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Called to Teach: An Explanatory Sequential Study of Racism-Related Stress and Black Women's Well-Being in Higher Education Ecologies

Valdijah Ambrose Brown, EdD  
Drexel University

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Supervising Professor:

Dr. Larry Keiser

Editors:

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Copy Editor:

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# **Called to Teach: An Explanatory Sequential Study of Racism-Related Stress and Black Women's Well-Being in Higher Education Ecologies**

## **Abstract**

Black women faculty in higher education often refer to themselves as “Called to Teach”. However, this calling for Black women faculty working in predominately white institutions (PWIs) is at risk, impacted by the racism-related stress on their bodies and minds resulting from prejudice and discrimination imbedded in PWIs. This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to explore the experiences of 11 Black women faculty exposed to prejudice and discrimination at PWI's, and the potential of embodied meditative practices to reduce brain-body response through the use of a neuroprotective professional development module (PDM). Black women faculty involved in the study who successfully completed the PDM, and 15 days of meditative practices reported improvements in their ability to manage the physical, emotional, and mental stress precipitated by experiences of prejudice and discrimination in higher education ecologies.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of prejudice and discrimination that Black women faculty experience while working in PWIs that may lead to allostatic overload that precipitates racism-related stress. Research from neuroscience, psychology, and education was used to develop a neuroprotective professional development module to create an awareness of the impacts of racism-related stress on body-mind. The PDM and meditative practices were used as an intervention to mitigate the impact on trauma release of racism-related stress and (re)learning well-being.

## **Problem**

The impacts of racism-related stress are not widely known. Black women suffer disproportionately from health problems, mental health disorders, stroke, high blood pressure, neurodegenerative disorders, attributed to prejudice and discrimination (Fani. Et al., 2021b). Racially biased climates, such as PWIs have the potential to negatively impact Black women's social relationships with colleagues, students, and career advancement (Howard-Hamilton, 2004). Most concerning is racism-related stress' manifestation of allostatic overload that may cause a deterioration of the ventromedial prefrontal matter in the brain, a process called weathering (Okeke et al., 2022). Weathering decreases the length of telomeres located at the ends of chromosomes which suggests that racism-related stress can lead to a premature aging of the body that shortens life span (Menakem, 2017; Okeke, et al., 2022; Solorzano & Huber, 2020). The PDM was developed to raise awareness of these issues among Black women faculty participants and provide an intervention that would assist them with learning neuroprotective practices to reduce allostatic load.

## **Research Findings**

This study centered on four research questions regarding Black women faculty experiences with racism-related stress in higher education ecologies:

*Q1: To what extent did Black women faculty in higher education at PWIs experience racism-related stress?*

All Black women faculty participants (n=11) were selected using a 33-item survey that measured perceptions of prejudice and discrimination in the workplace, self-reported negative health outcomes, and use of embodied practices.

The embedded 14-item Workplace Prejudice/Discrimination Inventory (WPDI) (James et.al., 1994) used to 7-point Likert scale to measure the Black women faculty's experiences with prejudice and discrimination in their respective workplaces. The WPDI revealed that Black women faculty had unique lived experiences with stress due to prejudice and discrimination in their PWI's (Ambrose Brown, 2023). Survey findings showed moderate inventory ratings among the case study sample (n=3), a subset of the full complement of study participants determined by interest of the participants, were incongruent with their lived experiences shared during semi-structured interviews. Black women faculty shared experiences

of prejudice and discrimination such as, feeling invisible, dreading going to work, putting on a mask like everything is okay, and “I went through a depression that nobody knew, nobody could really understand” (Ambrose Brown, 2023).

*Q2: For study participants who experienced racism-related stress, what negative health outcomes did they report?*

Although all Black women faculty participants varied in their experiences with prejudice and discrimination, they all reported negative health outcomes at some point within the last year of participating in the study (Ambrose Brown, 2023). Negative health outcomes reported included sleeplessness, diabetes, anxiety, chronic headache, being overweight, and high blood pressure (Ambrose Brown, 2023).

