

Introduction to “Navigating the Racial Minefield:” Narratives from Professors, Graduate Students and an Undergraduate Student of Color

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To use our sociological imagination, we must look at how the social structure and our personal biography intersect to shape different opportunities, experiences and even life chances for different groups of people. In this Special Issue, each author honestly and explicitly discusses how the social structure of academia interlocks with the personal biographies of people of color in challenging and contentious ways. Racial minorities of different backgrounds from all academic levels—professors, graduate students and an undergraduate student—reveal how they navigate this domain on a daily basis, which more often than not feels like a racial minefield, riddled with symbolic triggers, explosions and the inevitable aftermath of frustration, hurt, anger and at times, devastation. Not to be overlooked, this dynamic is being identified, processed and negotiated all while balancing full-time course loads as either students or professors.

Why pay attention to this pattern now? Given mainstream ideas about a “post-racial” America and an increasingly diverse student body and professoriate, now is a prime time to deepen our understanding of the relationship between race and academia. Where does a racial minefield fit in a society where race is said to no longer carry significance? How can such a minefield exist in one of the most highly regarded social institutions that *promises* to generate success and equal opportunities? Many scholars have drawn attention to “post-racial” rhetoric and “colorblind” ideologies as inaccurate and dismissive of those who continue to be victims of racial and ethnic discrimination (Alexander 2011; Bonilla Silva 2008; Feagin 2010; Williams 1997). In essence, the twin illusions of “post-racial” and “colorblindness” prove to be counterproductive in the fight against structural inequality. Furthermore, scholars have found that empirical studies do not correspond with these dialogues and ideologies. For many faculty of color at predominately white institutions, the university environment is peppered with racial hostility, alienation and resistance from students (Rodriguez 2009; Sue et al. 2011). Additionally, graduate students of color face distinct challenges of adequate mentorship, which is a lifeline in graduate school (Evans and Waring 2011; Johnson-Bailey et al. 2009); and they walk the fine line of having the distinct responsibility of teaching undergraduates, yet do not have the status or prestige of a professor with nearly similar responsibilities in the classroom (Waring and Bordoloi 2013). Undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds also endure obstacles; college is often considered “the time of one’s life,” where students are able to freely explore their interests and discover who they are. However, minority college students report instances of racial animosity, which restricts their ability to adjust to college life (Fischer 2007), and certainly impacts whether they have the luxury of discovering who they are as they endure racially charged comments and encounters by both peers and professors. Hence, the time is now and the need is clear: being involved in the academic realm

carries a caveat for racial minorities, regardless of the role they play *or* the position they occupy.

While existing literature has explored this phenomenon, they often do so from one group's perspective, for example, professors (Williams 2001; Johnsrud and Sadao 1998), graduate and doctoral students (Evans and Waring 2011; Waring and Bordoloi 2013) and undergraduate students (Fischer 2007; Worthington et al. 2008). In this issue, our contribution is threefold. We examine being a racial minority through a kaleidoscope of the lived experiences of racial minorities from different racial heritages, different positions in academia and different regions of the United States. Our contributors include an African American female undergraduate Sociology major, an African American female doctoral candidate in Human Development and Family Studies, an Indian male Assistant Professor of Human Services, an African American female Sociology Ph.D. student working in Diversity Affairs and a biracial (black/white) Assistant Professor of Sociology. Our authors study and work at regionally diverse universities in the Midwest, the Northwest, and the Northeast; consequently, this issue represents a spectrum of experiences of racial minorities in different academic settings and departments and at varying levels of academia.

Our opening article, "Be Seen but Not Heard, the Other Side of Tokensim: An Undergraduate Woman of Color Perspective," by Shavaughn M. Lawson unearths the unique challenges of being a black female leader at the undergraduate level. She walks us through her minefield: meetings with peers, who also occupy leadership positions, conversations with faculty, and interactions with her subordinates. Lawson's article draws powerful and disturbing parallels between being a black, female, undergraduate leader and being a child, both of whom are expected to "be seen and not heard." Through her auto-ethnography, she encourages readers to re-think the buzzword of "diversity" on college campuses by looking deeper at how "diversity" operates behind closed doors and in everyday encounters with peers and professors.

