Decolonizing Higher Education Through Incorporating Antiracist Pedagogy in Doctoral Students' Academics, Mentorship, and Training

Branson Boykins and Sarah K. Samman

1 Multiculturally Focused Training Programs

A goal of any multiculturally focused training program is to meet the needs of a racially and culturally diverse student body. In our view, training programs in name only, without actionable commitment to antiracist pedagogy, are inherently problematic and lack opportunities for growth. In this chapter, we briefly discuss the importance of antiracist positioning as well as introduce ourselves and our social contexts to punctuate how our experiences inspired us to commit to multicultural and antiracist pedagogy. We share the ways we learned from our experiences, including combating our own assumptions and passivity toward an evolving multicultural and antiracist academic journey.

Dr. Ibram Kendi's (2019) controversial publication *How to Be an Antiracist* could not have come at a better time as we worked through our own antiracist journeys, especially as it pertains to our work in academia. Everyone deserves to feel confident academically. We imagine a world without carrying the burden of internalized racist and prejudiced ideologies that convince people with lesser privilege that they are worth less. Accordingly, faculty called to ally ship must intentionally combat the stereotypes, prejudices, and biases that reinforce these ideas that are believed to be rooted within people. There cannot be neutrality in any academic program or experience when it promotes ideologies grounded in policies that hinder the right to academic confidence and success (Kendi, 2019). For this reason, it is critical for faculty to challenge inequity by supporting applicants and students of the global majority differently toward systemic equity and justice.

B. Boykins (✉) · S. K. Samman
Alliant International University, San Diego, CA, USA
e-mail: branson.boykins@alliant.edu

To further understand our dedication to this positioning, we would like to briefly situate ourselves within the context of our commitment to antiracism. I (Branson) identify as a Black or African American (AA) cisgender, heterosexual man and an Associate Professor in the Couple and Family Therapy Program at Alliant International University in Irvine, CA. I am originally from Detroit, MI, and received my terminal doctorate in counseling psychology from Western Michigan University. My family originates from several parts of the United States (U.S.; e.g., Augusta, GA; Cleveland, OH, and Detroit, MI), and consists of highly educated professionals who value education, service, racial pride, and community. I have provided counseling services in a variety of settings (e.g., schools, university counseling centers, community mental health clinics, an incarceration center, and youth residential), many of which offered me opportunities to work with racial minorities, especially AAs. I owe a great deal of my training and education to a select group of AA mentors in my masters and doctoral programs and am fortunate to say that I had an all AA doctoral committee. These experiences furthered my passion to serve in academia and research while specializing in areas of multicultural psychology, AA psychology, men's issues, and contemporary forms of bias and discrimination.

Growing up, I experienced various forms of racial marginalization through micro- and macro-aggressions (Sue et al., 2019). White teachers lowered expectations, ignored my opinions, or said I was lucky to have made educational strides in the Detroit Public School System. Later on, my supervisors assumed that I would be able to work clinically with AAs despite receiving little to no training on this underserved population before my doctorate. As a professor, I continue to experience similar problems. Students have reported believing in the stereotypic images of Black men as angry and aggressive versus smooth or Black Cool Pose. They shared expectations that I would match these images and have written overtly racist comments about me in my course evaluations, cursed at me during office hours and meetings, frequently argued against established research on racial bias, and even made comments regarding my attire such as "being dressed as a cute boy." Withstanding these constant reminders of institutional racism within academia has taught me valuable lessons regarding student mentorship, academia, racial battle fatigue, picking battles, feeling unheard, forced compliance, and knowing my worth.

