Enhancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion within Agricultural Higher Education: Insights from Black Faculty and Administrators in Agricultural Colleges at United States Land Grant Institutions

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Abstract

The experiences of Black faculty as leaders and administrators in the field of agriculture have not been widely studied nor reported. The goal of this research focused on Black faculty leaders' experiences in agriculture to gain firsthand insights regarding the enhancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion within agricultural higher education. The central research question guiding the study was: What are the experiences of Black faculty leaders at Colleges of Agriculture at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)? Counter-storytelling was used to explore the personal narratives of eight participants. These experiences fall within the tenets of Critical Race Theory. Three primary themes emerged: Navigating Leadership: Microaggressions in the Midst; Inequities: Is Everyone Really Equal; and Isolation: The Lone Ranger. Findings of this study hold valuable implications for practitioners, policymakers, and academic institutions seeking to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion within agricultural higher education. Recommendations for policy and practice include providing support for leadership mentoring and professional development, conducting robust research on the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender for faculty of color, and establishing collaborative initiatives between academic institutions, industry partners, and community organizations to address historical disparities and stimulate interest in agriculture among Black communities.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

This study examines the leadership experiences of Black faculty and administrators in agricultural academic programs at the United States Land Grant Institutions. It emphasizes the need for increased representation of faculty of color, particularly in senior administrative positions, to improve recruitment and retention of students from diverse backgrounds. The scarcity and underrepresentation of Black professors in higher education, only 6% (NCES, 2022), is a significant issue. The study highlights the need to document and express the experiences of Black faculty and administrators in agriculture, as their contributions can help shape the future of agriculture. The agricultural field faces significant challenges in addressing the needs of marginalized populations due to the 72% overwhelmingly White American professorate (NCES, 2022), specifically full and associate professors. As the academic field of agriculture grapples with contemporary demands, embracing the contributions of marginalized populations becomes pivotal in shaping future agricultural infrastructure. Historical inequities, including the enslavement of Black people, sharecropping, and loss of farmland, have contributed to diminished interest in agriculture among Black communities, exacerbating the lack of representation (Hinson, 2008). Consequently, it is not surprising that few Black professors are in colleges of agriculture.

The findings of this study can inform targeted strategies and interventions aimed at increasing the representation and advancement of Black faculty within higher education, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment in colleges of agriculture. Moreover, the insights garnered from this research can guide institutional policies and practices that promote leadership development and equitable opportunities for faculty of color, driving positive changes in recruitment, retention, and career progression in the broader agricultural sector.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study drew from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the notion of microaggressions to inform the study's theoretical framework. In higher education, it is well-documented that Black people experience racism and discrimination (Haynes, 2020; Offermann et al., 2014; Turner et al., 2008). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) stated that "Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 2). Ladson-Billings (1998) stated that CRT helps to utilize and analyze experiences relative to African Americans within the systems of higher education by naming their realities. Counter-storytelling has emerged as a powerful and effective tool for connecting scholarship and marginalized voices in higher education. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) found that counter-storytelling allows faculty of color to relay their personal accounts of racial and ethnic inequalities.

Hiraldo (2010) contends that CRT is part of our society's political, social, economic, and education. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) provided the foundation for the five tenets of CRT. The first tenet states that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; in other words, racism is

embedded in everyday life. In higher education, when diversity initiatives are ignored, institutionalized racism continues to exist (Iverson, 2007). The second tenet, interest convergence (IC), refers to the notion that "racism advances the interests of both White elites and working-class people" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). At many higher education institutions, "professors are seen as owners of the curriculum" (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 5), and in this regard, they are the creators of knowledge in the curriculum as well as society. In essence, fewer black professors have opportunities to become creators of knowledge in higher education settings; therefore, they have a lack of voice in the curriculum for students. The third tenet is social construction, which refers to the ways that races are invented and manipulated by societal needs as long as they are useful and convenient. The fourth tenet contends that while racism is perpetuated at the structural/macro level in society, listening to and understanding the multiple and diverse lived experiences of individuals is essential for understanding how racism works to create inequities in individual outcomes due "to the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8). The fifth tenet focuses on the importance of intersectionality or simply put, the idea that no individual can be adequately identified by membership in a single group.

