



Reframing Our Relationship to Work Trauma

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Abstract

This era has shed light on gross inequities and racialized trauma in various work environments; bringing clarity to the dire need for individuals to create healthy boundaries and prioritize self-compassion. Through this commentary, the author seeks three outcomes: (1) to define and understand racialized work trauma, (2) to identify the difference between individual and organizational accountability therein, and (3) to give some guidance on individual practices that help create critical boundaries and healing in one's work life. Guiding questions are as follows: What is racialized work trauma? How does it manifest? What are quick fixes for fostering boundaries? What are some practical solutions to protecting one's psyche?

Keywords: Black Women, Healing, Higher Education, Racialized Work Trauma, Self-Compassion, Work Trauma

Introduction

The past two years have proven to be both challenging and clarifying. Challenging in terms of living and working amidst the pandemic and continued racial injustices. This era has shed light on gross inequities and racialized trauma in various work environments; bringing clarity to the dire need for individuals to create healthy boundaries and prioritize self-compassion. Through this commentary, the author seeks three outcomes: (1) to define and understand racialized work trauma, (2) to identify the difference between individual and organizational accountability therein, and (3) to give some guidance on individual practices that help create critical boundaries and healing in one's work life. Guiding questions are as follows: What is racialized work trauma? How does it manifest? What are quick fixes for fostering boundaries? What are some practical solutions to protecting one's psyche?

Racialized Work Trauma

After 55 years of life, I am EXHAUSTED from responding to racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression and exclusion. As a single Black working parent, I am fed up with educating the ignorant and battling for my place at the table or in the room. I don't know about anyone else but I am TIRED. TIRED of being told that what I feel isn't real! TIRED of being told I am TOO sensitive. TIRED of being told I NEED to be more of a team player [1].

TIRED of being overworked, underpaid, and ever-demanded to give more!

In recent years, the joy of my work has been replaced with

intense pain both mental and physical and frustration rather than meaning and purpose.

You would think Higher Education would serve as the pillar of diversity, equity and inclusion. I thought of colleges and universities as hubs for knowledge construction and diverse ways of knowing and being; this type of institution would be the place for ample diversity, discovery, and development of a culturally pluralist society. In my world, those of us working and operating in Higher Education would lead as the example modeling a more diverse work force at institutions that value diversity, equity, and inclusion as stated in the institutional mission, values, policies and practice. The day-to-day reality is quite the opposite, it is filled with mine fields of microaggressions and littered with implicit bias. According to the online dictionary, trauma involves an emotional response to a terrible or traumatic event such as rape, death, abuse, or continued exposure to a hurtful event or situation [2].

Like traditional trauma, racialized trauma alludes to mental and physical anguish. Prolonged exposure to systematic and individual racism, race-based discrimination, and hate crimes can have detrimental effects on one's mental and physical health. These symptoms can lead to depression, anger, migraine headaches, reliving the event, tension headaches, chest pains, insomnia, digestive problems, isolation, and in worst cases suicide (2).

Racialized work trauma is typically exhibited via microaggressions, micro assaults, and/or historical racial trauma directed toward individuals and groups. As a professional, my experiences with racialized work trauma range from a fellow colleague saying to me or another Black woman "Your hair is so cool. Can touch it?" or "I need you to sit on our search committee, we don't have any Black representation. You know I'm playing but can you, do it?" I show up for the committee to my surprise not only am I the only Black Indigenous Person of Color (BIPOC) person, but I am also the only woman in the room. Can you image dealing with the slights on a continued basis? In addition to faculty and staff experiences with racialized trauma, we can have a vicarious experience by the assaults on our students. Each of the following racial incidents were direct or indirect assaults on women of Color. They took place with a mixed audience of students, faculty, and staff: a faculty member used the term illegal and aliens when referring to immigrants; a supervising teacher told a clinical student their natural hair is unprofessional and needs to be changed before entering school the next week; a secretary in the Dean's office said "You don't look like you have a Ph.D." Helping student understand and process these types of assaults in

painful and tears away at your core. It is even more disheartening that the incidents took place with an audience which further deepens the hurt and shame of the event [3,4].

