Promoting Mental Wellness among Black Faculty: Strategies for Coping

Narketta Sparkman-Key and Shuntay Z. Tarver

> Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.
>
> Audre Lorde

Introduction

There is not a break from the onslaught of racial injustices that Black faculty experience within the academy that affords grace to focus on their mental wellness. Rather, being Black in higher education requires the engagement in what Audre Lorde defines as the political warfare of caring for ourselves as an act of self-preservation (Lorde, 1988). Black faculty must reckon with the reality that institutions of higher education are based upon white supremacy that benefits from the labor, thrives on the exclusion, and echoes the dehumanization of Black people. Consequently, navigating systemic inequalities requires Black faculty to engage in the strategic and simultaneous tasks of discerning what is happening to us, and actively employing numerous coping strategies that will allow us to thrive in hostile and unwelcoming contexts (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Bonner et al., 2014; Spates et al., 2020). This chapter explores this conundrum by discussing how Black faculty experiences cause mental strain, and the various coping strategies utilized to achieve mental well-being.

Black faculty embody a great deal of resilience to navigate systemic inequality successfully (Davis, Chaney & BeLue, 2020; Louis et al., 2016). Such resiliency is essential amidst pervasive institutional barriers that not only distract from professional success, but also undermine it through individual actions, systemic policies, and institutional practices. For Black faculty, becoming an expert in their field and securing a coveted position in the academy does not automatically result in institutions

welcoming and valuing their presence and empirical contributions (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Louis et al., 2016). Consequently, the phrase 'publish or perish', often reflects a deeper, and more troubling, reality for Black faculty, who must find coping strategies that will prevent them from mentally, emotionally, and physically perishing within the ivory tower, irrespective of the number of publications one has on the road to tenure. Black faculty are often challenged by racial exclusion, psychological torment, and institutional inequities that manifest as persistent mental, spiritual, and emotional attacks, or microaggressions that occur throughout one's tenure (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2011; Settles, Buchanan & Dotson, 2019; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Nonetheless, Black faculty continue to protect their mental well-being amidst the challenges experienced within higher education. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Black faculty promote mental well-being through the utilization of various coping strategies. Beginning with an explanation of Black faculty experiences in the academy, authors discuss how adverse experiences within higher education contribute to the mental strain of Black faculty. Next, we present strategies that Black faculty engage in to cope with the hostile climate of the academy. Finally, we conclude with the assertion that the resilience of Black faculty within the academy illustrates that they belong in the ivory tower, despite the multitude of messages and experiences that suggest otherwise.

Black Faculty Experiences

Black faculty experiences within the academy are less than favorable. It has been well documented that the presence of Black faculty has consistently been met with institutional inequities, racial microaggressions, and systemic marginalization (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). However, with the increasing exposure of racial inequities within the larger society, more attention has been paid to these experiences within the last few years. Black scholars have begun openly sharing more of their experiences beyond traditional academic outlets, such as journal articles and conference presentations, in active resistance to the illusion that the presence of Black faculty in higher education is reflective of systemic inclusion. Alternatively, social media has been adapted in numerous ways to unveil existing racial disparities within the academy. For example, a Twitter-originating movement titled, "Black in the Ivory," erupted on social media in solidarity with global outrage over the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by Minnesota Police

officer Derek Chauvin. The tweets inspired Black academics across the United States to recount their experiential encounters with anti-Black racism within the academy. One scholar tweeted, "today a colleague mistook me for our janitor . . . the only thing we have in common is that we're both Black women." In another tweet a scholar stated, "I've experienced many different types of racisms but the type where white people make you do all the work and then erase you is new to me." This movement shed light on the experiences, treatment, barriers, and overall inequity within academia toward Black faculty. Social media has made it far easier to express these experiences to a wider audience. Despite this recent trend, Black faculty experiences, critiquing systemic oppression within the academy, have been empirically articulated for decades because of persistent racial discrimination and adverse treatment in higher education.

