

Exploring the Social Psychological Undercurrents of Workplace Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) for Minority Faculty at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the U.S.

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Abstract: African-American faculty at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) continue to face disproportionate exposure to racism-related stressors despite formal legal protections and decades of diversity initiatives. While prior research documents racial discrimination in hiring, promotion, and evaluation, less attention has been given to the cumulative psychological harm produced by daily microaggressions, structural neglect, and the contemporary political climate that increasingly challenges the legitimacy of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Situated within ongoing cultural and ideological conflicts surrounding DEI, this qualitative study examines how African-American faculty experience racial battle fatigue (RBF) amid narratives that cast doubt on their competence, merit, and right to occupy academic spaces. Drawing on in-depth interviews with eleven African-American faculty members employed at PWIs, this study explores the emotional, psychological, and professional consequences of sustained racialized scrutiny, institutional silence, and weakened commitments to equity. Findings reveal that RBF is intensified by anti-DEI rhetoric that reframes structural interventions, such as affirmative action, as unfair advantage, thereby legitimizing heightened surveillance, professional undermining, and racialized classroom challenges. Participants described chronic vigilance, exhaustion, hopelessness, and emotional withdrawal, particularly in contexts where leadership failed to provide affirmation, protection, or material support. The study underscores that racial battle fatigue is not an individual coping deficit but an institutional outcome shaped by structural inequities, ideological resistance to equity, and the erosion of psychological safety. Implications highlight the critical importance of visible representation, images of expertise and competence, and proactive leadership advocacy in disrupting racialized paradigms of merit. By centering the lived psychological experiences of African-American faculty, this research reframes disengagement and attrition as rational responses to cumulative harm and calls for renewed institutional accountability to sustain equity, mental well-being, and the ethical foundations of higher education.

Keywords: Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF), Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), African-American Faculty, Diversity in Higher Education, Racism, Anti-DEI, Inclusion, Microaggressions, Psychology, Social Psychology

JEL Classification Codes: J1, I23, J71, J78, I24, D63

Introduction

African-American employees remain disproportionately exposed to racialized harm in organizational contexts, where discrimination in hiring, promotion, evaluation, workplace culture, and job assignment persists despite formal legal protections (Roberson, 2023; Burrell, 2022). Data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission underscore the magnitude of this inequity. For example, in 2017, African-Americans accounted for 25.2% of all Title VII discrimination charges, far exceeding their proportional representation in the workforce (EEOC, 2017). While such figures document formal allegations of discrimination, they obscure a far more

expansive and insidious landscape of unreported racial harm which often include, daily indignities, exclusions, and microaggressions that rarely culminate in formal complaints yet exact a profound cumulative psychological toll. Contemporary research consistently demonstrates that African-American employees experience racism at significantly higher rates than their peers, reinforcing the conclusion that racialized stress in the workplace operates simultaneously as a structural, cultural, and psychological phenomenon (Roberson, 2023).

Within higher education, these dynamics manifest with particular intensity for African-American faculty employed at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), where racial marginalization is increasingly shaped by broader political and cultural conflicts monitoring (Burrell, 2023; Morin & Burrell, 2025). In recent years, higher education has become a central battleground in national culture wars that frame diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives as illegitimate, excessive, or discriminatory toward non-minority groups. These narratives promote the myth that African-American faculty are hired or promoted not on the basis of merit, but through unfair or preferential processes, casting doubt on their competence, legitimacy, and right to occupy academic spaces. For African-American faculty, the internalization and external projection of these myths amplify the emotional and psychological burden of navigating already racialized academic environments, transforming routine professional interactions into sites of heightened scrutiny and defensive self-monitoring (Burrell, 2023).

One of the most salient frameworks for understanding this burden is Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF), which captures the cumulative physiological, emotional, and psychological exhaustion resulting from chronic exposure to racism-related stress (Arnold, 2016; Franklin, 2019). RBF reflects not an episodic response to isolated incidents, but a sustained condition produced by repeated racial assaults, both overt and subtle, that demand constant vigilance, emotional regulation, and identity negotiation (Burrell, 2024). In the current political climate, these assaults are increasingly reinforced by anti-DEI discourse that legitimizes suspicion toward African-American faculty and reframes structural equity efforts as moral or intellectual transgressions (Morin & Burrell, 2025).

Franklin (2019) conceptualizes racial battle fatigue as the embodied consequence of enduring daily microaggressions that question one's competence, legitimacy, and belonging. These microaggressions take on added potency in environments where African-American faculty are implicitly or explicitly viewed as beneficiaries of undeserved advantage. Over time, such narratives erode psychological well-being, manifesting in anxiety, depression, chronic fatigue, emotional numbing, and pervasive feelings of hopelessness and helplessness monitoring (Burrell, 2023). Importantly, the psychological harm of RBF is magnified when institutions fail to publicly affirm the legitimacy of equity efforts or defend faculty of color against delegitimizing rhetoric (Burrell, 2024). When experiences of racism are minimized, dismissed, or reframed as political sensitivities rather than structural harms, African-American faculty are left to shoulder the burden alone; an isolation that accelerates burnout and psychological withdrawal.

Racial battle fatigue among African-American faculty at PWIs is further intensified by structural inequities embedded within academic institutions and by widespread misunderstandings of the historical purpose of affirmative action. Affirmative action emerged in response to centuries of legally sanctioned exclusion that systematically denied African-Americans access to education, employment, and advancement, not as a mechanism for preferential treatment, but as a corrective intervention aimed at expanding opportunity where merit had long been ignored or suppressed.