I also utilized the notion of microaggressions to analyze the data. Solórzano and colleagues (2000) stated that microaggressions are verbal insults or nonverbal or visual affronts which can be performed automatically or unconsciously. Druery and colleagues (2018) further iterated that "the problem with microaggressions is that the 'micro' means small or minor" (p. 75) when there is nothing small or minor about this behavior. Sue (2010) found that microaggressions can be identified within the context of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are purposeful and targeted racial derogatory statements; microinsults are subtle insults that convey negative messages; and microinvalidations are communications that are used to exclude the realities and lived experiences of people of color (Sue, 2010). A significant consequence of microaggressions is their capacity to influence and shape career trajectories (Payton et al., 2018).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate and understand the leadership experiences of Black faculty and administrators within agricultural academic programs at the United States Land Grant Institutions. The study aimed to shed light on the challenges, opportunities, and dynamics Black individuals face in leadership roles in the context of agricultural sciences. By examining their experiences, the study sought to provide insights to inform practical strategies to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion within academic institutions and the broader agricultural sector. Additionally, the study aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on agricultural development by highlighting the significance of representation, leadership development, and advancement opportunities for underrepresented groups in the field of agriculture. The central research question that guided this qualitative study was: What are the experiences of Black faculty leaders at Colleges of Agriculture at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs)?

Methods

I employed counter-storytelling as a method informed by a critical race theory perspective. Counterstories are narratives of the combined experiences of people from marginalized communities (Patton & Catching, 2009). These stories are powerful because marginalized voices are usually the ones that are unheard or have been silenced. Counterstories are powerful personal accounts that are grounded in real life. Solórzano et al. (2002) stated that a counter-story emerges when the tenets of CRT are involved and when people of color share their story, it is a counter-story. These narratives counter the dominant narratives. As a researcher, I assumed participants authored their own experiences produced through their interactions with social structures of oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Participants

I recruited eight study participants through snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Each of my participants held the associate/full professor rank and was a current or past administrator within a College of Agriculture at a PWI. Snowball sampling proved valuable in securing qualified participants (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). All participants identified as Black, African American, Caribbean, or African descent. Participants worked in land grant institutions that varied in size and location, spanning the northeastern, midwestern, southeastern, and southwestern regions of the United States. To ensure confidentiality, I utilized pseudonyms (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017).

Demographics of Participants

The gender, cultural identity of participants, region of the current institution, and type of institution of degrees received are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Participant Self Identity	College/University Attended (BS, MS, PhD)	Institution Employed
Dr. Pioneer	Black Man	PWI, PWI, PWI	PWI
Dr. Analytical	African Man	PWI, PWI, PWI	PWI
Dr. Scholarly	Black Man	HBCU, PWI, PWI	PWI
Dr. Communicative	African Woman	HBCU, PWI, PWI	PWI
Dr. Candid	Black Woman	HBCU, PWI, PWI	PWI
Dr. Introspection	Caribbean Woman of African Descent	PWI, PWI, PWI	PWI
Dr. Intellectual	Black Woman	PWI, PWI, PWI	PWI
Dr. Empowerment	Black Woman	PWI, PWI, PWI	PWI

Our beliefs, assumptions, and values impact every aspect of the research process. My intentionality and positionality for my chosen population led me to ask participants to share their counternarratives. My lived experiences as a Black woman navigating the nontraditional academic field of Agriculture informed my research. Due to our similarities and prior acquaintances, the participants could relate to the researcher in a way that facilitated sharing their personal experiences about their academic careers at a PWI.

