


Exploring the Lived Experiences of African American and Latinx STEM Faculty and Students in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Racialized faculty have been under-represented in U.S. institutions of higher education for decades and this is exacerbated in STEM disciplines with gender disproportionality. This study deployed a descriptive phenomenological design to capture the experiences of 11 faculty, postdoctoral, and graduate scholars who identified as African American and/or Latinx drawn from two universities in the southern U.S.; one a predominantly White, privately funded school and the other a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution that is publicly funded. We found four main themes (and three subthemes) that captured the shared lived experiences among the participants. We consider these findings through the lens of intersectionality.

KEYWORDS

Descriptive Phenomenology, Lived Experiences, Racialized Faculty, Racialized Graduate Students, STEM

In the United States (US), racialized faculty (RF) have been underrepresented in institutions of higher education for decades. This is apparent for several racialized and marginalized groups of people including Native American, Pacific Islander, African American, and Latinx academics. There have been many institutional and federally supported efforts to positively impact trends and experiences in academia, which have coalesced in recent years under the rubric of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). DEI efforts sometimes involve the creation of leadership positions to spearhead efforts throughout campuses to include faculty recruitment and retention, student recruitment, and leveraging the metrics of DEI for marketing and rankings. These efforts are laudable but there is evidence that their impact on the lived experiences of racialized faculty and students may be limited. Reported in this paper are the findings of a study designed to capture the experiences of faculty, students, and postdocs affiliated with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines regarding the persistent exclusion of racialized people in the professoriate.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Data from 2018 indicate that African American and Latinx scholars each occupy 6% of full-time faculty positions though they comprise 13% and 16%, respectively, of the general U.S. population. By comparison, White academics hold 75% of faculty positions (United States Department of Education, 2020). The effects of this disparity are strongly felt in STEM disciplines and complicated with gender disproportionality within these male-dominated arenas. Racialized faculty have reported encountering barriers in the academy including racism, the inability to discuss diversity issues, service tax, and challenges with mentorship.

According to a survey of 10,438 STEM faculty, only 354 (3.3%) men and 260 (2.5%) women identified as underrepresented minorities (URM) (this definition excluded Asian faculty) (Matchett, 2013). Further, the percentage of URM women faculty in STEM shrank as rank increased, whereas the opposite trend was seen among URM men (Hurtado & Figueroa, 2012).

Racialized Faculty

Zambrana et al. (2017) found that racialized faculty largely view the academy as an unwelcoming environment, with racism being part of the “everyday experience.” Stanley (2006) found that the idea of race was exploited by White colleagues to drive claims of reverse racism and minimize the seriousness of microaggressions against RF. Majority faculty often question RF qualifications, devalue their accomplishments, and marginalize their research, forcing the need for RF to work twice as hard to succeed (Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011; Zambrana et al., 2017).

Several studies have identified an increased service burden among RF. This “racial ethnic tax” (Zambrana et al., 2017), or service tax, included longer time expectations for a minoritized person for mentorship and collaboration on committees, university functions, and departmental and university diversity initiatives (Stanley, 2006; Griffin et al., 2011). Stanley (2006) reported challenges with balancing the desire to support minority student groups, communities, and junior faculty with department/university diversity expectations and the research agendas critical for tenure and promotion. Similarly, Joseph and Hirshfield (2011) reported unequal faculty expectations around supporting minority students, providing the voice for diversity, and being pioneers and advocates for diversity initiatives. Connecting with and supporting students and junior FC is a critical component of success in the academy. For example, Stanley (2006) found that the quality of mentorship experiences and the collegiality with White university colleagues were seen as make-or-break experiences for RF. However, many traditional processes within the academy can be experienced as exclusionary and even oppressive. For instance, a study of Latinx experiences with the tenure and promotion process at a PWI by Urrieta et al. (2015) found that participants reported being isolated and socially excluded, being expected to suppress their ways of knowing based on their ethnicity, gender, and political views.

Racialized Women Students and Faculty

Two decades of research (see, e.g., Gaston Gayles & Smith, 2018; Guy & Boards, 2019; Tate & Linn, 2005) have shown that racialized female graduate students (RFGS) have reported experiences of marginalization in their academic environments. Specifically, RFGS have reported a lack of mentoring, poor relationships with their advisors, microaggressions and stereotyping, tokenism, “hyper(in)visibility,” diminished sense of belonging, and a chilly climate. These experiences can lead to isolation, self-doubt, and potential attrition (Ko et al., 2013). Consistent with this research, in a qualitative study on racialized female doctoral STEM students, Wilkens-Yel et al. (2019) investigated daily interpersonal encounters and found five main experiences: delegitimization of credibility, isolation and diminished STEM belonging, pressure to assimilate to cultural norms, tokenism, and differential treatment based on racial and gender identities. Research regarding racialized female faculty (RFF) showed similar findings.

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