Black Women Resistance to Whiteness in Social Work

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Abstract

As Black women, we are often challenged within organisations to critique incomplete and underdeveloped cultural competence/diversity organisational goals. Our Black bodies are used to meet a diversity/inclusion quota and create programming that appears representational of the larger community for the appearance of inclusivity. However, the white experience is set as the standard of living within systems connected to family, community and individual social and personal needs. Challenges transform to workplace stressors through unequal professional demands/workloads, racist tropes, silencing, questioning credentials, 'racial gaslighting', emotionally draining work, white fragility, and violence. At the core of our concern: Once the path has been traversed and it's time for us to move on to other professional or personal endeavors, what happens to the work created when Black women as change agents and leaders leave the space? What happens to the outcomes associated with the tireless work, accomplishments, and the intention for the work to continue? As Black women, we have found in providing cultural competency/diversity training that this instruction is steeped in whiteness and that presenters/teachers must pursue this education as a form of resistance as these presentations strengthen our pedagogy by addressing that whiteness and decenter whiteness for the betterment of our profession globally.

Keywords

As two United States-born-and-raised Black women who are licensed masters-level social workers, we are using an autoethnographic approach to unpack the cultural competence work we engage in within higher education, social justice/work agencies, community work, and our personal lives. Ellis (2004) describes autoethnography as "research, writing, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection" (p. xix). Our personal experiences share some similarities that include being Black, mothers, members of the same community, and graduates of the same university. Our friendship of 10 years deepens our relationship in the spaces that we differ. Another significant space that we share is, Black women who work in Historically White Institutions (HWI) as 'cultural competence ambassadors' to uplift the voices of Black residents/marginalised groups and educate white colleagues and students about the importance of our voices often embark on a lonely task. Especially challenging in these institutions is that within 'culturally competent' spaces, institutional whiteness creeps back in to reaffirm its 'comfortable place' in the HWI even when programming is intended to address racism, marginalised groups, or the needs of Black people.

Being Black women in the Social Work field means that we are constantly at the intersection that defines who we are and what we can do. We are at the intersections trying to point out the privilege, power, and oppression that keeps us in these communities and institutions. These intersections are personal, political, communal and globally impact us in every space we occupy. While at these intersections, we are attempting to direct justice so that it will flow equitably for marginalised groups. In our communities, we are often looked upon as outspoken and effective change agents on issues around cultural competence, racial disparities, and interrupting systems of oppression. As change agents, we know how challenging it is trying to address whiteness in social work/social justice spaces and in the community at large. This article will address how pervasive whiteness is and its destructive, morphing and reengineering properties that negatively impact us and the communities that we live. As social workers in the United States who adhere to the National Association of Social Workers, Code of Ethics, Social Work Ethical Standard 6.04 Social and Political Action:

> (a) Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.

We need Black women to centre themselves as a form of resistance against the harmful

effects of whiteness in our lives, the organisations we work for or direct and the communities in which we serve. Black women who demand fewer microaggressions and more equitable workspaces interrupt the spread and consistency of whiteness. Black women engaging in self-care moments helps in validating our experiences. Social workers who hold close to the need for cultural competency training for social workers in this field will continue to work towards cultural competence in our profession. We have to resist the language changes and well-meaning need to move away from competence to just having social workers who are culturally aware. Being a culturally competent social worker means that we work every day in all lived experiences to understand ourselves and how we will interact with the world in a way that will conquer whiteness, oppression and the depressive effects that are connected to systemic racism where whiteness lives. In this essay, we will explore the multiple aspects of our social justice work, touching upon the varied uses how cultural competency is not just language but that we need to move beyond the terminology to actions and become more humble in our approach as social workers as we serve diverse communities. Our hope is that you will gain insight to miss some pitfalls of when we limit ourselves to the annual diversity training and do not infuse intentions of love towards those we serve and so that we serve them well.

