

Impolite Hostilities and Vague Sympathies: Academia as a Site of Cyclical Abuse

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In this autoethnographic article I reflect on my experiences as a now-tenured faculty member of color, which have been punctuated by incivility, bullying, stress, and abuse. As part of reconciling several acute events, I came to a distinct realization of what I had been going through; I was able to name it, and I was able to articulate the strategies I had been using to cope and thrive. This reflective piece is not meant to minimize the experiences of non-minority faculty, but it is absolutely meant to highlight and emphasize the specific challenges of being faculty member of color in library and information science, and in the academy writ large.

Keywords: abusive behavior, counter-storytelling, faculty of color, faculty retention, workplace stress

Realizing

A practitioner colleague, who identifies as a White woman, recently expressed pure frustration toward her fellow White librarians, particularly her female colleagues. She said that her colleagues do a great job espousing diversity and inclusion in public, but when it comes time to back up their words with actions, not only do they fail to do so but they also say egregious things to one another in private to justify their inaction. They speak privately to those they perceive to be like-minded to justify their latent (and not always latent) biases and maintain their perceived power and privilege. In disavowing this behavior, my colleague referred to these rationalizations as “polite hostilities.” I pushed back on this phrase; while I know precisely what types of behaviors and comments

KEY POINTS

- Faculty of color in all disciplines face oppressions because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, and for simply existing in predominantly White spaces where their countenances are not the norm.
- Academic bullying, abuse, aggression, and incivility can affect the success, health, and retention of faculty of color.
- Counter-storytelling challenges us to complicate and disrupt the dominant narratives and to add important stories and experiences to the literature and to the field.

she was referring to, I have never perceived them to be polite. Rather, they have been rather pointed and dismissive. My experience has been with “*impolite* hostilities” or with just plain hostilities. She concurred, stating that if she was offended by what she was hearing from other White women, she could only imagine what people must say to me, and what effect it has on me as a Black woman.

Indeed. But it is not just what people say, it is what people *do*.

When I contemplate the things people do, especially in academia, these are impolite hostilities. These include what people do passively or by omission (e.g., benign neglect), what people do actively (e.g., the silent treatment), what people do unintentionally (e.g., judge or act in accordance with their implicit biases), and what people do intentionally (e.g., deliberate racism, sexism, etc.). Some of these actions are easy to identify, and many are absolutely subtle. All are harmful and hard to address, prove, and correct.

Impolite hostilities, which I argue fall within the domain of emotional abuse, happen in all professions and walks of life. It happens to library and information science (LIS) professionals, and it most certainly happens to professionals of color, and to those in the professoriate (Ceja Alcalá, Colón-Aguirre, Cooke, & Stewart, 2017). As I have progressed along the tenure track, I have found this abuse to be cyclical, and it does not always abate over time. I have also experienced impolite hostilities to go hand-in-hand with vague sympathies. I am defining vague sympathies as the following:

- nebulous murmurs of “I’m sorry you’re so upset” or “I’m sorry if you’re offended”;
- rote, insincere platitudes that promise “things will get better” and “that won’t happen again”; they also attempt to compliment by assuring that “you make us look good” and “we value you”; and
- weak attempts to defend and dismiss aggressive and offensive colleagues by saying “they didn’t mean it that way” and calling them “quirky” or “on the spectrum”; such labels give permission to ignore problem people and behavior.

Vague sympathies can also come in the form of “rewards”—a new office, an award nomination, extra resources for teaching, research or travel. These sympathies, tangible or not, are used to placate and distract, to calm and mollify so the status quo can continue unchallenged and uninterrupted.

After my first year on the tenure track, I was so outraged, demoralized, and confused that I seriously considered leaving the academy and returning to librarianship (Cooke, 2014). The abuse I endured was less than subtle, but I thought it was my fault and I thought it was normal, thinking “this is how the academy works and I just need to get used to things.” Vague sympathies ensued, and I continued on the course to tenure. Along the way, more impolite hostilities occurred, accompanied by various

rewards. Again, I realized that perhaps academia was becoming worse, but I still did not comprehend the larger context of what was happening.

