses that deal with privilege, oppression, and positionality is challenging for all faculty members, the burden is even greater for BIPOC faculty because the content in those courses require constant engagement with racial tension as BIPOC faculty strive to engage their students in discussion of the faculty’s own lived experience (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019).

To address this, the faculty of color on our campus began by submitting a proposal to the university administration requesting that multicultural courses be co-taught by a BIPOC faculty member with another faculty member in order to off-set the burden. This approach is supported in the literature, finding that co-instruction requires that faculty foster collaborative working relationships and honor the need for inclusion and diversity (Lock et al., 2016) and encourages greater student reflection and awareness of their own learning process (Harter & Jacobi, 2018).

This approach helped faculty members feel supported in many ways. It allowed students the opportunity to learn from BIPOC faculty members while not placing all of the emotional labor for challenging conversations with the students about race solely on the BIPOC faculty. It also served to support non-BIPOC faculty members in having to navigate the challenges of leading racial conversations from the place of privilege as a white person.

5.3 Supervision and Internship

We realized that we also wanted to ensure opportunities for all of our students to learn from BIPOC faculty members throughout their program, and specifically in supervision during their internship. While previously we had one on-campus supervisor follow a group of students through their entire internship in their on-campus supervision group, we decided to make a shift to have two faculty members split a section over the course of the year (i.e., two quarters each), requiring that at least one of them identify as a BIPOC faculty member. This way, we could support centering BIPOC voices in the area of supervision for our students with 100% of our graduating students having received supervision from a BIPOC Program Clinical Supervisor for a substantial portion of their internship process.

Additionally, it was important to me that our internship program did not perpetuate for-profit businesses in affluent communities, but instead engaged our students in providing services to those who would otherwise go unserved or underserved. In recent years with the rise of private and group practices being approved for internship sites, we were seeing interns charge a relatively high rate for their services, unlike agency settings that accept state insurance. I began to grow concerned that practice owners (who by and large were white therapists in positions of financial privilege) were making “free money” off of intern labor, all the while still failing to serve clients who are in need of affordable mental health services. In return, we evaluated our internship process so that the program’s social justice mission was directly tied to internship requirements and guidelines. We worked on revising the requirements for internship sites to affiliate with our program, including adding the requirement that the site must demonstrate that our interns were providing services for underserved populations. This process was implemented for all new sites, and still remains to be applied retroactively for existing sites.

5.4 Course Resources

Only 37% of the students surveyed indicated that faculty frequently included diverse, non-Eurocentric focused material and resources in every course; 12% indicated that diverse material was “never included” (Black Student Union, 2020). Faculty members were given the directive to make every attempt to reduce the

Eurocentric focus of course materials by including a balanced frequency of authors, academics, therapists, activists, and artists of Color. Any information that is utilized in a course should be sourced with appropriate attribution to authors, academics, therapists, activists, and artists.

We also recognized that an outcome of institutional racism in academia is that White academics and researchers are disproportionately represented in the literature. So as to accommodate for this imbalance we encouraged instructors to expand their use of course resources to include non-peer-reviewed articles, including books, videos, art exhibits, podcasts, music, and class activities that are created and developed by individuals of Color.

5.5 Student Engagement in Justice Activities

We created a program requirement of “social justice volunteer hours” that students must complete by the time they begin internship. This element was added based on feedback from faculty and students that more focused learning opportunities to practice social justice work were desired. We have also been working on creating student engagement opportunities, such as online networking times and workshops. While the pandemic has certainly slowed progress in these areas, future plans include hosting quarterly volunteer opportunities for students and faculty members to connect together around volunteer experiences.

6 Change at the Institutional Level

One of the major changes at the institutional level was a shift in the organization of our campus-wide faculty leadership team in 2020. Following an ongoing pattern of harmful experiences and interactions during all-faculty meetings, the BIPOC faculty on campus made the decision to boycott the meetings until white faculty members made a direct effort to address how institutional racism shows up at the university.

After months of back and forth, a new Faculty Leadership Team was formed to include a multiracial group of faculty members, all of whom cared deeply and felt committed to the mission to do anti-racism work as a collaborative. The goal of our new group was to work to promote repair and learning and a fundamental shift in the culture at the university – one that was aimed at developing an accountability process that would support BIPOC stakeholders in addressing racism in a way that is safe, without retaliation and rooted in restorative justice practices.

