

Civility and Structural Precarity for Faculty of Color in LIS

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have established particular patterns of inequity, micro, and macro-aggressions that affect faculty of color at U.S. universities. This article provides an autoethnographic perspective on the experiences of women of color in LIS. It focuses specifically on the ways that prioritizing comfort and civility over equity and justice can create structural precarity – precarity that is built into academic systems of reward and punishment – for female faculty of color. The article also gives brief suggestions for resolving this issue.

Published version can be found in the Journal of Education for Library and Information Science:

Gibson, A. N. (2019). Civility and Structural Precarity for Faculty of Color in LIS. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 60(3), 215-222.

<https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/full/10.3138/jelis.2019-0006>

A note on ontology/epistemology/methodology

This “article” (if that is what you will call it) is a telling of experiences—my own, and of others’ shared with permission—a form of collective autoethnography, complete with the methodological/ethical challenges inherent in the form (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012; Lapadat, 2017). It is a particular type of truth-telling. Similar articles have been published outside of LIS (e.g., Louis et al., 2016). More than anything, it is a nudge—a reminder that our “niceness” and “neutrality” reproduce their own inequity.

Smile

“Welcome.”

I get onto campus. Still trying to figure out where everything is, I head to parking services to get my parking permit. The woman at the counter tells me that they are done on a tiered payment schedule, with people with higher salaries paying more. She sizes me up and guesses my tier. She is wrong. She guesses one down. She is wrong. I say “no—no not less. Higher.” Confused and a bit embarrassed, standing in the line at the open counter, I don’t want to just tell her (and everyone in the room) my salary. She guesses two more tiers up, looking more and more annoyed each time. Finally, frustrated, I just blurt it out. Her eyebrows shoot up and she gives me the once over again, but she processes my paperwork. I smile and leave, wondering if this would be a new normal.

“Nice to meet you.”

I am at a conference reception, where colleagues and students from around the country have gathered. A young man—a doctoral student from another school—greet me. “Hi, I’m _____. What is your name?” “I’m Amelia Gibson. Nice to meet you!” He asks me, “who do you study with here?” He leans in with a drink in his hand. Understanding his assumption (his mistake), I smile. “I currently have one doctoral student, _____.” He is confused, and stutters. “Students can have students here? I don . . . what?” I say, “I am an assistant professor.” And he laughs. And waves his hand, and laughs more, and rebuffs me, “No, really. What do you do here? Seriously!” A white male colleague comes through the door and steps up beside me, and the doctoral student asks him—“What does she do here?” A bit indignantly (and I thank him for that), he says, “She is a professor here.” The student is shocked. He accepts the authentication, but not necessarily my “authority.” I smile, teeth together. Deep breaths. Greet the next person.

“Getting to know you.”

Walking down the street, a student catches my eye. He gets a mildly panicked look that I know well—the one that says “I know that I know you, but I can’t figure out who you are.” Rather than smile and say nothing, he makes an attempt. “I know you. You are one of the research assistants for Dr. Gibson.” I have three doctoral students. They are all Black women. They are the only Black women in the doctoral program. He’s taken a calculated risk. The odds are three out of five— three doctoral students, and two Black faculty. But he’d guessed wrong (despite having been in my class for an entire semester). “No,” I say. “I am Dr. Gibson. It’s ok. My hair is different today.” I smile, and try to make him feel better.

Taking it with a smile.

“You are overreacting.”

“That’s now how I meant it.”

“Why are you so sensitive?”

“Can’t you just ignore it?”

“No one here is a bad person.”

“Let us make sure we remain collegial.”

“I don’t even see your race, just the quality of your work.”

“We are all good people.”

“It is just the law/process/rule . . .”

“We should be civil.”

Recently, protestors tore down a Jim Crow–era civil-war statue on the UNC campus. The statue, which was erected by the Daughters of the Confederacy in 1913, was, according to Julian Carr’s (1913) dedication speech, intended to help ensure that the Southern cause would never die. Soon after the statue was removed, the protestors who removed it were criticized for taking direct action instead of using the political process to achieve their goals. Their actions were, despite their “rightness” or “wrongness,” outside of the law. They had been “uncivil,” and for many people this outweighed the rights and sense of safety and belonging of UNC students, staff, and faculty of color. As it often does, civility provided a convenient way to shift the conversation away from issues of equity, justice, and (ironically) civil rights. In the weeks and months following the removal of the statue, the campus where our students, staff, and faculty live and work every day has been subject to neo-confederate, armed “protests.” We have seen manifestos threatening professors (Spivey, 2019), racist vandalism (Thompson, 2019), and armed visits to campus (Daily Tar Heel, 2019). Students and faculty of color regularly express grave concerns that “it isn’t a matter of if, but when” someone gets hurt. Still, responses to the ever-increasing sense of threat often focus on facade, appearances, legalities, and “civility.”

