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Race, Imposter Thoughts, and Healing: A Black Man's Journey in Self-Discovery While Working at a PWI

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Abstract:

This chapter is concerned with acknowledging the mental health issues that black men face in higher education. Research is presented and blended with lived experiences of being a full time employee and doctoral student on a primarily white campus. This chapter focuses on the emotional trauma of black men, imposter phenomenon traits, and offers strategies for healing from critical race scholars. Strategies to keep higher education institutions accountable for the hiring, and retaining black men are also discussed.

Race, Imposter Thoughts, and Healing: A Black Man's Journey While Working at a PWI.

Being black and male brings unique gender, cultural, and social stressors that can impact mental health (Alvarez, Liang, & Neville, 2016; Robinson, Jones-Eversley, Moore, Ravenell, and Adedoyin, 2018). Although all minorities are subject to both covert and overt white hegemonic practices in higher education, Comas-Diaz, Hall and Neville (2019) suggest African Americans are more exposed to racial discrimination than other ethno-racial group. Further, Daniels (2019) notes that black professionals are often "judged through problematic racial filters, creating additional hurdles, and barriers (p. 34). Anecdotally, one black male professional articulates his experiences with race while working in higher education, "you have to understand [that there is] a thing called open racism and there is hidden racism. I see a lot of hidden racism in higher education." (Turner & Guarholz, 2017, p. 217). Ironically, [black men] are charged with the "duty of successfully navigating white dominant institutions while at the same time teaching about how important diversity and inclusion are" (p. 151). Furthermore, researchers refer to the clear emperical evidence supporting the association between greater exeperiences with racial discrimination and depression among persons of color (p. 4). These mental health impacts have been confirmed by the United States Surgeon General who stated that racial and ethnic health disparities were likely due to racism (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

Consequences of these emotional burdens can lead to “increased levels of stress, burnout, decreases in job performance, and satisfaction over time” (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016, p. 195). Students interactions and learning are also negatively affected when the mental health of black males are compromised. For example, Brooms and Brice (2017) are two black male professors and posit that racialized identities impact how [professionals and students] receive content - and resist it as well, “we are seen before we are heard; thus, the way students and professionals see us influences the way they hear us” (p. 151). Theses burdens are exacerbated for black identifying professionals who may identify in non-binary ways. (Comas-Diaz, Hall & Neville, 2019).

Although there are many tools and strategies to understand one's trauma and begin healing, Comas-Diaz, Hall and Neville (2019) note that black men require unique methods to properly begin the healing process. Traditional methods of coping with these harms are incomplete as “racial trauma carries psychological and physiological effects like: hypervigilance to threat; flashbacks; nightmares; avoidance; suspiciousness; headaches and heart palpitations” (pp. 1-2). Research shows that being a black male on campus can bring experiences that exhaust the body, mind and spirit, thus, it is important to gain a clear and complete understanding of the trauma, in order to heal.

Unfortunately, these unique burdens do not commonly begin for black men once their offer letter is signed. Generally, black parents understand the unique burdens that black boys will face in America and are commonly known to prepare their kids for this uphill battle by using the common, yet problematic statement, “you must work twice as hard to get half as far as your white counterparts”. I was told this message as a young boy, but it never was applied until I

entered community college at age 24. After a “career” of D.J’ing, and a short stay in the county jail; grit and perseverance became the primary tool to be successful in higher education, and to get my life back on track. These concepts worked well for me while earning my A.A., B.A., & M.A. degrees. With these tools, I was able to replace self-doubt with longer study times, and with each course passed, I found an increase in my appetite for more ambitious academic and professional undertakings.

However, after enrolling in my doctoral program while still working as a full time student advisor, I have noticed a peculiar, consistent fatigue in my mental state. Attempting to “work twice as hard” feels like starting a lawn mower to no avail. Yanking over and over in my brain is the notion of grit and perseverance, but they do not quite motivate me as well as it did in the past. As I continue to work full-time and matriculate through my doctoral program, new feelings of being an imposter within the academy have re-emerged, which is linked to personality traits such as conscientiousness and neuroticism” (Hutchings & Rainbolt, 2018, p. 197).

These imposter feelings are consistent with research which suggests that when grit does not work, imposter phenomenon can emerge, leading to self-doubt and feelings of depression (Hutchings and Rainbolt, 2017). Common characteristics of imposter phenomenon often look like individuals explaining their success as getting lucky, avoiding praise, and discounting their success, with the strongest indicator being “persistent self-doubt regarding intelligence and ability” (Hutchings and Rainbolt 201, p. 194). Researchers find that these feelings are common in career faculty, women, or minorities and minority professionals in fields where they are traditionally under-represented, and often face bias to their professional inclusion and legitimacy.