The group redesigned the structure of campus-wide faculty meetings to work toward an equitable and inclusive shared governance structure. We streamlined business meetings through the use of a consent agenda; this was helpful toward productivity and protecting faculty members of Color from harm, as previously,

discussion around innocuous topics, like committee appointments, would regularly devolve into discussions laden with micro- and macro-aggressions toward faculty of color and other communities.

After much back and forth with university administration, we were able to coordinate the hire of an outside consultant to help facilitate conversations on developing an anti-racist framework for the university that will address the needs of all stakeholders, prioritizing BIPOC stakeholder needs and desires first. Through this, administration, faculty, staff, and students engaged in anti-racism and horizontal oppression work through monthly trainings, workshops, and caucus spaces.

In conjunction with these trainings, we required faculty attendance and participation, and included an addition of race-based caucus groups to create separate spaces for processing and learning around challenging racism personally and in the workplace. This work proved to be the most challenging. While these efforts were successful in some ways – for instance, BIPOC faculty members were shielded from having to witness white faculty members doing their own anti-racism work and processing by separating into race-based caucus groups – they were problematic in others. Despite the university operating from a social justice-oriented mission, it turns out that mandating faculty members to do anti-racism work was not well received by all and, for BIPOC faculty members, having to witness colleagues vocalize direct opposition to doing this work made for heightened tensions and fractured relationships between faculty members. Faculty members fought, outright refused to do the work and attend the meetings, and some even quit. I have never experienced anything quite like the heartbreak I felt when watching some of my closest and most trusted (white) colleagues refuse to vote to support taking action toward making our work spaces safer for BIPOC faculty, and then when the vote passed, turn in their resignations stating that their “values and mission no longer align with the direction the university and program are heading.”

Perhaps I should not have been surprised. This experience is supported by research. Wise and Case (2013) described common obstacles to the experience of developing privilege awareness including defensiveness, judgment, guilt, shame, the myth of meritocracy, the learner’s tendency to focus on marginalized identities, entitlement, fear of loss, and hopelessness in the face of injustice. These learner reactions are commonly attributed to those in leadership positions, especially BIPOC individuals.

7 Conclusion

To me, sometimes it felt like our faculty experience was simply an experiment for validating findings like I described in the preceding text. While I personally experienced enormous support by most of my colleagues within the program, the emotional wear of the entire multi-year process wore everyone down, and as the program leader, I felt the emotional brunt of it. Faculty morale showed a steady decline as more time passed, and as the point person for managing faculty concerns, it quickly

took its toll on me. Even still, although I can sense we are on the road to healing and recovery, many of us are certainly worse for wear. I see it across my close faculty colleagues, those in other institutions, and most personally, in myself.

I feel grateful to be a part of a team of colleagues who have committed to doing the work of our mission, as I know that not all CFT faculties across the country are as open to this. Our program made choices to ensure that the voices of BIPOC authors, academics, and activists were well-represented in our course work. We evaluated our learning objectives and made decisions about how we could more actively engage ourselves as educators and our students as learners in social activism, moving beyond multicultural “lip service” in the classroom into active justice and service in our community. And yet, while I feel proud of the efforts our program has made to create safer, braver spaces for our BIPOC students, faculty, and staff, it has come with costs. BIPOC faculty members are *burned out*. The emotional burden has been great, and I often fear it is too much to bear. These battles have changed us.

I know I am not alone in this feeling. Research has found that BIPOC faculty routinely face subtle forms of discrimination and racism perpetrated by their colleagues, students, and institutions, to which they must respond with professionalism and poise (Kardia & Wright, 2004). These changes and efforts need to happen, and putting in this effort is *flat-out* hard. This journey has been taxing, vulnerable, infuriating, heartbreaking, and at the same time necessary. There is clearly so much work to still be done, and even on the worst days, I hold out hope that putting systems theory into practice will win out in the end, and a little bit of change at a time can go a long way in the end.

The question lingers for me: is it possible for our programs to sustain these changes and relationships at the same time? This duality sometimes feels impossible – other times, hopeful. In the meantime, we lean on each other. We hold space – both formally in meetings and informally through texts and personal check-ins – and we lean on the relationships that we have with one another. By doing this, I have found that each of us as individuals has the freedom to step in and out of spaces for advocacy, growth, introspection, frustration and anger, and rest and recovery, while continuing to move forward as a team and as a program. By keeping an eye on and tending to both the larger goals for the program as well as the individuals who make up our system, it seems we have the best shot at making change and doing so in the most sustainable way.

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