In "Negotiating (Il)legible Identities: On Being a Black Female 'Professor in Training,'" Brandyn-Dior McKinley illuminates the challenges of being a black woman pursuing a Ph.D. Her article provides insights about how she attempts to dodge the dual mines of being underrepresented in academia as an intellectual while being disproportionately (mis)represented in the media as stereotypical. This reality dislocates the possibility of black womanhood as McKinley has experienced it, and her auto-ethnography reveals how this profoundly shapes her experiences as a doctoral student. McKinley's article compels us to confront the implications of black women in the Ivory Tower with regard to how they will be perceived by undergraduate students and graduate student colleagues as they seem to embody a contradiction that provokes offensive and intellectually futile queries.

"On Being Brown and Foreign: The Racialization of an International Student within Academia" by Samit D. Bordoloi centers his lived experiences as an Indian male international student at two American graduate institutions. His auto-ethnography re-orientes American racial sensibilities by elucidating the

problematic nature of the American racial taxonomy for immigrants. His triggers include not only fellow graduate students but also faculty and staff who go to great lengths to ensnare him in the “correct” racial designation that neglects to recognize ethnic diversity and that lubricates notions of inferiority and superiority. In addition, Bordoloi emboldens us to acknowledge the impact of the increase in non-domestic minorities in academia, as “evidence” of strong diversity values while the numbers of domestic minorities remains precariously low.

Denishia N. Harris’ “Not Only Navigating Race: Self-Management and Class Background in Pursuit of a Ph.D.” calls attention to the inextricable relationship between race and class that becomes highlighted in distinct ways in academia. She outlines her attempts to prevent mini-explosions by selectively disclosing parts of her identity with colleagues and professors in ways that foster connections, create a sense of belonging and display professionalism by challenging racial and gender assumptions. Her auto-ethnographic account underscores self-management as a form of armor as she navigates the racial minefield of academia. Harris’ article plants important seeds about inequality, opportunities and the expression of personhood that are worthy of sociological germination.

In “The ‘Invisible’ Minority: On Being Biracial and Monoracial Spaces,” Chandra D. L. Waring unveils the seemingly paradoxical dynamic of being a racial minority not only among whites, but also among other racial minorities. She recalls circumstances in which her biracial background is questioned, dismissed or constructed as problematic, relegating her to a “minority” status, albeit invisible. Waring’s auto-ethnography invites readers to re-frame our interpretations of what constitutes racial minority status by conceptualizing an alternative racial classification system that consists of “monoracial” and “bi/multiracial.” This article challenges readers to grasp the cumulative effects of experiencing a type of racial marginalization that is not visible to the untrained eye. In doing so, she conveys the emotionally volatile manifestations of a racial minefield that implicates perhaps the least expected offenders, race scholars.

Although the narratives poignantly recounted in this Special Issue reflect the unique experience of each author, a common theme is interwoven into each article that informs the reader of the overwhelmingly isolating experience of being a racial minority and the thoughts, sentiments and negotiating skills that accompany this status. “Navigating the racial minefield” facilitates a strong sense of urgency to pursue academic success despite adversity, just as soldiers who endure battle are eternally committed their mission, regardless of life-threatening obstacles. Also, traversing this contentious space generates a heightened awareness of the self as an “outsider” in relation to the dominant group, which parallels warriors who are terrifyingly aware of their different, unwanted presence during battle. Although I use military metaphors symbolically, each author recalls visceral reactions to racial prejudice and discrimination that I hope will enlighten readers to better grasp the scope and magnitude of racial injustices. Furthermore, other scholars have also drawn parallels between being a minority in academia and military combat, and have referred to this dynamic as “racial battle fatigue” (Smith 2004). We should not lose sight of the fact that institutional

inequality comes at a great cost to humanity (Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001); and the narratives published here are conservative when compared to the greatest suffering that still occurs. Our aim is to show the complexities and challenges, as well as rewards, of participating in academia as racial minorities in hopes to create a more equitable environment where any “minority” status (be it, race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, ability, socio-economic status, etc.) dissolves, and academia becomes a liberating, aware, enriching domain that by default, is meaningfully—and not merely theoretically—diverse.

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