

# Experiences With Imposter Syndrome and Authenticity at Research-Intensive Schools of Social Work: A Case Study on Black Female Faculty

LaShawnda N. Fields  
Renee M. Cunningham-Williams

**Abstract:** *There is little known about the experiences of Black women in schools of social work, specifically those situated within research-intensive (R-1) Carnegie-designated institutions. Experiences of imposter syndrome and authenticity often result in negative experiences and poor professional outcomes for Black women in academia. This study explores Black women social work faculty members' sense of self through the prisms of imposter syndrome and authenticity. Social work is of particular interest in that it espouses a code of ethics and core values of service that if applied to the cultures within these schools, Black women may have more equitable experiences. This article presents qualitative findings from nine in-depth interviews with Black women faculty members at R-1 universities. Findings revealed that Black women faculty member's experiences of imposter syndrome impacted many facets of their professional experiences from moments of paralysis to potentially unhealthy over-productivity. Findings also highlight Black women faculty members' concerns around their colleagues' professional and personal perceptions of them and this often prevented these women from presenting their authentic selves in academic settings. Despite these barriers, some women chose to remain authentic regardless of possible backlash in refusing to assimilate into the dominant White culture. Black women scholars cannot survive and thrive in social work education unless institutions build trust with these women by respecting their diverse backgrounds, race-related research interests, and range of methodology.*

**Keywords:** *Authenticity, hyper/invisibility, inclusion, imposter syndrome, social work faculty*

More than 100 years after the first Black woman completed her doctoral education in America, Black women continue to be underrepresented across all academic disciplines (Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014). Doctorate degree graduation rates across all disciplines for Black women have improved from 6.5% to 10.4% of total degrees conferred between 1977 and 2018 respectively (U.S. Department of Education [US DOE], 2019). Yet in 2018, Black women represented only seven percent of all college professors in the U.S. (NCES, 2019). This percentage is even lower in research intensive (R-1), doctoral-granting institutions where Blacks/African Americans represented only 4.1% of all tenure and 5.26% of all tenure-track faculty members in comparison to baccalaureate status institutions, where this demographic accounted for 5.21% and 9.7% of tenure and tenure-track faculty respectively in 2017 (Vasquez Heileg et al., 2019). Historically and currently, these R-1 institutions are more often than not predominantly White (Vasquez Heileg et al., 2019). A predominantly White institution (PWI) refers to institutions in higher education with a White student enrollment at or above 50% (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

---

LaShawnda N. Fields, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University of Arkansas Fayetteville, AR.  
Renee M. Cunningham-Williams, PhD, MPE, LCSW, Associate Professor and Director, NIDA Transdisciplinary Training in Addictions Research (TranSTAR) Pre- and Post-doctoral Training Program, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, St. Louis, MO.

Copyright © 2021 Authors, Vol. 21 No. 2/3 (Summer 2021), 354-373 DOI: 10.18060/24151



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Black women faculty, finding themselves in the minority at these predominantly White research institutions, face unique challenges rooted in cultural differences, and both individual and institutional biases, making their experiences in these settings highly problematic. Given social work's long-term commitment to social justice (National Association of Social Work [NASW], 2021), one might expect a healthier culture and more equitable experiences within social work education. Social work's Code of Ethics proscribes all forms of discrimination, demands cultural competence, and advocates on behalf of social justice, dignity, and respect for all (NASW, 2021). However, these statistics and lack of representation of Black women scholars in R-1 institutions are concerning. And for Black women scholars who are currently employed at predominantly White institutions, there are concerns about their experiences of racism and discrimination embedded in these structures (Croom & Patton, 2011). By exploring the participants' sense of self through the prisms of authenticity and imposter syndrome, this study seeks to better understand these women's unique experiences and inform institutional efforts toward inclusion, retention, and advancement among this segment of the professoriate.

This article defines imposter syndrome as one's hesitation in believing they are as intelligent, skilled and deserving of their success as their colleagues and often believe this unfounded truth will be discovered by others at any moment (Abdelaal, 2020; Clance & Imes, 1978). In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* blog, Leonard (2014) wrote,

It is crucial to note that Impostor Syndrome stems not just from the mismatch between the representation of an academic and one's identity, but also from the daily experiences in which faculty, students, and administrators convey that you don't belong, or that you don't have what it takes. (para. 9)

## Literature Review

### History of Oppression

Though Black women are not alone in facing the challenges of assimilation into the academy or the absence of inclusion, they face fundamental and unique issues rooted in gender and race inequalities as faculty members (Grant & Ghee, 2015). Consequently, these experiences result in pervasive racist and sexist discriminatory employment practices against Black women (Crenshaw, 1991). Historically, Black women's employment in the United States is complicated and oppressive and can be understood from an intersectional lens. Black scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2002) has extensively written on this subject, stating:

The vast majority of African American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves in a situation of oppression. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the United States. However, the convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another. It also created the political context for Black women's intellectual work. (p. 4)

Numerous laws and policies have reinforced the expectations that Black women will survive and thrive while being discriminated against, overlooked for advancement, and overworked (Collins, 2002). In response to either personal or learned experiences, Black women may internalize racism resulting in moments of imposter syndrome and/or struggles with authenticity in White spaces.