Our Story: Intersectionality of Being Black and Women in a White Community

I, Spears, was raised in a community of Black racial majority South suburb of Chicago, IL, USA to Iowa City, IA USA to start her college career space shifted into a predominantly white space. Living, working and ultimately raising children in a space dominated by whiteness has led her to critically explore her racial identity. This self-exploration occurred during adulthood in the white-dominated spaces. While pursuing a degree in the social work profession and enduring the position as a black student in predominantly white classrooms there was born a need to survive and thrive in multiple areas. Particularly in classrooms where racial gaslighting, isolation, microaggressions, stereotyping and negative racialised conversations increased in her daily life as she entered white-dominated spaces. Racial gaslighting, according to Davis and Ernst (2017), is "the political, social and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist" (p. xx). Racial gaslighting is used to silence, and when Black women are in an isolated space, it is disorientating. Often, I would find myself in workspaces being one of very few, or the only, Black women. Colleagues would look me as a Black woman to speak on behalf of their monolithic idea of Black people, provide comfort for fragile white emotions, diminish the love and

accomplishments of Black identity, internalise the establish negative messages about Blackness, and expect me to "(we)wear the mask" as poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar describes to cover our pain (Dunbar, 1999).

For many Black women the challenges don't stop at the office door; they are replicated in the classroom. As a Social Work professor in an HWI, I find my classroom is often the first time that students have experienced a Black woman standing in front of them, in a position of academic power and a content expert in the field. Speaking directly and plainly about whiteness, cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), colonisation and racism is often challenging and construed as threatening to white-dominated systems, institutions, policies, and personal egos. Engaging in pedagogies that negotiate the feelings of white fragility while imparting academic theories is a continuous tightrope (DiAngelo, 2018). As well, teaching future social workers about the detrimental and traumatic impacts of colonization is global.

Community work done by a social worker also pulls her into speaking up for children of colour in a white-dominated politically liberal cosmopolitan town that is surrounded by conservative-minded cities, as my students soon learn. The dominant community outwardly embraces a perspective of engaging in social justice work that is leaps and bounds ahead of surrounding communities. The individuals within the community systems purport to embrace what Hansen et al. (2009) refer to as "an outlook toward the challenges and opportunities of being a person or community-dwelling in a world of ongoing social transformation" (p. 587). As a Black woman living in this 'idyllic' community created by whiteness, the challenge is that when my Blackness is expressed it is not viewed as empowering or transformative but as a threat to the community.

Like Spears, DeLoach grew up in a midwestern and predominantly white state and community. I completed my education in the same community that supported me through a traumatic childhood and have found solace in having a community that I know has many of the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of small mostly white-majority towns. However, over time the implications of 'soft racism' or passive-aggressiveness laced with racism caused me to develop racial inferiority issues and thankfully were identified by a Black woman Social Work professor and mentor who helped me overcome this harm. I have worked for years to deconstruct the whiteness around me and continue to combat the residue from society's European beauty standards and misogynoir. As a community organiser with extensive years in government service, I have been behind the scenes as policies are created by stakeholders. Yet those who enforce the policies get to interpret who will receive a disproportionate number of violations for said policies. As a previously

elected official, I also have had the opportunity to be at the table to change policies and practices in large institutions. In my years as a service provider, I have developed many programs, events, and activities to center Blackness and Black people as a form of self-preservation, community healing, and as a pathway to self-empowerment.

Together, we have collaborated to provide perspective on how whiteness as a concept is very alive and dangerous in that its implications have negatively impacted the lives, livelihood, and careers of Black women. Our work as social workers and advocates is about engaging children and families of colour in predominantly white spaces. We strive to help families provide their tools for empowerment and survival that, we believe, is the core to much of the Social Work field. We contextualise in this article, that globally, cultures are complex and cultural competency training is needed and we lack the racial diversity demographics internationally in our profession.

Global Impact of Social Work

Social Work profession and human services work is dominated by women - and primarily white women - in the U.S., Australia, and in England. The Australian Association of Social Workers (2019) reports that 80% of their members are women. More interestingly, .02%, or 297 of social workers in Australia, identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Indigenous people. Recently, data showed 71.7% of children and family social workers in England identified as White British while 11.1% were Black (including people from Black Caribbean, Black African and Other Black backgrounds). Some 85% of social workers were women (Race Disparity Unit, 2019). In the U.S., 68% of social workers identify as White, 21% as Black, and 81% as women (DataUSA, 2019).

According to the U.S. Council on Social Work Education, approximately 70% of students obtaining a Social Work degree are white. In contrast, only 25% of students obtaining the same degree identified as persons of colour including Black, or Hispanic/Latino. Working at an HWI and living in a historically white community (HWC) which is 'self-identified' as a liberal ally to marginalised groups' space is challenging for Black women (CSWE,2015). We live in a midwestern state within the United States that is approximately 90% white and has maintained these demographics for hundreds of years. Communities in any country where the majority culture (white/colonised) have visible and invisible rules of society are founded and maintained by the socialisation of white/coloniser ideology. Therefore, living in such a homogenous, white state requires a very specific skill set to survive cultural destructiveness imposed by whiteness. As Terry L. Cross describes in the 6 stages of cultural competence continuum, cultural destructiveness is the most negative end of the cultural continuum, as the group in power

sees their way of life and culture as superior and using their power to harm, exclude, remove, castigate or eliminate the other culture (Cross et al, 1989). And living in these tense spaces is an extraordinary challenge within the veiled racist systems and institutions.

