

“The Double Whammy”: Navigating Racial and Gender Inequities and Microaggressions in Education Leadership

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Abstract: The racial and gender biases that women of color endure in educational leadership are more prevalent than most realize. Women of color who serve in educational leadership positions face inequities and deal with microaggressions more frequently in the workplace. Autoethnography scenarios serve as illustrations to demonstrate the racial and gender biases that exist, as well as the microaggressions the author has faced as a woman of color. Often women of color learn to navigate, tolerate, and deal with these inequities and microaggressions in order to survive. However, it is time to take a proactive approach by providing training at all levels within the educational environment. Professional development focused on equity and microaggression can promote more equitable practices and raise awareness to better understand and help identify inequities, biases and microaggressions that exist within the workplace, especially for women of color.

Applying evocative autoethnography research practices, real life scenarios are shared as illustrations of biases, inequities, and microaggressions that women of color face. As a researcher, I attempt to provide the reader with a reflective analysis of the choices I made and the reasoning behind those choices. However, I realize the limitations of autoethnography in qualitative research, especially as the researcher, relying on memory to provide self-narratives in order to help others understand and connect to my reflective analyses.

Key words: autoethnography, evocative autoethnography, personal narrative, racial bias, gender bias, equity, inequities, discrimination, microaggressions, women of color, writing stories

Acknowledgements

As a retired P-12 administrator and an assistant professor, I am a life-long learner who believes in leading by example and building the capacity of others. Reflecting on my career and sharing lessons learned as an administrator, whether through scholarship, teaching, or service, I hope my lived experiences can provide guidance, insight, encouragement, motivation and ideas for further research in our profession.

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“THE DOUBLE WHAMMY”: NAVIGATING RACIAL AND GENDER INEQUITIES AND MICROAGGRESSIONS IN EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

Introduction

Equity and microaggressions training should be afforded to all stakeholders at all levels within an organization to bring awareness, address inequities and eliminate the types of disparate biases and systemic discriminations in the workplace. Women have tolerated so many inequities and microaggressions in the past that sometimes we become numb to it or cautious when trying to deal with them in order to avoid confrontations. Gaining a better understanding of equity, along with learning about types of microaggression offenses, to include the context, intent and impact, helps one determine the best approach in addressing and correcting inequities and microaggressions in the workplace (Sue et al., 2019). More specifically, there should be increased focus on the impact of microaggressions on women in education workplaces.

There is an ever increasing need to understand and address equity and microaggression in K-12 education. Elementary and secondary schools and districts need to include both types of training in their professional development plans on an annual basis. Educators are engaging in conversations and beginning to adjust their lenses toward equitable opportunities for students. There is an increased focus now on analyzing and auditing the equitable practices of schools, as well as access and inclusion for all students. Research agencies and consortiums, such as Hanover Research and the Mid-Atlantic Education Consortium, higher education institutions, state education departments, districts, and schools, are providing a plethora of equity audit resources and guidance to assist K-12 schools with efforts to ensure diversity, equity and inclusion for all students, and even adults.

I am a retired African American female superintendent, with 32 years of formal experience as a K-12 educator. I served as an administrator for 24 of those 32 years, starting as an assistant principal, principal, central office director, central office senior leadership, and division superintendent. During my tenure, I experienced a number of microaggressions and inequities as a woman of color. These experiences were not unique to me, but broadly experienced by other women in executive leadership roles. I have transitioned into higher education with the awesome opportunity to share my experiences and lessons learned while advising/mentoring future administrators from a practitioner’s point of view. I share three scenarios to shed light on the types of inequities and microaggressions women, and more specifically women of color face in the workplace.

Microaggressions are subtle, every day, discriminatory actions, insults, and/or comments directed toward historically marginalized or underrepresented people that may be racist, sexist, ableist, linguistic, xenophobic, heterosexist, and transphobic, among other forms of oppression (Fleurizard, 2018; Nadal, 2011; Pierce, 1977, Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2019). According to Sue and colleagues (2007) microaggressions are described in three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (pp. 274-275):

- Microassaults are explicit, verbal or nonverbal attacks meant to hurt someone. They are a conscious or an explicit bias.
- Microinsults are verbal or nonverbal subtle snubs and insults that carry hidden meaning. They are unconscious or an implicit bias.