This chapter is written for black male professionals in higher education. The ones who primarily rely on grit, and the concept of working twice as hard as their key to obtaining academic and professional success. This chapter will define and address the struggles black men face in higher education, present traits of imposter phenomenon, and will offer strategies to remain physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy while navigating a career in higher education. This chapter is also for the overachievers. The ones who volunteer for numerous committees, research roles, and advisory positions in the name increased professional status, sometimes at the expense of their psycho-social and emotional wellbeing.

This chapter is also important for higher education institutions, as the burdens that black men endure on their campus can negatively affect “work attitudes, career development, and learning” (Hutchins and Rainbolt, 2017, p. 196). Additionally, institutions should note that when black men are emotionally burdened, “everyone suffers—administrators, students, staff, and faculty who otherwise would benefit from the experiences, perspectives, and mentoring of these talented professionals” (p. 223). It also offers critiques from critical race theorists when discussing higher education institutions, grit, and offers culturally relevant strategies for healing.

This chapter will present empirical research while blending lived experiences and perspectives from an early career black man, and doctoral student at a primarily white institution (PWI). The following themes drive the focus for this chapter: (1) black men in higher education, (2) imposter phenomenon, (3) healing, and (4) equitable suggestions for higher education institutions. This chapter intersects with gender, race and racism, and mental health.

Background of Author

I am a first generation college student and full-time employee at a small PWI in California. In 2018, I enrolled in a doctoral program and am scheduled to complete it in 2022. The statement “you must work twice as hard to achieve half as your white counterparts” has reverberated in mind throughout my time in higher education, both as a student and a professional. Although this lesson was not applied in K-12, I later internalized the concept, and credit it for being an HBCU graduate, an M.A. degree holder, full-time employee, and current doctoral student.

My working twice as hard has also allowed me to appear on the Oprah Winfrey Show, speak on nationally syndicated television programming, and travel the country as a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) student scholar. This chapter was written to learn more about, and heal my own imposter thought patterns and to find more healthy ways to thrive in higher education while being mindful not to ignore my internal fluctuating emotional states. As a disclaimer, even after completing research and internalizing theoretical concepts on the matter, I am not sure that the full eradication of imposter syndrome is possible. Instead, it has helped me to manage this issue and continue to choose positive, healthy ways to overcome this persistent life obstacle.

Black Males in Higher Education

Stating that the educational system in the United States is rooted in a history of racial bias and racialized practices is nothing new, yet some still ignorantly claim that America is in a “post-racial society” (Rich, 2013), or that class is more important than race. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) note that by every social indicator, “racism continues to blight the lives of people of color, including holders of high-echelon jobs, even judges” (p. 12). Furthermore, these

authors also submit as evidence of the permience of race the shorter lifespan, worse medical care, fewer years of school completed, and employment in more menial jobs than whites. Turner and Grauerholz (2017) also note that Euro-American socialization of racial privilege and power is pervasive and directly affects higher education institutions. Additionally Brooms and Brice (2017) highlight the commonality that colleges share with general American society as they reinforce a norms in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present. Although Turner and Grauerholz (2017) posit that marginalization and institutional racism exist unchecked in part because of the "profound lack of black male senior-level professionals" (p. 220), authors Brooms & Biles (2017) and Delgado & Stefancic (2017) however, opine that no matter the hierarchical position of the black male, race is always the master status that overpowers other existing statuses, leading to more overt and covert experiences of racism no matter the position.

To highlight the correlation of reported racism and mental and physical health outcomes, researchers Ben, Denson, Elias, Priest, Pieterse, Gupta, and Kelaher (2015) performed a meta-analysis of peer reviewed literature focused on racism as a determinant of health. These researchers analyzed 293 empirical articles from 1983-2013 which revealed racism being positively associated with "depression, anxiety, psychological stress and poorer physical health" from those experiencing levels of racism (p.1).

Additionally, dismal hiring rates and the lack of institutions retaining black men also contributes to negative health outcomes. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) reports that just 20 percent of all full-time faculty at degree-granting institutions in 2013 were persons of color. Furthermore, this report also indicates that black male faculty comprised only three

percent of all full time faculty. Similarly, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) reported that only 13 percent of all educational administrators were black. Isolation is a common feeling when working on a campus with low black employment rates. Turner and Grauerholz (2017) speak to the psychological impact of working in a racialized workplace, "where there are few people who look like them, around people who question their abilities, and in which they are clearly treated differently--prompts concern for the mental and physical health of black male professionals" (p. 223).

