The Urban Review (2020) 52:173–197
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-019-00523-4

"It's Pretty Essential": A Critical Race Counter-Narrative of Faculty of Color Understandings of Diversity and Equity in Doctoral Admissions

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Published online: 10 June 2019
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Abstract
Using a short story fiction counter-narrative, this critical race study examines how faculty of color within higher education and student affairs doctoral-granting programs bring critical epistemologies to their decision-making in the student admissions process and work to decolonize the academy despite neoliberal pressures. Faculty of color depart from current accounts of faculty decision-making in doctoral education in two key ways—by disregarding standardized measures of success and by considering diversity throughout the entire admissions process—leading us to important insights about how faculty of color differ from white faculty in their perception of and in their emphasis on diversity, equity, and justice in the admissions process. The implications are both broad and specific for creating dynamically diverse campus climates in an era of persistent challenges to affirmative action. The findings speak to the ways that those concerned with educational diversity and equity can support diversity and equity efforts in a neoliberal, color-blind environment. In a world defined by such policy and practice and a country that determines options and opportunity based on race, this study centers the voices of faculty of color in their institutions and analyzes how identity and institutional logics influence behavior.

Keywords Graduate education · Admissions · Critical race theory · Faculty of color · Diversity · Equity

Across the admissions landscape proponents of diverse and equitable enrollments face persistent attacks on affirmative action (Garces 2012, 2013; Poon and Segoshi 2018; Poon et al. forthcoming), market-based shifts away from equity-focused policies led by neoliberal ideology (Giroux 2015), and the commodification of bodies

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of color toward increasing enrollments (Osei-Kofi et al. 2013; Squire, forthcoming). These realities paired with a diversifying national demographic (Humes et al. 2010) should provide a clarion call to those interested in equity: It is time to critically examine and re-conceptualize enrollment management toward more equitable processes and outcomes.

Understanding how doctoral students are selected for programs through examining how faculty of color navigate multiple aspects of their identities may provide some clues on ways to admit and support a dynamically diverse student body. Examining a group that persisted through doctoral education as racialized beings and currently engages critically in the doctoral admissions process provides clues on how to think divergently about the admissions process. Addressing the historical purposes of affirmative action toward remedying underrepresented racial groups in higher education (Berrey 2015) requires creative thinking and examining of alternative understandings of enrollment management. Specifically, this paper is concerned with faculty of color along the axis of race, tenure status, and the influence of institutional logics (e.g., campus and department norms and values) on decision-making; each of these dynamics has the potential to effect how one experiences the academy. These, along with other intersecting identities, are important considerations in determining how to develop diverse leadership bodies, how to build a dynamically diverse campus context, and how to maintain the United States' doctoral education superiority and productivity particularly in the wake of the continuing dilution of race-conscious admissions options (Bowen and Rudenstine 1992; Garces and Jayakumar 2014; Joseph and Holley 2013).

With the understanding that doctoral education is increasingly important to preparing a "talented, well-motivated, and well-trained [workforce that contributes] critically to our collective ability to generate ideas and educate new generations of students" (Bowen and Rudenstine 1992, p. 3) doctoral enrollments totaled 524,497 in Fall 2017 with Education enrolling 79,115 of those students, the second highest number of all fields (Okahana and Zhou 2018). To develop a diverse group of leaders it is important for faculty and administrators to ensure dynamically diverse campus contexts and diverse enrollments (Garces and Jayakumar 2014). Despite the importance of developing diverse leaders, racial diversity in graduate education remains bleak. In 2017, 23.4% of U.S. citizen and permanent resident students enrolled in doctoral education were from underrepresented racial groups (Okahana and Zhou 2018). The field of education plays a major role in these disparities because it is among the top five fields with the largest percentage of graduate students. In the 2015–2016 academic year schools of education conferred 11,829 doctoral degrees (NCES 2018). Of those, 7244 (61%) were awarded to white students (NCES 2017).

This paper expands the understanding of faculty decision-making processes in the doctoral admissions process in one field, higher education and student affairs (HESA) by asking: how do faculty of color in HESA doctoral programs understand diversity and equity in doctoral admissions? As a sub-field in education, HESA programs are often guided by standards of social justice and inclusion (ACPA/NASPA 2010; Pope et al. 2009) thereby insinuating that these faculty should also act with a social justice perspective. Institutional leaders should consider the complex dynamics of admissions by paying closer attention to faculty decision-making because

faculty have great latitude in admitting whom they want into doctoral programs (Agosto et al. 2014). Faculty of color are an apt group to analyze due to their previous experiences as students of color, their racial salience on predominantly white campuses, and, with this study's participants, their critical view of standardized measures of merit and diversity particularly within a field with such stated social justice views. This manuscript provides insight through presenting a counter-narrative of faculty of color who have engaged in doctoral admissions cycles.

Literature Review

Graduate admissions is the gateway process by which one gains access to limited resources (e.g., faculty, research) both to further one's own wellbeing through increased forms of capital, but also to pursue opportunities to effect change in the world (Wendler et al. 2010). Therefore, faculty have the complicated task of choosing the "correct" students to gain access to these opportunities, including discerning criteria for admissions (e.g., fit, ability; Hagedorn and Nora 1996). However, these metrics are value-laden and influenced by a variety of cultural, institutional, and faculty characteristics. The following literature review examines the experiences of faculty of color that may affect the admissions process and faculty decision-making including standardized measures of merit. These factors are important considerations as the experiences of faculty of color may have an effect on the ways that they engage in admitting students to the program.

Faculty of Color Experiences

Extant literature showed that faculty of color experience the academy differently than their white peers and in turn may see their role in organizing and managing the university differently. Faculty of color worked harder, experienced more isolation, felt silenced, and perceived the norms of the academy in different ways (Ahmed 2012; Delgado-Bernal and Villalpando 2002; Patitu and Hinton 2003; Turner 2003). Aguirre (2005) described the academic workplace as "chilly and alienating" (p. 39) for women and racially minoritized faculty. Tokenism or being utilized as an exemplar to speak and act on behalf of your entire group, a proving culture, being othered, and being put on the periphery also led faculty of color to feel dehumanized and silenced (Aguirre 2005; Medina and Luna 2000; Turner 2003).