Contemporary portrayals that frame affirmative action and DEI as unfair advantages erase this historical context and obscure the reality that African-American faculty continue to face structural barriers, heightened evaluation standards, and unequal access to mentorship and sponsorship (Arnold, 2016). The expectation that faculty of color must simultaneously

overperform to counter stereotypes while absorbing accusations of unearned success creates a state of chronic psychological strain monitoring (Burrell, 2023).

The causes of racial battle fatigue thus extend beyond interpersonal interactions to encompass systemic and ideological conditions, including underrepresentation, lack of mentorship, weakened institutional commitment to equity, and the normalization of implicit bias through political rhetoric (Arnold, 2016). The absence of affirming professional networks is particularly damaging in an era when institutions retreat from DEI language or initiatives under external pressure, leaving African-American faculty without formal mechanisms for support or validation. While self-care and peer support are often promoted as coping strategies, reliance on individual resilience exposes a profound institutional failure which is that the expectation that those most harmed by racism must also bear sole responsibility for enduring it (Burrell, 2024).

The professional consequences of racism-related stress are substantial. African-American faculty at PWIs report significantly higher levels of stress, alienation, and professional dissatisfaction than their White counterparts (Arnold, 2016). In climates shaped by anti-DEI rhetoric, these experiences are compounded by fears of professional vulnerability, reputational harm, and political retaliation. Such conditions erode morale, diminish job satisfaction, and foster a pervasive sense of being undervalued and expendable (Morin & Burrell, 2025). Over time, this contributes to disengagement, reduced productivity, and attrition, reinforcing cycles of underrepresentation that are then misinterpreted as evidence against the effectiveness of equity efforts monitoring (Burrell, 2023).

Psychologically, sustained alienation undermines core aspects of professional identity, including self-efficacy and sense of belonging (Arnold, 2016). African-American faculty frequently describe being “othered,” or positioned as symbolic representatives rather than legitimate scholars, particularly in environments that question the moral legitimacy of DEI. This chronic marginalization fosters emotional withdrawal and heightens vulnerability to stress-related disorders and burnout. The cumulative effect extends beyond individual distress, resulting in a systemic loss of intellectual capital, institutional trust, and diversity of thought within higher education (Burrell, 2024).

Zambrana (2020) situates these experiences within a broader critique of higher education, arguing that racism and sexism are deeply embedded across institutional structures, from classroom dynamics to hiring and promotion practices. In the current political moment, these embedded inequities are further reinforced by ideological resistance to equity itself. When institutions fail to defend the historical necessity of affirmative action or address the psychological costs borne by marginalized faculty, they reproduce inequities that not only harm individuals but also undermine the ethical and intellectual foundations of higher education monitoring.

Problem Statement

Despite decades of diversity initiatives, African-American faculty remain profoundly underrepresented at Predominantly White Institutions, a reality that persists alongside growing political opposition to DEI efforts. National data indicate that African-American faculty constitute only 4.6% of full-time faculty at PWIs, with disproportionate placement in non-tenure-track positions that are lower-paying, less secure, and offer limited pathways to advancement (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Rather than being understood as evidence of ongoing structural inequity, this underrepresentation is increasingly mischaracterized within public discourse as the result of unfair hiring practices, reinforcing stigmatization and delegitimization of African-American faculty presence in academia.

Compounding this inequity, African-American faculty are less likely to be promoted to senior academic ranks and are systematically underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles (Arnold, 2016). The absence of representation at higher institutional levels not

only limits advocacy for equity but also intensifies psychological isolation, particularly in environments where institutional leaders avoid or silence discussions of race and DEI. This structural invisibility heightens vulnerability to racial battle fatigue, as faculty navigate academic spaces that are simultaneously hostile, politically charged, and emotionally unsupported monitoring (Burrell, 2023).

Research consistently demonstrates that African-American faculty experience higher frequencies of racial microaggressions than their White peers, experiences that are exacerbated by narratives questioning their merit and legitimacy (Arnold, 2016). These encounters are rarely addressed through formal mechanisms, especially in climates where institutions fear political backlash for acknowledging racial harm. As a result, African-American faculty are often compelled to internalize distress, normalize psychological injury, and endure racial battle fatigue in silence monitoring (Burrell, 2023). This study examines the forms of racism and microaggressions encountered by African-American faculty at PWIs and interrogates how the convergence of structural inequity, anti-DEI rhetoric, and institutional retreat from equity commitments contributes to psychological harm, professional alienation, and faculty attrition.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how African-American faculty members experience racial battle fatigue within Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), with particular attention to the psychological, emotional, and professional consequences of sustained racism-related stress. Through in-depth engagement with the lived experiences of eleven African-American faculty members, this study seeks to illuminate how chronic exposure to racial microaggressions, structural exclusion, and institutional neglect shapes mental health, professional identity, and sense of belonging. By centering the voices of those most affected, the study aims to move beyond surface-level accounts of workplace racism to examine the cumulative and embodied toll of racial battle fatigue, especially in contexts where support, validation, and understanding are limited or absent.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a critical gap in higher education research by foregrounding the psychological and emotional dimensions of racial battle fatigue among African-American faculty; a population that remains both underrepresented and underexamined. While prior research has documented patterns of discrimination and underrepresentation, fewer studies have captured the depth of mental and emotional harm produced by persistent racialized stress within academic institutions. By providing nuanced, qualitative insights into how African-American faculty navigate isolation, invisibility, and unsupported distress, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the human costs of institutional racism. The findings have the potential to inform more responsive faculty support systems, mental health interventions, and equity-focused policy reforms, while also challenging higher education institutions to confront the often-invisible psychological burdens placed on faculty of color.