A toxic cycle

Despite a history steeped in oppressive racial politics and an implicit commitment to studying and serving the most privileged (under segregation, and then “innovation”), LIS has a history of weaponizing civility, neutrality, and silence as a cover for marginalization. A habitual cycle of negligent transgression (we can, apparently, see the harm in moral cowardice only in hindsight), apology, and “reconciliation” (e.g., ALA, 2018) has created a dangerous environment for scholars of color in LIS. Faculty of color who manage to make it through our PhD programs and into tenure-track positions often face racial and gendered contexts that put them at risk for high levels of anxiety and stress in the workplace, contribute to burnout, and bar junior faculty from promotion, even in the most polite of environments.

Structural inequities by the numbers

Academia (broadly) and LIS (specifically) embody a set of deep-seated inequities in hiring, working conditions, evaluation, retention, and promotion that are often dismissed as indicative of massive individual deficits (or disinterest in the field) among those underrepresented in LIS

programs and information work spaces. Black and Latinx faculty are underrepresented in the field, both numerically and conceptually. According to 2017 ALISE statistics, only 5% of LIS faculty are Black (compared with a census estimate of 13.4% of the US population)¹, and only 3% identify as Hispanic or Latinx (compared with a census estimate of 18.4% of the U.S. population) (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Likewise, the LIS canon—works taught as “foundational”—has largely excluded critical work (which often addresses issues related to power and identity) and the work of faculty of color (Gibson, Hughes-Hassell, & Threats, 2017). Inequity extends to pay. Overall, there are consistent pay disparities between men and women, with the average male assistant professor earning approximately \$10,000 more per academic year than the average female assistant professor, and the average male dean earning over \$50,000 more per year than the average female dean (ALISE 2017). Many Black and Latinx faculty in particular are “firsts and only”—a precarious position for a faculty member (especially female faculty), as they are more likely to be expected to mentor students and fill departmental service roles (Guarino & Borden, 2017; June, 2015). Additionally, most faculty of color are aware of the long list of star scholars of color who have been denied tenure (without warning, in many cases) by their institutions (see Flaherty, 2016, for a short list of recent, high-profile cases). All of this is the backdrop against which faculty of color frame their experiences in LIS departments.

An epistemic orientation toward privilege

LIS classrooms at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are also largely privileged spaces, in terms of both population and culture. Many of the highly ranked programs are populated mostly with white US students and faculty (who comprise the racial “majority” in terms of social, political, and economic power in the United States), with some measure of statistical “diversity” achieved primarily through the recruiting of international students and faculty from high-income, also privileged backgrounds. In doing so, programs exclude already marginalized “domestic minority” groups and reinforce the field’s epistemic orientation toward privilege and away from any substantive reckoning with issues of race and power in our work and in our workspaces. It is the same orientation that drives us ever toward technological determinism and always chasing the newest “shiny data object.” Because many faculty members have little understanding of the history or nuances of race and power in the United States, they are often at a loss to address those issues in the work, in the classroom, and among colleagues, and they default to individualistic myths about meritocracy and deficit thinking when colleagues and students experience difficulties.

The black female faculty experience

The racial and class composition of US and international LIS programs creates a context that prioritizes privilege and punishes already marginalized scholars. If other faculty within a department are unaware of the functions of race, gender, and class in academic spaces and how they influence their behavior, students’ behavior, and their colleague of color’s experience, they often end up perpetuating racist and sexist working conditions. Being the only, or one of two, faculty of color (FOC) in a department brings with it a sense of structural precarity, as the

¹ Calculated from total of American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and White. Excluded is Hispanic, as Hispanic may include any race.

faculty member's success is often reliant on her ability to educate key allies about these issues without arousing fragility or defensiveness (DiAngelo, 2011).