The experiences of Black faculty within higher education are plagued with overburdening due to service demands, barriers to promotion, individual racial microaggressions, and systemic discrimination embedded in institutional policy and practices. Such experiences threaten the advancement of Black faculty within higher education. Faculty of color are often heavily recruited, then subjected to cultures in which they must prove they are qualified, with no institutional support to retain them (Kelly, Gayles & Williams, 2017). According to Stanley (2006), "The wounds of covert and overt racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia run deep for many faculty of color. Discrimination cuts across many areas of the academy such as teaching, research, service, and overall experiences with the campus community" (p. 705). This results in institutions rendering faculty of color simultaneously *hypervisible* in problematic ways, yet adversely *invisible* at the same time (Settles, Buchanan & Dotson, 2019). For example, as Settles and colleagues have asserted: Faculty of color, as an underrepresented group that lacks power within the academy, may be *hypervisible* due to their race and other markers that distinguish them from dominant group members. At the same time, their marginalized group status may render them invisible in terms of their personal identities, personhood, or work performance. As a result, achievements warranting recognition may be largely unnoticed, whereas mistakes and missteps, whether real or merely perceived by dominant group members, may be amplified, and receive heightened scrutiny (Settles, Buchanan & Dotson, 2019: 63).

Such hypervisibility renders any perceived deviation of Black faculty from implicit standards of behavior to be overemphasized and pathologically interpreted. At the same time, significant contributions made by Black

faculty are often overlooked or misattributed to someone other than Black faculty. The experiences of faculty of color within academia are convoluted with tokenism and exclusion, while the nuanced injustices characterizing their experiences are often ignored (Griffin et al., 2011; Louis et al., 2016).

Faculty of color experience issues related to teaching, from students, including problematic attitudes and behaviors, questioning of their authority and credibility in class, and resistance to the incorporation of diversity perspectives in course content (Stanley, 2006). Often, teaching evaluation scores are lower for Black faculty in comparison to their white colleagues, and negative comments from students are used to challenge the advancement of faculty of color (Smith & Hawkins, 2011). In fact, these evaluations are often cited in annual reviews and promotion materials, with little to no consideration to how they may represent biased perspectives that skew the performance of Black faculty.

Black faculty experiences are also characterized by marginal or inadequate mentorship within the academy. Lack of mentorship has an impact on faculty of color's knowledge of the culture, ability to develop collegial relationships, and overall value within their institution. The experiences of many Black faculty reflect issues with an institution's lack of formalized processes of mentorship, resulting in adverse mentorship experiences. While many institutions of higher education successfully engage in mentorship of white faculty, Black faculty experiences often reflect institutional barriers that restrict professional advancement. In such instances, faculty sponsored mentorship assignments result in exploitation, microaggressions, and limited professional opportunities. In addition, institutionally assigned mentors may possess adverse beliefs of Black faculty. Problematic beliefs include perceptions such as the "fail or succeed entirely" mentality – the belief of success being achieved without mentoring, belief in a "one size fits all" type of mentoring, and the idea that if someone needs mentoring something about that individual must be lacking (Stanley, 2006).

Within the academy, faculty of color are often invisible to their colleagues and must prove, or over-prove, their presence or worth (Stanley, 2006). This reality is directly influenced by how faculty of color are hired by institutions, and existing biases toward institutional hiring processes. Negative views of affirmative action and opportunity hires have led to the erosion of Black faculty credibility, challenges in the tenure process, and microaggressions (Kelly, Gayles & Williams, 2017). As a result, lack of collegiality by disgruntled colleagues may become a barrier to success, despite the belief that collegiality is automatically an aspect of being

a faculty member. Black faculty may be perceived in terms of attributes and stereotypes related to their gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual identity, religion, culture, and socioeconomic status (Stanley, 2006). Their identity within the academy, thus influenced by how others view them, often leads to discriminatory practices (Griffin et al., 2011). In such instances, colleagues see Black first and a professor second (Griffin et al., 2011). The lack of control over how they are viewed within the academy has a negative impact on the success of Black faculty (Alexander & Moore, 2008).