In their interview with 12 new faculty members in higher education administration programs about stressors related to new faculty life, Eddy and Gaston-Gayles (2008) found that because of a lack of information faculty of color felt unprepared, isolated, in limbo, and had to "piece together information on how to best prepare for tenure" (p. 100). Ultimately, seemingly objective and meritocratic standards created double standards for faculty of color. Changing standards for tenure are normalized when a majority white faculty feels that Schools of Education are being devalued by women faculty of color attempting to obtain tenure (Kelly and McCann 2013).

Researchers also recognized that civility and collegiality were understood differently by white faculty and faculty of color (Ahmed 2012; Delgado-Bernal and Villalpando 2002; Griffin et al. 2011a, b) and at times racist and hostile incidences occurred in the university (Aguirre 2005). Griffin et al. (2011a) interviews with Black faculty illuminated narratives that mirror these findings. One faculty member noted:

> You're very, very cautious about what you say. You tend not to speak your mind…because anything you'd have to say you would think may have racial consequences because you're the only racial minority. You have to be twice as good as people who work in other areas. (p. 51)

Delgado-Bernal and Villalpando (2002) found that faculty of color had to be wary of being seen as "militant" or "against" white faculty when researching topics on issues related to race/ethnicity. These findings highlight that faculty of color are often seen as the "problem" (DuBois 2005, p. 1) in their own departments particularly when they are perceived as going against the "normative" [read: white] behaviors of their [white] peers.

Despite the many obstacles necessitated by institutional racism and sexism (other social identities are greatly understudied in the literature), many faculty of color "resist from the margins" (Thomas and Hollenshead 2001). Resistance techniques included finding mentorship (Butner et al. 2000; Fries-Britt and Kelly 2005) and learning to say "no" when feeling overstretched (Thomas and Hollenshead 2001), though male and female faculty said 'no' at different levels (Griffin, et al. 2011a, b). Baez (2000) found that faculty of color resisted by engaging in service where they can advocate on behalf of marginalized students in order to change institutional policy and structures. A final site of resistance comes from Griffin, et al.'s (2011a, b) multi-case study with 28 Black faculty at two research universities, where they found that Black faculty resisted by building external networks away from their departments.

Faculty Decision-Making

While there is limited evidence on how faculty make decisions in the admissions process, Posselt (2016) interrogated the faculty decision-making process in elite graduate admissions, Lamont (2009) examined decision-making on faculty panels for grant proposals, Posselt (2014) provided a meta-literature review examining decision-making literature in higher education more broadly (e.g., administrator hiring, grant proposal processes), and Posselt (2018) studied how ambiguities were navigated in the admissions process as well as how trust networks facilitated admissions. Faculty essentially make decision in two phases: first, utilizing merit-based measures and second, using non-cognitive factors, sometimes intertwining the two to make final decisions.

Faculty utilized standardized graduate exams, grade point average, and undergraduate institution selectivity across most studies (e.g., Attiyeh and Attiyeh 1997). The leveling of value given to a particular measure and the practice's effect on

graduate admissions (or commensuration) has been explored throughout faculty decision-making literature (Lamont 2009; Posselt 2013a; Steinberg 2002). Posselt (2013a) found that faculty often used the above mentioned indicators to compare applicants who were seemingly un-alike. When students are seen as similar according to standard metrics, additional variables become integral to determining proper fit in a graduate program. However, the myth of meritocracy perpetually infiltrates admissions (Liu 2011). In a meritocracy, people are seen as being uplifted by their own hard work despite the various societal systems at play and those who do not make it are seen as failures because they did not work hard enough. Meritocracies portend an equal playing field where each person has the same capacity for capital which aid them in successfully completing one's goals; however, people often start off with uneven advantage based on such factors as power, socio-economic status, or identity (Liu 2011; McDonough 1997). Meritocracies reinforce racist structures as they negate the impact of historic systems of oppression and disinvestment and bolster color-blind ideologies (Bonilla-Silva 2009).

Color-blind ideology is a "collective expression of white dominance" (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011, p. 192) that normalizes incorrect stereotypes about people of color, namely Black people, in order to erase racialized history and experience. Through the tenet of *abstract liberalism,* one of the color-blind ideological frames, a free-market mindset allows "reasonable" people to make arguments against affirmative action and other equity-based programs by arguing that they are "a violation of the norm of equal opportunity" (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011, p. 192), while at the same time using them for political and monetary gain. This mindset mirrors the free-market practices inherent in neoliberal theory thereby bolstering an anti-equity-based mindset. Guinier (2003) called an admission committee's inability to "grapple with the complexity and arbitrariness of our current normative conceptions of merit" a "failure to society" (p. 114).

Despite evidence proving that standardized tests may have marginalizing effects on racial and ethnic minorities and women, they are still used as blanket criteria in the graduate admissions process (Attiyeh and Attiyeh 1997). In HESA programs, the GRE is the most often used standardized test. Whether intentional or not, faculty may utilize tests as a gatekeeping tool to restrict access to diverse student populations to graduate programs (Stake 2006). Standardized test scores have been used to predict graduate student success as well as academic readiness (Freeley et al. 2005) for over 40 years despite conflicting evidence of utility (Kuncel et al. 2001). In one meta-analysis of the predictive validity of GRE on graduate GPA, the quantitative and verbal sections of the GRE accounted for only 6% of variance (Morrison and Morrison 1995). Additional widely recognized research shows that stereotype threat (the risk of fulfilling a negative stereotype about one's group) negatively affects the standardized test scores of African Americans (Steele 1997; Stricker and Bejar 2004), women (Wicherts et al. 2005), and students with low-socioeconomic status (Vaseleck 1994).

Second to standards of academic merit, Lamont (2009) found that faculty often make decisions that are influenced by their discipline and institutional logics. These logics stem from one's epistemological understandings and/or university prestige. For instance, faculty who have positivistic epistemologies may be more likely to

utilize efficiency and convenience tactics to select students. These logics also set standards for what is valued in a discipline; therefore, students who do not conform to discipline norms and share the faculty's academic worldview may be disproportionately negatively affected.

