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# **“I’m a Human Being, I Deserve Better:” Understanding Black Women’s Experiences with Selective Dignity Violations as Tenured Faculty at Predominantly White Academic Workplaces**

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## **Abstract**

A larger narrative inquiry study regarding professional identity development revealed that Black women experienced selective dignity violations as tenured faculty at predominantly White academic workplaces.

*Keywords:* selective dignity violations, tenured Black female faculty, professional identity development

There has been limited research on the intersection of gendered race, academic tenure, professional socialization, and socio-historical context in relation to professional identity development. Based on this gap, a larger narrative inquiry research was conducted to understand tenured Black female faculty (BFF) members’ stories of how they developed and maintained their professional identity at predominantly White academic workplaces (PWAAs), notably in the American South. Using a Black feminist analysis of narrative, two relevant findings were revealed in relationship to selective dignity violations and self-care agency. This paper takes a closer look at each finding and discusses implications for administrators and leaders in adult and higher education.

## **Literature Review**

Organizational culture is a complex construct that comprises of a shared history and meaning of values, beliefs, behaviors, traditions, artifacts, etc. that shape the identity of an organization (Shein, 2017). It influences hierarchy, impacts power structure, and normalizes unwritten rules or *the way we do things around here* (Shein, 2017). The pervasive nature of a culture significantly informs individuals’ perceptions and interactions with their colleagues as well as their broader engagement with the organizational environment. Furthermore, organizational culture and subcultures reinforce itself through the socialization process in which new and experienced professionals identify, communicate, and assimilate the existing norms of their respective groups, communities, and organizations (e.g., Kärmer & Dailey, 2019).

Professional socialization provides the framework upon which individuals develop their professional identities. The dynamic interaction between these processes is critical, affecting not just the individual’s self-perception but also shaping how they are viewed by their professional peers (Shein, 2017). Furthermore, scholars argue that in social contexts, where the culture has historically and presently been shaped by socially dominant groups, typically White men, individuals from minoritized groups might encounter barriers to full professional integration (e.g., Kärmer & Dailey, 2019). These barriers can lead to feelings of isolation, which can make Black women feel invisible or undervalued at work (e.g., Jones et al., 2015). This sense of exclusion can diminish their perceived dignity and self-worth. When professional socialization is

limited, there is less opportunity for cross-cultural understanding. Colleagues may be less aware or appreciative of the unique contributions and perspectives that Black women bring to the table, impacting how their dignity is recognized. Without networking and mentorship opportunities, Black women might miss out on professional development, which can affect their professional identity and impact how they perceive themselves and how their counterparts perceive them within the organization (Davis et al., 2021). These barriers further underscore the neglect of specific needs in identity development for Black female professionals within mainstream professional socialization practices.

## **Research Design**

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this study, Black feminist thought (BFT) served as the theoretical framework, emphasizing the intersectionality of Black women's identities beyond the *either-or* fallacy (Collins, 1991/2022). BFT not only explores multiple isms, but centralizes Black women's voices, fostering their agency to challenge hegemonic ideologies. It acknowledges their shared yet unique experiences and promotes self-definition and affirmation of their Black womanhood.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In the larger narrative inquiry research with 10 tenured Black female faculty members, an integrative analysis was introduced to analyze 21 in-depth interviews. This approach simultaneously positioned Black womanhood, experience, *truth*, and sensemaking at the center of the analysis. As a result of the integration, the concept of Black feminist analysis of narrative emerged as a deductive-thematic analysis. As the theoretical anchor of this study, it was only natural to utilize Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to deductively analyze the data. From a thematic approach, the intent was to discover commonalities, manifestations, or tensions among the Black women's experiences and *truths*. Therefore, Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic analysis or analysis of narrative was applied. As a part of the Black feminist analysis of narrative, the participants' shared aspirations, struggles, triumphs, and meaning-making processes were constructed and re-constructed across their multiple stories.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Using a Black feminist analysis of narrative, two salient findings were revealed. First, the participants' professional socialization and identity development processes were frequently bombarded with numerous selective dignity violations. Second, self-care agency played a salient role in safeguarding and preserving their professional identity development within the sacred groves of the academic workplace. The following sections take a closer look at each finding with supporting quotes from the participants and relevant literature.

