

## **The Intersection of Racist and Homophobic Bullying in Adult and Higher Education**

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The purpose of the study was to understand how adult bullying influences the lives of gay male faculty of color in higher education. The data revealed three major findings: a) bullying took different forms in academia; b) the gay male faculty of color used their prior life experiences to help manage their career paths in academia; and c) the participants had coped or were coping with their experiences of being bullied by using their prior experiences to help them develop a plan for strategically managing their careers in higher education. Three conclusions were drawn from the study: 1) The bullying of gay male faculty of color in academia was prevalent and practiced by White and/or heterosexual males and females while simultaneously being cloaked in civility, subjectively applied rules and policies, and enabled by a cooperatively complicit system; 2) Bullying had a negative cumulative impact on gay male faculty of color necessitating them to live in defense of their psychological well-being and academic careers; and 3) The gay male faculty of color separately and in isolation from other gay male faculty of color constructed support networks and developed self-help mechanisms as a way to insure their survival in academia.

### **Introduction**

Scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the social sciences have confirmed that bullying is an international phenomenon that exists in various social settings including K-12 schools during childhood and at the workplace during adulthood (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2011; Namie & Namie, 2003, 2011; Olweus, 1993). Although bullying has existed for a long time and has a history as long as that of the mankind (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2005), bullying only gained the attention of scholars, researchers, and policy makers about three decades ago when systematic investigations into bullying began in the 1970s in Scandinavia (Olweus, 1993), then spread to Europe in the 1980s (Adams, 1992), particularly in the United Kingdom, and finally became a important topic in the United States in the 1990s (Namie & Namie, 2011). Studies on bullying in childhood have paid heavy attention to K-12 school settings and studies on adult bullying mostly have investigated organizational and workplace bullying. Research on adult bullying in the context of higher education, on the other hand, has not gained much attention from scholars in the United States.

Furthermore, research on bullying in the context of higher education has not considered the multilayered social disparities and positionality between bullies and victims. Research on bullying regarding race and racism in the workplace in the United States (Fox & Stallworth, 2005) and research on the experiences of British lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who were bullied (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009; Rivers, 2004) have depicted racial minority and sexual minority experiences in two separate contexts, but even these types of research are very scarce. Notwithstanding the research on racial and homophobic bullying that does exist, there is no empirical research on the intersection of racial and homophobic bullying as experienced by professors who are both racial and sexual minorities in higher education.

The purpose of the study was to understand how adult bullying influences the lives of gay male faculty of color in higher education by focusing on the intersection of racist and homophobic bullying. There were three research questions that guided this study: 1) How is bullying manifested in the lives of gay male faculty members of color? 2) In what ways does bullying affect gay male faculty members of color's academic lives? and 3) How do gay male faculty members of color cope with bullying in higher education?

### **Methodology**

For this study, the qualitative research approach of narrative inquiry was utilized. Nineteen gay male faculty members of color were interviewed by the researcher. The research interview was designed to elicit information from the participants about their academic experiences as gay men of color. For the study, semistructured interviews were implemented because they are known to be most effective when a researcher collects data involving personal and sensitive topics from research participants. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed and coded for themes. Questions asked of the subjects in this study related to demographics and experiences both in classrooms and on campuses.

### **Findings**

The data revealed three major findings. The first finding indicated that bullying took different forms in academia and that the participants had experienced at least one of these three types of bullying: a) Positional Bullying; b) Counter-Positional Bullying; and c) Unintentional Conspirative Positional Bullying. The subsequent paragraphs will address examples of these three types of bullying.

*Positional Bullying* refers to bullying that is organizational, positional, or personal-power based. It is usually caused by a top-down power imbalance, meaning an organization or a person in a higher position of power abuses his or her power to bully his or her subordinate. For example, Professor Terry Davis, an African American associate professor, who had been to several different institutions before he came to his current institution said that he used to be a very active advocate for students and faculty members when they experienced negativity while teaching at previous institutions. However, helping others who experienced negativity did impact his tenure review. According to Professor Davis, being a gay male faculty member of color in higher education was not easy for him. Because of the campus demographics with very few African Americans on campus, he had been aware of discrimination that was going on behind his back, and he sort of knew how his race and sexual orientation could be obstacles in his career as a gay male faculty of color at the previous institution:

Well, my first couple of years there, I always felt like there was a target on my back, and I really, I was really having a hard time finding out specifically why. I knew that I was one of very very few African Americans on campus on faculty, and then also being gay, so I felt that, you know, I just felt like...I know that my performance was never given the same weight as the other people's performance, when I would publish a major piece, you know, get teach[ing] awards, those were always diminished and minimized, and my contributions were devalued...It would have been illegal for them to dismiss me because I was gay or because I was African American or because I confronted the issues of discrimination. But that's precisely what happened. But they have created an argument that was based on performance. They were firing you because your performance did not

reach the criteria. So there were many indicators and ... something was going on behind the scene.

Professor Davis knew that the institution was not supportive after he confronted the issue of discrimination. He felt that he was being publicly fooled and professionally attacked throughout his tenure process. He had originally thought that he was doing the right thing to combat issues of discrimination since the institution seemed to be all for promoting diversity. The denial of his tenure coldly impacted his professional life.

*Counter-Positional Bullying* refers to bullying that was carried out by a less powerful individual onto an individual who has higher organizational and positional power in an organization. In the case of this study, gay male faculty members of color were bullied by their students. Professor Melvin Kelly, a Black associate professor, also had experienced being questioned by a student as to whether he was knowledgeable about the content that he was teaching. From his experiences, such a thing was not uncommon for him; the same sort of negativities from his students appeared over and over in his academic career. He described one incident where a student publicly discounted his authority as a professor and challenged his knowledge about what he was teaching via emails:

You know, there are a lot of other things [that] happened in my career, but they are basically the same sort of things where either students are permitted to be disrespectful. Here is an example. Well, I was teaching one class, an introductory class, the first year class. We were talking about jurisprudential theory. So, one of the theories we were talking about was the law of economics. So, I was pointing out some of the analytical problems with the standard neoclassical theory. So, after the class, one of the students wrote an email to the class saying that he needed to correct some of the things that I had said about economic theory because I was wrong. So, he made this long list of things that I had said were wrong. So, I responded to the email and pointed out why I was taking those positions and positions that he was taking might be consistent with what he learned in Microeconomics 101. When you study of schools of economics, you have other perspectives and see things differently. So the students were upset by that because I knew more than they did. That was a problem. So, that kind of thing... Some individual students, you know, they may make an effort to undermine you in terms of asking questions that they think you don't have the answers to or things like that but, if they were really well prepared then they really can't do that. You do understand the material much more.

*Unintentional Conspirative Positional Bullying* refers to bullying that is done by people with higher organizational or positional status in cooperation with people who have lower organizational or positional status than the victims of the bullying act. Most often, the bullies with lower status go to the higher status bullies to talk about the victim, and they collude to bully the victim. The victims of bullying are then situated in the middle of or between their bosses and their students, a sort of phenomenon where the victim is sandwiched between two bullying parties. For example, through interactions with his chair and one of his students, Professor David Green, an African American assistant professor, experienced unintentional conspirative positional bullying where his credibility as a professor was diminished by his chair and his student based on his race:

This is related to being a gay male faculty of color. I was doing an independent study for an African American student on African American Literature.... She was a good student. But, the student wanted to try to get into the honors project. And, I didn't think that that student was strong enough to do the honors project. And, I told my chair [about] that. The student went to my chair (a White female African American Literature professor), and she tried to get my chair to get me to do it. And, I had a very difficult meeting with my chair over this scenario because I am a scholar of African American Literature, and I felt that I should be able to make the assessment of her. I should go ahead with the honors project with the student or not. Not the chair, not the student. I should be able to have that determination. And, I felt that the chair was trying to—... not... in a heavy-handed way, but in a kind of gentle way, but in a gentle way that was encouraging me to do it. And, I was adamant and mentioned that she was not strong enough to do the honors project. I thought I enjoyed the independent study with her and that was fine. But, the honors project, it required something more than the student had. And, she eventually said, "Okay. You made that call." So, she decided to do the honors project with her. I felt disrespected, actually. And, my judgment wasn't valued there by both the chair and the student. I was kind of ignored.