Nature of the Study

This study employs a qualitative research design to capture the complexity and richness of African-American faculty members' lived experiences with racial battle fatigue. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given the study's focus on meaning-making, emotional impact, and subjective interpretation of racism-related stress within PWIs. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eleven African-American faculty members, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own words and contextualize the psychological and professional consequences of racialized encounters. This approach prioritizes depth over generalizability, recognizing that racial battle fatigue is a deeply personal and

cumulative phenomenon best understood through narrative, reflection, and interpretive analysis rather than through quantitative measurement alone.

Causes of Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial battle fatigue does not arise from isolated incidents of bias but from prolonged immersion in environments where racism is normalized, minimized, or actively denied (Franklin, 2019; Arnold, 2016). In higher education, these environments are shaped not only by historical exclusion but by contemporary political and cultural dynamics that increasingly frame diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as illegitimate or harmful. African-American faculty are required to function within institutions that publicly espouse neutrality while simultaneously absorbing political narratives that portray equity efforts as unfair advantages. This contradiction places African-American faculty in a psychologically untenable position: they are expected to demonstrate exceptional competence while existing in climates that openly question whether they deserve to occupy academic space at all.

Anti-DEI rhetoric intensifies racial battle fatigue by legitimizing suspicion toward African-American faculty members' merit and reinforcing myths that their presence results from favoritism rather than achievement. These narratives surface in everyday academic interactions which could encompass colleagues speculating that a faculty member was hired "to meet a quota," students questioning credentials in ways not directed at White faculty, or peer evaluations subtly framing success as anomalous rather than earned. Such encounters are frequently rationalized as concerns about fairness or standards, yet for African-American faculty they function as repeated psychological assaults that demand constant self-defense and emotional regulation (Franklin, 2019). Each moment requires a calculation: whether to challenge the assumption, absorb the harm silently, or risk professional retaliation.

The emotional toll of these experiences is magnified by institutional silence. When administrators retreat from DEI commitments under political pressure or avoid explicitly affirming equity principles, African-American faculty interpret this absence as abandonment rather than neutrality. Institutional silence communicates that racial harm is tolerable if acknowledging it is inconvenient. Research consistently demonstrates that lack of administrative support is a central contributor to racial battle fatigue, leaving faculty of color to navigate harm without protection or validation (Arnold, 2016). Over time, this absence of support erodes trust and fosters a deep sense of isolation that extends beyond professional dissatisfaction into emotional vulnerability.

Structural underrepresentation further compounds racial battle fatigue. African-American faculty at PWIs are often one of few, or the only, people of color within their departments, a condition strongly associated with feelings of marginalization and psychological distress (Franklin, 2019). This isolation deprives faculty of informal spaces where experiences of racism can be processed collectively rather than privately. Without such spaces, individuals are more likely to internalize harm, questioning whether their perceptions are legitimate or whether enduring distress is simply the cost of participation. This internal conflict deepens racial battle fatigue by turning external injustice into internalized self-surveillance.

Implicit bias operates as a constant undercurrent within these environments, shaping assumptions about competence, authority, and intellectual legitimacy (Arnold, 2016; Evans & Moore, 2015). In climates saturated with anti-DEI rhetoric, implicit bias is often reframed as objectivity, further legitimizing exclusionary practices. African-American faculty frequently experience heightened scrutiny, delayed recognition, and diminished access to mentorship and resources, all of which demand sustained emotional labor to navigate (Arnold, 2016). The psychological cost of continuously proving oneself in the face of doubt is cumulative and profound.

Effects of Racial Battle Fatigue

The effects of racial battle fatigue on African-American faculty extend far beyond professional frustration, reaching deeply into mental and emotional well-being. Chronic exposure to racism and delegitimization produces emotional depletion, anxiety, irritability, and depressive symptoms (Franklin, 2019). Faculty describe living in a state of anticipatory stress; entering meetings, classrooms, and informal interactions prepared for potential harm. This hypervigilance, while adaptive in hostile environments, gradually depletes emotional reserves and impairs concentration, creativity, and cognitive flexibility.

Physiologically, racial battle fatigue manifests as chronic exhaustion, sleep disruption, headaches, and stress-related illness (Arnold, 2016). These symptoms are often dismissed as individual health concerns rather than recognized as embodied responses to sustained psychological strain. Without institutional acknowledgment, African-American faculty are left to manage these conditions privately, reinforcing a culture in which suffering is individualized and normalized rather than addressed collectively.

Emotionally, racial battle fatigue erodes motivation and professional attachment. Faculty who enter academia with strong commitments to teaching, scholarship, and service may gradually disengage as repeated invalidation signals that their labor is undervalued or conditionally accepted (Evans & Moore, 2015). In environments shaped by anti-DEI rhetoric, disengagement is not apathy; it is self-preservation. Emotional withdrawal becomes a means of surviving systems that extract labor while withholding care. One manifestation of this withdrawal is quiet disengagement, a pattern of minimal compliance accompanied by emotional distancing (Loewy & Spintge, 2022). Among African-American faculty, this response often reflects moral injury; the pain of recognizing that institutions professing equity fail to protect those most vulnerable to harm (Burrell, 2022). While quiet disengagement may reduce immediate psychological strain, it often carries long-term costs, including diminished fulfillment and increased likelihood of attrition.

