

Racism in the College Boardroom? A Personal Narrative and Case Study

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of ethnicity, race, class, and unwritten but ingrained college policy through use of an anonymized personal narrative and case study.

Intersectionality, as initially suggested by Lorde and later described by Crenshaw, provided the theoretical framework from which to explore this case. Development of the case was guided by four elements deemed as vital to effective case narratives: context, complexity, ambiguity, and relevance. The discussion focuses on the key question of the extent to which this was a case of racism, or if other factors might have accounted for the experience. The paper's intent is to draw attention to often veiled yet problematic and discriminatory behavior in academic leadership.

Keywords: intersectionality, racism, academic leadership, personal narrative, case study

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Sometimes racism is blatant, in your face. For me, racism has more often come in the form of a perplexing message that I needed to somehow decode. This personal narrative¹ is about just one of those head-scratching, unsettling times. In retrospect, my experience was a lens into the intersection of ethnicity, race, class, and unwritten but ingrained university policy.

Theoretical Grounding: Intersectionality and Racism as a Descriptor

Intersectionality provides an accessible framework and lens through which to understand and interpret the personal narrative that is at the heart of this paper. The roots of this framework are perhaps best seen in the writing of the radical literary feminist, Lorde (1984/2007), in which “questions of experience, systems of oppression, and multiple identities—often derived from Lorde’s arguments—remain the common ground of intersectional debates” (Ilmonen, 2017, p. 8). Lorde’s work in the 1970s eloquently expressed the issue of multiple simultaneous oppression, including race, gender, and class—the essence of intersectionality—though without using the term intersectional. The term and a broadening of the theory of intersectionality came in the 1980s with the work of Crenshaw (1989), a scholar who first regarded it as a legal term to explain how characteristics such as race and class intersect with one another and overlap. Crenshaw’s goal was not to build a racial hierarchy, as some suggest, but to demolish racial hierarchies. Or, in the words of Lorde (1983), “oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sexes and colors and sexualities; and among those of us who share the goals of liberation . . . there can be no hierarchies of oppression” (p. 9).

¹Although this is a personal narrative of the author’s first-hand experience, details have been altered to ensure organizational and individual anonymity.

Intersectionality counters the tendency to disaggregate social problems “into discrete challenges facing specific groups” (Crenshaw, 2021, para. 2) – e.g., that is a Black issue, a Latino problem, a women’s matter, a sexual orientation concern, and so on. In contrast to this silo-oriented approach to social justice, intersectional theory considers how factors such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, and other markers of differences work together to limit access to social goods. Thus, intersectionality is aimed at understanding issues and problem-solving across constituencies.

Similarly, Kendi (2019) argues against the use of “racist” and “not racist” as fixed categories. Instead, he explains, the term racist is best understood as a descriptor. “It literally describes what a person is being in any given moment, based on what they are saying or not saying, doing or not doing” (Kendi, 2020, as cited Belli, 2020, para. 5). Expanding on this idea of racism as a descriptor rather than a fixed category, Kendi observes, “Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities,” (Kendi, 2019, pp. 17-18). This conceptualization of racism as a descriptor and as an expression of both power and policy provides a complementary perspective to intersectionality theory. Each will be useful in exploring this paper’s personal narrative and case study.

Method: Development of a Case Study

The author’s personal narrative forms the core of the case study that is the focus of this paper. Such a focus offers several advantages in exploring sensitive issues like race, class, and unwritten but ingrained university policy. As other ethics and education researchers have noted (Kowalski, 2012; Merseeth, 1997), richly contextualized cases provide a bridge between the world of ideas and conjecture and the practical world in which we live. Case studies give readers the chance to grapple with problems that are set in specific, complex, real-life settings. Such

settings may be characterized by ambiguity and confounding information. From a teaching perspective, richly textured case studies provide an invaluable opportunity to engage in shared problem solving (Barnes et al., 1994; Fossey & Glover, 2006). An anonymized case that is grounded in reality opens the possibility of exploring challenging situations that might remain invisible in real life due to sensitive information (Olson & Walsh, 2019). The case study in this paper is an anonymized narrative drawn from actual experience.