Homophilies, or emotion-based sub-conscious attractions to like others help explain why faculty may feel that an applicant fulfills a sense of fit within the department and are an additional variable in the admissions decision (Posselt 2013b). Posselt (2018) also found that in cases of ambiguity or where students look similar on paper, faculty may utilize their *perceptions* of pedigree or trust in a *perceived* excellence of institutions to make decisions despite any empirical evidence of such excellence. Therefore, homophilic understandings are intricately linked to the faculty's personal, subjective self. This attraction compels the faculty to advocate on behalf of an applicant because that faculty has a unique connection, and therefore ability, to judge that applicant. This second round of consideration is also where diversity plays a role in the decision-making process, after merit-based metrics (Posselt 2014).

Diversity in Doctoral Admissions

Lamont (2009) argued that diversity is never compared against merit in faculty deliberations, but instead is used as an additive. Diversity is "valued as a component of excellence and as a means of redressing past injustices, leveling the playing field, and shaping the academic pipeline" (Lamont 2009, p. 203). Diversity included institutional, disciplinary, topic, gender, racial, and geographic variables. Posselt (2013a) corroborated this finding in her study of faculty decision-making on twelve elite Ph.D. admissions committees.

Diversity played three roles in the admissions process: 1) it helped level the representation of historically underrepresented groups, 2) faculty saw it as a legitimate way to improve the education provided to all students, and 3) faculty used diversity to compete against other programs who may also be seeking diverse students (Posselt 2013a). This third form has the potential to reflect a self-serving intent during the admissions process reifying the neoliberal aspect of the admissions process by foregrounding competition. Ultimately there is a disconnect between this thinking around admissions. One on hand, faculty attempt to diversify the academy through admission of people of color; however, on the other hand, neoliberal reasoning takes precedence and competition ensues.

Neoliberalism and its resultant practices, policies, and programs aim to promote free market rationalism by way of deregulation, fiscal austerity of social programs, and the upholding of white, elitism (Hamer and Lang 2015). In higher education, neoliberalism reveals itself in decreased state funding, heavy reliance on adjunct and other non-tenured faculty, the academic capitalist knowledge regime, and a shift from need-based aid supporting traditionally underrepresented groups to merit-based aid and reliance on ranking, test scores, and other value-biased measures (Giroux 2015). Neoliberalism directly negatively affects the aims of racial equity work as it shifts power toward elite whites and services away from social services

and programs that support low-income groups and communities of color (Berrey 2015). In the admissions context, neoliberal policy results in a commodification of bodies of color and other "diverse" groups through the presentation of those bodies on marketing materials (Hartley and Morphew 2008; Osei-Kofi et al. 2013; Squire, forthcoming) thereby painting a utopic "diversity" on campus in order to draw prospective students, and painting a picture of a "good" school that "does" diversity (Ahmed 2012). These color-blind acts of positioning diversity as "good" and "useful" to the university's enrollment outcomes while also reducing services and funding for the same students they use remains problematic.

Guinier (2003) argued that race should be considered throughout the application process because it "has the potential to push educational and political leaders to align admissions choices with institutional mission in ways that open up access to higher education" (p. 115). However, diversity metrics are employed following the utilization of standardized forms of evaluation such as the SAT, GRE, and GPA since intellectual ability helps present a scholar identity and may help faculty predict future success (Posselt 2014), despite their problematic nature, particularly for marginalized communities.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) guides this study. A critical race perspective activates an assumption that race and racism are pervasive and endemic to United States society and the formation of organizational structures within that society (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). It also provides space for actor agency to play a role in how people interact with their organizations broadly as it relates to power dynamics influenced by race, organization positionality (e.g., tenure rank), and other salient identities.

CRT allows one to better unveil the systemic racism pervasive in many of the policies, programs, and actions of the university as they are augmented by neoliberalism. It centers the voice of people of color, disregards liberal acts of remediation as sufficient to offsetting societal discrimination, and understands that race and racism are present and permanent in today's society and central to how one understands society (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2017). The use of CRT also recognizes the hegemony of whiteness (Cabrera 2018). Hegemonic whiteness helps one to understand that there is a "high likelihood that people of color will have increased levels of racial awareness" (p. 225), an assumption I take in studying with these faculty and which proved true. Additionally, hegemonic whiteness is a socially constructed ideology that upholds white supremacy and privilege by dictating what is normal, natural, and neutral. It constructs a certain set of beliefs, knowledges, and ways of being that distributes power asymmetrically toward dominant groups, traditionally white, in society by also intersecting with other forms of oppression, such as classism, patriarchy, and ableism (Stewart and Nicolazzo 2018). As a result, the exclusive culture of doctoral education is reified through reproductive admissions processes that align with and privilege whiteness.

These tenets help one to better understand how decisions are made in institutional settings situated within neoliberal, racist contexts. For instance, power can

be both constricting and emancipatory as faculty of color manage both privileged and oppressed positions and identities through a variety of interactions and tensions (Butin 2001). Faculty may choose to "pass" in their identity as a form of resistance or survival or "live" in it as an act of resiliency and empowerment (or resistance; Jones et al. 2012). Particularly as it relates to faculty of color, Stockdill and Danico (2012) noted "when faculty from oppressed groups speak out against systemic institutional and cultural factors…many faculty and administrators view them at best as non-collegial and at worst as the sources of conflict" (p. 17). Therefore, faculty must decide when to speak out or to remain silent as it relates to the power that other faculty with higher tenure rank or dominant identities hold over them. CRT also unveils the ways that anti-equity variables that reify whiteness are utilized in the admission process by centering race and racism in the analysis.

Methodology

Critical race methodology centers the voice of communities of color and resists against deficit thinking while offering liberatory solutions to racial subordination (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). As a group that exists in the margins due to their racialization, lack of representation, and ongoing, pervasive racism in the U.S., critical race methodologies are appropriate for this study (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Central to critical race methodology is foregrounding participant voice through the use of interviews and focus groups and utilizing the data presentation technique of counter-narrative. This paper employs a "pure" form of counter-narrative by using only faculty interview data rather than intertwining current literature and researcher experience (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). This provides a more "raw" perspective of the admissions process directly from the participants themselves. Discussion and analysis typically embedded within the findings section is therefore presented in a separate section.

