

At the Intersection of Race and Gender in Social Work Education

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Abstract : There remains much to learn about the experiences of Black women within social work education. Higher education, in general, has a strained relationship with this demographic and while social work has espoused a code of ethics and core values, Black women report inequitable experiences similar to those in other disciplines. Research-intensive (R-1) Carnegie-designated institutions typically have lower representation of those with historically marginalized identities; this study focuses on Black women in these schools of social work. This study presents qualitative findings from 9 in-depth interviews with Black women faculty members as well as interviews with 11 Black women doctoral students at R-1 universities. Many of the poor professional outcomes for Black women in academia are a result of their experiences with imposter syndrome and feeling as though they cannot present their authentic selves. The finding of this study highlighted the many ways imposter syndrome manifests within these study participants, from an inability to be productive to overproducing in an effort to win the respect and support of colleagues. Being scrutinized and seen as unprofessional when being authentic has led to some Black women isolating themselves and struggling to remain in academia. Other Black women have decided that regardless of the backlash they may receive, they will proudly present their authentic selves and allow their work to speak for itself rather than conform to the dominant White culture. These semi-structured, in-depth interviews shined a spotlight on the ways Black women doctoral students were denied inclusion throughout their programs. These students often believed both faculty members and peers seemed to actively work to ensure discomfort in these women. In response to these negative experiences and a lack of support, many of these Black women doctoral students created their own networks of support. These networks of support often included faculty members within social work but also beyond their discipline and outside of the academy at large. The faculty members who offered support to this demographic typically shared their race and gender identities. Both Black women faculty members and doctoral students historically have been forced to prioritize surviving, not thriving as a result of toxic environments within their schools of social work. This has negatively impacted their mental health and their levels of productivity. It is necessary for these institutions to build trust with these women by respecting their diverse backgrounds, supporting their race-related research interests, and honoring the rigor in a range of methodologies if substantial, sustainable change is to be achieved.

Keywords : education, equity, inclusion, intersectionality

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