Isolation not only poses a mental health problem to black men themselves, but is also problematic to the institutions reputation when claiming to be committed to diversity and inclusion. Most importantly, students of color, especially the first generation students, who also report experiencing marginalization, isolation, feelings of impostorship, and racism on campus (Beech, Calles-Escandon, Hairston, Langdon, Latham-Sadler, & Bell, 2013; Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2010).

Despite a robust collection of empirical studies that continue to cite the prevalence of racism in higher education, there still remain those who minimize or dismiss the burdensome realities of black men in higher education, even though they are not themselves, black men. First, critical race scholars find that whites and blacks continue to see race in different ways, most notably how whites believe blacks overreact to "innocent interactions, and malicious, race-based slights" (Turner & Grauerholz, 2015, p. 214). Blacks on the other hand, often believe that race is an unspoken part of every verbal and nonverbal exchange and continually report the raced based microaggressions that continue to happen to them (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). Unfortunately, microaggressions are often dismissed on the grounds that they do not constitute

real harm. However, feminist writer Friedlander (2018) defines microaggressions as "subtle acts of bias that reflect a structural form of oppression toward a specific group of people, such as racism, transphobia, or sex-ism" (p. 6), and believes constant exposure to these subtle acts can decrease morale, drive, and increase cynicism while working in higher education.

So does race matter in higher education today? Empirical evidence, as well as common sense tells us that racism is a lived experience, but since some scholars still (somehow) disagree with the lived racist experiences that black men face in higher education, here, I offer a more in-depth analysis of lived experiences of black men in the academy. Turner and Grauerholz (2017) conducted an empirical study which sought to understand the common mental health stressors of black men in higher education. Researchers conducted 10 semi-structured interviews, delving into the lived experiences through topics like racism, belonging, and isolation on campus. Their study suggest that these men often experience discrimination and marginalization in their work space. Through transcript analysis, researchers coded the following themes: (1) isolation from other black male professionals, (2) the questioning of professional credentials, (3) feelings of impostor syndrome, (4) experiences of tokenism and cultural taxation (p. 216).

Personally, I have experienced all of the previously listed themes while navigating higher education, both as a student and professional. After I graduated from Morehouse College, the nation's only all-male Historically Black College, I enrolled in a masters program. I was immediately struck by the lack of black bodies on my new campus, (but ironically noticed the many black men and women on college marketing materials). In my first year, as a way to combat my imposter thoughts, I sought to prove my worth, seeking to provide a spark of energy

and offer services to the black faculty, staff, and students. In retrospect, it seems as if I was exhibiting what researchers note as "doing more than what is formally required to prove [my] expertise and commitment" (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017, p. 222). Unbeknownst to me at the time, my reasoning for extending my services were also described in a study when researchers noted that black participants often hoped, in vain, that their actions would change others' perceptions of them and offer the same recognition, praise, respect, and acceptance as white professionals (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). Although I do not regret my taxing service given to the college and black community, I did however experience burnout and later decided to decrease my availability to focus on self-care. This recess could have been avoided if handled differently. If Imposter syndrome was more commonplace in higher education, I could have been more aware and governed myself accordingly so I could continue with my services, while ensuring self-care.

This section presented the unique ways which causes or exacerbates imposter syndrome in postsecondary education. Through lack of black senior administrators, dismal hiring rates, feelings of isolation on campus, microaggressions, and grappling with colleagues who dismiss the lived racist experiences of black men, imposter thoughts are born or increased. Additionally, researchers coded the following themes from black male professionals: isolation, the questioning of credentials, cultural taxation and tokenism.

Institutions should note that continued experiences of racism, microaggressions, isolation on campus and lack of retention will lead to burnout, loss of motivation and will negatively hurt the reputation of the college's diversity efforts. The next section will look into a common mental stressor, imposter phenomenon.

Imposter Syndrome

While providing therapeutic sessions with highly successful women, John Clance (1978) became the first identifier of the imposter syndrome phenomenon, defining it as the persistent thoughts of intellectual phoniness or fraudulence. This characteristic was concluded after he found that his women participants, in the midst of great professional success, did not believe they could sustain their success and would be identified as an imposter.

In the context of higher education, authors Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) define traits of imposter phenomenon as "the inability to internalize successes despite evidence to the contrary, as well as perfectionistic work tendencies in an attempt to overcompensate for doubts, and the experience of fraudulent feelings" (p. 194). Brems, Baldwin, Davis and Namyniuk (1994) also note feelings of phoniness, self-doubt, and inability to take credit for one's accomplishments as a prime characteristics for imposters. Interestingly, it was found that male professionals have "more of a reluctance to use active methods to assuage imposter concerns" (Hutchins and Rainbolt 2017, p. 210).