I (Sarah) worked as adjunct faculty for two years prior to joining Alliant International University in San Diego, California, and am now in my sixth year and an Associate Professor in the Couple and Family Therapy Program. I identify as a White cisgender, heterosexual, bicultural (Middle Eastern and European American), binational (Saudi and United States citizen), bilingual (Arabic and English), and religious and spiritual Muslim woman. I live in a larger, predominantly able body, am middle class, formally educated, and am a wife, mother, intersectional feminist, therapist, and professor navigating the complexities of academia. My immediate and extended family system values the building of knowledge, skill sets, and expertise as well as passion for their chosen careers. This directly influenced my desire to excel in the field of marriage and family therapy (MFT) and I began my journey providing therapy services in inpatient and outpatient addiction and rehabilitation services, behavioral health clinics, as well as a transplant institute. I earned my

terminal doctoral degree in Marital and Family Therapy from Loma Linda University in California.

I have personally experienced marginalization because of my intersecting identities due to patriarchal, political, and religious motives. Interestingly, I am often described as a Person of Color (POC) for presenting as an overtly practicing, but still White, Muslim woman. I have been explicitly asked how I could possibly call myself "an intersectional feminist and be a Muslim at the same time." I have had a few male students challenge me during office hours and tell me I should be "submissive" like I am expected to be in my "home country," implying not only a prejudicial belief, but one that excludes me from considering the U.S. my home. I have been explicitly described as a "foreigner" who does not understand "American culture" due to my paternal lineage and despite my complex sociopolitical maternal history in Northern America. This includes identifying as one of the First Families of Virginia and acknowledging the lineage of ancestors that enslaved Black individuals and families in the South.

2   Diverse Family Therapy Programs: Our Antiracist Vision

We learned quickly that choosing careers in academia would require commitment to actively intervene in power processes undermining diversity, equity, and inclusion. There were times when we felt powerless in the face of larger and more influential institutions, where the promotion of diversity and antiracist pedagogy would challenge the white majority perspective, and we might be considered nuisances or agitators. We knew that promoting a truly multiculturally focused training program would require that the institution as a whole – in addition to both core and adjunct faculty – take action. Steps toward this include faculty demonstrating awareness of their own social locations, then highlighting key components and interventions in their course content and the overall academic experience that reinforces racial inequality. This requires a keen awareness of the steep learning curve required to delicately balance the power dynamics involved.

3   Representation Does Matter: Commitment to a Diverse Faculty and Student Body

One of the ways we committed to an antiracist lens is by acknowledging the power that privileged communities have to describe, categorize, and treat others based on race, from historically describing Black and Brown folks as colored, to labeling them as minorities, to adopting the more person centered term in POC. We have first-hand knowledge of the ways Individuals of the Global Majority (IGM) commonly experience disparities in treatment in predominantly White communities

(Kendi, 2019). These are further exacerbated by disparities by White passing or White adjacent individuals from their own communities. We acknowledge that categorization has been an integral part of reducing individuals and communities to often superficial and decontextualized features. This is exceedingly problematic as 80% of the world's nearly eight billion inhabitants are considered POC (Campbell-Stephens, 2020). Thus, part of our antiracist approach is to actively deemphasize White centered and exclusionary terminology to be more accurate and inclusive.

4 Diverse Faculty and Students: Leaning into and Utilizing Our Intersecting Identities

When searching for our professional academic home, we applied to institutions that focused on building multiculturally diverse training programs that have racially and culturally diverse faculty, higher administration, and staff. Diverse faculty composition is critical for many reasons, including learning from unfortunate experiences with and commitment to combating marginalizing and discriminatory processes in academia. Part of our approach as early career educators was to be honest about the strengths of our program and the ways it may be lacking and where it could benefit from additional attention. We were also aware of the importance of acknowledging and understanding our static as well as dynamic social locations and intersecting identities as we navigate these processes. We learned that growth toward antiracist work generally evolves from a diverse faculty composition that then encourages and admits a diverse student cohort.

4.1 Diverse Applicants: Equitable Admissions Processes

One of the ways we committed ourselves to more equitable admissions processes is by doing away with requiring the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores or the strict adherence to a minimum grade point average (GPA). We decided to take an active approach to the process and acknowledge that a large majority of IGM, especially women, report that they lack the knowledge (i.e., mentorship, research skills) and abilities (i.e., financial resources, test taking scores) to navigate the application process for college in general, and postgraduate education in particular. Even though the technical aspects of the admissions process are beyond the scope of faculty responsibilities, we have taken steps to ensure we do not refuse applicants who do not meet all of the program's predetermined admissions criteria, that is, official transcripts with GPA, prerequisites, letters of recommendation, essay reflecting the fit for the program and research interests, curriculum vitae, etc.