Data collection involved in-depth, open-ended interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017) with all participants at their respective institutions or a neutral location. I conducted formal, semi-structured, open-ended, and in-person interviews with each participant. I journaled throughout the data collection process to document my thoughts and reflections before and after each interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). I also engaged in peer debriefing with expert colleagues and scholars in the College of Education to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. These experts also helped to conceptualize ideas and review questions and transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Based upon the thematic analysis, the following themes emerged: Navigating Leadership: Microaggressions in the Midst; Inequities: Is Everyone Really Equal; and Isolation: The Lone Ranger.

Findings

Navigating Leadership: "Microaggressions in the Midst"

Typically, leadership roles within Colleges of Agriculture are predominantly held by White males, with infrequent representation from Black tenured faculty. Amongst the few Black faculty members who attain these elevated leadership positions, a common strategy involves acquiring the essential tools and resources required to pursue such roles. For instance, they have actively engaged in leadership and professional development opportunities over the years, thereby equipping themselves for the demands of leadership positions. Dr. Scholarly shared his approach:

> You know that you come in with the deck sometimes stacked against you, or you feel that way. It really left me, thinking I better be extremely prepared. So, with every situation, I know that I better study harder, I better know every fact I can and I better be prepared for multiple situations.

After attaining leadership positions in academia, Dr. Scholarly encountered the daily influence of race and gender identities on his leadership experiences. He was acutely aware of the ongoing scrutiny he faced from his colleagues. Being a Black male situated in a predominately White environment, he anticipated and prepared for such challenges. This state of readiness aligns with the first and foundational tenet of CRT, asserting that racism is ordinary and a commonplace occurrence.

As Black faculty continued to explore their identities, they found intersections between gender and race. Dr. Communicative shared how race and gender intersections played out in her professional and academic roles:

> Everything I do comes from a context of my race and my gender, as well as, my community side, growing up in an inner-city area from an urban perspective. It's all interwoven and I don't think my race and gender influence my leadership, my leadership comes from a racialized context; it comes from a gendered context; it's intertwined.

Her multiple identities were salient in her daily interactions with dominant cultures in the work environment. Dr. Scholarly and Dr. Communicative reiterated the need to name their realities as they navigated each day while interacting with others.

Two participants stressed the importance of their ethnicities while navigating their leadership experiences. Dr. Introspection expressed that race did not impact her identity as a leader; however, she viewed her Caribbean ethnicity and gender identities as salient and central motivators for pursuing opportunities:

> If I see a training or an experience that specifically targets women, of course I'm going to go for it. The same thing with funding or taking advantage of opportunities that have been specific to me because of my ethnicity. I think that, being someone who comes from a culture where people are unafraid to take risks, is the lens from which I operate.

While navigating many leadership experiences at several universities and as a proud Nigerian, Dr. Analytical expressed similar sentiments.

> I think that the institutional arrangements here in the United States, for generations, created a kind of a master-servant environment. Maybe it came out of slavery which keeps some of our people where they continue to second guess themselves and seek approval where it's unnecessary. I wouldn't say we didn't have that experience because I come from Nigeria; it was a colony, but because of the way my family interacted, we were kind of rebels, as an African, I was raised with deep values.

As active participants within their familial and perspective cultural communities, Dr. Introspection and Dr. Analytical shared that their ethnicity and cultural identities were particularly salient relative to how they navigated their daily lives as they relate to their lived experiences and leadership.

Microaggressions such as microinsults and microassaults impacted their leadership. Dr. Scholarly shared one example of a microinsult inflicted on him by a colleague. His colleague continued to ask Dr. Scholarly the following question:

> Where did you go to school? I didn't expect you to know this. The assumption was that you were not able to compete, sometimes the assumption that you were there because you were Black, but not because of your academic capability. That was a challenge to overcome how you had to be twice as good and expect half the credit.

Furthermore, these types of questions and comments assign a degree of intelligence about Dr. Scholarly's racial identity. These comments also question the relevance and rigor of the participants' educational degrees by attempting to invalidate their intellectual value.

Inequities: "Is Everyone Really Equal?"