Generally, imposters struggle with making accurate attributions concerning their performance independent of their actual competence, often attributing success to external reasons, and failures to internal sources such as their own ability or intelligence (Hutchins and Rainbolt, 2017). They are also likely to interpret setbacks as evidence of their professional inadequacy resulting in "increased stress and adverse impacts to expected teaching, service, and research outcomes" (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017, p. 198).

In a relevant study, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) sought to understand if faculty, who persistently question their professional legitimacy are at higher risk for experiencing adverse psychological outcomes with implications to career retention, advancement, job performance, and job burnout. Their analysis suggests that "faculty experience imposter concerns as a critical event that results in increased psychological distress until they can reconcile (or cope) with the event and adjust their perception accordingly" (p. 197). In their qualitative interviews, researchers coded responses about imposter phenomenon as "disruptive events that created doubt, shame, and questioning of who they were" as a professional (Hutchings and Rainbolt, 2017, p. 201).

In another study to explore imposter phenomenon in faculty, Knights and Clarke (2014) noted consistent feelings of inadequacy and insecurity with faculty due to the competitive nature, research expectations, and the securing of external funding. Researchers concluded that these faculty shared a fear of "not living up to an ideal image of what it means to be an academic" (p. 342).

Research indicates that imposter phenomenon commonly happens at critical junctures or discontinuities in one's life and career. One participant of their study confirms this:

> I think it is more prevalent in people who have had journeys like mine. They are trailblazers in their families, they are the first in their families to go to college, and then to graduate school to get a doctorate or to get a masters. When you are exploring new territory, I think the context in which these thoughts and feelings are much more prevalent (p. 206).

Other examples of critical junctures or discontinuities include, for example, returning to postsecondary education after an extended leave, the transition from a doctoral student to

tenure-track faculty, or a mid-career move to an administrator role (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017, p. 197).

Seeking help for imposter thoughts is not always easy. An example comes from a black faculty member who shared his insecurities and reluctance to seek help when feeling like an imposter, "I don't know if the right word is ashamed, but that is very private (and) you don't want to tell other people that you're unsure of yourself or that you don't think you can live up to the expectations" [of the job] (Hutchins and Rainbolt, 2017, p. 205). Although it may be tough to reach out for help, there are negative effects of imposter syndrome. Bothello and Roulette (2018) posit "this condition leads to a sense of anomie; in more severe cases, individuals live with the constant fear that they will someday lose all credibility, either when they are exposed as charlatans or when their occupation is revealed to be a sham" (p. 2).

Imposter thoughts from black faculty centered around: scholarly productivity, questioning expertise, comparisons with colleagues, and handling success. The most imposter thoughts from faculty included "negative self-talk, inaccurate attributions concerning success and failure, and perfectionistic work tendencies" (p. 207). Several black faculty perceived women and other minority faculty to be more susceptible to experiencing imposter thoughts than their white male colleagues (p. 206). Ironically, Cowman & Ferrar, (2002) suggest "imposters strive to minimize these traits by working longer, working harder, and seeking perfection" (p. 13), which can also lead to additional burnout and stress.

Although I am not a black faculty member, I have instructed several college courses ranging from "introduction to African American studies", to "Project Success", an academic recovery course for first year students who find themselves on academic probation during their

first year of college. As a black instructor, I have experienced the confidence of my painstaking research diminish in a manner of minutes when white students ask me if "I am qualified to teach the course," "where the (black) authors used to illustrate points went to college," or that "African American studies courses keep racism going." Of course, I knew that comments like these happen, however, I did not expect them to hurt so deeply, so much so that I question my own research abilities.

In these trying times, I leaned on senior black faculty members who offered reminders of the world we live in as black men, and how our desire to educate those on black issues will be (ignorantly) challenged. Although pep talks helped, to get to the root of my imposter thoughts, (which is still a work in progress), I had to spend time meditating, getting in touch with my inner-self to understand these thoughts and juxtapose them with my desire to educate students, no matter the obstacles. Although imposter thoughts still arise when teaching, I am now able to better manage them, putting them into context so that I am able to endure obstacles while confidently imparting knowledge.