How can we tell our students to be better and treat one another with respect; when faculty and staff are modeling racist and discriminatory behavior?!

Addressing Personal Role versus Organizational Role

Coping with and overcoming racialized work trauma is easier said than done. When I think about my job; my role on paper and my day-to-day reality are drastically different. Some days I feel very uplifted and empowered. While many others, I feel like a token representative. I am constantly asked to participate and volunteer in meetings and committees that require my identities but do not desire my input. How do we bridge the gap between the institution and the individual to demolish the tensions?[5]

My training has taught me there are multiple voices and perspectives and additional interpretations of the content. As an educator, my purpose is to expose students to intellectually stimulating material as well as teach them to examine knowledge from multiple sources. I have seen first-hand what happens when instructors, teachers, and faculty fail to be inclusive and culturally responsive in their content or interactions with students. Institutions of higher learning should be places for personal & cultural growth, and a place to challenge our ways of knowing and being in the world. I challenge institutions to take a proactive stance on creating more inclusive environments and opportunities for positive outcomes. As you begin, reflect on these questions as a starting point [6]:

- What does the strategic plan/mission say about your commitment to inclusion, equity, and diversity?
- What policies and practices are in the Code of Conduct that hold the campus community accountable when issues surrounding bias, discrimination, hate speech, and racial or cultural violations occur?
- What policies and practices are in place to celebrate campus diversity, equity, inclusion, and cultural relevance?
- In what ways are academic programs and colleges held accountable for implementing cultural responsiveness & awareness in their course planning and course construction?

Failure to address the detrimental emotional and psychological well-being for members of a marginalized group who are continually experiencing microaggressions and other oppressive assaults lead to employee departures, sick leave, suing the institution for negligence, or worst-case scenario suicide and death. This is why it is imperative for each of us to have an individualized plan to heal from and resist the racism [7].

Pathways to Critical Boundaries and Self-Compassion

In order to be effective to ourselves we must learn how to reframe our practices of caregiving that exclude us and prioritize others. Renegotiate what you respond to and how you respond. I want to leave you with this advice that helped me create a better relationship with my work and overall mental health. In using what I call P3 (Prioritizing, Planning, and Purpose); I discovered what not to do and what I learned from my own unhealthy relationship to work [8].

1. THE INSTITUTION WILL NOT LOVE YOU BACK – No matter how much you give or how hard you try these institutions are run on a Business Model not a Humanity Model. You must decide how much you are willing to invest before you become bitter. Prioritize where you expend your energy and plan how and when to do so. Keep track of your purpose and motivation to not get caught up in the mess.

2. SET BOUNDARIES WITH YOUR TIME, EMAIL, & MEETINGS – Self-care and compassion are key to valuing oneself and one's team. Begin to block off your calendar, if need be; set up 45 minutes-1 hour for lunch daily and take breaks! (5-15 minutes away from the office and/or all computer/phone screens after working 3 or more hours in the same position). Stand up stretch and practice deep breathing throughout the day as needed.

3. FIND A GOOD THERAPIST IF NEEDED AND CONFIDENT NOT AFFILIATED WITH YOUR INSTITUTION – I am so grateful for my friends and colleagues outside of my institution. They help me see things more clearly and objectively. They also help me be kinder to myself and more realistic with what is within my power to change and impact.

4. RECOGNIZE WHEN YOU HAVE DONE ALL YOU CAN – Life in higher education can be hard and taxing. There is always a battle to be fought but you do not always have to serve in every altercation. Pace yourself and celebrate your successes and triumphs. Recognize we are in a marathon not a sprint!

5. RECOGNIZE THE CONTRIBUTION OF YOUR TEAM AND SAY THANK YOU IN ANY WAY YOU CAN – It is critical to recognize and celebrate your staff and coworkers. You must make time to connect as people and not just workers. Create happy hours and celebratory programs to acknowledge your team and their successes. Let the people you work with know you appreciate them always! Treat others the way you would want to be treated!

6. BE KIND TO YOURSELF, THE WORLD IS A HOT MESS – Pause and get a new perspective. Know and set limits. Find your joy and passion!

Remember, we can only control ourselves and how we react to the world.

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