Participants questioned their treatment based on their race, ethnicity, and gender identities and shared how they were often excluded from potential opportunities. These types of exclusions further exemplified the tenets of CRT, highlighting that racism is an integral component of the daily interactions faced by Black faculty. Dr. Intellectual said:

> Some of my constituents that came in around the same time came into an extension and a research appointment and automatically they're in on grants. They didn't have to contribute to it at all, well other than a little bit, they come into papers. There is just a relationship already, that changes your outputs, your thought process, and your sense of belonging.

These inequalities continued to surface even after participants secured various leadership positions. Dr. Analytical shared his experience as a center director when a research dean decided he should no longer have a leadership title or authority. The research dean expected Dr. Analytical to continue to keep the center running efficiently but without the appropriate title. Ultimately, the research dean appointed someone else to Dr. Analytical's position. Additionally, the new director's salary was funded by grants previously awarded to Dr. Analytical; moreover, the new director became Dr. Analytical's new supervisor. This painful experience resulted in Dr. Analytical returning to his department to resume his role as a faculty member. In this case, the institution not only allowed such blatantly aggressive behavior but also initiated and carried it out.

Faculty in this study shared the need to prove their worth at work. Even though participants were qualified and demonstrated success in their respective positions, colleagues still perceived them as less than their colleagues. As the first Black female administrator in her department and the first to serve in this type of administrative capacity in her academic college, Dr. Candid was met with resistance by her colleagues every step of the way. She shared with her department head:

> They keep going over my head to you, and every time you do that, you undermine my position. You undermine not just the position and what the position stands for, but you undermine me on a personal level and a professional level as a woman of color.

In this example, the department head began to work with Dr. Candid and attempted to support her. However, this support was too little too late, as Dr. Candid chose to leave and relocate to another institution due to the microaggressive behaviors of colleagues.

Professional Isolation: "The Lone Ranger"

Participants shared their feelings of isolation in their faculty and academic leadership positions. Most participants were the first Black faculty or person of color in their departments within their agricultural colleges. Dr. Empowerment said, "I came here as the first female and the first person of color, first Black person, still the only Black person on the faculty, period, tenure stream, or otherwise." Other participants also echoed the experience of isolation.

Experiences of acute disrespect described by participants were reminders of the dominant social orders. Participants reported being the first person of color to hold a position and having remained that way over decades. Participants also grappled with the additional pressures of representing or being the spokesperson for their ethnicity or race. These aggressions of exclusion and alienation are behaviors that are more advantageous toward White people. Dr. Scholarly said:

> You feel like you have a whole culture on your back because, if you mess up, then the assumption is that this is what happens if you hire a person that looks like him, so there's a huge weight.

Black faculty are often in positions where they must prove their worth within their discipline. Participants also reported various committees and service activities where they volunteered to work with several organizations. One such faculty member became overly involved as a leader in her discipline. While serving as a leader in multiple organizations simultaneously, she continuously felt as though she had to prove her worth.

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

These themes are vital to consider because microaggressions and institutional racism continue to prevail in U.S. institutions of higher education (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021). However, it is not a surprise that microaggressions are present with Black faculty in colleges of agriculture due to the longstanding history and negative perceptions and realities of Black people in agriculture. Hurtado (1992) discusses the "chilly" climate that Black faculty endure due to colonialism. Three decades later, the "chilly" climate appears to be more like an "iceberg" with Black faculty trying to measure the depths underneath the iceberg while navigating the academy.