Methods

Critical Race Methodology aims to include multiple, intersecting identities within the analysis, centers the participant voice, and challenges dominating ideology toward emancipatory ends. The methods chosen for this study ensure that the knowledge uncovered is robust, affirmative, and true to the participant's experiences. As noted prior, the interview data is presented through the lens of CRT and neoliberalism and therefore reveals the ways that racism and capitalism affect the participants' doctoral admissions experiences.

Recruitment

Based on the methodology and research question for this study, each participant (a) must have identified as a person of color. A person of color is a person who identifies

as Black, Asian, Latinx[1]/Hispanic, or multi-racial, and not exclusively as white; (b) as an assistant or newly tenured (1–2 years tenured) associate faculty member at a predominantly white U.S. university; and (c) worked in a doctorate-granting Higher Education and Student Affairs program (or its aptly named equivalent). Importantly, "person of color" is often a term that it utilized by a person who engages in work that is in solidarity with other people of color working toward emancipation from oppression. While this looks different for each person in action, all participants reported holding a worldview that was critical (Dixson et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2014; Patel 2015) either as it related to their research, or in the way they personally engaged with the world. In total, I recruited 14 participants. Thirteen were untenured and one was newly (<1 year) tenured. They were recruited through discipline listservs, personal networks, and unsolicited snowball sampling from already recruited participants (Merriam 2009).

Data Generation Tools

Four forms of data were utilized for this study. First, participants completed a demographic form where faculty shared basic information about themselves, their epistemologies, and their programs, allowing for a more complete understanding of the participants. I conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Gee 2014) of institutional mission and diversity statements prior to each interview (n = 28) and reviewed approximately 900 pages of institutional strategic plans; campus, college, and department level marketing and admissions materials; and general information, if available, to better understand the campus context. Critical race methodologists must understand experience within a historical and present context.

Next, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the 14 faculty members via Skype or Google Voice (Deakin and Wakefield 2014) lasting approximately 60 min each. During a major educational conference, I invited participants to take part in a focus group. The focus groups acted as a member check of initial themes and findings and as a space of resistance for faculty of color who may be isolated on their campuses (Hooks 2009). Three participants attended the focus group in person and two provided feedback in an "on-line" focus group. The in-person focus group lasted 120 min.

Data Analysis

I conducted a three-phase data analysis for this project. Opening coding of institutional diversity and mission statements for language reflecting diversity, equity, and justice revealed stated outcomes of diversity, diversity descriptives (e.g., race, gender, class), and stated institutional goals (e.g., need for increased enrollment of marginalized communities), among others. Next, I conducted a Critical Discourse

[1] Latinx is a gender-neutral racial/ethnic identifier for participants who are from or are descendants of Latin American countries.

Analysis utilizing Gee's Building Tasks of Language examining for engagement with broader social conversations and discourses (Gee 2014). These analyses provided institutional context but are not specifically presented in this paper.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and memos kept. My conceptual framework and major question groupings were used as a quasi-a priori coding scheme. After utilizing a priori *codes,* I open coded the transcripts. Three peer auditors also open coded at least two transcripts each and we discussed our codes and understandings of the interviews. In total, 82 codes were found. Axial coding resulted in 12 codes. The 12 codes were also used to code the focus groups. Two additional note takers were present in the focus groups and notes reviewed to bolster trustworthiness. Additional trustworthiness was ensured through faculty attending the focus group where initial findings were shared and by sending the final findings to participants for feedback (Tierney and Clemens 2011).

Data Presentation

I utilized a creative, short story, non-fiction narrative data presentation (Polkinghorne 1995). Due to the sensitive nature of the participants' identities (e.g., race, tenure status; Nespor 2000) and the ease with which one may be able to identify participants if geographic, institutional, or specific program characteristics are shared, a narrative construction account is an appropriate method to display the findings (Barone 2007; Caulley 2008; Polkinghorne 1995). This mode of presentation has been utilized in both higher education publications (e.g., Espino 2012) and dissertations (e.g., McCann 2014; Stapleton 2014), as well as in other disciplines (e.g., Piper and Sikes 2010) to protect the identities of participants and as alternative formats of data presentation (Polkinghorne 1995). The data collected from the interviews and focus group could potentially negatively affect the participants (e.g., termination of employment) if their identities are revealed, further justifying the use of this mode of presentation. Additionally, this presentation format centralizes participants' voices in the text through counter-storytelling, a method aligned with critical race methodology (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

This is accomplished through the use of *composite characters* that are based on the participants' salient identities and shared experiences as identified in the interviews. Composite characters were constructed by combining participant stories where participants mentioned similar salient identities such as race, age, and tenure status or race and sex. It was clear throughout the process that some faculty shared experiences in their programs (e.g., younger women of color). Other times, a shared racial identity became salient, and gender did not, creating the opportunity to formulate a new character as is the case with Greg. A *completely fictional* facilitator (Carolina) provides action and narrative to progress and facilitate interactions. Therefore, while there are 14 participants in the study, there are five composite characters, plus a sixth fictional character.

In this presentation, fictionalized scenes are created where composite characters "interact" through a back and forth conversational format called *captured conversation* (Caulley 2008). The quotes are direct quotes from participants' interviews

and focus groups. This form of presentation allows participants to talk to each other across themes, a mode of data presentation utilized in traditional social science research (Vickers 2010). Analysis and discussion is presented in a separate section to allow for purity in data presentation. The next section presents a portion of the findings from a broader study of all interviews, and focus groups. The character biographies include:

Carolina Azevedo is the Vice Chancellor of Diversity and Inclusion at a medium-sized, private research institution located in the Southwest United States. She identifies as a Latina woman. Carolina's main role at the pre-conference is to facilitate conversation.

Amber Jones is an assistant professor of higher education at a medium, public research university in the Midwest United States. She identifies as a Black woman. She is in her second year of her job as a professor in the school of education at her university. Amber works in a department that she describes as moderately racially diverse. She describes her epistemology as social constructivism with critical, transformative perspectives.