Implications for Higher Education Institutions

Imposter phenomenon in employees is directly related to an institution's future and academic profile as institutions are at "risk of losing top [professional] talent (ironically those most at risk for experiencing imposter tendencies) because of persistent imposter concerns" (Hutchins and Rainbolt, 2017, p. 195). Researchers also note that prolonged imposter experiences may stunt higher education professionals from growing in their capability and efficacy towards their professional identity.

Furthermore, in relevant studies, Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016), and Vergauwe Wille, Feys, Fruyt, and Anseel (2015) found that imposter phenomenon was negatively related to their motivation to lead groups and lower strivings for promotions. It was also noted that "persistent experiences of questioning their expertise is a characteristic of unsupportive work climates which has been linked to higher turnover and lower satisfaction" (p. 208). Knowing this, institutions should be highly concerned with imposter phenomenon as it has the ability to stifle output and work environment.

In my experience, the research of imposter thoughts on campus holds true. In my doctoral program, I found myself being the only black male in my 14 student cohort which includes principals, school superintendents, Silicon Valley executives, and myself, the youngest member, a recent HBCU graduate with limited professional experience, and tattoos on my arms (which is often considered as a physical judgement point in professional settings) (Fries-britt and Griffin, 2007). Being surrounded by middle aged men and women who, in some regards, are at the peak of their career, produced feelings of inadequacy, anxiousness, and the feeling of not belonging.

My physical appearance in my cohort and PWI workplace also contribute to imposter thoughts. In class, and while working on campus, each inquisitive gaze onto my tattoos, curly textured hair style, or my style of dress was interpreted as a judgment to me, often triggering more imposter thoughts.

Research indicates that I am not alone in my physical appearance triggering negative thoughts. Black male tenured professors Brooms and Biles (2017) describe their thought processes while dressing for work, "no matter how we dress, we are often not assumed to be the

professor" as dressing in business professional attire can still be an affront to some white senses (p.152). They also note the differences when a white professor wears jeans and a T-shirt as being "down to earth and relaxed," whereas when [we] wear jeans and a T-shirt, [we] are viewed as unprofessional (p. 153). These professors also believe their business professional clothes are assumed to be uppity and pretentious, concluding, "if we are visually off-putting, then what we teach is viewed the same way on many occasions" (p. 152).

This section provided the common, and sometimes crippling effects of imposter phenomenon in black men as well as implications for higher education institutions. Research indicates that imposter phenomenon usually comes at times of change or uncertainty. In black male professionals, imposter thoughts include, negative self talk, perfectionist work tendencies, or self-discrediting. Although it directly involves the individual, higher education institutions should be aware of imposter symptoms, and actively strategize on how to assist black men with overcoming; as research indicates prolonged imposter thoughts are indicative of unsupportive work environments and high employee turnover. Furthermore, institutions are at risk for losing motivated, promising professionals who can potentially enact change and increase the profile of the institution.

Healing

With the stress and burdens of being black in America, in addition to navigating higher education with imposter thoughts, healing is needed. The road to healing imposter feelings for Black men will be challenging and will require significant internal commitment and external support. To motivate, Chowdhury (2017) recounts the oftentimes grinding and heart-breaking

imposter thought process, but proclaims that the courage to heal was profoundly inspiring and a self-affirming process.

This section is titled “healing” because critical race scholars believe that simply “coping” with stress and emotional trauma does not address the unique racialized issues that black men endure in higher education (McGee & Stovall, 2015). For example, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) define coping as, “the ways in which individuals respond to stressful situations” (p. 196). When juxtaposed with critical race theorist definition of healing, a more thorough outcome is found, “restoring health and well-being” through the development of a “critical consciousness of social oppression” (McGee & Stovall, 2015). In this case, the critical race scholars definition of healing gives black men the agency to restore their health *while* confronting racism which also contributes to their imposter thoughts (McGee & Stovall, 2015, p. 510). Critical race theorist Ginwright (2010) argues for “radical healing” for the purpose of restoring the health and well-being of professionals who have been exposed to chronic poverty, racism, and violence. Comas-Diaz and Neville (2019) also highlight the importance of healing the social oppression of racial wounds because they occur within a socio-political context and on a continuing bases” (p. 2). Critical race scholars views of healing is appropriate for this topic as opposed to traditional coping methods because the approach to coping is embedded in a eurocentric perspective, thus, “treatments tend to lack cultural relevance for most persons of color” (p. 2).

To move toward healing, Comas-Diaz and Nevill (2019) conclude that both researchers and practitioners should contextualize their healing approaches to persons of color by using culturally responsive and racially informed interventions. McGee and Stovall (2015) agree, “many treatments subscribe to holistic healing, that not only acknowledges one's pain, but also

provides the tools to empower the internal, psycho-social and emotional health of black men in higher education (McGee & Stovall, 2015). The previously provided definition of coping also contributes to the unique nature that black men face in higher education as Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) note, “no studies were found describing coping skills derived from participant’s lived experiences” (p. 196), which for black men, are unique from others’ experiences.