- Microinvalidations are verbal communications that invalidate the experiences of a person.

Analyzing the intent of a microaggression and considering the impact helps one process the type of microaggression experienced and also helps one determine ways to respond. My analyses of scenarios 2 and 3 factor the impact of these statements on me personally and the cultural context as well.

Autoethnography allows one to examine cultural experiences that one has lived, observed, and/or experienced. I am relying on memory and recollection of past experiences as described within the scenarios and I examine these experiences specific to the cultural beliefs and overall culture of the educational environment in which I am a participant, specifically within the context of a woman of color. In telling my story, I am recalling the accounts within three specific scenarios in order to share my truth, as well as expand thinking and understanding. Bochner and Ellis (2016) state:

The narrative truths of evocative autoethnography are pragmatic truths. The question is not whether autoethnographic stories convey precisely the way things actually happened, but rather what these stories do, what consequences they have, and to what uses they can be put... If we relapse into traditional ways of assessing the value or validity of research, we risk delegitimizing the very essence of what makes the evocative autoethnography paradigm powerful (p. 239).

Each scenario is a self-narrative of lived experiences representing circumstances of biases, inequities and microaggressions I experienced as a woman of color educational leader. I am in the position of both researcher and subject with the intent to give the reader an opportunity to reflect upon the described scenarios and reflective analyses in order to recognize and consider the biases, inequities and microaggressions that exist. I acknowledge as a researcher and agree with Noblit et al., that “we cannot and should not claim to separate our own perspectives from this work, as our positionality inherently influences every aspect of our teaching, research, and service” (2004).

Bochner and Ellis posit at least one limitation of autoethnography – the difficulty of maintaining anonymity when writing about people we know, whether family, friends, colleagues or people in the community. People can see themselves within the story (2016, p. 141). This perceptibility makes it more challenging to adhere to ethical expectations of maintain the confidentiality of others involved. I have attempted to be as generic as possible to protect the identity of other participants within each scenario.

Scenario 1

In my first senior leadership position, I served as the Chief Academic Officer for a small rural school system. Prior to accepting this job, an African American male held this same position for approximately four years, with the title of Assistant Superintendent. When I was promoted to this position upon his departure, I did not receive a pay raise, although the two previous men who held this same position both received a pay raise when assuming this post. I was also assigned two additional job responsibilities that were not a part of the purview assigned areas when the former assistant superintendent held the position. In addition, the Board was uncomfortable giving me the same title, regardless of the fact that I had 13 years of previous experience as an administrator and an earned doctorate degree in Educational Leadership, whereas the previous African American male employee did not hold an advanced degree. The superintendent informed me that the reason

for changing the title for this position was due to the fact that another African American female central office director was interested in this same position. The Board did not want to show favoritism to me over her. The Board further decided that the other female should now have Executive Director added to her title because of her loyalty to the school system. This female held the same responsibilities before, yet the Board did not believe a title change was necessary at that time. Furthermore, this female did not hold a doctoral degree. So, why now? Quite frankly, to me it was a bogus rationale. The other female and I were both subjected to the systemic inequitable, misogynistic practices of this Board.

It is appalling how organizations and governing boards tend to justify and rationalize their decisions when changing rules or making rules fit philosophical beliefs and implicit biases. If I were male, I have no doubts this Board would have kept the same title of Assistant Superintendent with an accompanied pay raise as was done with the men who held the position previously. This scenario further exposes the intersectionality of race and gender and its “double-whammy” impact on women of color. The other female colleague and I, with the level of experience we held at that time, should have been compensated with the same salary expectations afforded to male executive leaders in similar positions. I cannot justify this Board’s way of thinking. It is simply inequity in action! The microaggression exemplified within this specific scenario, gender bias, is one that I believe almost every woman in leadership will experience at least once within their career. I must add, the seven-member Board included four African American women and two African American men. An analysis of this scenario, it reveals that microaggressions and inequities can happen within our own racial and gender subgroups based on implicit biases and internalized racism and sexism. Diangelo (2018) states, “People of color may also hold prejudices and discriminate against their own and other groups of color, but this bias ultimately holds them down and, in this way, reinforces the system of racism that still benefits whites” (p. 22). Until we all consciously open our eyes and focus on bringing attention to and eliminating microaggression behaviors and inequity, this way of thinking will unfortunately continue.