Four elements vital to a realistic and effective case narrative guided its description: context, complexity, ambiguity, and relevance (Fossey and Crow, 2011). Context means giving readers all the background information needed to fully appreciate a specific problem and apply creative solutions. In my narrative, this element was closely tied to complexity. The goal was to share a realistic, though anonymized case that reflects the complexity inherent in contemporary academic structures and leadership, regardless of discipline. Context and complexity, in turn, provided the basis for imbuing the case with the ambiguity that is characteristic of ethical dilemmas, encouraging readers to reflect on multiple perspectives and approaches and to think in more fluid and less static ways (Crow, 2006; Weick, 1978). A good case is “full of ambiguity,” emphasize Fossey and Crow (2011, p. 5). The final element of a good case, relevance, is highlighted by the importance and immediacy of the narrative that follows.

Personal Narrative

I was a new dean at a moderate-sized, private, non-profit college serving a minority majority student body, most from lower income families with deep roots in the Dominican Republic. When I entered my first “president’s team” meeting, it was with genuine enthusiasm and positive expectations. We met in the quintessential college boardroom—an oversized and expensive looking conference table, plush chairs, rich wood paneling, elegant drapery, and

windows that looked out on a beautiful lawn. The president opened with a welcome message and then proceeded to the first order of business, a brainstorming session on how to increase student engagement. Each leader took turns offering suggestions. Most, it seemed to me, went down a similar path of pep fests, fairs, and various competitions for prizes and awards. One other suggestion was a golf event. The suggestions were met with encouraging comments from around the table, as well as praise from the president.

Then it was my turn. I was having trouble with the image of our students golfing, which reminded me of a misguided research question from years past. I had been investigating quality of life in a population similar in many ways to our current student body. I winced in recalling how the research question used golf to illustrate a typical leisure activity, which was uniformly met with a blank stare by study participants.

I wondered, had I misunderstood the question posed by the president? If not, then why were these seemingly bland ideas met with such enthusiasm? Pushing aside these thoughts, I began by sharing how impressed I was with the rich ethnic and cultural heritage of our students. And, with as much earnestness as I could muster, I suggested a celebration of our students' Dominican American culture. After what seemed an interminable time, during which no one spoke, the president calmly but firmly responded, "we tried that before," and then said, "let's move on to the next person." I was unnerved, and although I was physically present, the remainder of the meeting was a blur. What kind of egregious faux pas had I committed?

Deflated, I retreated to my office. A short time later my assistant interrupted my thoughts to say that one of the other deans was there and asked if I had a few minutes. I said of course and offered a chair to my colleague. She started with "welcome to the college," but then quickly pivoted to the meeting in the boardroom. She said, "I felt kind of sorry for you. But look around.

Minority serving college in a wealthy town? Not only could our students never live here, they're given a prescribed driving route to the college to avoid disturbing any residents. The town council just voted down a proposal for an assisted living facility because 'it would smell.' We may be the favorite charity for many of the folks here, but only as long as we keep things quiet and low key."

I thanked my colleague for explaining, but said, "that sounds racist to me." I shared that I had been clear throughout my interview process that I had come to the college precisely because of its diversity and its mission to serve the underserved. In an apparent attempt to smooth things over, my fellow dean added, "You have a lot of freedom here. The president just doesn't want to put our students' ethnicity on display." I thanked her for coming and said goodbye.

Unable to sleep much that night, I called the president's office the next morning to set up a one-to-one. When asked by her assistant what this was regarding, I said that I was concerned about yesterday's leadership meeting. I received a quick call back and was told that the president was at a satellite campus, but that she could meet me there and that one of the staff would drive me. The speed with which arrangements were made suggested that the president anticipated my call.

The president was exceptionally cordial as she invited me into her office. In retrospect, I realize that she was in damage control mode—smooth over any hurt feelings, reassure, and above all, avoid direct mention of the "R" word. Our conversation did not go well, nor did the one after that, or several others that followed. When I expressed concern about the racist undertones of the boardroom meeting, the president reacted personally, insisting that she could not be racist given all the challenges that she had faced in her career.

Discussion

Ultimately, this experience left me feeling morally compromised, a common definition of moral distress (Varcoe, Pauly, Webster, & Storch, 2012). And yet, the situation itself and possible responses were not as clear cut as they initially seemed. Indeed, the complexity and ambiguity of this case led to these fundamental questions:

- To what extent was this racism or could other factors account for the experience?
- The race and ethnicity of the president and the other college leaders were not specified in my initial write-up. To what extent, if any, might that change interpretations of the case?
- How might my own background have influenced what I felt and observed, as well as how I responded?
- What are the ethics of this situation?

