

Invisibility of Black Staff in Academia: A Qualitative Analysis

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The Black staff experience in academia is an unexplored area of research. To fill the void, researchers interviewed several Black staff members at predominantly White universities. Using standpoint theory, this qualitative analysis sheds light on the perceptions of invisibility that Black staff members experience in the workplace. Although Black staff members reported enjoying the nature of their work, they felt invisible in their work environment.

A passage in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* illustrates the relationship between a slave and his master. The slave in this passage is not supposed to be wise enough to have an opinion that matters or makes sense. He is supposed to behave in an unintelligent manner, as a nitwit – subservient and subordinate – without a voice. In this particular passage, the slave master (called schoolteacher) accuses a slave, Sixo, of stealing a shoat (an edible animal):

“You telling me you didn't steal it, and I'm looking right at you?”

“No, sir. I didn't steal it.”

Schoolteacher smiled. “Did you kill it?”

“Yes, sir. I killed it.”

“Did you butcher it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you cook it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, then. Did you eat it?”

“Yes, sir. I sure did.”

“And you telling me that's not stealing?”

“No, sir. It ain't.”

“What is it then?”

“Improving your property, sir.”

“What?”

“Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better change. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.”

Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined. (Morrison, 1987, p.190)

Because of the slave's wit and defiance, he is beaten. Often slaves were supposed to be seen and not heard; and they were not to appear to outfox or outsmart their master – only to work according to the instructions given.

In the workplace, what qualifies as work or what counts as important or as unimportant work often is not based on the nature of the task; rather, it is on how “work” is defined and who does the defining. The definition of work, furnished mostly by those in power or in a

superior role, renders some work invisible and some work visible. In some situations the performance and the end-result of work is visible but the workers themselves are invisible. For instance, in the United States domestic workers are socially invisible to their employers even though their physical labor is visible (Rollins, 1985). In other situations “work may become expected, part of the background, and invisible by virtue of routine (and social status)” (Star & Strauss, 1999, p. 11).

Understanding the workplace culture requires an examination through the lens of the workers. Standpoint theory (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1998) holds that a culture is not experienced similarly by its membership. Rather, different groups within a culture have dissimilar powers and experiences. Standpoint theory “claims that the social, material, and symbolic circumstances of a social group shape the standpoints of members of that group” (Wood, 2004, p. 212). Therefore, the best way to discover the world of Black staff members and to recognize their conditions is to interview individuals and get their perspective.

Using standpoint theory, this paper examines the work experiences of several Black staff at public universities within the framework of invisibility. “There has been remarkably little systematic study of the roles and values of university administrative staff” (McInnis, 1998, p. 161), and there is an absence of research on Black staff in academia. Through semi-structured interviews of several Black staff participants at predominantly White universities, this research reveals the perceptions of invisibility that Black staff experience in the workplace. Finally, in this qualitative analysis we discuss the implications of our findings.

Method

The sites of this study were two large predominantly White public universities in the United States. Black researchers on the team conducted in-depth interviews of Black university staff employees. The Black staff members were invited to participate in face-to-face, one-hour, tape-recorded interview sessions. The researchers used an interview protocol that included a series of questions about the staff members’ work experiences.

The twelve Black staff participants were university employees for at least one year. Nine of the interviewees were female and three were male. All participants had at least a high school diploma. The average number of years of employment was six years. Nearly three-fourths of the participants were paid hourly, and the rest were salaried. Participants ranged from 30 to 66 years of age and occupied a variety of clerical and administrative positions.

The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the data collected from the in-depth interviews. Of the several themes that emerged from the transcripts, invisibility in the workplace was dominant.

Results

The theme of invisibility – not being noticed or considered as a valued staff member – became apparent, as it was a prominent thread. The notion of being invisible, as described by one Black staff participant, was as follows: “I’m not one of them. . . . Sometimes I wonder does [name of boss omitted] really see me.” One other participant said, “A lot of times people think being fair is just ignoring something. . . . Some mornings I come in and them little

heifers act like they don't wanna speak." Further, another participant said, "The mindset of White folks are still, you look at us as guests." This participant, like some others, contextualized her perceptions of invisibility within the larger framework of race relations in United States history. Another participant explained that the contributions he or she made as a staff member were of no consequence with this statement:

People have been there for many, many, many, you know, years. They're comfortable, and no matter what information you give them, even if it's new and needed, they're not going to act. You know, I think, you know, not that I want them to, but at least get a little gleam in your eye

The foregoing statements present the image of what it is like to feel invisible as Black staff at predominantly White universities. In addressing the invisibility of a Black man, Ralph Ellison (1952) stated:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 3)

According to Ellison (1952), invisibility occurs because people willfully refuse to see; they are not literally blind – they just choose not to see or concern themselves with the person. People see all around them; yet they somehow see through and miss the individual standing or sitting directly before them, as if the individual is not there at all.

Some of the Black staff participants in this study who felt invisible likewise felt that their contributions did not matter. One participant said he or she was not expected to be around long, in the following statement: "When I first started here, I wasn't supposed to last because . . . we've never had a permanent Black. . . I'm the only one up there now." The participant said, "So I just stopped saying anything. . . It's just the way the game is."