After enduring continual physical and mental stress, even being hospitalized at one point, I became more vocal, asking more questions and requesting transparency in the curriculum and in the organizational culture. This pushback was calculated and came with great risk (particularly as a pre-tenure professor); however, this risk became negligible as I began to lose my authenticity and understanding of why I entered academia in the first place. I have been called aggressive, sensitive, and angry (predictable microaggressive dog whistles meant to discredit and silence me), so why not lean into that? Since I had already been labeled and stereotyped, I felt like there was less to lose when speaking my mind and attempting to defend myself.

Until recently, I did not have names for the things that were occurring. It was not until doing interdisciplinary research for another project that I encountered clear explanations and definitions of some of the phenomena that I had endured. There are a host of emotionally abusive behaviors, and these could vary depending on the actors involved. The three behaviors that resonated the most strongly with me are as follows:

- Gaslighting (McKinnon, 2017), which is “false information presented with the intention of making victims doubt their own memory, perception, and sanity” (Street Smart Women, 2017).
- Minimizing (Hunt, 2013), which is “a covert control tactic used to cause self-doubt, by ‘downplaying’ the event. It’s deceptively designed to manipulate a victim into feeling irrational. ‘You’re overreacting, it wasn’t that bad!’” (Street Smart Women, 2017).
- Silent treatment (Cortina & Magley, 2003; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Robinson, O’Reilly, & Wang, 2013), which is “a form of punishment (aka control) designed to cause harm by making the victim feel powerless, invisible, insignificant, and non-existent” (Street Smart Women, 2017).

To illustrate the three aforementioned behaviors, I offer an example that represents academic bullying, aggression, and incivility, one that has left its mark on me in the form of post-traumatic stress and serious retention concerns.

In the summer of 2017 I was targeted by alt-right/White supremacist websites and bloggers who doxxed my professional contact and location information and branded me a racist for the research I do related to diversity and social justice (Peet, 2018). During an initial fraught period of being concerned about my physical and mental safety, I was offered little support and my situation was largely ignored. A year later, when the administration was questioned by external parties about these events, the responses ranged from “I don’t know anything about that” to “we dealt with it” to “it wasn’t serious”—to plain and painful silence. Silence and

denial have been the response on more than one occasion, which leads me to believe that the strategy is “if we ignore it, it will go away.” This strategy is rooted in gaslighting (“it didn’t happen”), minimizing (“it wasn’t that serious”), and the silent treatment, in the form of silent denial and in the form of purposefully ignoring and not speaking to me for periods of time, as passive-aggressive punishment for causing a scene. What is as painful as going through a traumatic event is the abuse that accompanies it; being questioned about the bullying event renewed the trauma and exacerbated the cycle of abuse. Interestingly enough, the vague sympathies did not accompany this cycle of abuse; this time I was met with excuses and defensiveness. This was disappointing, but it was ultimately instructive.

Naming

I firmly believe in the power of naming things, in this case naming the explicit type of abuse that was occurring—gaslighting, minimizing, and the silent treatment. Author and activist Audre Lorde cautioned readers that “your silence will not protect you: (2017, p. 201); silence does not solve or lessen the pain of abuse; rather, these experiences should be named, reclaimed, and discussed. As Lorde and many other authors have done, explicitly defining something and seeing yourself in the literature is a validating and powerful thing (Cooke, 2014). Unfortunately, bullying and abuse in higher education are nothing new (Frazier, 2011; Gaffney, DeMarco, Hofmeyer, Vessey, & Budin, 2012; Martin & LaVan, 2010; Misawa, 2010; Namie, 2003; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts 2006), and while there is substantial literature in the area, across disciplines, there are certainly many, many more examples that have not been shared or written, and definitely not published. Fear of retaliation is real, and there are likely many who have yet to recognize, identify, and name the experiences they are encountering. In the literature related to faculty of color and incivility, bullying, and abuse, other topics arise such as emotional labor (Bellas, 1999), humiliation (Klein, 1991, 2005), fear (Cortina & Magley, 2003), invisibility and hypervisibility (Edwards, Clark, & Bryant, 2012; Vakalahi & Hardin Starks, 2010; Roberts & Smith, 2002), emotional abuse (Austin, 1988; Estes & Wang, 2008; Keashly, 1997), racial battle fatigue (Dade, Tartakov, Hargrave, & Leigh, 2015; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011), low morale (Kendrick, 2017), and physical and mental stress (Thompson & Dey, 1998). All of these topics are significant and worthy of their own treatments. They are mentioned here to provide context about how non-physical abuse can manifest in an academic environment and demonstrate the effects of this type of systemic and systematic abuse.