I (Sarah) and my colleagues at the San Diego Branch recommend scheduling individual interviews with two faculty members if students do not appear to meet all

the predetermined criteria for an interview. This provides applicants with the opportunity to express any concerns they may have regarding their application and fit for the program. We request examples of how the student has learned a skill set or has a plan to achieve success in the program and in the field in general. Additionally, we learned the value of developing a list of multiculturally informed admissions interview questions, as shown in Table 1, that encourage IGM to highlight their academic and interpersonal strengths and potential.

4.2 Diverse Classroom Experiences

Discussions in the classroom and experiential activities that elicit dialogue from multiple perspectives have been some of the biggest rewards of implementing antiracist practices. As a student, I (Branson) recall several instances where I attended a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and felt isolated as the only Black male in the classroom. I often felt pressured to "represent" all Black students or Black men when topics arose that connected to my Black identity. These types of experiences were psychologically harmful and impacted my academic performance and sense of belonging and comfort within the learning environment. Encouraging a diverse student body challenges the pressure faced by students of the global majority to be a voice for their community when interacting with individuals with more privilege such as White, White passing, or White adjacent faculty or peers.

Table 1 Multiculturally informed admissions interview questions

1. What draws you as an applicant to this profession/program?
2. What personal/diversity strengths would you bring to your academic journey as well as therapy room?
3. What personal/diversity weaknesses or biases might you bring to your academic journey as well as therapy room?
4. Tell us something about yourself, community, or interests that we would not get from your application materials?
5. What drew you to the field/profession and what challenges might you have overcome to get here?
6. What are the populations with which you resonate, have a passion for, or with whom you work well?
7. What are the populations with which you have historically struggled or anticipate you may experience difficulties?
8. What skills have you developed to manage potential difficulties?
9. What is an example of a time when it was difficult or painful to hear some feedback, especially if diversity related, and what did you do with the feedback provided?
10. Where do you see yourself 5 years after graduation and why?

4.3   Blocking the Demand for Emotional Labor

Another common challenge to antiracist learning spaces is determining whether or not we should address microaggressions publicly or privately. When addressing them in a public space, we have found it helpful to mindfully and respectfully challenge the student's request for emotional labor and redirect attention away from the IGM. We can challenge privilege in those moments by reflecting, "Those are some great thoughts and there might be areas of growth that some of you might benefit from. What is important is to ask ourselves what is the purpose of the question? If it seems out of curiosity, what are the potential areas of growth? What are some biases we might have held and how might we do better knowing what we know now? What are some biases that we still hold and how can we dismantle them? I can help point you to some authors who've put in the emotional labor to address questions like these."

4.4   Making Space and Challenging Invisible Privilege

At times, students feel compelled to express feelings of guilt or shame about not having to "deal with" racial issues. I (Sarah) personally fell into that shameful feeling as a White woman, speaking to how I could simply take off my headscarf and benefit from my Whiteness. However, I quickly realized that I was occupying space that was not mine. My failure to stay in my lane unintentionally silenced important voices. While painful and embarrassing when redirected to focus on the experiences of my peers from the global majority, it was necessary. Managing student reactions such as defensiveness and blame is also important. As faculty, I try to validate as well as join in the discomfort and normalize the reaction. I let them know that I understand it might be hard to acknowledge the more powerful parts of the self when we have a tendency to attune to the less powerful and more victimized experiences of ourselves. When we know better, we can do better.