### **Selective Dignity Violations**

Drawing from the work of Hicks (2021), the term "selective dignity violations" was coined to differentiate explicit or implicit violations that are embedded in discrimination due to an individual's race, gender, and other social identities. The subsequent sections highlight three of seven major selective dignity violations that emerged from the participants' stories.

### ***Workplace bullying***

As an African woman, who spoke with a Caribbean English dialect, Professor Shondell was a target of workplace bullying. Her dignity violators were often her White students, who used bullying behaviors to insult and criticize her dialect not only in the classroom but on their evaluations. She shared:

Some White students are very bold and very disrespectful to me, especially on [their] evaluations about the fact that I can't speak English and most of them are deeply hurtful, deeply hurtful.

Professor Shondell recalled another bullying incident:

I was teaching in the lab and providing instructions on a specific task, right. I was showing students how it's supposed to be done and just offering feedback and tidbits, you know, being supportive. So, I left, and I went to my office. A Caucasian military male student came in, I mean in a military stance, and told me that I was loud and obnoxious, in front of my colleagues. I was hurt. I mean, why should I be bullied and ridicule? These things affect me because I'm a human being. I deserve better. I put my life, my blood, my tears, and my sweat into my teaching and my students.

Although the students held less power, their perceptions of her authority and credibility were rooted within the stereotypical views of Black women - inferior, lazy, incompetent, and inconsequential (e.g., Johnson-Bailey, 2015). Such biases also restricted how she responded to such acts of bullying. She further explained:

I'm always cognizant of people thinking that I'm an angry Black woman. So, I have to always act with decorum and not feed into the stereotype. But I see myself sometime like a caged animal, being probed with electrodes or something sharp trying to provoke a reaction from me.

Like previous studies that focus on the bullying of Black female educators in PWAWS (e.g., Johnson-Bailey, 2015), Professor Shondell's experience often occurred as personal attacks, such as insults, intimidating, and with the intent to discredit their reputation as a professional. The intent was to violate her sense of identity, safety, and feeling of belonging.

### ***Intellectual Exploitation***

This study revealed that for those Black women who had opportunities to collaborate with their White colleagues, they frequently experienced intellectual exploitation. Case in point, Dr. Grangy pointed out:

I've done things with a White female colleague, but you know that collaboration [was] really one-sided because she only called when she needed me and not when I needed her. We considered each other friends, but I know she only came to me when she wanted something.

Although financially benefiting from collaborations with her violator, Dr. Grangy acknowledged that she had been exploited for her expertise and identity as a Black female. With respect to the latter, she said, “[White female colleague] often called and asked me to be a part of something to make sure that she didn’t have an all-European American delegation. So, she would bring ol’ [Dr. Grangy].” Dr. Grangy was disheartened with cross-race collaborations, specifically with White co-workers. She expressed, “I really don’t have time for the intellectual abuse. So, I have not collaborated with people, mostly European American. Then again, they’re not saying, ‘oh, [Dr. Grangy] let’s write together.’” Like previous studies that highlight Black women’s experiences in dominate workplaces (e.g., Blackshear & Hollis, 2021), Dr. Grangy’s experience continues to call attention to how Black women frequently struggle with marginality, distorted stereotypes, lack of support of collegial relationships, and the lack of dignity within PWAAs based on their gendered racial identity.

### ***Contra-power harassment***

Several of the Black women expressed that they experienced contra-power harassment in the workplace, specifically from their White female subordinates. Contra-power harassment is defined as an occurrence in which a person with seemingly less power, such as a subordinate, harasses someone more powerful, such as an administrator (Lampman et al., 2016). Dr. Kim explained, “the challenge in my administrator role was leading a person who couldn’t give two pennies about me”. She shared that it was difficult to lead the subordinate her for two reasons – “she was an older White woman and my authority”. Dr. Kim further shared:

the challenge for me [was] dealing with the trauma of leading somebody who didn’t want me to have the job in the first place. She was not a part of the band that said, “hire her.” I have to emphasize that she did not want me there and everything she did pointed to that like the lack of support and lack of engagement.