Personal and professional survival in this space creates unique 'challenges' that are infused with racist tropes, unequal professional workloads/demands, silencing tactics in which oftentimes negates our expertise. When Black women occupy spaces as the only one or one of the few people of colour, they are constantly thwarting the challenges that whiteness and white fragility entails. As Black women in these locations are used as community advocates, they play two important but contrasting roles when challenging whiteness in the community and within systems. This duality of these roles, first for bringing expertise to the table, and second for being a person that belongs to the marginalised group who experiences disparities, can cause emotional struggles. This is deeply personal and causes secondary PTSD symptoms which have led to a destructive path of the Superwoman Syndrome through which Black women have embodied the idea of taking care of all responsibilities in life in an unsustainable role for too long (APA Dictionary, 2019). This centuries-old exploitation and under-compensation of Black women's work is a cornerstone in maintaining whiteness in our communities worldwide.

The Shifting Power of Whiteness

A term used throughout our writing and that is at the centre of our argument is the devastating impact of whiteness. Whiteness as a system is a virus that continuously replicates itself in society with detrimental impacts on everyone, that is also interpreted as:

> a dominant cultural space with enormous political significance, with the purpose to keep others on the margin.   [W]hite people are not required to explain to others how 'white' culture works because 'white' culture is the dominant culture that sets the norms. Everybody else is then compared to that norm.   In times of perceived threat, the normative group may well attempt to reassert its normativity by asserting elements of its cultural practice more explicitly and exclusively (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 21).

Whiteness as a concept is similar to the social construction of race (Guess, 2006; Omi, Winant, 1988). It is complex and has numerous implications about how white privilege and whiteness remains a main source of power in the world (McIntosh, 2003). However many times, what keeps whiteness from taking over spaces is the integration of spaces

that have been predominantly spaces for Black women in the past. Individuals of colour who demand fewer microaggressions and more equitable workspaces interrupt the spread and consistency of whiteness (Wilson, 2009).

It is extremely exhausting to be women of colour in predominantly white spaces, who also want to survive. Additionally, like many Black women historically, we burden ourselves with futuristic thoughts of those who will come behind us and the maintenance of services, policies, practices long after we have left the institution (hooks, 2015). For example, Black women have been at the forefront of working against police violence in Black communities for years, starting and contributing to social movements, such as #MeToo, BlackLivesMatter (2019), PushOut (Morris, Conteh, & Harris-Perry, 2018), and the Black Panther Movement (Cleaver, 1999).

Yet, when Black women leave spaces where they were the main champions of discussion or 'taboo' movements, whiteness resurfaces in its need to protect itself, to create a safe comfortable environment and regain 'lost' power (DeLoach, 2018). Whiteness is a safety net for those that benefit from it - and it has a built-in defense mechanism. When you are working to remove one small section from the 'defense mechanism', it quickly rebounds to its original state when you move to another section to 'repair'. More labourers are needed to destroy the machine of whiteness and its destructive illusions and to truly heal from racialised cracks in the foundation of the United States and other countries where whiteness is the dominant system of power and control. When Black women have been in leadership roles within organisations and communities and are strong advocates for more equitable goals in those spaces their ability to hold that space and those practices for future people of colour are only sustainable for a short amount of time. When they leave that position and space, they leave a void that is not filled but by whiteness which regains that space and bolsters its protective edge or backtracking. And backtracking is a core concept of whiteness (Jardina, 2019).

When white people are working in anti-racist organisations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), there is often an internal struggle where white members centre whiteness over the actual goals of the organisation. Sometimes these organisations appear to be directed by Black people with Black community-oriented goals but when the covers are turned down, whiteness is comfortably taking up space disguised as Blackness. For example, there is a need for a right to feel comfortable when discussing crucial and important discussions about race and hamper the energy and will to address these issues head-on when the leadership includes Black and white leaders in Black organisations (Jones & Okun, 2001).