### **Academic Culture and Climate**

Retention of Black women faculty members remains a challenge for research-intensive institutions of higher education, primarily due to climate and culture issues (Allen et al., 2000; Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Marbley, 2007; Pittman, 2012). As defined by Stolp and Smith (1995), climate represents the shared perceptions of an organization, whereas culture is the historical values, beliefs, norms, and myths understood by members of a community or organization. Identifying with multiple marginalized identities, as Black women do, may lead to a hostile climate wherein one's credentials, expertise, professionalism, and contributions as a faculty member are regularly questioned (Allen et al., 2000; Marbley, 2007; McGee & Kazembe, 2015). These negative interactions within the academy can result in Black women internalizing racist experiences causing them to struggle with imposter syndrome and/or authenticity when the issues are in fact external characteristics of an inequitable institutional culture.

Lee and Leonard (2001) labeled the behavior in a hostile academic environment as “violent,” citing individual behavior or systemic practices rooted in the misuse of influence and power against Black people at PWIs of higher education. The authors use the term violence to identify ridiculing, threatening, intimidating, and gossiping behaviors. These experiences are in stark contrast to the six values espoused in the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics and Core Values of Service, namely social justice, dignity and worth of the individual, importance, and centrality of human relationships, integrity, and competence. According to Parsons and colleagues (2018), institutions that evolve beyond passive, independent, system-wide or department level policies around diversity and inclusion to actively problem solve at the departmental and institutional level will achieve greater success with improving their cultures and climates.

### **Relevant Studies**

A study of 1,189 college and university faculty members at six institutions—three private and three public—found that when evaluating their experiences of the culture and climate of the institution, Black women faculty members were the most dissatisfied of the four race/gender groups studied: White/male, Black/male, White/female, Black/female (Allen et al., 2000). Black women faculty members reported experiencing a reduced sense of community, limited satisfaction with the interactions they have with White faculty members, and less satisfaction with the organizational culture and climate in comparison to their White counterparts (Marbley, 2007).

In a study that examined stereotypes of Black and White women among 109 White undergraduate students, Donovan (2011) found numerous trends among White students.

Findings revealed that White students frequently assigned stereotypical characteristics to Black women including the Matriarch/Sapphire historical stereotype of being loud, quick-tempered, argumentative, dominating, tough, and strong (Donovan, 2011). White students also assigned traits to the Mammy stereotype including loyal, family-oriented, and kind (Donovan, 2011). These stereotypes and images of Black women are frequently captured in literature, media, and popular culture, and are deeply embedded in American society. Collins (1991) explains, "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression" (p. 39). These often-used stereotypical labels of Black women could be seen as fluid, meaning a woman can find herself being viewed in one way or another or several ways at any given moment (Collins, 1991). The findings of Donovan's 2011 study further underscore the unique experiences of Black women providing an explanation for why imposter syndrome may surface as well as concerns of being authentic within academia. In lieu of authenticity, some Black women engage in code-switching to dissociate themselves from these racialized and gendered stereotypes. Code-switching occurs when people of different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds are present and one changes their vernacular and other forms of self-expression to better fit in (Dunn, 2019).

In 2015, McGee and Kazembe conducted a phenomenological study of Black faculty members (50% female participants) in education departments at 13 institutions across the country. They found that when presenting their research, participants believed they faced racialized stereotypes in expectations to behave as performers, believing humor and smiling were as necessary to their scholarly presentations as the substantive content. Additionally, participants reported receiving criticism for lacking scholarly integrity, leading to their experiences of pressure to counter and manage these stereotypes and biases, again presenting barriers to authenticity and feelings of inadequacy rooted in imposter syndrome (McGee & Kazembe, 2015). In 2018, Allen et al. conducted a study to understand the barriers to research African American social workers encountered and overcame. They found that most of their sample ( $n=10$ ) had similar experiences with the devaluing and constant questioning of research focused on African Americans, as if this population was not worthy to be studied (Allen et al., 2018).

### **Social Work Education**

Despite social work's core value of social justice (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2017), Black social work faculty still experience discrimination due to their race and gender in academia. Black women social work scholars' experiences in the academy are often occurring within the predominantly White male academic context, which commonly leads to negative interactions with administrators, faculty, staff and students in response to the Black women faculty's gender and race (Vakalahi & Stark, 2010). When discussing their informal support group within their school of social work, Comer and colleagues (2017) stated that women of color in higher education are often told they were hired due to their race and gender; this notion is in fact another way messages of inferiority and incompetence are perpetuated. Social justice is a tenet of social work education and

social work practice with the intention of disrupting and dismantling oppressive structures, except those within social work education (Hudson et al., 2017).

While there has been endless work towards equitable experiences for Black women in social work education, there has not been much improvement, and each generation faces nearly identical challenges as those who came before them, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Vakalahi & Stark, 2010). Combating White supremacy continues to be a burden for Black women in social work education. Although there have been advances for this demographic, they continue to fare worse than White women and Black men with regards to representation, tenure and promotion, and compensation in social work education (Pewewardy, 2007). Edwards et al. (2012) conducted a study about the experiences of African American female faculty in PWI schools of social work (n=108) and found that respondents from schools of social work with greater representation of Black faculty members were more likely to have achieved tenure. This finding again speaks to the value of representation in academia and the ways it can support Black women on their journey to not only survive within these institutions, but to thrive.