Roger Craddock is a multi-racial queer Black man. For him, his race and sexual orientation have been most salient to both his research agenda and his positionality in his university and community. Roger is in his first year as an assistant professor of higher education at a large, research extensive university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. He describes his department as isolating because he is one of the only people of color. He defines his epistemology as critical.

Kathleen Jeffers is a Black woman and has been an assistant professor of higher education for six years. She recently submitted her tenure dossier. She works at a large, research university in the Pacific Northwest. Kathleen defines her department as moderately racially diverse. She describes herself as a critical scholar.

Greg Dickerson is a second year assistant professor in the higher education program at a large, research extensive university on the West coast. Greg identifies as an Asian man and for him race is the most salient identity. Greg is the only faculty of color in his department. He describes himself as a social constructivist who sometimes utilizes critical perspectives in his work.

Jennifer Rice is a second year assistant professor. She works in a higher education program at a large research extensive university in the Northeast. She identifies as a Chicana, Latina woman. Jennifer works in a department that she describes as moderately racially diverse and is not the only person of color in her department. She describes herself as a critical constructivist researcher.

It's Pretty Essential

The group of six higher education scholars entered the room and took their seats around the table. The dim roar of the conference continued from outside the temporary wall that separated their discussion from the larger group of conference

attendees. Carolina, our facilitator, grabbed a set of papers and tapped them on the table evening out their edges.

"I'd like to get started with talking about the admissions process and how you discuss diversity, equity, and justice in the process. Maybe we can talk about what happens when you think about engaging with others in an admissions meeting," Carolina continued.

Amber, an assistant professor from a medium, public research university in the Midwest started, "It's hard because I feel like I don't have a real, true sense of what's gone on in the past and I'm still learning the culture of my department, of my concentration, of my other faculty, colleagues."

"I can never come to the table saying 'I think this is an issue we need to address' and I can never say it that way because I don't think, I think people get a little nervous when I approach things that way. And I have noticed when I have said things [about social justice] I feel I get a little more resistance. I mean, it feels white dominated, I think my department particularly is really white," Roger added.

"I see you nodding Greg," Carolina observed.

"I think no matter what, we're always within a political arena. It doesn't matter that everyone is really nice to me; I'm nice to them. For me, it's probably kind of what I expected out of a PWI. That's kind of what my life has been. I've been at PWIs my whole life, that's just the nature, I think, of higher education," Greg, the only faculty of color in his program, said.

Amber added, "Within the program, we have a set of core values that we all actually believe in. And I think that's why it feels safe [for me to speak my mind]…"

"I am hearing a couple different narratives," Carolina interjected. "One is that newness is playing a role in how you are experiencing your programs. Some of you are still navigating those politics, relationships, and program culture. Others of you seem to know that your programs can be, as Amber intuited, 'unsafe.' You might face resistance particularly when talking about diversity or social justice that challenges whiteness. When you anticipate this resistance or feel these tensions how do you make sense of that? Do you change your behaviors or actions in any way?"

Roger, who has only been at his institution for a year, replied, "I've started to play more nice than most people. I still have to play nice Black guy. I think it helps a lot that I naturally come across as a nice guy, but it's even more tiresome to have to think about ways I can present myself and be even nicer than I am. So, I say it can be very exhausting some days. I think there are a lot of power dynamics at play. That can be very frustrating and I think it's a mix of for me personally, it's about age, then a Black man, then queer. So when I present things or when I am talking to people, I phrase things in ways I would normally not do. I usually pose questions to people."

"How does this all relate to your position as untenured or newly tenured faculty?" Carolina probed.

"It's tough because I am pre-tenure. You have to [say things] cautiously. The squeaky wheel is okay occasionally, but not having me tenured, you don't want to be that squeaky wheel all the time where you're unlikable. What I've been told in the tenure process is much about your likability as it is about your record," Greg added.

"So, it definitely, for me, has transitioned over time. [My mentor] told me, 'keep your head down, just write, just publish, don't get involved, show up but

be invisible.' By the second semester of my first year I was completely dying on the inside. Then, in my second year, I was like, 'yeah, no this is not going to happen this way.' I even made an announcement 'I'm going to be talking more and I'm going to be asking questions.' So, I would say it has changed significantly… I don't care if people think that every time I open my mouth it is to talk about diversity again. 'Yes, yes I am going to talk about diversity again, and you're gonna listen!'" Kathleen said.

"New faculty have not always been comfortable, but want to and feel the need to ask questions, raise concerns, sometimes related to diversity, equity and justice but sometimes not," Jennifer said. "I think a lot of that is not around race or gender as much as it is tenure status, which you can't deny the intersections of how that will play into being judged but to what extent should pre-tenure faculty in general earn their place or space. I can't be just going head to head with my department; I have to be a little more reserved I think. I'm figuring that out."

"What I am hearing is that there are levels of decorum that new and untenured faculty members are held to. It seems to me that you are suggesting that asking questions and playing nice in order to be likeable are important aspects of new faculty life," Carolina summarized. "Let's move to the admissions process and the criteria that you utilize to admit students."

Kathleen started, "I'm personally interested in working with [students] who care about social justice, equity, hell, even if you are talking about diversity and inclusion, I'll take that. I, many times, find it problematic if you're not talking about some of those ideas or are using coded language.'"

"For me, that's almost one of the most important factors of what I'm looking at is how they are articulating this sort of social justice mission," Greg replied. He continued, "I want people of color *and* white allies that are able to articulate some of these issues because you need both."

Jennifer shared another story.

"Academic background is the last thing I look at in the admissions file. I recommended admitting a doctoral student of color to our Ed.D. program without even noticing he didn't have a Master's degree this last round, even though it is a requirement. Everyone else rejected him, no comments. I have since admitted him to our Master's program," she shared. "So, I'm coming from this very like super, super radical, critical way of thinking about academics, and grades and meritocracy. I'm just gonna admit [him] because I understand what [he] represents within the system."

"I am hearing a lot about alternative measures of excellence such as interest in issues of social justice and equity. I am also hearing that you want people with great experiences, drive, and passion. What about the GRE?" Carolina asked.