Stanley (2006) found that "regardless of the situation, faculty of color perceive that they are held to higher expectations and that they are not acknowledged when they make an effort to respond to the requirements in place" (p. 715). Untenable political landscapes and microaggressions contributed to participants leaving administrative positions (Edwards & Ross, 2018; Griffin et al., 2011). Many participants in this study chose to return to their academic departments and resume their full-time duties as faculty members. These experiences reflected the first tenet of CRT —that racism is ordinary (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Another tenet of CRT —interest convergence —also played out in the participants' experiences. Black faculty administrators who were perceived as no longer serving the interests of their White colleagues were either replaced or removed (Bell, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Orelus, 2020). The fifth tenet of CRT reflects the importance of intersectionality. In this regard, Black faculty shared their gendered experiences and how their intersectionality impacted their professional workspaces. Microaggressions were experienced by all participants in this study. Similar studies (Louis et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2008) found that Black faculty who experienced microaggressions felt disempowered.

These findings suggest that additional research should be conducted to explore the intersections of leadership, race, ethnicity, and gender for faculty of color and administrators in colleges of agriculture. Such studies could aid in developing a model to inform policies to support underrepresented faculty in colleges of agriculture on a local and national level. Institutional level mechanisms must be established wherein Black faculty can comfortably discuss issues such as microaggressions and inequities they experience in their daily interactions. Jayakumar (2009) contended that understanding this type of issue is one of the first steps to equity in our society. It is further recommended that equitable institutional programs and resources be implemented and accessible for each faculty/administrator. The findings of this study hold valuable implications for practitioners, policymakers, and academic institutions seeking to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion within agricultural higher education.

The following implications offer actionable insights to create a more inclusive environment for Black faculty in colleges of agriculture and administrators within the United States land grant institutions:

Targeted retention will address CRT's first tenet, which states that racism is ordinary, which is identified in each of the following themes: Navigating Leadership: Microaggressions in the Midst; Inequities: Is Everyone Really Equal; and Isolation: The Lone Ranger, based upon participants' experiences while sharing their sentiments of isolation in the workplace. Mena and Vacarro (2017) describe this isolation type as environmental invisibility, implying that you are one of a few on a college campus. Academic institutions have primarily focused their efforts on the retention of diverse faculty. However, it is not enough to bring Black faculty to campus; academic institutions must institute programs, practices, and interventions to retain faculty. Such practices must address isolation issues by working towards creating a critical mass of Black faculty. Thus, an authentic sense of belonging may begin to exist in the work environment.

Leadership Development and Advancement programs will address CRT's first tenet, which states that racism is ordinary, identified in the following themes: Navigating Leadership: Microaggressions in the Midst; Inequities: Is Everyone Really Equal; and Professional Isolation: The Lone Ranger. CRT's fourth tenet contends that while racism is perpetuated at the structural/macro level, it is identified in the theme: Inequities: Is Everyone Really Equal? CRT's fifth tenet, which focuses on intersectionality, addresses the theme Navigating Leadership: Microaggressions in the Midst. Participants expressed experiences of exclusions and biased treatment from colleagues and academic leaders. Academic institutions should prioritize two types of leadership development programs —one that caters to the unique needs of underrepresented individuals and another that focuses on White academic leaders' biases and the daily and often insidious impact of those biases. Leadership development should include providing an inclusive environment that promotes open dialogue, awareness, and active engagement with diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.

Collaboration and outreach will address CRT's first tenet, which states that racism is ordinary, identified in the theme: Navigating Leadership: Microaggressions in the Midst and Inequities: Is

Everyone Really Equal? Collaborative initiatives can stimulate interest and promote a holistic approach to agriculture.

These initiatives will bridge the gap between academia and practical agricultural applications while addressing historical disparities and creating a sense of community among stakeholders. This study underscores the urgency of addressing the underrepresentation of Black faculty and administrators within agricultural higher education. Higher education institutions can cultivate a more inclusive and diverse academic environment, which, in turn, benefits students, faculty, and the broader agricultural sector. Inclusiveness also enhances the quality of diverse perspectives. Embracing these recommendations is pivotal for advancing academic excellence and realizing a more equitable and inclusive agricultural education landscape. Lastly, including a diverse faculty will help address local, national, and international issues such as food security, climate change, and STEM. The United States is remarkably diverse, and its land grant higher education institutions, including the agriculture sector, should represent that diversity.

Acknowledgments

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