Microaggressions sustain these effects by accumulating over time. Defined as everyday slights and insults that communicate devaluation or exclusion (Sue, 2010; Smith et al., 2020), microaggressions include being interrupted, misidentified, stereotyped, or ignored. In anti-DEI climates, such behaviors are frequently reframed as misunderstandings or expressions of free speech, further invalidating the experiences of those harmed. The cumulative psychological impact is corrosive, steadily undermining self-confidence and emotional resilience. Tokenism introduces an additional layer of harm. When African-American faculty are visibly included for symbolic diversity yet excluded from meaningful influence or advancement, they experience profound dissonance and emotional exhaustion (Harley, 2008). Being seen but not supported creates a sense of exploitation that deepens alienation and mistrust.

Evaluative processes also function as sites of racialized harm. Research demonstrates that African-American faculty receive harsher student and peer evaluations, reflecting implicit biases that racialize authority and competence (Berk, 2017; Bavishi et al., 2010). Because evaluations influence promotion and tenure, biased assessments intensify stress and reinforce professional precarity, contributing to chronic anxiety and emotional insecurity (Allen et al., 2000).

Racial Trauma and Psychological Consequences

Over time, racial battle fatigue may escalate into racial trauma which is a form of psychological injury resulting from repeated exposure to racism, exclusion, and invalidation (Harts, 2021). Unlike acute trauma, racial trauma is cumulative and relational, emerging from sustained harm that institutions rarely recognize as traumatic. Symptoms such as hypervigilance, emotional numbing, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance closely parallel those associated with post-traumatic

stress disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Sibrava et al., 2019).

A central mechanism linking racism to trauma is helplessness. When African-American faculty experience racism and perceive that reporting it will result in retaliation, dismissal, or inaction, they internalize the belief that harm is unavoidable and unprotected (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; King et al., 2023). Anti-DEI rhetoric intensifies this dynamic by framing equity concerns as illegitimate or divisive, further silencing those most affected and reinforcing psychological withdrawal.

Perhaps most damaging is the absence of understanding. When African-American faculty are told, explicitly or implicitly, that racism is exaggerated, outdated, or irrelevant, they experience a profound form of invalidation that compounds psychological injury (Franklin, 2019). Being misunderstood does not merely fail to alleviate distress; it deepens it. Over time, this invalidation can erode self-worth, foster depressive symptoms, and lead to disengagement from academic life altogether.

Racial battle fatigue is not a deficit of resilience, professionalism, or commitment. It is a predictable psychological outcome of sustained exposure to racial harm in environments that lack support, understanding, and accountability. Anti-DEI rhetoric does not merely shape political discourse, it shapes daily lived experience, legitimizing suspicion, normalizing exclusion, and eroding empathy. Promoting understanding of these dynamics requires more than abstract acknowledgment; it demands a willingness to listen, to believe, and to recognize that the absence of support is itself a form of harm. For interdisciplinary audiences, this insight is essential: equity is not a political preference but a psychological necessity, and empathy is not optional; it is foundational to human and institutional sustainability.

Workplace Dynamics, Psychological Contracts, and Racialized Harm

The psychological contract, the unwritten set of expectations governing the relationship between employees and their institutions, plays a central role in shaping workplace trust, engagement, and well-being (Kraft, 2008; Rehman et al., 2019). This contract is sustained not merely through formal policies but through everyday signals of respect, fairness, and protection. When employees believe that their organization values their contributions and will respond to harm with integrity, they are more likely to invest emotionally and professionally. For African-American faculty, however, this contract is frequently compromised by racism, microaggressions, and institutional silence, producing a sense of betrayal that extends beyond professional dissatisfaction into psychological injury.

Employees of color often navigate workplaces that outwardly espouse commitments to diversity while simultaneously reproducing structures that marginalize them (Burrell, 2024). One of the most persistent challenges is the dissonance between organizational rhetoric and lived experience; a phenomenon increasingly described as diversity dishonesty, in which institutions perform symbolic inclusion without enacting substantive change (Burrell, 2024). For employees of color, this dissonance produces not only professional frustration but deep psychological strain. Being hired into an organization that publicly celebrates diversity yet fails to provide equitable access to mentorship, advancement, or protection against bias fosters a sense of disposability (Burrell, 2024). Over time, this contradiction erodes trust and generates emotional exhaustion, as employees must reconcile the promise of inclusion with daily experiences of exclusion, minimization, or silence.

A second major challenge lies in the chronic underrepresentation of employees of color in leadership and decision-making roles (Morin & Burrell, 2025). This absence functions as both a structural barrier and a psychological signal, communicating whose voices are valued and whose futures are envisioned within the organization (Morin & Burrell, 2025). When employees do not see themselves reflected in leadership, they often experience diminished belonging, heightened self-doubt, and constrained professional aspirations. This dynamic can

fuel imposter syndrome, particularly in environments where merit is implicitly racialized and success by employees of color is framed as exceptional rather than expected (Morin & Burrell, 2025). The mental toll of continually proving one's legitimacy, while lacking advocates with institutional power, contributes to chronic stress, emotional fatigue, and disengagement (Burrell, 2022).