Healing Imposter Symptoms

Critical race scholars maintain that to heal imposter symptoms, black men should not accept, but be critical of the notion of “grit” and “working twice as hard” as others. Although grit educator Angela Duckworth (2016) subscribes to resilience and persistence as the key to success, critical race theorists McGee and Stovall (2015) criticize Duckworth’s stance, stating “grit does not adequately examine the role it plays in producing anxiety, trauma, and general unpleasantness in people of color” (p. 493). Furthermore, it also does not account for the systematic racist structures in higher education, that no amount of hard work can overcome. Mills (2017) also criticizes Duckworth’s (2016) book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, stating,

> Although it is a New York Times Bestseller, there are some growing concerns that grit may have negative effects on historically-marginalized students...one size does not fit all, and there are some dangers in treating all students the same, without considering their backstories (p. 3).

Mills’ (2017) then summarizes how grit contributes to increase imposter feelings, “Duckworth’s assertion that grit will produce hours and hours of practice to demonstrate perseverance, and endure countless obstacles in isolation, passion or perseverance alone do not equate grit” (p. 3).

To be fair, there are positive aspects of grit. Fitzgerald (2016) agrees that one of the greatest benefits of the concept of grit is that it consistently predicts success, even more so than

test scores. Grit also can motivate those who may not excel academically with perseverance and resilience traits. However, negative implications come from critical race theorists McGee and Stovall (2015) who contend that "current research on 'grit' and 'resilience' does not account for the toll societal racism takes on [professionals]" (p.492). No matter how much grit and resilience a professional employs, historically-marginalized professionals based on race, poverty level, disability, and language proficiency are still at a disadvantage.

To heal from imposter phenomenon brought by grit, professionals should be constantly aware of overexerting themselves. Mills (2017) suggests learning relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and other mindfulness activities. This self-awareness is also a strategy that can be taught in order to self-regulate when stress emerges, or if one denies their basic physical needs of eating, sleeping, to be successful. Relaxation techniques can look different based on the person. For example, I enjoy playing basketball when stress gets high. This is one of the only activities where I only focus on the task at hand, instead of balancing all of my problems at the same time. For others, it may look like taking a walk at the park, baking, or spending time with family. No matter the method, the key is to be self-aware at one's own stress levels, constantly determining if what they are doing, or thinking about is causing more stress or alleviating stress.

Additionally, although I face imposter symptoms, even as I write this chapter, to overcome, I try to make my work bigger than myself by affirming that my work is not only helping myself, but to all readers who find themselves bombarded by their imposter voice. This voice may be compelling one to do something, or not to do something. I also find going through logical steps to mentally determine if my fears are rational. For example, I ask myself, "how many times do I say that I cannot do something? How many times do I prove myself wrong? Is

this a legitimate fear? Or is this fear coming from my imposter voice? By going through these steps, I find that I am able to recall countless times in my life of completing things that my mind told me I couldn't. In my doctoral program, I was encouraged to take things day by day. I was reminded by a warm and caring faculty member that feelings come and go, and I may not feel the same way that I do now in the next class. The experience of sharing my fears and concerns with someone else provided feelings of liberation to know I was not alone in my process.

General Healing Strategies

In general, McGee and Stovall (2015) offer the following effective healing strategies for black men on campus who may feel isolated, overworked, and experiencing anxiety and depression.

connect to the larger community.

Sharing experiences with same-race colleagues or friends, seeking community support, feeling a sense of responsibility to serve the community, adhering to a religious or spiritual practice or ideology, and having a critical understanding of how race and racism operate in American society can assist with personal mental trauma. In addition, having a racial identity that strongly identifies with the collective black experiences on campus can buffer the stress and anxiety associated with racial discrimination and help prevent racial stereotyping that can bring about a negative self-concept or poor self-esteem.

Although my school has a very small black professional population, I became active in a listserv that connects Black faculty and staff (BFS) on campus. These connections (usually by email) sprouted pot-lucks, self-care opportunities, dialogue sessions, end of year ceremonies, and

happy hour visits. "Community offers a sense of purpose, opportunities to forge relationships, and develop skills to bring social change" (McGee & Stovall 2015, p. 510).

hold inclusion circles.