"When you look at perceived ability to the GRE, then [you] kind of miss the boat on what they are actually interested in doing, and how it matches with what exists in the faculty and what exists in their career interest and trajectory and what they have actually done as a body of professional work. I think those are the students at which I find myself saying 'are we not reading the same file?' It's a mechanism to say if you don't score X amount quant, qual, and then the writing and then [faculty don't] look through the rest of the file. But if you don't look at the quality and passion that

somebody has, and I think the reality is and I know I am sensitive to students of color who have been excluded," Jennifer said.

Amber jumped in, "Test scores don't matter to me, the thing I weigh the most is that personal statement. I've seen so many students get a high GRE score, but are not good students. I don't think it's a valid measure. I don't like standardized tests."

Kathleen added, "I take note of them because there are other people around the table who care about GRE scores, so I make my own notes on all the folders to include that so that I can at least have the information in front of me. But I don't care about GRE scores either."

"The reason why I don't care so much about GRE is from my own experience," Greg shared. "I don't think the GRE measures a whole lot in terms of things people do in grad school."

Roger nodded.

"It seems to me that the GRE is pretty much a non-factor for you all unless you are thinking about how you are going to talk to the graduate school about accepting a student with a lower GRE score. You all mentioned an attraction to students with similar interests to you and also those with critical perspectives. Does anybody else feel drawn to other students of color?" Carolina asked.

"Students who are racial…ethnic…I do tend to read their essays and think about their personal experiences. And they will write about that experience and you can 'understand' where they are coming from those experiences. I try to take a little bit more time with those essays because with some of my colleagues those students could just become one in the pile," Kathleen began.

Amber added, "For me, recruiting a diverse population of students is also important. I teach a doctoral seminar now of our first year doc students and five out of the six of them are white, and to me that's just strange. I think I tend to initially think about identities that are salient to my own."

"Last year I chose one Latina and I think that was the only advisee I brought in so this year we admitted two, a Latina and a Latino" Jennifer nonchalantly quipped.

"Do they have to be the same racial identity as you or can they just be a person of color?" Carolina inquired.

"Would I take them if it doesn't exactly match? Probably, because I think by that point my thought is if I don't take them I don't know who else would. And I'm not convinced that there are many, if any, people in my department who have an interest in that or a background in that. So for me, I'm like, if I don't take this person I'm not sure anybody else really will. And I'm not trying to make the assumption that all students of color wanna study students of color, people of color…but there's probably a slight correlation," Greg said.

"If they're a student of color, I typically want them. And if they're a low-income student I typically want them," Kathleen added. The others sat up at the sound of her voice.

"And I know that often students who are drawn to me are students of color, particularly women of color are students who typically will mention me as a person to work with. So I am very sensitive to that and knowing that those tensions of wanting those students to succeed and knowing what the realities are… time and support that one would hope to get," added Jennifer.

"I do think about students' background, racially, professionally, and other forms of groups that are underrepresented on our campus," clarified Amber. "I think I tend to initially think about identities that are salient to my own, but then again there was a candidate who was talking about their interest in looking at transgender student experiences and talking about their own experiences and you know that really resonated with me. Because I really want our students to not just think about, not just structurally represent diversity, but value it, issues of diversity and equity. So I think that that's something that I look for myself."

Kathleen nodded in agreement.

"When do you look at diversity?" asked Carolina.

Roger replied first, "I think for me it happens pretty early on. I think it is really important to create an atmosphere and environment where we have a really diverse classroom. I like to think I do that from the very early stages."

"[For me, it's] at the very beginning of the process because that's one of the first things that I look for. I'll always look and see what they are and who they are. So I always look. That's always the first thing that I look at," Greg added.

"[I think about it] all that time. That is one of the things they (the other faculty) don't keep track of is race or ethnicity and gender, and so I consciously think about that as I'm reading applications. So most of the time I write them down to keep track as we're having conversations. And I definitely keep track of the students of color for sure," Kathleen said.

Jennifer added, "For me, it's pretty essential."

Then Carolina asked, "So when it comes to bringing students in, how have you advocated for students?"

The room fell silent.

Greg started, "For me, I have cautiously, put my foot down. This person has to be admitted. For me, it has to be the perfect candidate because I'm literally vouching for this person. I'm putting myself out there that this person comes in and is the worst student they ever had. Then the next time we're in these meetings, they're not going to give a darn what I think because 'oh yeah you're the one that was so adamant about bringing that bum in.' The time I did it was the candidate who really had a unique background, was a former foster youth, this person was African American or Afro Latino. He just had such a fantastic—and all the things he's overcome and all the things he wanted to do. He didn't have strong GRE scores, and that was a thing knocking him out. His GRE scores were fairly low. He was a student athlete in undergrad so his GPA was a little low, but since then he was in a Master's program doing really well in a Higher Ed Master's program. He was really able to articulate a lot of these things that I really value. I had to go bring in things. I had to Google him and look for other indicators. I was able to find some paper that he wrote for his Master's program. We don't have a writing sample, mind you. I showed it to some of the colleagues. Look, read this, this is good! 'Wow this is actually well written!' [they said]. All these questions that they had for this student were kind of answered in that. Since he's been there, he's done a pretty good job. People like him. That gives me credibility to do the thing again."

"So the two candidates that I really stood up for I think the reason they stood out to me is primarily their research interest and the way they think about social justice

and equity, so one candidate for example identifies as heterosexual but is very interested in ally development. So I was very interested in that. And it was the way he wrote his personal statement, really stood out to me. So I was a little persistent in having our program nominate these two candidates to come to campus," said Roger.

"[If] I think they are a good person, but I can't take them on, [I tell my colleague] 'you should take them on.' Sometimes I have to do a little convincing, but it's worked," added Kathleen.

"What a great conversation. It looks like it's about time to head out of here. I'd like us all to take out a sheet of paper and jot down some notes and reflections from today's conversation. I'll do it along with you. We'll just take a few minutes. Once you feel ready to go, feel free, and we'll see you in the morning" Carolina explained as she flipped open her briefcase and pulled out her small leather journal, reaching for a pen that had rolled to the center of the table.