The second finding showed that the gay male faculty members of color used their prior life experiences to help manage their career paths in academia. Professor Howard Phillips, an African American assistant professor, had experiences where the search committee members asked questions that they should not have been asking in the job interview. He vividly described how these job interviews turned out to be hostile and how the search committee members and interviewers used their power abusively:

When I went to an interview with them (an institution in the West), they, the first time, I interviewed with them at a conference in Miami. I interviewed with them and there were three people in the room. There was African American gay man and then two White women. So, we were going to the interview, and all the sudden one of them looked at me and she goes, "Do you have a partner?" You know that is illegal. And so the guy jumped in and said "You can't ask him that." And, she said, "No, but I think it's very interesting. I need to ask him if he had a partner." He was saying to her, "It's illegal, you can't ask him that." She goes, "Well, why not?" They've been like that for the next 10 minutes, why she can't ask me this question. So, finally I said, "You know, I want the record to show that I willingly and voluntarily answered this question for her. I want you to know on the record that she asked me this question in a formal interview that I chose to answer the question." And I said "Well, I don't have a partner." I could not believe this was happening to me....It was a level of [dis]comfort that should not have been there. And the lack of professionalism...

The third finding revealed that the participants had coped or were coping with their experiences of being bullied by using their past experiences of being bullied, discriminated against, or marginalized to help them develop a plan for strategically managing their careers in higher education. Professor Anthony Young, a Black tenured university professor, provided several strategies for coping. One of them was to remove himself from the toxic or hostile workplace. He felt that there was no way for him to cope with the negative experiences at his current institution. His coping mechanism was to get out from the hostile environment:

I am also looking at other nursing programs. I just have had it with that particular type of program. I am just gonna move on. I won't be teaching at the same school. I will probably either retire or something because I can't stand it any longer....My environment now is very hostile. You could not pick a better word. That's the best word... that's the best word you could pick. And, it is hostile. I am currently trying to work on getting out of the particular environment. I've been there for a long time, and I need to get out. I've been teaching here since [the mid-1980s]. I should've left a long time ago.

### **Conclusions**

The findings showed that gay male faculty members of color in this study had experienced bullying related to racism, homophobia, and heterosexism as victims and/or bystanders in higher education. Their experiences of being bullied appeared to be of relational, positional, and continual nature; they had experienced bullying when interacting with peers, professors, and administrators as students in higher education and when interacting with their own students, colleagues, and deans as faculty members at any level of their professorships. The gay male faculty members of color's experiences of racist homophobic bullying seemed to be continual in that they had similar experiences repeatedly in their lifelong careers in academia.

However, while the literature that focuses on race and sexual orientation usually addresses racism and homophobia separately, race and sexual orientation are tightly fused and inseparable. When gay male faculty members of color come into classrooms or meetings in higher education, they always bring their sociocultural identities such as race, sexual orientation, and gender with them. However, conventional studies of identities, positionality, and bullying have ignored how multiple different sociocultural identities impact one's interactions and relationships with others.

This study provided a new understanding of adult bullying in American higher education in terms of racism, homophobia, and heterosexism by having focused on gay male faculty members of color's experiences of adult bullying. In other words, this study provided a way to look into the intersection of racist bullying and homophobic bullying from the concept of positionality. This topic has not been explored much in the United States or in any other countries at this point in time, although bullying has been explored in childhood in K-12 schools and in adulthood at workplaces or the community at large (Twale & De Luca, 2008; Westhues, 2006). Of the research on bullying in higher education, there is virtually none that has been done on these particular populations; most research and publications are on generic bullying where samples were treated as uniform populations (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). However, experiences of People of Color and LGBTQ people are different than those of their White, straight colleagues. People of Color have to face racism daily and LGBTQ people face homophobia and heterosexism all the time. Some scholars like Fox and Stallworth (2005) have examined how race or ethnicity impacts People of Color's experiences in the workplace in terms of bullying. Also, O'Higgins-Norman (2008) focused on homophobic bullying in Irish secondary education. However, it is rare for scholars to examine race and sexual orientation simultaneously or racism and homophobia together (McCready & Kumashiro, 2006). Similarly, such intersectionality is rarely examined in adult and higher education (Misawa, 2009). Overall, this study turned out to be different from previous studies about bullying or positionality, and provided a new path to

understanding how positionality influences the lives of professors whose racial and sexual identities are considered to be minority positions in the United States.

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