To the outside world, many see some of these organisations as Black empowerment organisations without knowing and understanding that many of these organisations were created for Black people but from within white benevolence, with the idea that Black women should be appreciative that people who benefit from white privilege would provide grace for them to occupy certain positions or good graces and people of colour should be thankful for their goodness. This type of malevolent practice and silent impact has a toxic impact on the mental, physical and livelihood of Black women.

The Toxicity of Whiteness -- and Living Through It

Black women often find themselves working as institutional 'anchors' or the change agents in establishing the foundations of the need for diversity and inclusion practices within institutions that are historically white. They become the creators and genesis within organisations to start the institutional process reviews, intersectional work, diversity training, strategic planning, and cultural competency goals. These foundational anchors in topics as simple yet complex at assisting organisations to begin investing and working toward inclusive treatments or services for employees and the communities they serve are many times added tasks that are added to the staff of colour.

How do you resist something that is around you, surrounding you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? It's impossible to rise against the system of racism and white supremacy when it is working while you sleep. Resistance is futile when whiteness is engaging in dominance and crushing against you in all the spaces that you occupy. Whiteness is constantly working to deny, deflect, and diminish blackness. At every turn, whiteness is constantly reaffirmed on an individual basis and in systems that we have to engage in daily. Challenging and resisting can seem like a daunting task, but we continue to forge ahead.

Our healing and 're-arming' ourselves for the battle of racial justice occurs in multiple ways that often include leading and supporting social justice movements, community organising, and teaching. Our mere existence in the places we occupy is an act of resistance and when we call out the racial gaslighting it diminishes the power of white dominance (Davis & Ernst, 2017). We show up in a variety of ways in classrooms, parent meetings, community events, educational forums, workshops, political events, and conferences to name a few. Showing up every day is a form of healing and resistance.

As Black women, we are constantly resisting racism on the institutional and individual level, and it has a significant cost to our lives. There are parallels when working in social justice movements and within institutions. Black women continue to work against the salient use of racist/white-dominant systems and institutions to ascribe and/or describe

blackness and Black communities as pathological. Black women are facing power structures within institutions such as school districts, higher education, child welfare organisations that are ruled by white gaze and dominance that includes powerful administrative policies and practices, white students and co-workers, and the overwhelming white majority community we reside in. We are often deluded by narratives that negate our Blackness and are racially gaslighted into thinking our experiences in the classroom or social work/justice spaces are unreal.

We often view our experiences as Black women through the lens of critical race theory or Black feminist theory which challenges the framework of white dominance. Some of the main tenets of these theories which include: outsider within status that focuses on a black women's cultural view of self, family, and society (Collins, 1986) and intersectionality of the impacts of our race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). Additional challenges include nonconscious bias; recognising the social construction of race has very real impacts on our lives, the need for fostering self-determination, speaking out on anti-discrimination policies, understanding how our voices are marginalised.

Our experiences leading classes and workshops on cultural competence topics and identifying the impact of whiteness are often presented to predominantly white audiences. We frequently have to defend ourselves in that as Black women, being pro-Black does not mean we are anti-white. This declaration is a pronouncement to remind ourselves and ultimately inform others that no matter how Black people or Blackness is portrayed historically, the negative stereotypes and sustained by depictions in the media, we are proud to be in the skin that we live in. As a form of self-love to explain that being pro-Black is to recognise that we will speak about race in the presence of whiteness, we will communicate the history of Black people from the frameworks of Black scholars, citizens, activists, and perspectives. We will seek out, collaborate, and create spaces specifically for Black people without feeling guilty about not including other racial identities. This often leads to a myriad of feelings from participants as they hear our academic perspectives, social justice expertise, and at times our emotional perspectives.

Whiteness, like cancer, is a pervasive and debilitating disease that if not caught early on it can slowly and silently kill you (Anderson, 2012). Taking a holistic approach to fighting it aggressively overtime is necessary, or it will reestablish itself and return stronger. Many times the main reason Black women continue to work, teach, and promote racial equity and work towards social and economic justice is the belief that whiteness can be eliminated, conquered, and eradicated. Holding on this belief to maintain some sense of

hope is critical. Otherwise, it would be a debilitatingly hopeless professional and personal life to live.

Historically, as Black women, we have labored more than anyone to try to defeat the oppression and subjugation of whiteness and white supremacy (Collins, 2000), from nursing white children from babies to become adults who have learned to hate us and mothering young people during the U.S. Civil Rights movement to understand the impacts that their white bodies could have on a movement for helping Black bodies become empowered to energizing movements to support new allies from the early 2000s to present day with Black Lives Matter, #MeToo (which has been co-opted by whiteness) and the many hashtag movements.