Inclusion circles offers opportunities for black faculty, staff, and students to informally, or formally share their struggles, "acknowledging that their experiences are not isolated incidents" (p. 511). There are many benefits from inclusion circles. For example, the social nature of gatherings can help group members open up in a less stressful environment in which to discuss their concerns. Circles can also provide a platform for group and shared healing opportunities. The BFS listserv on my campus offers several venues and opportunities for professionals to get together in a variety of settings to initiate self-care. Furthermore, as the advisor for the Black Student Union, I encourage the executive team to continually offer spaces for the black student population to gather to normalize their experiences and feelings through dialogue.

Equitable Suggestions for Higher Education Institutions

Institutions, especially the ones acclaiming a commitment to diversity and inclusion should be actively strategizing to accommodate the emotional toll that black men face while working on their campuses. This section will offer strategies for institutions to enact to make their campus more equitable for black men.

First, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) note that institutions should assist in identifying and addressing imposter concerns because they are directly related to job stress, morale, productivity loss, and lack of leadership. Furthermore, institutions "should provide support to [professionals] who struggle with imposter thoughts, specifically around offering opportunities for support and clarity in performance metrics" (p. 206).

Awareness surrounding whether a campus perpetuates institutional racism is of importance to Hughes (2014). This researcher suggests institutions consider the following practices to determine if racist or biased practices are common on their campus: (1) "pictures of past presidents that do not depict a demography that matches that of the state," (2) "those in all upper level positions are white, and those in lower level positions are folks of color," (3) "when the same people of color are consistently selected for various committees" (para 6).

Finally, Richards (2019) urges PWIs to develop more inclusive environments for black [professionals] by moving beyond simple numerical diversity. Instead, these PWI's should focus on "subtle dynamics of campus exclusion, and the extent to which [professionals] feel they belong and are well mentored and supported" (para, 3). Furthermore, Richards (2019) also offers the following shifts that PWIs can take: (1) develop new success metrics. Increased numeric admissions of underrepresented populations are good, but a new metric could be surveying current black professionals to determine if they have a sense of belonging and attachment to the institutions, (2) train people in how to discuss racial issues-training faculty, staff and students on how to navigate race can lead to more effective conversations on campus.

Confront "Colorblind Racism"

Colorblind ideology is the belief that one treats all races and ethnicities the same, and is usually accompanied by the statement, "I don't see color" (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 155). Historically, researchers Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) note that colorblind ideology supported the obstruction of civil rights policies and progress by allowing individuals to defend the racial status quo under the rhetorical guise of equality and same-ness across racial groups (p. 1). The problematic nature of this idea is also articulated by Weinzimmer and Bergdahl (2018) who posit

"teaching perspectives on race and ethnicity is challenging due to the predominance of color-blind ideology in our supposed post-racial society" (p. 225). Other authors believe subscribing to colorblind ideology is a form of racism within itself, "it would be a mistake to regard color-blindness as a non-racial move and more accurate to construct it as a particular deployment of race" (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 150). In other words, those who subscribe to color blind ideology are in essence, participating in a form of racism, as colorblind ideology does not take into account the traumatic historical and contemporary complexities of certain ethnicities and simply ignores them, leaving the individual, in essence, inaccurately believing, "I don't see color."

Further, by not seeing color, these individuals, in essence, denounce the unique lived experiences of persons of color and their ancestors, who endured physical, psychological, and spiritual traumas of race and color in the United States. Daniels (2019) notes, this "almost pathological adherence to the myth of color-blindess reinforces the silence, markers of innocence, and collusion with the existing system of power and domination" (p. 29). Simply said, colorblind racism as a way of ignoring racial differences.

Institutions should "disturb notions of color-blind ideology, which often prevails as the status quo of discussions dealing with race" (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 147). Dealing with color-blind subscribers both in and out of the classroom is another obstacle that people of color must deal with as they often find themselves convincing whites that race matters in ways that are different than whites' understanding of it. Instructors should encourage all students to acknowledge history in a factual way, feeling all the feelings of the lived experiences of persons of color in the United States .

Encourage Mentorship

Empirical research from Turner & Grauerholz (2017) suggests Black male professionals benefit from mentorship by creating opportunities to share expertise, advice and mutual interests, which could increase retention and morale. Furthermore, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) note that effective mentoring of black men can normalize imposter concerns by understanding the typical incidents that might trigger such feelings or thoughts and ways to challenge distorted attributions of performance that imposters typically make (p. 207). Furthermore, properly trained and aware mentors can assist in identifying signs of imposter phenomenon and refer individuals to stress management training and techniques that can support a positive shift.