Employees of color also contend with the cumulative psychological impact of everyday workplace racism, including microaggressions, biased evaluations, and exclusion from informal networks that facilitate opportunity. Although these experiences are frequently dismissed as minor or interpersonal, their repetitive nature makes them profoundly harmful. Navigating such environments requires constant vigilance: employees must monitor how they speak, react, and advocate for themselves to avoid being labeled unprofessional, confrontational, or ungrateful. This sustained emotional labor depletes psychological and cognitive resources, increasing vulnerability to anxiety, burnout, and diminished well-being. When organizations fail to acknowledge these harms, or frame concerns about equity as divisive or exaggerated, employees of color are left without validation or support, intensifying feelings of isolation and helplessness. This imbalance fosters disengagement and accelerates racial battle fatigue; a chronic state of psychological exhaustion rooted in sustained inequity (Franklin, 2019; Arnold, 2016).

Contemporary anti-DEI rhetoric further destabilizes this exchange by reframing equity as excess and inclusion as threat. In practical academic settings, this rhetoric manifests when institutional leaders quietly retreat from DEI language, dissolve diversity committees, or frame equity initiatives as politically risky (Burrell, 2024). For African-American faculty, these actions communicate that institutional support is conditional and fragile. In environments already marked by racial vulnerability, such retreats intensify fear, uncertainty, and emotional withdrawal, signaling that protection may be withdrawn precisely when it is most needed (Burrell, 2024).

Racial Battle Fatigue and the Breakdown of Trust

Racial battle fatigue emerges when African-American faculty are required to endure persistent racialized stress without meaningful institutional acknowledgment or relief (Franklin, 2019; Arnold, 2016). This fatigue is not produced solely by overt acts of discrimination but by the cumulative psychological labor of navigating daily microaggressions, managing emotional responses, and anticipating bias. Faculty often describe feeling compelled to remain constantly vigilant, monitoring their tone, appearance, and reactions to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or provoking backlash.

Microaggressions erode job satisfaction and trust by signaling exclusion and devaluation, particularly when they are dismissed as misunderstandings or framed as interpersonal rather than systemic concerns (Arnold, 2016; Evans & Moore, 2015; Corbin et al., 2018). When African-American faculty raise concerns and encounter defensiveness or silence, the psychological contract weakens further. The absence of response communicates that their experiences are unworthy of attention, fostering emotional isolation and reinforcing racial battle fatigue.

The breakdown of trust is especially pronounced in high-stakes processes such as tenure and promotion. Research demonstrates that women and faculty of color face disproportionate exclusion and biased evaluations despite comparable productivity and qualifications (Zambrana, 2020). For African-American faculty, these inequities produce chronic anxiety and a sense of professional precarity, an awareness that career outcomes may be shaped by racialized perceptions rather than merit. The psychological cost of this uncertainty is substantial, undermining confidence, motivation, and long-term commitment to the institution.

Institutional Barriers, Anti-DEI Rhetoric, and Emotional Injury

Institutional policies and practices often reproduce inequity through unequal access to resources, mentorship, and professional development (Zambrana, 2020). These barriers become particularly harmful in environments influenced by anti-DEI narratives, where calls for fairness are reframed as divisive or self-serving. African-American faculty may hesitate to advocate for themselves, fearing that raising concerns will result in reputational harm or professional retaliation. This silencing compounds distress by forcing individuals to endure injustice quietly.

Recruitment and retention efforts that prioritize optics over inclusion further exacerbate emotional harm. Tokenized inclusion, being hired without being supported, creates a painful dissonance between visibility and value. Faculty may be asked to mentor students of color or serve on diversity initiatives while lacking equitable access to workload balance, research support, or advancement opportunities. Over time, this imbalance produces emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and disengagement, eroding trust in institutional intentions.

Collective advocacy structures such as unions and professional associations can offer important safeguards by amplifying voices and providing mechanisms for accountability (Zambrana, 2020). In their absence, African-American faculty often confront systemic harm individually, intensifying vulnerability and reinforcing racial battle fatigue. The psychological burden of standing alone against institutional power is profound, contributing to feelings of helplessness and moral injury.

Psychological Safety, Empathy, and Institutional Responsibility

Inclusion and health within academic workplaces are inseparable from psychological safety; the belief that one can speak openly without fear of retaliation or humiliation (Edmondson, 2018; Clark, 2020). For African-American faculty, psychological safety is frequently compromised by environments that tolerate bias while discouraging candid dialogue. Without safety, even well-designed equity policies fail to mitigate harm.

Psychological safety does not require the absence of conflict; rather, it depends on trust, empathy, and accountability (Burrell, 2022). When faculty believe that their experiences will be heard and respected, they are more willing to engage constructively and contribute fully. Conversely, when institutions dismiss or politicize racial harm, they foster climates of withdrawal and disengagement that undermine collective excellence.

Creating psychologically safe environments requires intentional action. Transparent evaluation criteria, equitable access to resources, culturally competent training, and meaningful mentoring are foundational (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2022; Pittman, 2012; Sinanan, 2016). Support services such as counseling, affinity groups, and peer networks provide critical buffers against isolation. Open dialogue, where concerns can be raised without penalty, is essential to rebuilding trust and restoring the psychological contract.