Discussion and Analysis of Findings

Based on previous analysis of the institutional logics of the participants' universities (Squire 2015), the universities were guided by color-blind ideologies which stood in contrast to the faculty members' understandings of diversity, equity, and justice as being representative of a variety of identities, understanding of past imbalances, and actionable toward diversity and equity. Participants' universities sought to encourage meritocratic measures of success such as the GRE that are contingent on applicants having access to specific forms of capital, namely cultural and economic. Additionally, these logics were believed to be in contrast to their universities' espoused values through diversity and mission statements, meaning that the values of the university (e.g. supportive of diversity) were in conflict with the practices (e.g. requiring standardized measures of success). The contrasting value and practice components of institutions are a well-documented tenet of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005).

Therefore, faculty of color in this study departed from the current narrative of faculty decision-making in doctoral education (Posselt 2013a, 2016) in two important ways. First, faculty of color considered applicant diversity immediately and at all times throughout the process. Secondly, faculty did not consider the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or other standardized measures of merit valid indicators of quality or excellence. These are separate yet intertwining concepts and highlight the ways that faculty of color have been marginalized due to their own negative experiences around standardized measures of success and the importance of social identity, particularly race and class (Steele 1997), in the everyday life of the faculty member. Faculty of color also are attracted to students who share similar racial identity, backgrounds, and epistemologies. At the same time, they often feel restricted in their ability to fully engage with their faculty peers around issues of diversity, equity, and justice due to tenure status and identity; however, they find ways to resist those restrictions by modifying their behaviors and playing into notions of respectability.

All participants noted racial saliency first in each of their interviews and described that saliency in the context of their university's predominant whiteness. This saliency of race, in combination with gender, sexual orientation, and perceived

age combined to support an intersectional portrait of the faculty of color experience and its influence on the admissions process. In these ways, faculty show up in their race as they advocate for students of color (Ahmed 2012). As a color-blind racial theoretical mindset overtakes society and education, faculty centralized the experiences of people of color in their admissions discussions. By de-centralizing whiteness, faculty of color challenged the tenets of color-blind racism, liberalism, and neoliberalism.

Graduate Record Exam (GRE)

Faculty challenged dominant narratives of educational excellence through their explicit rejection of the GRE as influenced by the racialized experience of faculty members, race's connection to capital accumulation, and race's relation to educational exclusion. In Posselt's (2013a) study, she found that faculty defaulted to GRE scores to evaluate merit for the reason that high GRE scores provide access to elite intellectual communities, may help protect faculty from admitting students who cannot perform, and it is a convenient metric.

Faculty in this study challenged that narrative by only considering the GRE score when: (a) they knew other faculty would challenge them, (b) they had to consider students for fellowships/assistantships, and/or (c) there were graduate school minimums. Even in this last case, faculty often noted that they would be willing to write a letter of support to the graduate school for students of color who did not meet the minimum GRE requirement if there was other evidence that a student would be successful in the program. The GRE was not used as an initial cut off for the faculty interviewed and was more seen as a procedural hurdle. This is not to suggest that faculty of color do not look at GRE scores at all, but the faculty in this study were very clear that they did not support the GRE as a valid measure of merit. Some of this aversion stemmed from personal experience with doing poorly on the GRE and now feeling that they survived and are succeeding as faculty members. Others referenced research that discounted the validity of the test as a way to measure merit. Faculty are clearly concerned with the levels of capital that students of color and other underrepresented groups may have gained throughout their previous educational experiences and therefore the amount of support that they had regarding test preparation and success on these measures (McDonough 1997). As faculty of color, and previously students of color, there is a certain experience that each participant brings to the admissions process that provides additional context for understanding the applicants.

Faculty in this study identified as critical, post-modern, constructivist, feminist and/or queer scholars whose epistemology supported a more complex understanding of systems of oppression and the ways that standardized tests have been created and utilized to maintain white supremacy in higher education (Guinier 2015; Levinson et al. 2011). These worldviews helped faculty to recognize various forms of capital and the ways that society marginalizes racial minorities and constricts the forms of capital attainment that are valued in higher education. Posselt (2013a) found that some faculty would only consider bringing diverse students to campus when they

are seen as the presenting the lowest amount of risk. This is in direct opposition to the all of the faculty in this group. Just as social identity is salient for the faculty in this study and drives their research and actions, considerations of social identity also trump the measures of success that, if not considered to be up to a particular standard, may reflect negatively on a student applicant, namely GRE or GPA (Liu 2011).

Diversity

Unlike the GRE, which was rarely considered, faculty considered marginalized groups throughout the entire process. Certainly, race played a role in the dismissal of the GRE, but non-dominant identity students broadly helped faculty to feel connection to students and identify potential collaborations. Some faculty were given only race and gender statistics initially, but read for the student's implicit and explicit diverse identities in letters of recommendation. Faculty partially felt a common connection with other people of color, but also believed that students who were like them (i.e., came from similar backgrounds) would also be the students who wanted to do the type of work that they did (i.e., work on race, gender, equity) or work that may not fit into normative ideas of scholarship (e.g., trans* scholarship). As Holvino (2010) noted, faculty will engage with logics and employ them in different ways particularly when they identify with multiple identities. Therefore, this variety of attraction is not surprising. Faculty felt a duty to seek out those students and to bring to the forefront those student's identities rather than have those identities be "managed" (Ahmed 2012), assessed for "risk" (Posselt 2013a), or whitewashed (Bonilla-Silva 2009), thereby challenging the logics of their fields that privilege standardized measures of success. Mentorship, students with similar backgrounds, and identifying students who have related or non-normative research topics pushed faculty of color to privilege identity.

Faculty sought out students who shared a racial homophily with them. That is, faculty who identified as Black sought students who were Black. However, these were not exclusive determinants of interest for the faculty as they generally had very complex notions of identity and the experiences of people of color generally. Faculty were eager to talk about students who "looked like them," but were just as eager to support all students of color who were doing work informed by critical worldviews, would forward the profession, and had a unique viewpoint. At least two faculty members mentioned that they would support white allies who were critically minded and focused their work on issues of power and oppression; but if those students did not explicitly state terms such as "equity," "inclusion," or "oppression," that they would not consider those students and noted that there were other programs for those students to apply to instead.