While a substantial amount is known about the experiences of Black females in higher education across disciplines, we know a lot less about the experiences and outcomes of Black female faculty members at research-intensive schools of social work. The purpose of the present study is to help bridge this gap in the knowledge and determine if research-intensive schools of social work have more inclusive cultures as may be expected based on the pillars of the discipline and the NASW (2021) Code of Ethics. This information is important to support institutional efforts in the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and result in potentially more culturally competent evidence-based practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

When seeking an understanding of the experiences of Black women faculty in schools of social work at research-intensive institutions, this study used a case study methodology informed by Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2002) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; hooks, 1981). It is important to note that intersectionality was introduced by Black scholars and Black feminists, namely Lorde (1984), hooks (1981) and Crenshaw (1991), to broaden prior waves of feminism that often excluded race and the dual oppression of Black women (Nash, 2011). Black feminist theory is built upon the historical collective struggle and resistance of Black women regardless of their individual experiences and priorities (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The feminist/intersectional case study methodology allows the capture of the historical, cultural, personal and social elements of this phenomenon while offering a platform centered on Black women's experiences in higher education (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Jones et al., 2013). It also lends itself to studying the complex and intricate details of a single case (Stake, 1995), which in this case is Black female faculty members at schools of social work.

Intersectionality describes how Black women's experiences are unique in that they are constantly coupled with their race and gender, resulting in Black women having lived as "others" in society resulting in differentiating discriminatory experiences from both Black

men and White women (Lloyd-Jones, 2014; Roberts, 2014). Intersectionality is multidimensional in that it considers overlapping experiences related to marginalized identities and how these identities impact a person's agency, viewpoints, and aspirations, including women of color faculty members facing presumptions of incompetence as instructors, researchers, and leaders in higher education (Carbado et al., 2013; Comer et al., 2017; Jaysiiree et al., 2011).

## Method

### Recruitment and Data Collection

The decision to use a case study methodology was first approved by the dissertation committee then an application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Washington University in St. Louis approved this project in September 2019 as the first author's dissertation project. Yin (2012) stated that case studies are frequently used to conduct evaluations, and one element of this study is the evaluation of the self-management of the participants. Following IRB approval, the first author sent an email to potential research participants following her website content review of the faculty member pages at the top 20 schools of social work (U.S. News and World Report, 2019). Requirements for inclusion in the study was to identify as Black, female and a current faculty member at an R-1 school of social work. Carnegie designation of R-1, also referred to as research-intensive, are institutions that are doctoral universities with very high research activity (Carnegie Classification of Institutions, 2021). Participants from the authors' home institution at the time of the study, Washington University in St. Louis, were excluded even if they otherwise met the inclusion criteria.

As a former equity, diversity and inclusion practitioner within higher education, the first author relied upon years of experience in developing climate surveys supported by the current literature to craft the questions and execute the in-depth interviews. The goal of the interviews was to better understand how these women managed their sense of self. Sample questions used for data analysis in this article include:

- “How do you define inclusion and equity?”
- “Do you believe your race and/or gender have impacted your experiences in the academy independently or as intersecting identities?”
- “Have you experienced imposter syndrome (ask if definition needed) at any point throughout your journey to and as a faculty member?”
- “Do you present as your authentic self at work?”
- “Do you believe your experiences as a professor have been in alignment with the National Association of Social Work (NASW) code of ethics?”

These questions served as a guide and follow-up questions were asked based on responses. Thus, all participants may not have been asked the exact same questions.

## **Analytical Methods**

One goal of this study was to examine whether Black female faculty members in schools of social work had similar experiences reported from other disciplines. As is the case in deductive coding, conceptual and empirical literature from various disciplines aided in interpreting the primary themes that emerged from the data collected. The deductive coding process involved a review of the literature on inequities and barriers to inclusion and success in the academy for Black women faculty members to discover any existing themes and patterns about this topic (Allen et al., 2018). Examples of the deductive codes drawn from the literature are lack of social/political preparation, professional mentoring, and ambiguity of tenure and promotion. The first author used prior experience to guide the assignment of sub-themes to the data as some of the text could have been coded in many different themes, however; hierarchical coding allowed the text to be coded at different levels making distinctions between those data providing an overview and those which are more detailed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King 2004). There were two rounds of coding by the first author to improve the clarity of the categories, themes and concepts (Saldana, 2015).

As previously mentioned, the first author has years of experiences as a diversity administrator in higher education that not only led to this line of inquiry but helped shape the interview questions. She conducted all the interviews and solely coded the data as the project was conducted as her dissertation study wherein research independence at this level is required. In addition to IRB oversight of the project, a committee of faculty experts, chaired by the second author, approved and supervised the project. The first author identifies as a Black woman faculty member at an R-1 school of social work housed within a predominantly White institution making her an insider to the experiences of this group. As such, to further ensure data integrity in data coding and analysis, the first author met with one committee member throughout this process, given her training and expertise in cultural anthropology and qualitative methodology.

## **Participant Profiles**

The sample size of this study ( $n = 9$ ) represents nearly one-third of the target sample of 30 who agreed to completing recorded, in-depth interviews about their experiences. Two participants opted to meet in-person in October 2019, for audio-only recordings, and seven had online video-recorded interviews. Study participants represented nine different R-1 institutions, with varying lengths of time and rank in the professoriate ranging from 2-20 years of experience with one professor, three associate professors and five assistant professors. All participants' research related to either their race or gender. Seven participants have doctoral degrees in social work with one being in education and another in sociology. All the study participants attended PWIs for their undergraduate and graduate programs and all but one of the participants have worked full-time outside of higher education. Finally, all but one of the participants are either the only or one of two Black women faculty members in their schools of social work. Table 1 summarizes the professional characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. *Participants Professional Characteristics*

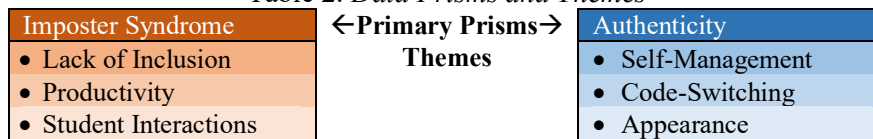
Participant Name*	Academic Rank (Professor)	Years of Experience	Ever Attended an HBCU	Experience Outside of Higher Ed	Social Work PhD
Doris	Associate	20	No	Yes	Yes
Dana	Full	15	No	Yes	Yes
Elise	Assistant	3	No	Yes	No/Education
Keisha	Associate	7	No	Yes	Yes
Laura	Assistant	3	No	Yes	Yes
Nicole	Assistant	3	No	Yes	Yes
Robin	Associate	15	No	Yes	Yes
Sheila	Assistant	4	No	Yes	No/Sociology
Tracy	Assistant	2	No	No	Yes

\*Pseudonyms used to protect participants' identities.