Coping, Survival, and the Cost of Endurance

In the absence of institutional support, African-American faculty often rely on informal coping strategies, including building peer networks and engaging in advocacy organizations (Franklin, 2019). These strategies provide emotional validation and collective resilience, yet they cannot substitute for systemic change. Expecting those most affected by racism to also shoulder the responsibility for healing reflects a profound institutional failure.

Racial battle fatigue should not be interpreted as diminished resilience or commitment. It is a predictable psychological outcome of sustained exposure to racial harm in environments that lack empathy, accountability, and protection. Anti-DEI rhetoric exacerbates this harm by legitimizing exclusion and eroding institutional responsibility. Promoting understanding of these dynamics is essential for fostering empathy and ethical leadership. Sympathy emerges when institutions and individuals recognize that silence, dismissal, and

inaction are not passive—they are forms of harm. Empathy begins when lived experiences are believed, supported, and met with meaningful action.

Methodology and Study Design

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of African-American faculty members employed at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). A qualitative approach was selected to capture the depth, complexity, and cumulative nature of racism-related stress, particularly as it relates to racial battle fatigue, burnout, and perceived institutional abandonment. This design emphasizes participants' meaning-making processes and mental health impacts rather than prevalence or generalizability.

Participants

The study included eleven African-American faculty members representing a range of academic ranks, disciplines, and years of experience within PWIs. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who self-identified as African-American and had direct experience navigating racially marginalized academic environments. This approach ensured rich, information-dense narratives relevant to the study's focus.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Interviews were conducted individually via secure video conferencing platforms to ensure confidentiality and accessibility. A semi-structured format allowed participants to reflect on both specific incidents and cumulative psychological effects of workplace racism while allowing flexibility to pursue emergent themes related to mental health and organizational dynamics. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. A trauma-informed interviewing approach was used, prioritizing participant agency, emotional safety, and reflective listening throughout the interview process.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze interview transcripts through an iterative, inductive process. Initial coding focused on psychological responses to workplace experiences, including stress, vigilance, exhaustion, alienation, and disengagement. Codes were then clustered into broader themes reflecting racial battle fatigue, burnout, hopelessness, and perceived abandonment.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Experiences of Microaggressions

1. Can you describe recurring interactions or behaviors in your workplace that have made you feel subtly disrespected, questioned, or diminished because of your race?
2. How do these experiences affect you emotionally and psychologically, both in the moment and over time?

Racial Battle Fatigue and Psychological Strain

3. How would you describe the cumulative emotional and mental toll of navigating your institution as an African-American faculty member?
4. In what ways has the need to remain vigilant or self-monitor at work affected your psychological well-being?

Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion

5. Have there been periods when you felt emotionally or mentally exhausted due to your work environment? What contributed to those feelings?
6. How has this exhaustion influenced your motivation, sense of purpose, or engagement with your work?

Hopelessness and Disengagement

7. Have you experienced moments when you felt discouraged or hopeless about your ability to thrive or advance within your institution?
8. How have these feelings shaped your level of engagement or emotional investment in your role?

Perceived Abandonment and Lack of Support

9. How has your institution or leadership responded when concerns about race, bias, or inequity have been raised?
10. In what ways, if any, have you felt unsupported, dismissed, or abandoned by leadership or organizational systems?

Leadership and Organizational Support

11. What specific actions, behaviors, or forms of engagement from leaders or administrators have you found, or believe would be, most effective in reducing the emotional and psychological strain associated with racial battle fatigue?
12. What organizational policies, resources, or structural changes do you believe are necessary to create a work environment that genuinely supports your mental well-being, sense of safety, and long-term sustainability as an African-American faculty member?

Question 1

Can you describe recurring interactions or behaviors in your workplace that have made you feel subtly disrespected, questioned, or diminished because of your race?

Theme 1: Racialized Questioning of Competence and Expertise (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects repeated experiences in which African-American faculty members' authority, competence, and expertise are subtly challenged, particularly by White students, in ways that exceed normal academic engagement and carry racialized undertones.

Illustrative Quote:

"I was constantly being challenged in class by White students on how I should be teaching; why I chose certain materials, whether my approach was 'rigorous enough,' or whether I really understood the subject. It didn't feel like curiosity; it felt like interrogation. Every class became emotionally exhausting because I wasn't just teaching content, I was defending my right to be there. Over time, that kind of constant questioning made me feel lonely, tense, and deeply anxious, like I had to armor myself just to walk into the classroom. I was being treated like I was incompetent and the fact that I had a doctorate and 20 years of teaching experience did not matter to this 22-year-old student, who thought they knew better how to teach than I did."

Theme 2: Professional Undermining by Colleagues (9 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures subtle yet damaging behaviors in which colleagues undermine African-American faculty credibility through disparaging comments or indirect actions that shape student perceptions.

Illustrative Quote:

"I later learned that other faculty members were disparaging me to students behind my back. Students came into my class already doubting me, already skeptical. Knowing that colleagues,

people who were supposed to be peers, were actively working against me was devastating. It made me feel isolated and unsafe, like the workplace itself was hostile. That sense of betrayal sat with me every day and made me question whether I belonged in academia at all.”

Question 2

How do these experiences affect you emotionally and psychologically, both in the moment and over time?

Theme 3: Immediate Emotional Distress (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects acute emotional reactions, anxiety, anger, humiliation, that occur during or immediately after microaggressive encounters.