Research has found that faculty of color experience microaggressions frequently in their professional life (Louis et al., 2016). In fact, many noted daily experiences ranging from snide remarks, condescending comments presented as jokes, mixed messages in job performance, racialized comments, assumptions that race would be the deciding factor in tenure, and surreptitious action (Griffin et al., 2011; Louis et al., 2016). In addition, racism shows up in the form of microaggressions for many Black faculty, resulting in feelings of powerlessness and high levels of stress (Louis et al., 2016). Such instances exacerbate the ill effects of Black faculty being overburdened with service responsibilities and ignored in promotion processes (Stanley, 2006). Service, such as the mentoring of students of color, recruitment and retention activities, community support, and educating white faculty, administrators, staff, and students on issues of diversity, are rarely counted toward tenure and promotion, yet faculty of color are often saddled with these added responsibilities (Settles, Buchanan & Dotson, 2019; Stanley, 2006).

Racism is a constant thread within the experiences of faculty of color. Both individual and institutional racism plague the journey and success of faculty of color within the academy (Griffin et al., 2011; Stanley, 2006). Racist practices and policies disadvantage faculty of color based on their racial group and nationality (Bhopal, 2016; Griffin et al., 2011; Stanley, 2006). Black faculty have also described institutional resistance and failure to increase the number of Black faculty on campuses as racism (Griffin et al., 2011). This leads to marginalization, isolation, and feelings of not belonging within their departments or among colleagues (Griffin et al., 2011). Black faculty are often the only people of color in their departments, colleges, and/or universities. Lack of representation has a direct impact on the experience's Black faculty encounter within the institution (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Bhopal, 2016). Numerical underrepresentation leads to tokenism and being treated as though the individual epitomizes their entire race (Alexander & Moore, 2008). Institutional racism is also visible in

tenure processes when Black faculty's engagement in race-related work is not seen as scholarly (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Griffin et al., 2011). Lack of institutional support to retain faculty of color is prevalent across institutions in which groups designed to support multicultural faculty lack proper financial support, are not advisory, and have no reporting mechanism to university leadership (Kelly, Gayles & Williams, 2017).

Collectively, there is a significant cost that Black faculty pay for enduring complex and multifaceted challenges within academia. Persistent experiences with individual and institutional racism adversely contribute to the mental strain of Black faculty. To examine how this occurs, the following section discusses the influence of hostile academic contexts on the mental health of Black faculty.

The Impact of Hostile Contexts on Black Faculty's Mental Health

Continuous encounters of racism within the workplace affect the physical and mental well-being of employees (Memon et al., 2016). Everyday events such as threats, being treated with less respect, or being thought of as having lower intelligence due to race, constitute chronic racism (Woods-Jaegar et al., 2021). It is known that racism can lead to physical and mental health challenges such as chronic and acute forms of stress (Novacek et al., 2020). In Black individuals, stress caused by racism manifests as hypertension, depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and low self-esteem (Woods-Jaegar et al., 2021). Chronic racism characterizes the experiences of many Black faculty within higher education. Research on the actual mental health impact of Black faculty experiences in the academy is limited, which could be due to a lack of reporting. However, researchers have found that the inability to recognize symptoms of mental illness, rejection of mental health related symptoms, and fear of stigmatization lead to a lack of reporting (Arday, 2020). Alternatively, the ability of Black faculty to navigate hostile environments is essential to their survival within higher education. Thus, limited research on the mental well-being of Black faculty may also reflect their ability to mask the influence of toxic contexts on their mental strain through utilization of maladaptive coping strategies (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). In addition, within academia, the physical and mental well-being of Black faculty remains an afterthought. There is a lack of concern and focus on the impact of racism, as well as a lack of resources provided to support Black faculty. Race-related crisis exacerbates feelings of anxiousness, isolation, and marginalization (Palmer & Ward,

2007). Yet, Black faculty are often requested to lead diversity efforts on campuses with no acknowledgment of how societal events impact them as Black individuals.