Parkman and Beard (2008) argue that organizations in higher education need to develop increased awareness on imposter phenomenon and identify problematic organizational messages that feed impostor behaviors. If institutions do not heed this suggestion, they risk losing black male employees to a treatable burden.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to delve into the taxing experiences and mental health burdens of being a black male on a PWI campus. It began with presenting research on the unique emotional experiences of black men working in higher education. Research indicated that racist interactions have a negative effect on the health of black men. Furthermore, lack of black senior administrators, dismal employment and retention rates for black men, campus isolation, microaggressions, and those experiencing white colleagues who minimize or dismiss lived racial experiences all contribute to their mental health unease.

Next, the common internal unease of imposter syndrome were presented. With imposter syndrome, individuals usually discredit their own accomplishments, often explaining their success to external reasons, yet they internalize their experiences of negativity. Imposter syndrome usually emerges at times of change or uncertainty. Negative self talk, perfectionist work tendencies, or self-discrediting are all characteristics of imposter syndrome. Research suggests that higher education institutions should be aware of imposter syndrome and strategize on assisting black men with overcoming. Research indicates prolonged imposter thoughts are indicative of unsupportive work environments, and can yield high employee turnover. If institutions do not heed the call to offer suggestions to heal, institutions are at risk for losing motivated, promising black men who can enact change and increase the profile of the institution.

Additionally, those, including myself, who rely on grit and perseverance as their primary success mechanisms are not safe from adverse mental health burdens, and should seek alternative methods to cope with systemic injustices in higher education. Finally, “radical healing” is called on by critical race scholars, as this method is beneficial to black males as it requires both acknowledging past pain and trauma, while empowering the individual to confront racist and discriminatory practices in higher education institutions.

Healing is necessary for the years of racist experiences in American society as well as on college campuses. Instead of coping with trauma, critical race scholars called for radical healing that focuses on healing past trauma while simultaneously acknowledging race and how it contributes to one's mental health. These scholars call for culturally responsive and racially formed interventions to assist black men with their healing. Critical race scholars also offered critique of the notion of “grit” and “working twice as hard” as a determinant to people of color.

In addition to these strategies, research offered the following suggestions for healing on campus: connecting to the black campus communities, holding inclusion circles, and calling out institutions who contribute to institutionalized racist practices like displaying college presidents who are only white men, and exclusively employing white men in senior-level positions.

Finally, institutions are called to make their campuses more equitable instead of diverse. One researcher suggested shifting success metrics from the numeric hiring of black men, to surveying if black male employees are satisfied and feel a connection to the campus community. Research also indicated to train faculty, staff, and students to assist with race conflict on campus. Institutions should also prioritize in coordinating mentorship for black professionals to other black male professionals, as this strategy allows this population to feel connected, articulate, legitimize and understand that their feelings are not isolated.

Overall, this chapter should not be seen as a "black problem" chapter. Research indicates that everyone on campus suffers from the marginalization and insistence that their racial experiences are not happening. Institutions should support professionals of color who navigate their campus and face continued racist experiences each day. These experiences have a taxing effect on black professionals and could ultimately contribute to high attrition rates of employment, as black educators become exhausted with the demands of teaching, navigating white supremacy, and helping their students do the same.

Finally, as a final note to my own healing, yes, imposter thoughts come, sometimes without notice, and can disrupt my immediate future in terms of mindset, motivation, and confidence. However, knowing that if I succumb to these common, yet powerful feelings, other students of color would not benefit from my training, lived experiences, mindset, and desire to

motivate students. For example, I am currently contemplating proposing a course entitled "Black Lives Matter." Each time I sit at my computer to plan the syllabus and articulate rationale for the course, imposter thoughts creep in, and sometimes convinces me that I cannot do it, am not equipped to do it, or do not have the courage to stand up to senior-level gatekeepers. Even as I write these words, I feel imposter feelings in my body.

However, I have learned to be more self-aware of these thoughts. After I take a breather, I am reminded, and refocused to the vulnerable students on this campus, and how a course of this matter can benefit them immediately and in their future. This is my new approach to imposter thoughts. Instead of sorry for myself (which is also a work in progress), I shift, reframe, and twist the narrative to "how can I help those who need this the most?" "What type of impact can I make if I take a courageous step, outside of my comfort zone, and continue on?" "How many other prominent black leaders had to be courageous and do what was right, while enduring imposter thoughts?" With these questions, I am able to remove my own self-pity from the situation. Yes, self-care is important, and I will be aware of myself when making decisions that expand my bandwidth to unhealthy levels, however, I will not stay there. I will motivate myself not by working twice as hard, but helping twice as many people.

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