Dr. Kim implied that the mental gymnastics made it difficult for her understand the White female subordinate’s behaviors, thus creating challenges to navigating the relationship. She shared:

I had never experienced a person like that, and it made me wonder “is it because I’m Black?” I asked myself, “what did I do?” I never got my answer, but I still think it had something to do with me being a young Black woman coming in, giving orders, and making almost what’s she making.

She expressed that her gendered race, position of authority, and economic status made her a target of the older White female administrator’s biases. Due to the negative interpersonal relationship, Dr. Kim said, “I had a low level of PTSD after her and that’s not a joke. I mean, I didn’t know how to move left or right.” Dr. Kim’s health consequence aligns with previous research that revealed that Black women’s daily gender and race-based stressors can jeopardize their psychological safety, resulting in conditions like PTSD, depression, anxiety, and high blood pressure (e.g., Dicken et al., 2020).

### **Self-care as a Political Warfare**

This study revealed that tenured BFF at PWAAs experiences dignity violations framed within interpersonal biases based on their stigmatized identities. These violations left them feeling traumatized, overtaxed, undervalued, isolated, and overextended. Like prior research (e.g., Jones et al., 2015), the participants responded by adopting self-care strategies.

### ***Social Self-care***

Through the lens of Black feminist thought, self-care is “not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde, 2017, p. 131). As a radical act, self-care is about protecting and maintaining psychological, physical, and emotional well-being in a society that constantly exploits minoritized groups with little to no acknowledgement and/or compensation (Lorde 1988/2017). In this study, social self-care emerged as the key tactic in which Black women reclaimed their time and space to maintain their professional identity. From the Black women’s stories, “sistergirl” circles emerged as the main social self-care strategy. They implied that their specific “sistergirl” circles were therapy-like groups that gave them a safe, accepting space to be their authentic self, share their stories without judgement, and most importantly be seen and heard.

### ***Spiritual Self-care***

Like findings from previous research that focused on Black women’s experiences and spirituality (e.g., Reed & Neville, 2014; Hall et al., 2012), Black women in this current study used spirituality as a radical space of hope and inspiration while making meaning of their experiences. Black women employ spirituality to negotiate and understand their gender and race-based oppression, two aspects that signify uncontrollable stressors in their daily lives (e.g., Reed & Neville, 2014). In this analysis, all of them actively engaged in prayer for strength and empowerment. Several shared that they utilized faith, prayers, and/or the bible scriptures as internal reactions to manage their academic experiences. Literature points out that Black women have a greater degree of subjective religiosity/spirituality than White people and Black men (Hall et al., 2012; Reed & Neville, 2014).

### **Implications for Practice**

Black women are not a monolith. However, their collective perspective can inform practices in adult and higher education. First, adult and higher education administrators and leaders should invest in cross-cultural mentoring programs to meet the mentoring need of BFF. Due to the small numbers of BFF across PWAAs, they rely on non-Black faculty to support their personal and professional development. These programs can help bridge gaps in understanding and support, facilitate valuable connections, and empower Black women through tailored guidance. Second, academic leaders should mandate cultural competency training for all faculty to enhance intercultural communication, awareness, and respect. This training promotes understanding of one's own and others’ cultures, developing skills to navigate cultural differences effectively. Lastly, administrators and leaders in academia should join allyship training to learn about their own biases, understand systemic barriers affecting minorities, and advocate for change. This training helps them support Black women and other marginalized groups more effectively, fostering an inclusive environment where all faculty can succeed.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the intricate challenges faced by tenured Black female faculty at PWAAs. These educators navigate a complex landscape where their professional identity development is often hindered by dignity violations rooted in systemic biases. Despite the resilience and adaptability that the Black women demonstrated, institutional support structures must be strengthened. The establishment of cross-cultural mentoring initiatives, comprehensive cultural competency training for mentors, and robust allyship programs for leaders are not just beneficial but necessary steps toward fostering an academic environment where equity and respect are paramount. This study serves as a call to action for higher education institutions to commit to long-term structural changes that support and empower Black women in academia, honoring their contributions and fostering a culture of respect and equity.

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