Black faculty within higher education have consistently experienced extremely high levels of stress, powerlessness, isolation, marginalization, discriminatory practices, and overt and covert racism within academia (Salazar, 2009; Settles, Buchanan & Dotson, 2019). Elevated levels of stress often impact job performance among Black faculty (Louis et al., 2016). Daily experiences of microaggressions from colleagues and students in the professional lives of Black faculty have an impact on well-being. For example, researchers found that after an encounter with microaggressions, Black faculty reported not feeling calm and feeling angry, with a smaller percentage feeling depressed and anxious (Robinson, 2014). Consistent exposure to microaggression influences the mental well-being among Black faculty (Louis et al., 2016). Furthermore, Black faculty are often stigmatized and rejected, causing them to disengage with their environment out of fear of mistreatment, leading to further isolation. Feeling like an outsider within social networks, along with tokenism, exacerbates stress among Black faculty (Louis et al., 2016). Lack of social networks results in compounded feelings of marginalization and residing on the periphery of social circles, which negatively affects mental well-being (Arday, 2020). Isolation also has a negative influence on spiritual well-being. Spiritual well-being is defined as "a high level of hope and commitment in relation to a well-defined worldview or belief system that provides a sense of meaning and purpose to existence, in general, and offers an ethical path to personal fulfillment" (Heintzman & Mannell, 2003: 207). In addition, "social isolation affects one's spirituality or sense of connectedness to others and is characteristic of a cold campus climate that disconnects [Black] faculty from their colleagues" (Alexander & Moore, 2008: 6). Tokenism has been associated with psychological trauma (Alexander & Moore, 2008). Psychological trauma is the experience of an event that was too overwhelming for a person to manage and results in symptoms that adversely impact the well-being of the individual. These symptoms may include recollections of the trauma, reactivity to response reminders, negative beliefs about self and others, inability to feel close to others, being easily startled, dissociation, emotional numbness, and inability to remember aspects of the trauma (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin & Kelly, 2006).

Black faculty report the need always to be alert, guarding their actions and responses to disprove inaccurate perceptions (Louis et al., 2016). Perpetual self-monitoring leads to decreased autonomy and self-determination

(Alexander & Moore, 2008). Decreased self-determination can impact performance and lead to more stress among Black faculty. In addition, symptoms of anxiety can manifest, with the need to consistently self-monitor and perfect acceptable views and behaviors.

Imposter syndrome also presents challenges to mental well-being among Black faculty, and is highly, but not exclusively, experienced by Black women faculty (Trotman, 2009). It occurs often among high-achieving Black women within academia, where people with institutional power and authority simultaneously overburden them with work while questioning their authority. Symptoms of imposter syndrome include intellectual self-doubt, accompanied by anxiety and often depression. Trotman states, "the subtle and not-so-subtle attacks on the African-American woman as a student, a professor, or an administrator in US institutions of higher education can seem relentless" (2009: 78). Consequently, Black faculty consistently work to disprove the stereotype of their incompetence throughout their career by taking on the stress of proving their merit, even when that merit is apparent (Meyers, 2002).

Collectively, racism has a significantly adverse impact on the mental health of Black faculty. Despite limited research, empirical studies have uncovered stress, psychological trauma, anxiety, depression, and imposter syndrome as challenges to the mental well-being of Black faculty. However, Black faculty are resilient and often succeed within the academy. Their ability to cope with limited support and resources is a testament of their amazing strength and tenacity. The following section explores various coping strategies that drive the resilience of Black Faculty.

Coping Strategies

The resilience of Black faculty within the academy is evidenced by their ability not only to succeed, but also to thrive amidst systemic inequalities. This resilience is only possible through the utilization of a host of coping strategies that buffer the adverse influence of discrimination, racial exclusion, and microaggressions on the mental health of Black faculty. Research indicates that Black faculty engage in both maladaptive and productive coping strategies to be resilient (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). However, while maladaptive strategies are less than ideal to engage in, it is important to note them to avoid the consequences of coping with institutional hardships by creating personal ones. Alternatively, productive coping strategies are actions and behaviors that not only allow Black faculty to endure adverse experiences, but also allow them to thrive in hostile

environments (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). Collectively, each of the coping strategies detailed below contribute to the tenacity, determination, and drive it takes to be successful in the academy without perishing.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

Maladaptive coping strategies are defined as, "negative or unhealthy approaches that may increase stress [despite the] attempts to mentally, emotionally, and physically remove stressors" (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019: 3). At the time of engagement, it may or may not be apparent that the coping strategy being utilized is maladaptive because the focus becomes surviving the microaggressions, discriminatory issues, or systemic barriers that one is experiencing. Maladaptive strategies include, but are not limited to, overworking, feeling suppression, and avoidance (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019).