So, what did I do in response to understanding the realities and dynamics of this situation? I accepted the job anyway, like the innumerable women placed in similar untenable situations. All too often, women take these positions even when they are aware of pervasive inequities and microaggressions. Some may find it a means to an end and others may find it necessary due to the limited opportunities available for women. While I assumed the position and worked diligently, I realized then, my time with this school system would soon be coming to an end. I find it hard to work in an environment in which the governing body or the organizational culture operates under double standards and archaic beliefs to justify behaviors. I have always excelled as a top-performer in every career position I have held. Knowing my solid performance and stellar track record would open doors of opportunity, I was less inclined to subjugate my compass for professional ethical standards to an organization that did not see the errors of their way of thinking, nor recognize their bias and seek to change their behaviors. Ryff (1989) states, “Environmental mastery is the individual’s ability to choose or create environments suitable to his or her psychic conditions is defined as a characteristic of mental health” (p. 1071). For my own mental health, I needed to seek employment elsewhere.

Scenario 2

In my second year as a superintendent, I was standing among other superintendents in an early afternoon networking social for those of us participating in a two-day professional

development session. After grabbing a plate of hors d'oeuvres, a white male representative from one of our educational vendors sponsoring the social, starts making small talk with me. After a few quick pleasantries, and sharing where I was from and a little bit about my educational background, he states, "Wow quite an accomplishment for you to have moved through the ranks and become a superintendent even though you have children. How did you balance the demands of being an administrator and also a mom?" Now, if he led with just the question and not divulged his line of thinking with his first statement, I might have quickly responded and shared how I had actually balanced the demands of being a mom and professional obligations. Instead, with his first statement, it was clearly a microinsult (Sue, Alsaïdi, Awad, Glaeser, Calle, and Mendez, 2019). I do not believe he intended to be insulting and/or discriminatory. It was just his subliminal belief about persons in CEO positions and the demands of such a job, not easily handled by women with children.

My initial thought during the conversation, immediately went straight to my inner voice shouting – As if women cannot effectively lead and be a superintendent if they have children. So, I took a deep breath and replied with my own question by asking, Do you have children? He stated he did. So, I politely followed with a simple explanation: I'm Wonder Woman. Of course, he laughed and just accepted this simplistic answer. While I was quite startled by the question at first and not sure how to respond, I quickly recovered and followed with my light hearted response because I believed it more appropriate within the current atmosphere. Although later that evening, reflecting on the original question asked, I wished I would have said, You're really asking this question? What is the difference between me and the majority of the other superintendents in this room, except for the obvious fact that I am a black female and they are not? I do not think he was trying to be offensive, but I have no doubt he would not have asked his original question of any one of the male superintendents in the room, who by the way have children and balance both home and job obligations.

Hence, at times when we experience microaggressions, for reasons such as fear of losing our jobs, creating uncomfortable working relationships, etc., we do not face them or deal with them head on. As I am more informed, I am more apt to acknowledge, address and even confront microaggressions that have been directed towards me or others. Perhaps this is because now I am a seasoned educator and leader with fewer concerns about promotion, job security and being too out-spoken. There are ways to react, depending on the situation, so it would be beneficial to provide our employees within the educational environment with the skill sets needed to navigate and lead appropriately (Washington, Birch, and Roberts, 2020).

Scenario 3

Again during the second year of my superintendency, I was faced with another microinsult in an interaction with an elderly white married couple following a community forum. The wife states, "I enjoyed listening to you and appreciated you answering all of the audience's questions. It was a tough conversation. I was pleasantly surprised at how knowledgeable and articulate you are." I was quite bothered by the wife's latter statement. While she might have been trying to be polite and genuinely trying to be complimentary under the circumstances, I immediately became defensive. In my mind I am thinking and asking the following: Why would she be surprised a superintendent could present with intelligence and articulate well enough to facilitate an informative public forum? Did she think I lacked necessary prerequisite knowledge and would have difficulty speaking intelligently because I was female, or black or both? So, I politely replied,

“My parents instilled in us, early on, the value and importance of a good education. Among my five siblings and I, we hold 14 degrees collectively. So, with our extensive educational training and background, we should be able to speak intelligently. I appreciate you recognizing such.” I followed my statements with the sweetest smile I could muster and waited for my response to sink in. Luckily, one of my board members came over and asked for a copy of one of the handouts I had distributed earlier and I excused myself, which ended any further conversations with the couple.