### Findings

The in-depth interviews with Black women faculty members at research-intensive schools of social work produced highly nuanced understandings of the experiences of these participants. While the larger study examines structural challenges in the institutional environment, this article focuses on the management of self in the face of institutional and internal racism, using individual-level experiences of imposter syndrome and authenticity as prisms to understand these experiences. This analysis produced two sets of themes, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. *Data Prisms and Themes*



### Imposter Syndrome

Study participants were asked to provide examples of how they managed in the face of such adversity. They were asked directly if they had ever experienced imposter syndrome and the ways in which it manifested for them. Following are some of the responses that provide insight into how imposter syndrome was experienced as well as managed by these Black women faculty members.

#### *Productivity*

Nicole shared, “I overprepare for meetings. I try to make sure I have three points I want to make; I arrive early, and I watch what I say.” She noted that this routine leads to a lot of anxiety and wasted time. She believed if she did not participate and add something of value to faculty meetings it would be a sign of deficiency and others may see her as incapable of meeting the standards of her position. Nicole noted that other faculty members often sat



silently in these meetings, but she believed she was managing other's perceptions of her and that put her slightly at ease though it was laborious.

Elise expressed that she constantly feels pressured to be the best, resulting in exhaustion as she chases an unattainable goal of perfection. Elise had only recently become aware of the term imposter syndrome after joining her institution three years prior. She said during orientation she heard it referenced numerous times and how the school did not want people to experience it, but they did not create a culture that reflects those wishes. She believed she never had a champion for her success upon arrival. Elise had entered social work with a background in education and was only slightly hopeful that social work would be less toxic than higher education in general. Dana, who is in her 15<sup>th</sup> year, stated, "Even after all these years I still get nervous submitting manuscripts, presenting my research and applying for grants. I have come a long way, but I continue to have moments where I feel I do not belong, I am not good enough and I will be unfairly critiqued." It was insightful to hear that after decades of success including scholarly and academic acclaim, Dana continued to manage her reactions to both institutional and internal racism. Tracy said,

*You know the way we normalize a workload that I think is really unmanageable and so when everyone around you is acting like it's normal to be responsible for what you're responsible for and you are drowning that makes for that misalignment, that feeling of I can't do this. I can't pull this off. You know this isn't for me? I would say that's really probably the only domain in which I feel a disconnect in belonging to the institution.*

Her comment offers another perspective of how imposter syndrome can affect this group.

### *Lack of Inclusion*

Keisha shared that upon entering the job market she was often told she would easily secure employment because identifying as a Black woman would allow an institution to check two boxes related to her as a diverse hire. This is what she believes was the catalyst of her struggles in her first few years to believe she had what it took to be successful and was not a hire to meet a quota. In her 7<sup>th</sup> year now, Keisha believes that she secured tenure because she worked to meet and, in some ways, exceed the requirements. Several of these statements are reminiscent of the age-old adage that Black people must work twice as hard just to be seen as mediocre. Black people often receive these messages early and often throughout their lives. Erin shared in this sentiment and responded with "there's nothing I can do other than kill myself trying to meet a certain mark which means I'm going to kill myself doing it right?"

Laura, who is in her second year as a faculty member, attributed her decision not to use the title *doctor* to her feelings of imposter syndrome. She believed it would cause people to have expectations of her she was not sure she could live up to, "I have students call me professor, not doctor. I often wonder if maybe I heard God wrong, and I'm not cut out for this career." Keisha, who has tenure, believed she has always experienced some element of imposter syndrome, though she does not recall the term being used until recently. From a very early age, she recalls being the only Black girl/woman (or one of

very few) in spaces she often felt she did not belong. It was not until college that she was exposed to other smart Black females. While she feels she has come a long way with her self-confidence, she knows the work will be ongoing.

Doris, the participant who has been in the academy the longest, believed imposter syndrome is rooted in the reality that merit does not warrant outcomes. Doris expressed having seen many colleagues who did not have the best academic records advance to leadership positions while some who had consistently achieved success were overlooked for these same opportunities. A few other study participants shared in this sentiment that hard work was not always equitably recognized or rewarded. These experiences were not exclusively along gender or race lines, but minoritized groups were more often in the exceptional yet overlooked group.

### *Student Interactions*

Most of the women reported getting decent evaluations, but some of the qualitative responses were more related to their race and gender than their performance as an instructor. Keisha received a comment on an evaluation that her clothes were colorful and bright, which led to her revamping her wardrobe to be taken more seriously. Others reported receiving feedback that used words like *aggressive*, *intimidating* and *too familiar*. These negative remarks, disruptive moments in the classroom and unwarranted reports of misconduct can feed into the feelings of imposter syndrome these women have experienced. It is important to note that three respondents reported receiving teaching awards, and they attributed these accolades to the authenticity they carry into the classroom with them.