Engaging in this education takes time and energy away from FOC research productivity and teaching capacity, and the level of effort required increases with the number of "allies" the FOC attempts to cultivate. On the other hand, the fewer the number of colleagues that understand how racism and sexism influence teaching evaluations, scholarship, and service, the more reliant the faculty member is on those individuals to continue to act as allies. Not doing this work is not an option, as FOC success depends almost entirely on at least one white colleague and/or administrator understanding the racial dynamics of teaching and service. At the same time, female FOC have relatively high service expectations (mandatory diversity on hiring and other committees combined with low FOC numbers ensures this). Additionally, because many white faculty feel uncomfortable talking about race, FOC are at risk of becoming the ostensible moral consciences of their departments—at great personal and professional risk. Placing the onus for commenting on issues related to racism and sexism on faculty of color (especially female faculty of color) without the requisite protection and support for implementing change means putting that FOC in a politically and professionally precarious situation. Civility and ideals of community-oriented self-sacrifice are often weaponized against women of color when they respond to harmful policies and practices in the academic workplace. Many students (and some faculty), never having had exposure to a Black teacher or professor, have difficulty engaging with Black women in positions of authority and lapse into stereotypical expectations and behavioral scripts in and outside of the classroom. Students are often more demanding of favors from female faculty (El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, & Ceynar, 2018) and are statistically more likely to evaluate them more harshly. Often, Black female faculty are characterized as unreasonable for putting boundaries on requests for "care work" such as comforting and counseling distraught students, tending to the business of the department (but not business that builds the faculty's research agenda, or serves strategic career purposes), and working for the "good of the order" at the expense of the faculty member's own career. While some of these seem ridiculous, and it would seem that all a young, untenured faculty member would have to do is say "no," research has shown that Black women in workplaces (including academia) are more quickly labeled confrontational, uncooperative, angry, and uncivil when they speak up about gendered or racial inequities (Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2018; Thomas, Johnson-Bailey, Phelps, Tran, & Johnson, 2013).

Departmental responses

Speaking to colleagues of color, I have heard a few common trends in responses to faculty who try to speak about these problems. Whether intentional or not, many colleagues and administrators default to defensive stances when engaged in discussions about race, choosing disbelief, minimizing FOC experiences (It can't be as bad as you say), and accusing FOC of exaggeration. Colleagues who receive death threats or other abuse are told that they are "overreacting." Administrators and senior faculty weaponize civility, with the subtext of precarity, and forced "gratitude" for FOC achievements as means of controlling FOC responses to structural racism and/or sexism. Vocalized concerns and opinions are met with reminders that double as accusations: "I got you hired," "I nominated you for that award," or "I got you tenure" (as though the scholar did not work as hard as her peers to achieve those things). In response, we are expected to maintain a smile and to cover a multitude of sins with a veneer of calm, regardless of the impact on our own careers, health, or personal/inner lives. Interactions with

other faculty are often entwined with this subtext of precarity and the sense that the faculty member should be grateful just to be at the institution, to have gotten tenure, or to have received funding, and that this was not done through their own work but because of a special dispensation (or line of funding). In some cases, departments and colleagues don't deal with issues of race at all, and the faculty member is to fend for herself and expected to "just be happy they have a job." Colleagues take the position that life is hard for everyone (basically ignoring both the research on FOC experiences and the lived experience of their colleague), so why should it be any different for faculty of color? Others acknowledge the problem and attribute it to lack of quality candidates—the "pipeline/deficit argument." If there are no FOC here, it is their own fault. They must not want to be here (without considering why they might not want to be there). It is ironic that this individualistic perspective is written into the modern identity of the field (Cronin, 1998), even as we focus our energy on the development of systems that control others' access to, and experience with, information. While some institutions work toward resolving these inequities, many focus on selective "diversity"— hiring one or two faculty members from traditionally underrepresented groups—in lieu of doing the work necessary to enact broader systemic change within their universities and in the field of LIS. Others derail discussions about broad inequity by individualizing and defending.

What to do

Fixing racism in the academy would take more space and wisdom than I have here. But here are a few points to consider for improving the experiences of faculty of color in LIS:

- Do your own reading about how racism, sexism, and ableism function in academia— don't wait for your FOC colleague to teach you about racial politics in the United States and academia. Don't put the onus for teaching on your FOC colleague. They have their own work to do.
- Speak up about inequities and injustice—again, don't leave all this work to your FOC colleague. They have their own work to do and, in the case of junior faculty, are often put at risk by engaging in advocacy on campus.
- Question the idea of "civility"—Really think critically about who on your faculty is characterized as "uncivil" or a "troublemaker." Is this person making others uncomfortable or angry by pointing out systemic problems? Is the reaction to this individual an exercise in fragility (DiAngelo, 2011)?
- Learn your FOC colleague's name—Put in the effort to distinguish them from the other Black faculty member in your department (statistically speaking, there probably aren't more than two among the tenure-track faculty. Learn to tell them apart).
- Believe your FOC colleague when they describe their experiences— Don't diminish them. Don't belittle them. Don't call them liars or say they are exaggerating. They will have experiences with students, other colleagues, and members of the public that you will probably never have. Believe them.
- Protect junior women FOC from threats specific to their group—All faculty should have the same opportunity to succeed, and junior faculty need protection in order to do that. Beware of the "strong Black woman" stereotype, which can lead to the assumption that women of color (and Black women in particular) do not need protection because they can speak up/out for themselves. This can be read as uncivil, and not collegial, by other colleagues.

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