Illustrative Quote:

“In the moment, my heart would race and my stomach would knot up. I’d feel embarrassed, angry, and exposed all at once, but I couldn’t show it. I had to stay calm, professional, composed. Suppressing those emotions took so much energy that by the end of the day I felt completely drained, like I had nothing left for myself or my family.”

Theme 4: Cumulative Psychological Wear (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme represents the long-term psychological consequences of repeated microaggressions, including chronic stress, sadness, and emotional numbness.

Illustrative Quote:

“Over time, it just wore me down. The stress didn’t go away when I left campus; it followed me home. I started feeling hopeless, emotionally numb, and constantly exhausted. Even when nothing happened on a given day, I was already bracing for the next incident. That constant tension slowly eroded my mental health.”

Racial Battle Fatigue and Psychological Strain (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Question 3

How would you describe the cumulative emotional and mental toll of navigating your institution as an African-American faculty member?

Theme 5: Feeling Structurally Set Up for Failure

Definition:

This theme reflects institutional neglect during onboarding and early employment that places African-American faculty at a disadvantage from the outset.

Illustrative Quote:

“As a new faculty member, I felt completely set up for failure. I was assigned teaching assistants who had not been trained, no one told me where or how to get IT support to set up my courses, and I had to scramble just to function. I even had to purchase my own textbooks for the classes I was teaching. That experience created constant stress and shame, because when things went wrong, it felt like I was being judged rather than supported.”

Theme 6: Persistent Hypervigilance (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures the psychological strain of continuous self-monitoring to avoid confirming racial stereotypes or attracting negative attention.

Illustrative Quote:

“I was always watching myself; how I spoke, how I reacted, how firm or soft I sounded. I felt like I couldn’t afford to make a single mistake. That level of vigilance is exhausting. It felt like my mind was never allowed to rest, and that constant pressure slowly burned me out.”

Question 4

In what ways has the need to remain vigilant or self-monitor at work affected your psychological well-being?

Theme 7: Emotional Suppression and Internalized Stress (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects the suppression of emotional responses to avoid being labeled unprofessional, leading to internalized stress.

Illustrative Quote:

“I swallowed so much anger and hurt just to survive. I knew if I expressed frustration, it could be used against me. Holding all of that inside made me feel tense and irritable all the time, like my body was carrying stress it couldn’t release.”

Theme 8: Loss of Authenticity (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures the psychological harm of feeling unable to be one’s authentic self in the workplace.

Illustrative Quote:

“I stopped being myself at work. I became careful, guarded, and quiet. That loss of authenticity made me feel lonely, like I was disappearing inside my own life. It’s painful to realize you can’t fully exist in the place where you spend most of your time.”

Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion

Question 5

Have there been periods when you felt emotionally or mentally exhausted due to your work environment?

Theme 9: Resource Deprivation and Burnout (9 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects burnout resulting from having to compensate for institutional failures without adequate support.

Illustrative Quote:

“Having to buy my own textbooks and figure everything out on my own made me feel abandoned. It wasn’t just about money; it was about feeling invisible. That constant struggle drained me emotionally and mentally until I felt completely burned out.”

Theme 10: Surveillance and Over-Scrutiny (10 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures burnout caused by excessive monitoring and micromanagement by leadership.

Illustrative Quote:

“My department chair micromanaged how I taught my class and even sent out surveys for just my course. Knowing I was being singled out made me anxious and exhausted. I felt like I was under a microscope every day, and that pressure was unbearable.”

Question 6

How has this exhaustion influenced your motivation or engagement?

Theme 11: Emotional Withdrawal (10 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects reduced emotional investment as a self-protective response.

Illustrative Quote:

“I stopped going above and beyond. Not because I didn’t care, but because caring hurt too much. Pulling back felt like the only way to protect myself from complete emotional collapse.”

Theme 12: Loss of Purpose (8 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures erosion of meaning and professional identity due to sustained exhaustion.

Illustrative Quote:

“I used to love teaching. Now I sometimes wonder why I’m even here. That loss of purpose feels heavy and heartbreakingly.”

Hopelessness and Disengagement

Question 7

Have you felt discouraged or hopeless about thriving or advancing?

Theme 13: Career Futility (7 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects a sense that effort does not translate into opportunity.

Illustrative Quote:

“No matter how hard I worked, it felt like advancement was out of reach. That realization made me feel hopeless, like I was running on a treadmill that never moved.”

Theme 14: Emotional Resignation (10 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures quiet acceptance of limited possibilities.

Illustrative Quote:

“Eventually, I stopped expecting things to change. That resignation was emotionally crushing, but it felt safer than constantly being disappointed.”

Question 8

How have these feelings shaped your engagement?

Theme 15: Disengagement as Survival (7 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects disengagement used as a coping strategy.

Illustrative Quote:

“I emotionally checked out to survive. Staying fully engaged felt dangerous to my mental health.”

Theme 16: Isolation from Institutional Life (6 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures withdrawal from collegial and institutional participation.

Illustrative Quote:

“I stopped attending meetings and social events. I felt disconnected and alone, like I didn’t belong in those spaces anyway.”

Perceived Abandonment and Lack of Support

Question 9

How has leadership responded to concerns about race or bias?

Theme 17: Institutional Silence (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects non-response or avoidance by leadership.