Overworking

Many Black faculty have experienced being taught that you must work twice as hard to get ahead, or that you must be twice as good to be accepted (Salazar, 2009; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). However, there are adverse consequences that come from putting pressure on yourself that results in overworking. Although it is common to work extended hours in the academy, overworking becomes problematic when it is done in response to institutional issues, such as having one's reputation questioned, attempting to meet excessive demands, and working to meet changing or informal expectations (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). Overworking produces heightened levels of stress and can have adverse mental and physical ramifications on the body, such as exacerbated stress-related disorders like depression, anxiety, hypertension, and diabetes (Woods-Jaegar et al., 2021). Unfortunately, overworking rarely lifts the institutional barriers that exist for Black faculty. However, many choose to cope by striving to fulfill the unrealistic institutional expectations.

Feeling Suppression and Avoidance

At times, Black faculty attempt to deal with hostile situations in the academy by suppressing their feelings and avoiding contexts that will introduce microaggressions (Griffin et al., 2011; Decuir-Gunby et al., 2020). Black faculty who cope with hostile situations with avoidance of potential traumatic experiences, may be at greater risk of being (re)traumatized by the very inequalities they seek to alleviate (DeCuir-Gunby

et al., 2019). Despite the tempered professionalism that Black faculty exhibit, interactions led by feelings of suppression and avoidance are often interpreted as being disengaged or non-collegial. These coping methods exacerbate internal frustrations and may inadvertently create a more contentious context for Black faculty.

Productive Coping Strategies

Productive coping strategies position Black faculty to thrive and excel in the academy amidst hostile contexts (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). Such strategies require a great deal of tenacity and resistance in navigating institutional policies and practices in ways that protect, affirm, and enhance their productivity. There are many productive coping strategies that Black faculty engage in to succeed within higher education, including forgiveness, intentional self-care, expanded networking, and creating culturally specific professional spaces.

Forgiveness

Black faculty often cope with institutional inequalities by forgiving the offenses of administrators, colleagues, and students who perpetuate discriminatory behaviors. Such forgiveness does not denote or reflect the acceptance of problematic behaviors and does not require Black faculty to ignore offenses. Rather, forgiveness requires acknowledgment of one's own humanity and the justified feelings of anger, deception, resentment, and fear that follow experiences of institutional inequities. It also requires an internal evaluation of one's feelings, and how holding on to negative feelings can hinder future interactions. However, it does not mean that Black faculty accept or permit adverse behaviors to go unaddressed. Alternatively, an initial first step toward forgiveness is often confronting the perpetrator of racial injustice in an authentic way. Furthermore, forgiveness is a realization that holding on to detrimental feelings, irrespective of how justified they may be, will have far more adverse personal consequences, such as stress, resentment, anger, and bitterness. Such negative feelings will prevent future professional interactions. Thus, forgiveness requires Black faculty to release damaging feelings personally held toward perpetrators of microaggressions, injustices, and other offenses, in liberating ways. This is a necessary coping strategy because, in many cases, offenders who carry out institutional inequities, racial exclusions, and microaggressions, are often colleagues that Black faculty will have to interact with on an ongoing basis. As a result, many Black faculty find forgiveness an essential coping strategy for thriving within the academy.

Intentional Self-Care

As stated at the opening of this chapter, "self-care is an act of resistance," and intentionally engaging in self-care "is self-preservation" in the academy (Lorde, 1988: 132). Self-care strategies include working out, maintaining a healthy diet, engaging in therapy, praying, journaling, meditating, and a host of other ways that relieve and/or prevent adverse levels of stress. Intentional self-care is validating and requires consistent engagement practices that remind Black faculty that they matter and are valuable contributors to the academy. It is essential to be intentional about one's self-care practices, because the academy makes little to no room for building up and affirming the esteem of Black faculty. The positive impact of engaging in self-care is well documented (Barnett et al., 2007) and intentional self-care is a critical component to the success of Black faculty within higher education (Nicol & Yee, 2017).