My processing and thoughts about emotional abuse in the academy, particularly as it pertains to faculty of color, would be remiss without a mention of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). In her now classic theory, Crenshaw emphasizes that oppression can affect anyone—men, women, Black, White, and so on. However, there are groups of people who can be

disadvantaged and discriminated against by multiple oppressions at once. For example, a Black woman can be oppressed because of her gender *and* her race, which makes her experiences different from that of a Black man or a White woman. With this framework in mind, we can see that faculty of color in all disciplines face oppressions because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, and so forth, and for simply existing in predominantly White spaces where our countenances are not the norm. We exist in spaces where we're called by each other's names, labeled, stereotyped, and microaggressed, and we're mistaken for secretaries, students, custodial workers—for anyone other than full-time core faculty in the tenure stream. So this reflective article is not meant to minimize the experiences of non-minority faculty, but it is absolutely meant to highlight and emphasize the fact that faculty of color have additional things to contend with in the same spaces. Faculty of color are tasked with assimilation, maintaining a double consciousness, code switching, and living with fear of retaliation and alienation, on top of the already high demands of teaching, research, and service.

Surviving

Regrettably, I have yet to figure out how to dismantle the underlying causes of impolite hostilities described here, but I have found a way to name, share, and reclaim them in the vein of Audre Lorde, even when my experiences have been dismissed or denied. Lorde (2012, p. 40) proclaimed,

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect.

To that end, I offer three survival strategies/tactics that have sustained me during my time in academia. The first strategy has been to be the best teacher and researcher that I know how to be. There is definitely pressure to produce faster and better than my White colleagues in order to prove my academic worth, but the satisfaction of contributing to the literature in my field, traveling the world to share my work with fellow LIS professionals, and having the opportunity to work with wonderful students has maintained and renewed my academic purpose.

My second strategy has been to cultivate and closely guard my network and relationships with mentors and peers, particularly those who are also faculty of color. Connecting with others via social media and at conferences has been a lifeline. Being able to cry, complain, strategize, and elicit support from peers who understand exactly what you are going through, without explanation or justification, has been validating and crucial to my well-being (as confirmed in Henry & Glenn, 2009), as have the opportunities to write and present with them.

The third strategy has been to tell my story without apology. Counter-storytelling, a part of the larger critical race theory, challenges us to complicate and disrupt the dominant narratives and to add our stories to the literature and to the field (Ender, 2019; Griffin, Ward, & Phillips 2014; Smith, 1999). In this case, taking the risk to tell my stories and share my experiences as a woman of color and a faculty member of color can stand in stark contrast to the dominant stories of LIS, which is dominated by White women. These stories, and those of my peers, are also in contrast to the dominant narratives of higher education more generally. Counter-storytelling is cathartic and often difficult, as it requires the emotional labor of reliving abusive encounters and comments. But it paves the way for more scholars of color to follow in our footsteps, and it is an act of resistance. As a dear colleague reminded me, “If we are going to talk about improving diversity across the profession, then we need to talk about the nature of the environments we are sending these diverse folks into. You can’t send someone into the lion’s den thinking the lion is just going to let the person share his space amicably” (Cyndee Sturgis Landrum, personal communication, January 1, 2019). *This is why counter-storytelling is necessary and important.*

As I said in the ALISE panel that inspired this issue of *JELIS* (Cooke et al. 2018), having a faculty member of color on staff in graduate LIS programs is about more than checking a box or having a feather in your cap because you have a unicorn or rare commodity in your midst. We are incredibly hard working, and our experiences with and personal understanding of race, diversity, social justice, and issues of marginalization make our brilliance shine that much brighter. We deserve and expect to be retained within the academy, not just recruited and then ignored and/or abused. LIS programs have much work to do in order to be inclusive for faculty, staff, and students; we are incredible assets to any program, but we cannot and will not be abused and disregarded indefinitely.

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