

Chapter 11

Navigating Inequitable (Mis)Treatment and Racist Harassment in Higher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Self-Decentered Autoethnographic Case

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ABSTRACT

The SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic (late 2019 to the present) brought to the fore latent and externalized forms of racism and bias and xenophobia. The author experienced a range of inequitable mistreatment and racist harassment in her workplace in higher education during this time, including from her direct supervisor who engaged in a racist microassault along with excess work assignments (the work of several individuals or multiple FTEs) during multiple years of the pandemic. This work uses a self-decentered auto-ethnography to explore practical ways to address racism and discrimination in the workplace, through clear documentation, honest in-lane reportage, and other efforts up an escalatory ladder. This work highlights the challenges of working towards a solution in a bureaucracy with a mix of apparently conflicting objectives and foremost to protect the institution against lawsuits and negative publicity.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-5934-8.ch011

INTRODUCTION

For a multiracial pluralistic liberal democracy such as that of the U.S., to function at high efficiency, people need to be able to engage each other with various differences with mutual respect and trust. Without such collaboration and mutual understanding, human organizations will break down, and people will retreat to their respective social groupings. To this end, there has been a lot of work invested into research about racism and its causes, various types of antiracist pedagogies in education, and policy research. There has been work to de-bias language. The thinking is that outright racism is more of a rarity, and those with racist ideas have taken their ideas underground and expressed them more indirectly through microaggressions and microassaults of various types.

The social order though seems to be in constant flux. Humanity will be drawing lessons from the SARS-CoV-2 / COVID-19 pandemic for many years to come. On the social front, the two years (and counting) of the pandemic—with necessary lockdowns and social distancing and masking measures followed by vaccination measures—have taken a toll on people's social relationships. Politicians have emerged to take advantage of the social disarray, with political messaging to differentiate themselves from others and scapegoating particular minorities in order to gain political points (cater to their voter base and encourage their showing up to vote for them in the future). The hyper-suggestible and those with racist sympathies have taken the message as authorization to bully and harass and even attack others. Some of these racial tensions have also spilled into workplaces, with some engaging in microaggressions, microassaults, and other expressions of hate, perhaps influenced by macroaggressions from hate messaging from national leaders in the U.S., a country with its own fraught history of collective racism and intergenerational traumas. Researchers note the effects of such historical challenges.

Experiencing microaggressions may be particularly harmful to people who are members of social group categories (i.e., race, ethnicity/national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability/ability, etc.) with long histories of systemic and legal exclusion, physical marginalization, oppression, and state-sponsored violence or discrimination because they are markers of ongoing systems of oppression and inequalities. The continued normalization and acceptance of microaggressions serve to reinforce existing inequities. (Skinta & Torres-Harding, 2022, p. 3)

Many argue that it is not just the oppressed who are harmed by racism but that the perpetrators of the biases also are harmed because of compromises to their own characters and lives. Reparation is seen as a possible approach to making peoples whole (Klein, 1964, as cited in Rasmussen & Salhani, 2010, p. 505).

A Triggering Personal-professional Event

In September 2021, the author and her supervisor were in a Zoom web conference call discussing the untenability of stacking multiple work positions on the author. In mid-2019, the last of a group of three staff had left the university. The work they supported had slowly accrued to the author, who had been assigned to the task on a ticketing system used by ITS. [In IT, the ticketing system is used as a forcing function at times to monitor work and to force extra work.] Even though the conversation was civil and without tension, on the surface, without warning, the author's supervisor took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes hard with both hands, and then pulled out the outer edges of his eyes into a racist "slant eyes"

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