To this day, I continue to reflect upon and analyze this scenario. I recently started reading *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* by Banaji and Greenwald (2016) and this specific passage resonated with me:

It is difficult to fathom what it even means to have an automatic stereotype, that is, a belief about a social group that we possess but don't personally endorse or even approve of. But our minds have been shaped by the culture around us. In fact, they have been invaded by it (p. 98).

Perhaps the wife was completely oblivious to the impact of her statement and may not have even thought her comments were implicitly bias.

Conclusion

Microaggressions and inequities are exhibited by stakeholders within the educational environment, both implicitly and explicitly, therefore awareness and training in these areas will equip employees with skills and practices to implement within all levels. In the case of scenario 1, Board members are not excluded from this necessary training requirement. School Boards must address systemic inequities within their own practices and behaviors, especially as the governing body of the school district with the major role of hiring and assigning personnel and ensuring equal opportunities for personnel and students. This scenario provides a relevant example for why this Board needs equity training to help them understand and discover the hidden prejudices, inequitable practices, and microaggressions leading to civil rights violations and inherent discrimination. In order to eliminate microaggressions and inequities in the workplace, educational leaders must be willing to work collaboratively to raise awareness and learn how to deal with and eliminate inequities and microaggressions. It would have been most helpful for me earlier in my career as the first black principal and director in a predominately white school district to not only deal with my own circumstances, but to also support staff and peers dealing with microaggressions or inequities as a result of interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and parents.

Early in my leadership career, I completely avoided dealing with microaggressions towards me when I was a principal within this predominantly white school district. Two specific situations come to mind, one involving a microinsult from a board member during my first year as a principal and the second a microassault from one of my high school parents directed towards me and my office executive assistant in my second principalship. As a superintendent, I was much more comfortable responding to the persons involved in the conversations described in scenarios 2 and 3 when addressing the two microaggressions. However, as a principal in the two aforementioned situations, I was reluctant to respond or confront the issue for fear of reprisal or losing my job. Challenging systemic issues related to discrimination, inequity, and oppression is truly a democratic imperative and the health of our democracy depends on how we decide to respond to these issues (Parker, 2003).

The above referenced instances of microaggression and inequitable treatment are in no way exhaustive, but highlight the disparate effects and impacts on women, especially women of color in educational environments. This is not just a phenomenon within businesses and corporations. In promoting the building of equitable systems throughout all of our institutions, it is imperative that we begin the work of identifying and eradicating this type of discrimination in educational work spaces for all stakeholders. Dixson and Anderson indicate educators could be more intentional about including and valuing the perspectives, experiences, and voices of people of color when developing and evaluating educational policies and practices (2018).

It is time to acknowledge and address the elephant in the workplace. Studies show people of color are discriminated against in the workplace (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004). Failure to expose, confront, and dismantle systemic sexism and racism in education continues to erode the quality of education; fuels the disparate treatment of black/brown educators; and limits the opportunities for well-qualified black, brown, indigenous people of color. Thus, building capacity and providing learning experiences for educators to improve practice should include a focus on equity and microaggression training. Training could inspire others to take action, encourage changes in policies and practices, and implement solutions to eliminate biases, inequities, and microaggressions.

Furthermore, conducting ethnographic research involving women of color educational leaders may provide an opportunity for more voices to be heard and lived experiences shared. I strongly encourage and highly recommend that women of color educational leaders begin journaling or keeping digital reflection logs to record experiences involving bias, inequitable practices, and microaggressions. Therefore, when one is comfortable and ready to share their experiences, this record can be used as field notes to support their personal narratives, which strengthens autoethnography. Unfortunately I did not keep a written record of the facts regarding each scenario, thus acknowledging the limitations of sharing these narratives based on memory alone. Perhaps keeping a record of biases, inequities, and microaggressions with the intention of sharing them one day will allow for further discussions and opportunities to take action.

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