Working in white-dominated spaces presents Black women with a unique challenge of working in isolation which causes tiny traumatic contacts that create an impactful, cumulative debilitative experience. To combat these experiences, we build connections that disrupt the negative impacts of the mind that appear in symptoms such as dysthymia (a low-level, persistent depression); or of the body, such as in the case of high blood pressure. The physical and mental impacts that Black women who work in HWIs experience are well documented through social media and hashtags. We tell stories from nebulous communities as a form of supporting one another globally, by using platforms such as Black Twitter which is a global online community of Black people united against any form of anti-Blackness but also to celebrate the beauty of all things that Blackness brings to this world. These communities are powerful places of hope and joy for Black people, especially Black women who work in predominantly homogenous institutions.

Addressing Incessant Whiteness of Institutions

In HWIs, we are pulled in every direction from our actual employment obligations toward the unspoken secondary positions of cultural guru, student of colour liaison, and unpaid community counselor. We are sought after as 'free' consultants to the organisation. This free labor is siloed in the job description as 'other duties assigned', a clause that requires that our lived experiences on race and other cultural issues are used to coach and mentor colleagues who are many times in more senior positions within our organisations. Many articles show the 'cultural taxes' paid by Black staff for just working in these homogeneous spaces (Padilla, 1994). Within the U.S. university environment, for instance, the number of Black, full-time faculty in degree-granting, post-secondary institutions in 2017 was 5.5%; 3% are Black women (Digest of Education Statistics, 2018). There are added stressors to the work of Black faculty to be counselors, mental health professionals, and 'aunties and uncles' to many Black students. This unpaid labor

is provided because Black faculty at one point in their academic career needed those same supports.

This concept of reaching back to help the next generation to move other Black brothers and sisters forward is an Adinkra symbol, Sankofa (Temple, 2010), which became more popular in African American communities in the 1970s and continues to flourish in the community today as a way to give back (Temple, 2010). Many times, the reaching back extends to Black students and any student of colour. Though the taxation on the Black staff has been proven over and over there still seems to be a lack of compensation to these individuals. Unspoken statements and clauses for the Black staff that includes 'invisible' racial emotional labor within job descriptions.

It is extremely frustrating to keep doing this double labor of 'love'. We are slowing killing off the Black women in our world who are out here trying to save the world. Many Black women work in spaces that are averse to how they live their natural lives and they have to engage in cross-cultural brokering to survive in these spaces (Agusti-Panareda, 2006; Ishimaru et al., 2016). Cross-cultural brokering provides a framework to explain the individuals who attempt to widen the educational pipeline for improved access to academic spaces (Agusti-Panareda, 2006). Black women have been the keepers of history, innovators, and the main reasons we have been able to integrate cultural groups into public and private institutions. There is a great consequence of taking the milk/essence of Black women when they are the embodiment of life itself. Harm is created when society does not replenish them with nutrients that will sustain them continues to ripple around the world through every system of oppression (DeLoach, 2018).

Many times, people of colour become diversity consultants and experts just by being born a person of colour and they know how difficult it can be to navigate the world as such (Ladson-Billings, 2005). This exploitation of local cultural experts happens throughout the U.S., especially in communities that have smaller populations such as American Indians and other indigenous groups. This issue is felt globally. For example, in Australia there are ethnic/racial issues between Aboriginal workers and community members who are brought in as experts to discuss issues impacting their communities but receive little to no recognition when other professionals outside their communities would be acknowledged as professionals/experts for their understanding of Aboriginal cultural ideas and knowledge (Green et al., 2016). There is always such a propensity for white fragility to move into defensive mode when there is a push for a more equitable workspace. Unfortunately, those who are in authority will either completely ignore the

need until pressured by employees to make changes or there may be complaints or legal issues.

Final Thoughts

In this essay, we have addressed the incessant and destructive impact of when whiteness roams freely within institutions and the negative impacts that it has on Black women. We have shared the emotional toll of working on social justice issues in historically white institutions and communities. This is necessary work that challenges all of us and it should not be ignored or deserted when it is difficult to address these issues. If we truly believe in the intrinsic worth of every person we partner with and work for then we must move beyond the basics of a cultural competency training or class and move onto action steps that include an evaluation.

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