*Q3: To what extent did Black women faculty in PWIs report using embodied practices to cope with racism-related stress?*

The Black women faculty participants all indicated that they each participated in at least one embodied practice; however, the case study sample revealed most did not begin embodied practices until 15 years into their teaching careers (Ambrose Brown, 2023).

The subset of case study sample participants further revealed that these practices were used to cope with racism-related stress as well as to counter emotional eating, the psychological hardship of invisibility, and the burden of being the only (i.e. the only African American and only person of color in their department) (Ambrose Brown, 2023).

*Q4: How did Black women faculty in PWIs describe their experience learning about racism-related stress and incorporating embodied practices from the Professional Development Module (PDM) intervention?*

The Professional Development Module (PDM) consisted of four modules situated in empirical research about racism-related stress that aimed to create an awareness of the impacts of racism-related stress identified in the literature (Ambrose Brown, 2023). The case study sample (n=3) found that the PDM was insightful about the effects of racism on the brain and how it translates to the weathering process (Ambrose Brown, 2023). Furthermore, the case study sample indicated that the PDM reinforced that racism-related stress is real (Ambrose Brown, 2023). During the 15 days of embodied practice use, the case study sample became aware of how the practices were actually benefiting them, one participant indicated, “tools that can only help me find better ways, healthier ways to channel all the stress (Ambrose Brown, 2023).”

*Q4a: For study participants who expressed a change in their stress response, to which aspect of the intervention did they attribute the change?*

Following the PDM intervention, the case study sample expressed a change in their stress response, and embodied practices were uniquely experienced (Ambrose Brown, 2023). *Sandra* attributed her release of stress to meditative writing paired with a drawing that was inspired by the metaphorical deck (Ambrose Brown, 2023, p. 97). *Rochelle* associated her change in stress response with her ability to channel her anger, frustrations, and hopelessness through all three meditative practices, namely, movement, drawing, and writing (Ambrose Brown, 2023, p. 97). *Kyra* attributed her change in stress to the use of the metaphorical deck paired with meditative writing (Ambrose Brown, 2023, p. 97).

*Q4b: How did study participants consider using or adapting embodied practices in the future?*

*Sandra*, *Rochelle*, and *Kyra* (case study sample) planned to use the meditative practices as part of their neuroprotective tool kit. *Rochelle* shared that her mother, a non-university educator, who experienced racism-related stress as a K-12 teacher is now experiencing dementia. *Rochelle* wondered if the PDM might have helped her mother prevent her current experience. *Rochelle* committed to continuing the practice of meditative drawing and to sharing the practice with her daughter to teach her self-care early

Sandra committed to using the embodied practice of meditative writing. Kyra committed to continue meditative writing with the prompt deck (Ambrose Brown, 2023, p. 97).

### **Conclusion/Discussion**

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study found that Black women faculty experienced prejudice/discrimination at both the institutional and individual levels determined by ratings on the WPDI (Ambrose Brown, 2023). These ongoing experiences led to racism-related stress for Sandra, Rochelle, and Kyra (Ambrose Brown, 2023; Menakem, 2017; Solorzano & Perez Huber, 2020). Racism-related stress (dis)membered Black women faculty by isolating them, making them feel invisible, discrediting their expert knowledge, and racism helped create a misogynoir narrative (Ambrose Brown, 2023).

### **Future Research**

As higher education ecologies look toward sustainable futures that support Black women's well-being, there must be a (re)membering in which Black women have the space and latitude to be authentic, to reconnect, and flourish in regenerative leadership. There were five recommendations for future research (Ambrose Brown, 2023): Study should be replicated with a broader sample of Black women faculty; the study should be replicated in all higher education institution types, PWI's, HBCU's, Hispanic Serving-Institutions, and Minority Serving Institutions; a longitudinal study to measure the long-term impact of embodied practices; within a longitudinal study, fMRI imaging should consider the impact embodied practices on the brain's white matter; and while the WPDI provided a foundation for understanding the experience of prejudice and discrimination, future research should focus on enhancing the instrument.

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