## **Authenticity**

### *Self-Management*

This study found that six of the nine participants felt uncomfortable presenting their authentic selves at work at some point throughout their tenure as a faculty member. The respondents in this study sacrificed their authenticity by managing their speech, managing their research, managing their moods, managing the discomfort of others, code-switching and being overly critical of their appearances. Nicole had several thoughts on how she moves throughout her school as a Black woman. She emphasized wanting to “do it right” because it is important to her that no one ever thinks she was hired to meet a diversity need of her institution. Being more specific, Nicole said “It’s a lot of energy exerted because there’s this pressure because you feel like people are looking at you that way even if they never say it. You are always having to second guess what you wear, what you say.” This is what led to Nicole’s over-preparation for meetings as discussed earlier.

### *Code-Switching*

When asking about authenticity, we talked about “code-switching,” a practice of changing one’s vernacular when interacting with those of different ethnic and/or racial

backgrounds. The responses were consistent among the interviewees. Although code-switching was a common practice, as these women secured tenure many found themselves engaging in this practice less frequently. Several of these women felt more comfortable being their authentic selves with their students than with their colleagues. When asked to elaborate, Tracy said, “When I’m at the front of the classroom lecturing, my students get a pretty raw version of me. I am not concerned about tone, or vernacular in the same way I am during faculty meetings.” Similarly, Elise added that she does not present her authentic self because she does not trust that others do either. She believes people bring representatives of themselves to work and know what is acceptable or not; therefore, her White and or male colleagues may not share their thoughts of racism and or discrimination though it may be clear in their behavior.

### *Appearance*

Even though many of the participants attended top-ranked schools for their doctoral studies and have a proven track record of academic success, at times their self-doubt and insecurities may surface if they show up in spaces in a way that someone has arbitrarily decided is unprofessional. It is these unwritten rules and additional layers of scrutiny that result in these women feeling they have to dress, speak and behave in a way that is acceptable to their superiors, colleagues and students. This self-censorship results in exhaustion while reinforcing their challenges with imposter syndrome and upholding White supremacy.

Three of the respondents were sure to present their authentic selves at work and Sheila noted that “people are bothered by it and I love it.” She then states that she knows she is good at her job; her research is necessary and improving the lives of Black people and she wants to challenge the academy to grow independent, innovative scholars. The more senior faculty members in the sample both show up as their authentic selves to their schools of social work. In different ways they expressed it was a journey to arrive at their current level of comfort. These changes were a result of securing tenure and surviving and thriving in the academy for an extended period of time. Donna specifically stated, “they are going to see you as the problem, so you may as well be the problem.” Despite having completed doctorate degrees, these women believe their competency is scrutinized because of their slang, tone, or even their fashion choices, leading them to question how authentic they can be within their professional spaces, engaging in code-switching and altering their person to conform and put others at ease.

## **Discussion**

This study explored the experiences of ( $n=9$ ) Black women faculty members at R-1, predominantly White schools of social work. We focused on how these women managed the internal and external racism through the prisms of imposter syndrome and authenticity. We sought to learn of challenges as well as strategies or tactics used to combat and overcome these experiences. Findings from this study confirm that Black women faculty in social work are having experiences comparable to those of Black women across other disciplines in higher education. These findings are in line with a study of 14 Black faculty

members at a Midwestern research-intensive institution (Pittman, 2012), in which 86% of faculty members interviewed believed race played a significant role in their campus experiences in general and 71% of respondents felt that their race-related experiences were negative and included feelings of exclusion and tokenism.

Black women in the academy are often facing barriers to success due to stereotypes historically associated with Black women. Stereotypes reflect the power denied to minority groups, as others have been able to define themselves and control the narratives of their experiences and worth (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). It is important to note that the possibility of being associated with a stereotype is impactful before any direct consequences. Study findings complement those of Bradley (2005) who posited that institutions of higher education cannot ignore the likely impact these stereotypical images can have on the experiences of Black women, considering how pervasive the images remain in popular culture. Additionally, these stereotypes are cause for concern as they devalue Black women and diminish perceptions about their intelligence, resulting in their feelings of inferiority in the academy (Jones et al., 2013). Collins (2002) noted that justification for race, gender, and class oppression is provided by the frequency of images of Black women as “Other.” It is this feeling of being seen as “other” that can lead to these scholars having to manage their responses to both internal and external racism which this study explored through the prisms of imposter syndrome and authenticity.

When participants were asked why they continued to endure these often raging waters, they primarily spoke of the benefit of being able to ask and answer valuable questions they believed improved the human experience. Many spoke of improving the lives of those with whom they share identities. There were also many references to the freedom and flexibility that being a professor afforded them. Not feeling as though they are being micromanaged was important to many of the participants. Another common response to why they remained in their positions was the students. They spoke of the Black students who needed to see them to know that it was possible to pursue this line of work as well as to be a resource to these students. It was also a common response that non-Black students needed to gain experience with Black women as well. In preparation for direct practice and other career paths, these women felt they were broadening the cultural competency of students who may not otherwise encounter a Black faculty member and engage in the conversations they were often having with their students about power and oppression.

### **Limitations**

There are a few methodological limitations this study encountered that are important to address in future research. This study interviewed current faculty members to understand their lived experiences, but it is worth noting these women have had time to develop coping mechanisms as they all attended predominantly White institutions prior to joining the professoriate. The tactics and strategies these Black women have learned over the years allows them to survive and thrive as professors at R-1, predominantly White schools of social work; often labeled as hostile environments (Lee & Leonard, 2001). It would be useful to expand the study to Black women who have left professorships to understand how they arrived at those decisions and what if anything could have led them to stay.