4.5   Mentorship as an Intentional Diversity-Centered Process

In both our past experiences as students and current experiences as faculty, we have found that students experiencing marginalization often have intersecting identities that present as additional barriers for our consideration. For example, they may identify as first- or second-generation immigrants or international students struggling with language barriers, first-generation college, graduate, or doctoral students, or students experiencing financial burdens or hardships. We have heard their fears of being "found out" and proven inadequate, worrying about faculty disappointment, and feeling burdensome. As faculty, we need to be intentionally mindful of

how each student's various intersecting identities can impact their learning style, interpersonal relationships with faculty and peers, reactions to learned materials, and potential and challenging barriers to their success.

Based on our personal and anecdotal experiences, we have found that students may avoid seeking out mentorship for the preceding reasons. Because of this, we ensure we briefly and openly speak about how our identities intersect within and outside of academia as well as create space for dialogue for students from marginalized communities in the classroom. More specifically, having personally (Branson) attended PWIs, but still benefited from AA faculty mentorship, I have learned to take the responsibility to give back to future generations. Through a variety of approaches. I provide real world examples of the encouragement and hardships I faced as a student and as a beginning therapist so they feel validated in their experiences and hopeful about the future.

We also speak to our confidence as faculty in our decision to accept our students and invest in their success. We make a point of speaking to how comparisons among peers undermine each of their individual and contextual goals and could result in internalized shame. Shame is a powerful antagonist that leads to further isolation and blocks desire to connect with others. So it makes sense that we normalize confusion, stress, and overwhelm in an effort to level the playing field and promote self- and other-compassion and grace. We try to serve as role models and offer encouragement and reassure students that we all have areas of potential and growth. We encourage them to actively audit their skill sets and develop confidence in their ability to learn and succeed just as competently as any other student within the program.

When considering students' fear of inadequacy, we work to provide space for conversations about career development and professionalism for those who may be unaware of ways to make the most of their mentorship experiences. Examples may include discussing differences between a résumé and curriculum vitae, the importance of a cover letter and what it should include and why, the benefits of networking, especially when attending conferences and symposia, how to research and apply for fellowships and scholarships, and how to be involved in leadership positions in university-related organizations. All of this is critical for the development of a strong, culturally diverse cohort, where students who were originally perceived as "weak" applicants are viewed as just as strong as their peers by the end of their academic training.

Lastly, it is helpful to keep a log of which students could benefit from additional mentorship, particularly those who appear reluctant to seek guidance. We make note of our observations during faculty meetings to set these students up for success in their relationships with other faculty and staff. Part of our goal for student mentorship is to remind students of the possibility of succeeding at the highest levels, even when reporting suffering from "imposter syndrome." This syndrome is often used as an explanation of internal struggles that one has to overcome with toxic positivity such as "just be confident," "ignore your self-doubts," or "don't wait until you're offered a seat at the table." However, in reality, this phenomenon is deeply contextual and reflects a power imbalance in which those in power decide what is valued

and sought out and exclude the multiple and equally valid skill sets that marginalized populations and communities can and should be able to offer toward a globally rich and meaningful experience.

4.6 Challenges Implementing Antiracist Pedagogy

Serving as a multiculturally informed and antiracist faculty member has presented challenges, both personally and professionally. Among these challenges are the asymmetry between multicultural/diversity course intent and outcome, as well as challenging student–faculty interactions, including those requiring additional faculty labor and further emotional burden.

4.7 Asymmetry Between Course Intent and Outcome

Graduate training programs may strive to incorporate a multiculturally infused training program where clinical and developmental theories are contextually viewed through lenses of diversity, inclusion, power, privilege, and racism. However, training programs seem to be falling short of this ideal vision when superficially discussing topics of bias, discrimination, and racism and in ways that reinforce the status quo (Beitin et al., 2008; Yzaguirre et al., 2022). We therefore ask our readers, if in such a program, how might you assess if you are accomplishing your goal? How might you intentionally encourage the absorption of legitimate and valuable emic experiences of diversity? How might you avoid maintaining institutional racism when accepting and disseminating only the work of white men or even white feminists?