Many times the participants felt that they gave higher priority to the goals of those they served than their own. As one staff member commented,

We set the climate for each office, and we are the first to welcome visitors and faculty each day. Often we are referred to as 'the glue that holds the office together' because we are heavily relied upon to successfully ensure that the department runs smoothly. Without us, the offices in the colleges and universities could not function properly.

One participant who had been employed as a staff member for several years said, "The more I looked around, things hadn't changed that much. Things were just ignored, so I found myself still having to stand up and be counted." Even after several years with the public

university, this participant still did not feel that the contributions she made were noteworthy or that she was valued as a significant employee; she was still fighting to be recognized. Her comments bear out what Ralph Ellison (1952) says:

You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. (p. 3)

The participant also reflected on determination and individual needs when thoughts of quitting surface because the individual feels he or she is not wanted in the workplace. She continued:

I went home and told my mother they're trying already to get rid of me but I'm gonna be there when they are dead and gone. And believe me the guy that did say (that) to me – he is dead and gone. But I took a lot.

Sometimes the invisibility was expressed as disinterest by White coworkers. One participant expressed the following sentiments: "White folks really try to know us through TV instead of personally knowing us." This participant felt that her coworkers did not feel the need to become acquainted with her personally because they could get to know her without having a typical working relationship with her on the job. This participant felt that her coworker's only familiarity with her was through inaccurate mediated messages, which made her feel more invisible.

While problems of invisibility emerged disproportionately, all Black staff participants expressed satisfaction with the overall nature of their work. Two participants stated the following: "I like the way the job is set – what I gotta do." And, "I am absolutely satisfied as far as working for the university."

Although all participants indicated enjoyment of their work, when asked if they were satisfied with their salary, most participants felt they were not paid enough. Two made the following emphatic statements: "Absolutely not. No." And, "No, no. No. No. . . . I've been at the base pay, you know . . . because I just recently discovered that. And I said, 'My God, I'm not even anywhere, anywhere near mid-range!'" Despite the participants' resolute appall over salary, the pleasure they derived from their work may have lessened their need to exercise power and agency to construct alternative expectations of their place at work.

Discussion

This research presents evidence of perceptions of invisibility in the workplace at predominantly White institutions from the standpoint of Black members. To develop a standpoint, an individual "must become aware of and reflect on the conditions that define and shape a group's experiences. . . . African Americans who become conscious of America's history of racial discrimination and devaluation of blacks can develop a black standpoint. . . ." (Wood, 2004, p. 213). Recognizing the historical struggles and conditions of African Americans, the participants identified their perceptions of invisibility with race relations that exist in the workplace even though they were competent and organized.

Although the Black staff participants communicated enjoyment of their jobs overall, they felt perceived experiences of different treatment as compared to their White counterparts; feeling that they “did not fit in,” and questioning whether their supervisor “saw them” created perceptions of invisibility and nonpersonhood within their workplace environment. Star and Strauss (1999) write:

Creating a nonperson need not be a monolithic event; every workplace and organization employs people who may give or receive such a status, even if only partially. In academia, some people are judged ‘dead wood,’ and their work is ridiculed or they themselves are ignored as people. Janitors, cleaners, physical maintenance workers, and those who work as laboratory technicians are often treated as nonpeople. (p. 19)

The reasons for the lack of communication and perceived invisibility from the standpoint of the Black staff participants are not readily apparent. It is possible that most staff, faculty, and administrators are aware of Black staff in the periphery of their daily lives but not as a source of and major contributor to their own success and upward mobility within the university hierarchy. Howard Stevenson (2003) said,

I have witnessed the conspicuous invisibility of how Black folk help to develop the science projects of countless researchers without so much as a passing comment about the nature of the relationships that are imbued with the culture, style, and expressions of the participants (and the researchers). The invisible contributions exist before, during and after we verify them through novel research technologies. (p. 523)

Black staff contribute to and influence the research, but they are not given credit or recognition for their participation. They are treated as though they are invisible.

Implications

The present study points to the need for additional research on Black staff's experiences at public universities. Generating important dialogue and an understanding of the perceived notions of invisibility felt by Black staff at public universities will lead to increased awareness and greater appreciation of different cultures and peoples in our diverse institutions. In this study, the researchers found that Black staff members do not feel recognized as valuable contributors to the academic process. They feel like they are “guests” whose contributions matter little, and the feelings of invisibility cause Black staff to feel disempowered, constrained, and subjugated. With further study, perhaps greater awareness of the perceived experiences of invisibility felt by Black staff members will emerge, necessary workplace modifications will be practiced, and the perceptions of invisibility will disappear.

While the issue of Black staff invisibility reported here is based on interviews of Black staff, we did not interview non-Black staff and, as such, perceptions may vary. Nevertheless, of particular relevance to the academic community is our finding of the absence of research on Black staff at universities. Consequently, to the extent they are deemed not worthy of study, they remain invisible to us.

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