Another limitation of this study is that all the women interviewed attended PWIs throughout their academic careers; it would be useful to interview those who have experiences in more diverse institutions and identify differences and similarities. Future studies may also benefit from interviewing multiple faculty members from the same institution when possible to compare and contrast their experiences in hopes of gaining a richer understanding of the culture and climate. This study's sample size (n=9) was a limitation even though the researchers sought additional participants from more institutions. However, researchers often believe theoretical saturation typically occurs between 10–12 interviews, and different approaches to qualitative research have various considerations which could result in a case study analysis being as small as a single case while many phenomenological studies have between six and 10 participants (Breen, 2006; Padgett, 2008).

All the interviewing and coding was completed by the first author, resulting in the possibility of researcher bias. To prevent these biases and personal experiences from excessively influencing the study, use of a reflexive journal was implemented. This journal was used to critically examine why and how decisions were being made throughout the study. It was a priority of the first author to ensure that these decisions were being made in the best interests of the study and not being unduly influenced by the researcher's own biases, perspectives, and personal narrative. In addition to the journal, the first author debriefed with dissertation committee members and doctoral student peers. Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the literature by identifying key challenges identified by Black women scholars in social work and R-1 institutions.

## **Implications**

### *Implications for Practice*

Many of the practice considerations around supporting Black female faculty members in research-intensive schools of social work are the responsibility of both the school and university leadership teams. These results have implications for hiring practices to support the entry and retention of Black women faculty. For example, findings suggest the development of postdoctoral programs as feeder pathway programs into tenure-track faculty positions at the same institution. Such an effort can be a part of a larger strategic planning document showing a true commitment to diversity as reflected by resource allocation (Fries-Britt et al., 2011). Throughout their time in a post-doctoral program, Black women scholars can be assigned mentors who can support them with socialization and understanding institutional norms that can reduce their instances of imposter syndrome. Further development of their research agenda can also be a benefit to these fellows prior to the start of their journey to tenure, which can also help with confidence and a sense of belonging which is the opposite of imposter syndrome. Another hiring practice these institutions may benefit from is cluster hiring. Cluster hiring is a practice of bringing in multiple new employees together to create a cohort experience, which could eliminate the challenges of isolation and lack of representation this study discussed. Specifically, authenticity was often more problematic for the women who were the sole or one of very few Black faculty members at their institution. Representation will

reduce the hyper-visibility some reported as well as decrease moments or patterns of feeling invisible.

Attention also needs to be given to matters of inclusion and equity in academia at the institutional level as well. It is critical to acknowledge how a larger system of oppression comprised of economic, political and ideological forces that function to prioritize White male interests and positioning while guaranteeing Black women are assigned to a subordinate status (Collins, 2002). Leadership is tasked with communicating the priority of equity and inclusion while backing this priority up with practice, policy, and procedures. For example, professional development targeting cultural competency as a requirement for all faculty members can improve the institution's overall consciousness (Dade et al., 2015). Changing an institutional culture is a slow and arduous process but it is the only way Black women will be empowered within higher education and comfortable being their authentic selves and knowing their worth through a critical mass of individuals with a changed consciousness (Collins, 2002). Creating and nurturing a culture of collaboration is important to aid in the success of Black women faculty members. If faculty honor the rigor and quality of this research, it will help Black women manage the challenges they face with imposter syndrome. Ensuring prepared and dedicated mentors are available both within and beyond the schools of social work would support the success of this population (Kelly et al., 2017).

In addition to support, opportunities to create and maintain trust with Black women faculty members is vital. When trust is absent, these negative experiences will continue to overshadow the positive aspects of these females' professions. One way to build trust with Black female faculty members is to host events that present opportunities to share the various supports the institution has in place. These events can range from welcome receptions for Black women faculty members to meetings throughout the academic year to discuss any discrimination, isolation or other negative feelings they may have experienced (Abdul-Raheem, 2016). Black feminist thought reminds us that even though these women may share identities, their experiences remain unique, and they may or may not arrive to a point of group knowledge, meaning they can benefit from a variety of supports specific to their needs (Collins, 2002).

Transparency, empowerment and asking these individuals what they need are good ways to begin committing to genuine and informed change. A lack of transparency was often the source of mistrust. Discussing changes that leadership would like to see as well as the plan of action to achieve the changes will let Black women faculty members know that improving the culture is a priority and resources are being allocated toward improvements. This level of transparency is important in that it is an opportunity to provide support and respect to this group immediately who often believe they have not historically been afforded either.

### *Implications for Research*

This case study highlighted the experiences of the nine Black female faculty members at research-intensive schools of social work showing that their experiences are often inequitable and unnecessarily exhausting at best. These women have and

continue to endure toxic work environments that create a climate in which they constantly question their decisions to stay and their ability to succeed. Sadly, many of these internal battles remain present for those who have seemingly successfully navigated these difficult situations for as many as 20 years.

Specifically, the findings provided insight into the experiences of Black women faculty members and imposter syndrome and the energy expended conforming to the expectations of the dominant culture and avoiding behavior that may be viewed as stereotypical. An area of further inquiry could be determining if there are mental health implications of the negative experiences these women shared. What are the true costs of feeling the need to work twice as hard as others to be average? What does one sacrifice when constantly censoring their language, appearance and general interactions with colleagues? It would also be valuable to expand the research to include Black females who chose to leave academia. Understanding if they left as a result of the “othering” related to imposter syndrome and/or authenticity as discussed by the women in this study is important.