Intersectionality provided an ideal prism for further reflection. My automatic response, demonstrated in my remark to my colleague, was to label this racism. No doubt that was part of my boardroom experience. But just as Lorde, Crenshaw, and Kendi have endeavored to see identities as complex and multidimensional, so too this situation commanded a deeper look into other possible factors involved. The students at the center of this story were not simply Dominican Americans who, as a group, were browner than all the members of the meeting just described. But there was something else. In fact, the college's board of trustees included a dark-complexioned trustee, albeit just one. Still, looking beyond race and ethnicity, it was obvious that none of the trustees or the college leaders came from where the students lived, an economically impoverished section of a sprawling city. They came from far wealthier enclaves that more closely resembled the bucolic community in which the college was located -- the average income for their zip codes was \$143,462, while the average income from the predominant zip codes of

the students was just over a quarter as much, or \$40,088 (actual figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This deeper look at the experience, using the framework of intersectionality, suggested that possible biases involving ethnicity and race may have been layered on socioeconomic descriptors to influence both the silences and the spoken responses.

Regarding the second question, the makeup of the college leadership sharply diverged from that of the student body. Although not stated in the case, it was a mixture of men and women. All were white, and all had names of Anglo-Northern European origin. This begs the question of whether a more racially diverse group might would have reacted differently. “Maybe” is the only possible answer. To be sure, none present questioned the tightly controlled environment in which the campus functioned and, instead, closed ranks around the president. A more diverse leadership group may have had a greater inclination to question the direction of the boardroom discussion and to support ways to celebrate the diversity of students. And yet, even a more diverse leadership may have had second thoughts about suggesting initiatives or activities that could have worried donors, at least in a college such as this one in which private donors were key to its economic survival. Thus, a lack of diversity in academic leadership and economic survival were additional, critical factors to consider in this case.

My own background no doubt influenced my initial response, as well as my later reflections and ultimately the final decision that I made. To borrow the words of Lorde and Crenshaw, I am the intersection of multiple identities. I have worked in higher education as both a faculty member and administrator for more than four decades, in various institutions across the country. I am a White male, a tenured professor, a member of a mostly female discipline (nursing), and a gay person who has been partnered for the past 48 years to an African American man from the rural South. Some of these descriptors likely sensitized me to what I regarded as

injustice. But others, just as surely inclined me to empathize with what, upon reflection, I saw as the economic need underlying the unspoken but widely understood and accepted policy to obscure the reality of our students, except of course for the purpose of fundraising. This is hardly something new, as minority groups have often been publicized for fundraising purposes, salving the consciences of donors, with the understanding that the groups don't get too close to one another, or otherwise freely intermingle. Such is the contradiction, for example, embodied in efforts to raise money for a crisis-ravaged Haiti, while simultaneously turning away (sometimes violently) Haitian refugees from the U.S. border (Narea, 2021).

On balance, I am convinced that although the factors described are useful in deepening understanding of this case, none change the essential meaning of what occurred in that boardroom. Although veiled and more than a little perplexing, what I witnessed was unjust and prejudiced discrimination against a student body. And while it may be impossible to tease apart and rank all the influences, the intersection of ethnicity, race, class, economic status, and unspoken but ingrained college policy stand out as significant forces in shaping what occurred.

The realization of the injustice that I witnessed in that pivotal meeting left me in an ethical bind. Should I stay and continue to battle and, in the process, help some students, just not in the ways or to the extent that I had hoped? Or should I become a whistleblower, if such a response was even possible? Or should I simply make my conclusion known to the college leadership and resign from a position in which I felt ethically compromised? In the end, after several weeks of fruitless communication, I gave my statement and handed in my letter of resignation.

Conclusion

As I have taken on progressively more challenging administrative positions in higher education, I have come to a fuller appreciation of another unwritten rule of the boardroom, which has both a literal meaning within my narrative and a symbolic meaning for academic leaders generally. It is the rule that one does not “air one’s dirty laundry” to the outside, or otherwise disparage one’s academic home to the public. This is a key factor in keeping narratives such as the one I’ve shared hidden, that along with the ever changing and often subtle nature of discrimination. Indeed, who wants to risk exploding one’s academic organization, along with derailing a personal career, when proof can be so elusive? And yet, in my own personal narrative, I continue to wonder if staying and somehow resisting would have been a more noble response to injustice than resigning.

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