Expanded Networking

Successful Black faculty have well-established networks beyond their institutional departments and universities (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Salazar, 2009). Expanded networking includes both traditional and non-traditional connections for advancing within higher education. Traditional networking may include connecting with colleagues at conferences who have similar research interests, maintaining collegial relationships with post-doctoral students, and connecting across one's institutional department or college. Non-traditional opportunities are those that may not be institutionally supported but are vital to the success of Black faculty. Creating networks, such as community connections and connecting with other Black professional organizations, is critical to the success of Black faculty within the academy. Collectively, an expanded network provides support, encouragement, and strategies for navigating institutional injustices. They may also offer additional employment options if institutional climates become toxic (Griffin et al., 2011).

Creating Culturally Specific Professional Spaces

When Black faculty have had difficulty accessing traditional sources of academic advancement, they have coped by creating culturally specific professional spaces (Dyce & Williams, 2015). This includes the establishment of journals with targeted interests, developing conferences with specific topics and expanded networking opportunities, establishing sections and interest groups within existing professional organizations, and establishing organizations that support Black faculty's resistance to white

supremacist practices and ideologies. The creation of culturally specific professional spaces has proven to be an effective coping strategy that supports the advancement of Black faculty within higher education.

Implications for Institutions of Higher Education

Engaging in Culturally Relevant Retention Efforts

Many institutions of higher education have responded to the racialized climate of the academy by focusing on recruitment efforts. However, recruiting Black faculty into toxic environments only enhances the institutions' inability to present diverse representation within the academy. Alternatively, engaging in culturally relevant retention efforts requires institutional efforts to focus on institutional inclusion of Black faculty. Such inclusion efforts include, but are not limited to, mentoring Black faculty to assume existing and forthcoming leadership roles; removing intuitional expectations that overburden Black faculty with service; training all faculty on methods of cultural inclusion in ways that improve the institutional climate; holding white faculty and students accountable for racial microaggressions, discrimination, and engaging in oppressive actions; including the institutional work of Black faculty in processes of tenure and promotion; and recognizing the inherent worth, dignity, and contributions of Black faculty in ways that do not exploit them for institutional gain. In addition, retention of Black faculty should include providing equitable salary compensation and academic start-up packages. Culturally relevant retention efforts require critical and consistent evaluation of institutional policies and practices, and attention to how such practices influence the experiences of Black faculty.

Utilize Institutional Funding to Support Expanded Networking

Black faculty experiences are nuanced with social isolation, lack of collegiality and a lack of support in the promotion of mental wellness (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Bhopal, 2016; Kelly, Gayles & Williams, 2017). Institutions must promote mental wellness through the funding of expanded networks that provide a sense of community, mentorship, and resources that support Black faculty. These networks, both inside and outside the institution, should have a focus on combating the negative experiences of Black faculty by being a resource and support network. Institutional affinity groups often lack the funding really needed to provide

programming and resources to support the needs of Black faculty and aid their retention. Institutions must make it a priority to fund internal networks, while also providing funding to give Black faculty the opportunity to identify their own external networks that will be an asset in their academic journey.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the resilience of Black faculty in the academy, despite the persistence of institutional barriers, racial exclusion, discriminatory practices, and a host of other experiences that make the academy a hostile context. Black faculty have demonstrated their resilience by engaging in both maladaptive and productive coping strategies that enable them to excel in hostile situations. Black faculty's ability to maintain their sanity and cope in ways that protect their mental health is illustrative of their belongingness in academic spaces. Through contributions to their respective fields of study and the creation of culturally specific professional spaces, Black faculty exert significant influence within higher education. Thus, at the core of promoting the mental wellness of Black faculty within the academy is the inherent belief and acknowledgment that Black faculty belong in the academy. To thrive, it is imperative that Black faculty draw from a wide range of coping strategies to remind themselves, and those around them, that caring for oneself through promoting mental well-being is both self-preservation and an act of academic warfare.

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