


Chapter 5

Accumulating Paper Cuts: Black Women Faculty's Experiences of Microaggressions in Predominantly White Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically examines the intersectional experiences of Black women faculty within predominantly white institutions (PWIs), exploring racial microaggressions' impact on mental health and professional development. Through Dr. Brooklyn Oakcliff's scholarly journey at Mountain Valley State University, the research unveils subtle mechanisms of institutional racism. Utilizing critical race theory and Black feminist thought, the study reveals how microaggressions function as systemic marginalization tools. These discriminatory practices generate profound psychological consequences, including elevated stress and trauma-related symptoms that compromise professional opportunities. By documenting the embodied experiences of racial trauma and survival strategies of Black women scholars, the chapter critically analyzes institutional cultures perpetuating racial inequity. The research illuminates how marginalized academics navigate and resist systemic oppression, demonstrating the transformative potential of resistance within hostile academic environments.

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INTRODUCTION

Black women faculty at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) navigate academic spaces fraught with racial microaggressions and institutional barriers that undermine their professional legitimacy and well-being (Louis et al., 2016; Newton, 2023). Unlike overt racism, microaggressions operate subtly but persistently, inflicting cumulative harm that is often invisible to dominant institutional cultures (Pittman, 2012). This article examines the multifaceted experiences of Black women faculty, situating individual narratives within broader systemic frameworks. Employing Critical Race Theory, Black feminist thought, and intersectionality, the study elucidates how racial and gendered oppressions intersect to create unique challenges for Black women in academia (Haynes et al., 2020; Rollock, 2023).

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Racial microaggressions manifest as everyday slights or insults that convey derogatory messages to Black women faculty, ranging from questioning their credentials to invalidating their emotional responses (Mickles-Burns, 2023; Perkins & Durkee, 2024). These experiences reinforce harmful stereotypes such as the “angry Black woman,” which delegitimize Black women’s professional authority while shaping hostile institutional climates (Middleton & Owens, 2023; Castelin & White, 2022). Critical Race Theory reveals that these microaggressions are entrenched within institutional policies and cultures that sustain white supremacist hierarchies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Black feminist thought and intersectionality further contextualize the compounded racial and gender oppressions that Black women faculty endure, underscoring the necessity of multidimensional analyses (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989).

Psychological Toll and Health Implications

The psychological impact of microaggressions is profound, with Black women faculty reporting elevated stress, anxiety, depression, and symptoms consistent with posttraumatic stress disorder (Dale & Safren, 2019; Schreier et al., 2015). The concept of racial battle fatigue describes the chronic psychological and physiological strain from navigating racially hostile academic environments (Smith, 2004; Chancellor, 2025). This fatigue manifests biologically as increased risk for hypertension, stroke, and other stress-related health issues (Simmons et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2022). Despite these documented effects, institutions frequently dismiss the severity of racial

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