Another line of inquiry would be to explore the experiences of former faculty members who are now administrators in leadership roles. Critical lessons about the climate for administrators can be learned if these Black women continue to deal with imposter syndrome and believing they cannot be authentic. It would be important to understand how their experiences have changed throughout their tenure in the academy. Comparison studies based on age of participants and length of years in the professoriate could also be telling as to whether or not there may be generational changes in expectations surrounding equity and inclusion. Are there any trends relating to authenticity and or imposter syndrome either increasing or decreasing? Expanding this research to include adjunct faculty and current doctoral students who aspire to full-time faculty roles could provide an additional layer of understanding the experiences of this group. Research that investigates the experiences of Black women from graduate school through professorship could bridge a significant gap in the literature in social work education. Understanding and closing leaks in the pipeline of Black female social work faculty members at all types of institutions calls for further exploration.

Future studies examining specifically the experiences related to scholarship for the Black women faculty members whose research centers Black women could further our understanding of this subset of faculty members. According to Crenshaw (1989), “Black women are caught between ideological and political currents that combine first to create and then to bury Black women’s experiences” (p. 160). Many Black women academics study Black women utilizing Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality theories to not only advance the experiences of Black women but to control the narratives around said lived experiences. Black feminist thought prioritizes empowerment and believes it is essential that Black women intellectuals are committed to advancing the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one’s own agenda is essential to empowerment (Collins, 2002).

## Conclusion

This case study of the experiences of nine Black female faculty members at research-intensive schools of social work provided an opportunity for voices that are often silenced to be amplified. It is evident that the Black female faculty members demonstrate determination and dedication despite the lack of representation, equity and inclusion within their institutions. Each of the interviewees stated that no one had ever asked the questions of this study or inquired about their experience as a Black female faculty member. Black feminist thought and intersectionality speak to the power of a counter narrative that can only be created by providing a platform for the often-silenced voices of Black women navigating multiple oppressed identities. Although social work is guided by a code of ethics and values of service such as worth and dignity of the individual and social justice, these tenets are not translating to inclusive and equitable experiences for Black women faculty members. It is not enough for Black women to simply survive in higher education, rather inclusion and equity will be achieved when these women are able to thrive in healthy and inclusive environments. Social work is of particular interest in that it espouses a code of ethics and core values of service that if applied to the cultures within these schools, may provide Black women with more equitable experiences. Black women scholars cannot survive and thrive in social work programs unless institutions build trust with these women by respecting their diverse research interests, choices of methodology, increasing representation across all academic ranks and fully adhering to the *NASW Code of Ethics*.

## References

- Abdelaal, G. (2020). Coping with imposter syndrome in academia and research. *Biochemist*, 42(3), 62-64. <https://doi.org/10.1042/BIO20200033>
- Abdul-Raheem J. (2016). Faculty diversity and tenure in higher education. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, 23(2), 53-56. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27439231/>
- Allen, W., Epps, E., & Guillory, E. (2000). The Black academic: Faculty status among African Americans in U.S. higher education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69, 112-127. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2696268>
- Allen, J. L., Huggins-Hoyt, K. Y., Holosko, M. J., & Briggs, H. E. (2018). African American social work faculty: Overcoming existing barriers and achieving research productivity. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 28(3), 309-319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731517701578>
- Bradley, C. (2005). The career experiences of African American women faculty: Implications for counselor education programs. *College Student Journal*, 39(3), 518-527. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-10358-012>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Breen, R. (2006). A practical guide to focus-group research. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30(3), 463-475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098260600927575>



- Brown, C., II., & Dancy, T., II. (2010). Predominantly White institutions. In K. Lomotey (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of African American education* (pp. 524-526). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412971966.n193>
- Carbado, D., Crenshaw, K., Mays, V., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). Intersectionality mapping the movements of theory. *DuBois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 303-312. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1742058x13000349>
- Carnegie Classification of Institutions. (2021). *Basic classification description*. [https://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification\\_descriptions/basic.php](https://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/basic.php)
- Clance, P., & Imes, S. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241-247. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006>
- Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Rutledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of Empowerment* (2nd ed.). Rutledge.
- Comer, E., Medina, C., Negroni, L., & Thomas, R. (2017). Women faculty of color in a predominantly White institution: A natural support group. *Social Work With Groups*, 40(1-2), 148-155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2015.1077641>
- Council of Social Work Education. (2017). *2016 statistics on social work education in the United States*. <https://www.cswe.org/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=6e8bc9e7-ebd6-4288-bc7a-d2d427d68480>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139-167. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ucf>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Croom, N., & Patton, L. (2011/2012). The miner's canary: A critical race perspective on the representation of Black women full professors. *Negro Educational Review* 62/63(1-4), 13-39, 265-266.
- Dade, K., Tartakov, C., Hargrave, C., & Leigh, P. (2015). Assessing the impact of racism on Black faculty in White academe: A collective case study of African American female faculty. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 39(2), 134-146. [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1127&context=edu\\_pubs](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1127&context=edu_pubs)
- Donovan, R. (2011). Tough or tender: (Dis)similarities in White college students' perceptions of Black and White women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 35(3), 458-468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684311406874>

