

Chapter 56

Analyzing University Exploitation of Diversity to Legitimize Hiring Discrimination: A Black Woman Professor's Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This critical race counter-story chronicles a Black woman professor's candidacy for an associate dean position at a predominantly White institution. It is uncommon to hear the voices of those who have been marginalized and disenfranchised in the hiring process at a university. This counter-narrative disrupts the silencing of voices at the margin and challenges the master narrative of the university hiring process by giving voice to a Black woman professor's experience. Using covert racism, the researcher deconstructs the university's actions to operationalize a deficit narrative of her associate dean candidacy, while simultaneously espousing a commitment to diversity by increasing funding to an outreach program for students of color. The chapter concludes with a discussion of self-care. Black feminist thought provides the framework to understand how acts of self-care influenced the self-definition of the Black woman professor.

INTRODUCTION

At a large, Midwestern, predominately white research university, three women interviewed for a senior administration position: two White women and one African American woman. After interviewing, one woman withdrew from the pool as it became apparent in the interview that she did not meet the position requirements. One woman was selected as the senior administrator, and one woman was “disadvantaged” by the university in the interview process. Two women were hired as senior administrators based on their interviews. What happened to whom is the basis of this chapter.

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This narrative deconstructs the covert racist practices of a higher education institution to dissuade legal action by an African American female professor who the university “disadvantaged”¹ in her application for an associate dean position. Two processes that commonly occur on a university campus provided the context from which this story of institutional racism emerged. The two processes were: a unit reorganization that brought about the need to determine a new administrative home for a STEM outreach program for students of color; and a national search for an associate dean of extension and outreach. Although independent of one another, the two processes occurred simultaneously.

Covert Racism provides the ideological perspective from which I examine and analyze the events that occurred in this narrative. I use critical race theory’s counter-storytelling to voice my experiences- first, as a woman professor of color leading a precollege outreach program for students of color, and then as a candidate for an associate dean position. Following the timeline of events, the narrative begins with the reorganization of an administrative unit. The political nature of the precollege outreach program placed me in racialized and gendered spaces where micro-aggressions were common and not viewed as racist/ sexist by Whites (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2011). I describe events that show the context and nature of interactions with university leaders.

Next, the events surrounding my candidacy for the associate dean position are presented as well as how my candidacy was adversely influenced by the actions of university administrators. Through veiled acknowledgement of their wrong-doing, the university conflated the decision regarding an administrative home for the precollege program with its resolution of racial discrimination charges. In so doing, the university provided new funding for the precollege program while simultaneously labeling my associate dean candidacy as inferior and deficit.

Using Black Feminist Thought, I discuss the methods and means of self-care used to endure my conflict with the university. I conclude the chapter with my rationale for choosing not to sue the university for racial discrimination.

Ideological and Theoretical Frameworks

Covert Racism can be viewed as racism that is hidden; secret; private; covered; disguised; insidious, or concealed.” (Coates, 2011, p. 1). At the heart of covert racism is a deliberate policy of denial, omission, obfuscation of black, brown, red, tan, and yellow issues, persons, and groups. Covert racism, as a boundary keeping mechanism, operates through well-established and understood racial codes to maintain social distance between racial elites and racial non-elites (p.121). According to Coates (2011), covert racism varies by context; and by understanding its contextual variability it is possible to interpret the racial matrix covert racism seeks to maintain.

The search and hiring processes of universities are steeped in ideologies of objectivity, fairness, and transparency and are often used in the master narrative. The majoritarian or master narrative is “the description of events as told by members of dominant/majority group, accompanied by the values and beliefs that justify the actions taken by dominants to insure their dominant position.” (Love, 2004; p. 228-229). Three assumptions underlie the master narrative of university hiring: the process is neutral, objective and fair; the most qualified candidate is hired; and the candidates not selected were not the most qualified for the position.

Framed in critical race theory (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009), I use my voice, as an African American woman, to tell an oppositional counter-story of the hiring of a senior university administrator and how the university conflated two university processes to engage in covert racism. As

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