4.8 Acknowledging Faculty-Related Challenges and Biases

Teaching a multicultural or diversity informed course is challenging and we certainly experienced a variety of feelings, pressures, and unease due to multiple stressors in combination with our intersecting identities. Challenges we have faced as early career faculty included how best to educate students, how much attention we pay to specific racial or cultural groups, self of the teacher and therapist exploration, education about power, privilege, and microaggressions, and integrating cross-cultural interventions within systemic theories. We have also learned that we must explore our own biases and potential for them to infuse the learning experience.

I (Sarah) have insecurities as a White woman teaching diversity courses. I have learned that no matter how much I prepare in advance, each classroom or system will introduce opportunities for conflict, yet also have opportunities for resolution.

I have found that self-compassion and self-grace are critical. I continue to remind myself to move beyond the didactic, content-based parts of the discussion to a more relational, process-based approach to student discussion. Understanding that faculty do not have all the answers and often have their own biases relieves me of some pressure, and allows me to model how to address conflict and disagreements. It also allows me to demonstrate how to manage discussions when not all opinions have equal grounding, weight, or legitimacy.

4.9   Acknowledging Student-Related Challenges and Biases

When teaching diversity courses, I (Branson) identify several internal goals grounded in encouraging student self-growth and a better understanding of their identities as racial and cultural beings. I attempt to create spaces for challenging dialogues where students can express their worldviews, while also understanding how these views might differ from or minimize someone else's. This is why it is absolutely critical that we avoid tone policing marginalized voices in order to soften the real struggles of racism and make them more palatable to those with more privilege. For example, a few students of privilege reported that they or their families believe racism no longer exists, any reports are exaggerated, and IGM use it as a "race card" to advance academically or professionally. Though difficult conversations to navigate, we are grateful for opportunities to invite disagreement and to see student comfort in expressing views that might be contradictory to others. I (Branson) attempt to listen to the students' perspectives while also providing various sources of information (e.g., personal testimonials, self-disclosure, research articles, and current socio-political events) to highlight the pervasiveness of the belief as well as limitations of their argument and how it may likely influence interpersonal relationships and clinical interactions.

4.10   Challenging Student–Faculty Interactions and Relationships

As is expected, we have experienced microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, compassion fatigue, and burnout from covert as well as overt negative and harmful course experiences (Bradley, 2005; Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Salazar, 2009). As alluded to in previous sections, a key, but emotionally laborious, skill when teaching antiracist and multiculturally focused coursework is developing negotiation and gentle maneuvering skills. This is where faculty must prepare compelling arguments and persuasive points to help educate privileged students who reject concepts based on anecdotal evidence, particularly personal ones based on their own marginalized social locations. We have had our fair share of students who

outright reject or minimize concepts such as White privilege, institutional racism, mental health disparities, or the need for cross-cultural interventions. We often validate and empathize with areas of underprivileged social location before challenging their privilege; for example, by highlighting that they may have experienced hardship due to financial hardships, but not due to the compounding effects of the color of their skin. Regardless of how well we may highlight relevant terminology, trends in research, personal experiences, client experiences, and historical foundations in a tactful and non-threatening way, faculty must prepare for dismissive responses such as "I guess we have to agree to disagree" as though they are equally valid positions.

Faculty and program directors should be aware of the likelihood of receiving criticism or negative feedback from students because they are tasked with challenging internal biases, promoting cultural and racial awareness and growth, and resistance to antiracist pedagogy. For example, we received numerous negative evaluations that were not connected to actual classroom content or instruction. Students have reported that we were "mean" and "intimidating" as well as fearful that I (Branson) was going to label them as "racist." It is understandable that students might use an evaluation to anonymously vent their frustrations; however, these often showcase their prejudicial biases toward us as the instructors, and these statements have lasting impacts on us.