Illustrative Quote:

“When I raised concerns, nothing happened. That silence was devastating. It told me my pain didn’t matter.”

Theme 18: Procedural Deflection (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures bureaucratic responses that avoid accountability.

Illustrative Quote:

“My concerns were passed around without resolution. It felt like being lost in a system designed to exhaust you into silence.”

Question 10

In what ways have you felt unsupported or abandoned?

Theme 19: Emotional Abandonment (8 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects lack of empathy or care from leadership.

Illustrative Quote:

“I felt completely alone. There was no checking in, no concern for how this was affecting me mentally.”

Theme 20: Invalidated Reality (10 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures dismissal of lived experience.

Illustrative Quote:

“Being told I was overreacting made me question my own reality. That kind of invalidation is deeply harmful.”

Leadership and Organizational Support

Question 11

What leadership actions would reduce racial battle fatigue?

Theme 21: Proactive Support and Preparation (8 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects the need for early, concrete institutional support.

Illustrative Quote:

“If leadership had ensured trained teaching assistants, IT guidance, and proper resources from day one, it would have changed everything. That kind of support signals you belong.”

Theme 22: Visible Advocacy (10 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures the importance of leaders actively defending faculty.

Illustrative Quote:

“Knowing leadership would step in when I was undermined would have reduced so much stress. Silence made everything worse.”

Question 12

What structural changes are necessary?

Theme 23: Accountability Mechanisms (11 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme reflects the need for systems that prevent racialized harm.

Illustrative Quote:

“There needs to be accountability so faculty can’t disparage you or single you out without consequences. That protection would bring psychological safety.”

Theme 24: Sustained Mental Health Support (7 out of 11 interview participants mentioned this concept)

Definition:

This theme captures the need for long-term institutional care.

Illustrative Quote:

“Having access to mental health support that actually understands racial trauma would make me feel seen. Right now, it feels like endurance is expected, not care.”

Conclusions

This study illuminates the profound psychological and emotional consequences experienced by African-American faculty members navigating Predominantly White Institutions, revealing racial battle fatigue as a deeply institutional phenomenon rather than an individual shortcoming. Across participants’ narratives, patterns of racialized questioning of competence, professional undermining, structural neglect, and institutional silence converged to produce sustained anguish, exhaustion, hopelessness, and emotional withdrawal. These findings underscore that workplace harm is not limited to isolated incidents of bias but is embedded in everyday practices, leadership behaviors, and organizational cultures that systematically deny support, validation, and protection. When faculty are repeatedly placed in environments where they must defend their legitimacy while simultaneously compensating for institutional failures, the psychological cost becomes cumulative and debilitating.

A central implication of this study is the critical importance of representation; not merely numerical diversity, but visible, supported representation that affirms expertise, authority, and belonging. The findings demonstrate that leadership demographics powerfully shape organizational culture and norms of credibility. When African-American faculty remain underrepresented in positions of influence, whiteness continues to function as the default image of competence, reinforcing paradigms that render faculty of color perpetually suspect. Conversely, sustained representation, particularly when accompanied by institutional advocacy, has the capacity to disrupt these racialized assumptions and recalibrate how expertise is recognized and respected. Shattering entrenched paradigms therefore requires institutions to treat representation not as symbolic inclusion, but as a structural intervention that reshapes who is seen, believed, and protected within academic spaces.

The findings further highlight the indispensable role of leadership in mitigating racial battle fatigue, particularly leaders who hold positional power, control access to resources, and shape institutional norms. Participants’ accounts reveal that psychological harm was often intensified not by single incidents of bias, but by leadership inaction, which encompasses silence that communicated abandonment and normalized inequity. Effective leadership requires moving beyond performative commitments toward consistent, relational action

grounded in listening, accountability, and advocacy. Leaders who actively interrupt bias, protect faculty from professional sabotage, and publicly affirm the legitimacy of faculty of color play a critical role in restoring trust and psychological safety. When leaders fail to act, they inadvertently reinforce narratives that devalue equity and legitimize harm.

This study recommends that institutions operationalize equity-focused leadership as a core professional responsibility rather than an optional moral stance. Concrete actions include embedding equity advocacy into leadership evaluations, ensuring equitable onboarding and access to instructional resources, protecting faculty from disproportionate surveillance and micromanagement, and establishing formal responses to racialized classroom challenges and colleague disparagement. Institutions must also confront anti-DEI rhetoric directly by rejecting myths that frame equity efforts as threats to merit. Such narratives not only undermine organizational cohesion but also exacerbate psychological distress by casting the presence of African-American faculty as illegitimate. Leaders have a responsibility to articulate clearly that equity initiatives exist to correct historical and structural exclusion and to affirm that excellence and inclusion are mutually reinforcing.

The potential impact of this study lies in its capacity to foster empathy while advancing institutional accountability. By centering the lived psychological experiences of African-American faculty, this research challenges deficit-based interpretations of burnout, disengagement, and attrition, reframing them instead as rational responses to chronic harm and neglect. For interdisciplinary audiences, the findings underscore that representation matters because it reshapes cultural expectations of expertise; leadership matters because it transforms power into protection; and understanding matters because without it, institutions risk reproducing the very inequities they claim to oppose. Meaningful change requires not only policy reform, but courageous leadership willing to see, speak, and act; using power not to preserve comfort, but to dismantle harm and create academic environments in which all faculty can thrive.

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