- Dunn, A. (2019). Younger, college-educated Black Americans are most likely to feel need to 'code-switch'. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/24/younger-college-educated-black-americans-are-most-likely-to-feel-need-to-code-switch/>
- Edwards J., Clark, T., & Bryant, S. (2012). African American female faculty in predominantly White graduate schools of social work. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 32, 90-107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2012.639683>
- Fries-Britt, S., Rowan-Kenyon, H., Perna, L., Milem, J., & Howard, D. (2011). Underrepresentation in the academy and the institutional climate for faculty diversity. *The Journal of the Professoriate*, 5(1), 1-34. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264003593\\_Underrepresentation\\_in\\_the\\_Academy\\_and\\_the\\_Institutional\\_Climate\\_for\\_Faculty\\_Diversity](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264003593_Underrepresentation_in_the_Academy_and_the_Institutional_Climate_for_Faculty_Diversity)
- Grant, C., & Ghee, S. (2015). Mentoring 101: Advancing African American women faculty and doctoral student success in predominantly White institutions. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(7), 759-785. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2015.1036951>
- hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press.
- Howard-Baptiste, S., & Harris, J. (2014). Teaching then and now: Black female scholars and the mission to move beyond borders. *Negro Educational Review*, 65(1-4), 5-22. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1054133>
- Howard-Hamilton, M. (2003). Theoretical frameworks for African American women. *New Directions for Student Services*, 104, 19-27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.104>
- Hudson, K., Shapiro, V., Ebner, I., Berenberg, A., & Bacher, N. (2017). Preparing tomorrow's professoriate: An examination of social justice language in social work Ph.D. program manuals. *Social Work Education*, 36(4), 443-455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1297395>
- Jaysiiree, J., Pierce, D., Ortiz, L., Hills, D., & Sowbei, L. (2011). Access to intersectionality, content to competence: Deconstructing social work education diversity standards. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 47(2), 283-301. <https://doi.org/10.5175/jswe.2011.200900118>
- Jones, T., Wilder, J., & Osborne-Lampkin, L. (2013). Employing a Black feminist approach to doctoral advising: Preparing Black women for the professoriate. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 82(3), 326-338. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.82.3.0326>
- Kelly, B., Gayles, J., & Williams, C. (2017). Recruitment without retention: A critical case of Black faculty unrest. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 86(3), 305-317. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.86.3.0305>

- King, N. (2004). Using templates in the thematic analysis of text. In C. Cassell & G. Symon (Eds.), *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research* (pp. 257-270). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446280119.n21>
- Lee, L. J., & Leonard, C. A. (2001). Violence in predominantly White institutions of higher education: Tenure and victim blaming. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 4(2/3), 167-186. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j137v04n02\\_09](https://doi.org/10.1300/j137v04n02_09)
- Leonard, D. (2014, March 17). Imposter syndrome: Academic identity under siege? *The Conversation*. <https://drdavidjleonard.com/2014/03/07/impostor-syndrome-academic-identity-under-siege-the-conversation-blogs-the-chronicle-of-higher-education/>
- Lloyd-Jones, B. (2014). African American women in the professoriate: Addressing social exclusion and scholarly marginalization through mentoring. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 22(4), 269-283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2014.945737>
- Loorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.
- Marbley, A. (2007). Finding my voice: An African American female professor at a predominantly White university. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, 22, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.18738/awl.v22i0.257>
- McGee, E., & Kazembe, L. (2015). Entertainers or education researchers? The challenges associated with presenting while Black. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19, 96-120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1069263>
- Nash, J. (2011). Practicing love: Black feminist, love-politics, and post-intersectionality. *Meridians*, 11(2), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1>
- National Association of Social Workers [NASW]. (2017). *Revised code of ethics*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- NASW. (2021). *Highlighted revisions to the Code of Ethics*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Highlighted-Revisions-to-the-Code-of-Ethics>
- Padgett, D. (2008). *Qualitative methods in social work research*. Sage.
- Parsons, E., Bulls, D., Freeman, T., & Atwater, M. (2018). General experiences + race + racism = Work lives of Black faculty in postsecondary science education. *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 13, 371-394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-016-9774-0>
- Pewewardy, N. (2007). *Challenging White privilege: Critical discourse for social work education*. CSWE Press.
- Pittman, C. (2012). Racial microaggressions: The narratives of African American faculty at a predominantly White university. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 8(1), 82-92. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.81.1.0082>

- Roberts, D. (2014). Complicating the triangle of race, class and state: The insights of Black feminists. *Ethnic and Radical Studies*, 37(10), 1776-1782.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.931988>
- Saldana, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Stolp, S., & Smith, S. (1995). *Transforming school culture: Stories, symbols, values and the leader's role*. ERIC Publications. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED386783.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education [US DOE]. (2019). National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS): Degrees and other formal awards conferred [Table].  
[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19\\_324.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_324.20.asp)
- U.S. News and World Report. (2019). Best schools of social work.  
<https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-health-schools/social-work-rankings>
- Vakalahi, H., & Starks, S. (2010). The complexities of becoming visible: Reflecting on the stories of women of color as social work educators. *Affilia*, 25(2), 110-122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109910364343>
- Vasquez Heilig, J., Flores, I., Souza, A., Barry, J., & Barcelo Monroy, S. (2019). Considering the ethnoracial and gender diversity of faculty in US college and university intellectual communities. *Hispanic Journal of Law and Policy*, 2(1), 1-31. <https://stcl.edu/Journals/HispanicLaw/2019/2019Heilig1-31.pdf>
- Yin, R. K. (2012). *Applications of case study research*. Sage.

**Author note:** Address correspondence to LaShawnda Fields, Ph.D., School of Social Work, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, 72701. Email: [lnfields@uark.edu](mailto:lnfields@uark.edu)