We have been fortunate that they have fallen in the hands of supportive leadership and administrators rather than in the hands of those who reinforce a fear within us of losing our contracts, or use them against us when seeking promotion, salary increase, new employment, or tenure. And although there is a dilemma for faculty who have to weigh the cost of teaching antiracist pedagogy at the expense of their well-being, professional reputation, and future in academia, they may find it well worth the risk long term as we did. We believe that the active commitment to continued professional growth and the application of antiracist pedagogy is a worthy endeavor and one that results, at the very least, in the passive support and uplifting of marginalized students and their allies' academic and professional experiences.

5   Concluding Recommendations: Antiracist Action Items

First and foremost, faculty benefit greatly from acknowledging and challenging their racist and prejudicial ideals. Faculty and program leaders must practice acknowledging how their identity, values, and beliefs shape and inform the culture, mission, and vision of their respective training programs. Faculty should routinely engage in a life-long process of antiracist work beginning with looking inward and asking for personal and professional consultation regarding areas of growth during the endeavor. This type of introspective work can lay the foundation for program transformation and liberation.

Second, we recommend the clear commitment and advocacy for visibility and representation in any faculty and student body. Once a program adopts an antiracist training focus, department heads and faculty with institutional power have a

responsibility to commit and maintain a diverse faculty and student cohort. Intentionality, as we have discussed, is key. Programs can audit which faculty take on an antiracist vision and how to recruit, support, and retain them. These programs can also actively adapt to equitable application processes and contextual support for these students once admitted. As Kendi (2019) described, for students and faculty of the global majority and/or represent marginalized identities, intentionally treating them differently by considering their actual rather than assumed resources will yield equitable opportunities and outcomes.

Third, programs benefit from the nuance of diversity-centered mentorship considerations. An antiracist training program should value mentorship and lean into how intersecting identities promote difficult and challenging discussions and experiences. Faculty must be mindful of the types of students who are likely to ask for help or feel confident in their ability, and those who may need additional support and guidance. Therefore, we call for intentionality in mentorship from a social justice and antiracist framework – one that creates affirming dialogue, support, and resources for all students including those who are likely to be left behind because of systemic oversight that often reinforces their fear of asking for help.

Fourth, we want to reiterate the obvious. Faculty self-care is critical to the success of antiracist work. Faculty such as ourselves are likely to experience challenges, burnout, and discriminatory encounters in the pursuit of an antiracist training program. We urge faculty to find avenues and support for self-care such as personal therapy, exercise, religious-spiritual support, as well as connecting with like-minded faculty within one's program, institution, or field.

We hope that through our stories and action items you also hear a call to personally reflect, consider, and suggest programmatic changes, and find the courage and dedication to challenge your training programs as they currently are. We hope you practice self- and other-compassion and recognize all the things you have done well and the areas in which you could benefit from continued growth. Perform an audit of your work and what values and direction you wish to lead in your training program, classroom, and own personal life. This work takes time, includes hurdles, and can be painful and exhausting. Yet we push through, and we hope you will join us and lend us your expertise as well.

References

Beitin, B., Duckett, R., & Fackina, P. (2008). Discussions of diversity in a classroom: A phenomenological study of students in an MFT training program. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 30*(4), 251–268. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-008-9072-4

Bradley, C. (2005). The career experiences of African American women faculty: Implications for counselor education programs. *College Student Journal, 39*(3), 518–528.

Bradley, C., & Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2004). African American counselor educators: Their experiences, challenges, and recommendations. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 43*(4), 258–273. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2004.tb01851.x

Campbell-Stephens, R. (2020). *Global majority*. Unpublished paper affiliated with Leeds Becket University UK. https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/schools/school-of-education/final-leeds-beckett-1102-global-majority.pdf

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.

Salazar, C. F. (2009). Strategies to survive and thrive in academia: The collective voices of counseling faculty of color. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, 31*(3), 181–198. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-009-9077-1

Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, white allies, and bystanders. *American Psychologist, 74*(1), 128. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296

Yzaguirre, M. M., PettyJohn, M. E., Tseng, C. F., Asiimwe, R., Fang, M., & Blow, A. J. (2022). Marriage and family therapy masters students' diversity course experiences. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy: An International Forum, 34*(1–2), 15–37. https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2022.2052534