Resistance

Faculty expected to be challenged by their peers, and prepared to make arguments for students they wanted to admit and around the concerns for which they felt strongly. Faculty members also modified their language and behaviors to ensure that

they protected themselves from enhanced scrutiny from tenured faculty and others with dominant identities. The practice of asking questions came up in multiple faculty interviews. I reflect on this practice as two-fold: an act of survival and an act of resistance. As an act of survival, faculty asked questions to be seen as civil or collegial with their peers (Haag 2005). Questioning, rather than assertively stating issues, is one way they engaged in the matters of the department without being seen as being out of line with the dominant, normative behaviors of being an untenured faculty member.

As an act of resistance, faculty of color in this study challenged dominant ideas of academic excellence (i.e., GRE) and neoliberal and color-blind theoretical logics around liberalism in ways that supported diverse student acceptance during the admissions process. By not allowing race and other identities to be disregarded in the admissions conversations through questioning and challenging, faculty of color centered the experiences of racialized students and embedded those discussions within their own experiences as people of color. This solidarity with future scholars and practitioners in their field uplifted students who held critical worldviews, similar research agendas which focused on issues of equity, and who may have lacked certain forms of capital that generally support student admission into graduate programs.

Implications

As affirmative action's historic goals become harder to implement in a neoliberal, color-blind society (Berrey 2015), supporting the aims of equity requires new direction. It is important to support and develop faculty of color who, due to their race, epistemologies, lived-experiences, and attention to erasing systemic inequities in education, may hold the key to helping improve dynamic diversity on college campuses. What is apparent from this study is that faculty of color seek out students of color and students with diverse backgrounds across a range of identities. Aside from social identity homophilies faculty of color are attracted to students who have varied worldviews, experiences, identities, and research interests that align with diversity, equity, and justice outcomes.

Institutional Reward Structures

By hiring and developing faculty of color who go on to admit diverse students, there is a possibility of enhancing dynamic diversity on college campuses. Faculty who are able to recruit diverse students and aid in their retention should be rewarded through the funding of research assistantship dollars, research funding, or other appropriate reward structures. This sort of development may also be supported through the hiring of postdoctoral fellows and other temporary faculty positions (with the opportunity to enter into tenure track positions) who are also people of color and/or hold critical epistemologies.

Institutional Framing of Excellence Logics

Universities should be present in naming how standardized measures of excellence and normative admissions structures consistently reduce the number of prospective students of color who are admitted to doctoral programs. Whiteness is as central to the experience of these faculty as their own racial identity for the fact that they are surrounded by whiteness and the persistent investment in it by their colleagues and the university broadly. Ahmed wrote, "Diversity becomes about *changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations"* (p. 34). Universities that are complicit in only naming the things they want (e.g., more Black students) rather than the things that they do not want (e.g., racism, sexism), or are so vague in their desired outcomes (e.g. diversity) as to be rendered useless, leave multiple oppressions intact. In diversity and mission statements, strategic plans, budget decisions, the types of faculty lines and research centers that are supported, activities organized, scholarships created, policies created or removed, and myriad other ways, institutions have the opportunity to reshape their institution's logics as to impress upon their community how the university leadership wants work to be conducted on a college campus. There are ultimate benefits to administrators who create campus cultures that support diversity, equity, and justice.

Institutional Doctoral Admissions Policy

Admissions committees should conduct regular and critical analyses of the criteria being used for admissions. By making these criteria explicit, they are able to "draw out the assumptions that need to be challenged" (Posselt 2018, p. 516). Drawing from Posselt's (2018) study on trust networks, admissions committees can work with graduate colleges to aggregate historical information on student applications and enrollments to bring to light patterns of discrimination including institutions that are often rejected, GRE acceptance patterns, and patterns of exclusion along social identity. Universities would also benefit from deep discussions on the relevance and utility of GRE scores in their doctoral admissions process and explore alternative approaches such as non-cognitive measures (Sedlacek 2004) which have proven to be helpful in admitting highly qualified students from minoritized backgrounds who are successful. Lastly, if universities are committed to increasing student diversity, they must also consider increasing faculty diversity. Contrary to Posselt's (2016) study on elite admissions, the faculty in this study centered diversity and challenged meritocracy thereby increasing the number of minoritized students and students aligned with social justice perspectives.

Developing New Epistemologies

Ultimately, disregarding standardized measures of success is a step in the direction of decolonizing the academy—an endeavor perfectly suited for justice-oriented higher education doctoral programs. Mirroring the mindsets of the faculty of color

in this study may provide a framework for beginning to engage in the decolonization of the meritocracy. As such, engaging in reframing the epistemologies of racism and meritocracy takes continual engagement with the questions of who is education for and how can one ensure that education is accessible. Practically, faculty can make changes when it comes to drafting and adhering to admissions standards and questioning their own assumptions about who and what makes a doctoral student “fit” into a program. Higher education as a field suits study on this topic as it is a unique field for which all institutional conventions can and should be challenged because of its metasubjectivity.

Conclusion

Institutional logics, race, and tenure status play clear roles in the way that faculty of color address the doctoral admissions process especially in the ways they are able to interact with their fellow faculty involved in admissions. Faculty of color in this study clearly disregard the GRE unless necessary to advocate on behalf of a student and they consider diversity at all times in the admissions process. At the same time, faculty of color feel limited in their abilities to take actions because of their tenure status and the political environment surrounding making too many demands or breaking an unwritten power dynamic and because of their race and being seen as not collegial or uncivil, both having potentially negative implications for reaching tenure themselves. The implications are both broad and specific for developing and supporting faculty of color and for creating dynamically diverse campus climates and speak to the ways that those concerned with educational diversity and equity can support those efforts in a neoliberal, color-blind environment.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Kate Gallagher for all her support and insight in reviewing a prior version of this manuscript. I would also like to thank the University of Denver Interdisciplinary Research Incubator for the Study of (in)Equality (IRISE) for their support.

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