

## CAN THE FEMALE BLACK SCHOLAR SPEAK OUT IN A NONCOOPERATIVE SPACE?

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### INTRODUCTION

For decades, Black women scholars in Management and Organization Studies (MOS) have been leading actors and remain principal voices in the fight for racial equality within academia and other organizational contexts (e.g., Nkomo, 1992). While these Black women academics may not denote their work as intellectual activism – defined as “the myriad ways that people place the power of ideas in service to social justice” (Collins, 2013: ix), they deploy their powerful ideas to challenge the ‘Othering’ (Said, 1978) of Black bodies, and consequently, the White supremacist social construction of Black individuals as ignorant and powerless. The primary goal of their Black scholarship (Muzanenhamo & Chowdhury, 2021) is to neutralize the *outsider status* attached to Black bodies within organizations which results in racist treatment of the individuals (Bell & Nkomo, 1999; Proudford & Thomas 1999).

Hence, Black female scholars critically engage with the stigmatization of ‘difference’ (Proudford, 1999), White privilege and White supremacy (Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014), tokenization of Black bodies (Minefee et al., 2018), intersection of gender and racism (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008), and the potential of Black women scholars to act as change agents (Shockley & Holloway, 2019). Despite this collective action against racism in academia (Bell et al., 2020), research on racialized bodies continues to grow (Chowdhury, 2019; Agyemang et al., 2020; Netto et al., 2020; Ozturk & Berber, 2020; Wang & Seifert, 2020), suggesting that racism is far from being eliminated from academia in particular, and wider society in general.

To offer a more transparent analysis of the possible reasons behind the limited capacity of intellectual activism to achieve racial equality, we draw attention to the social and organizational spaces within which intellectual activism manifests. Adopting and extending Chowdhury’s (2020) concept of ‘noncooperative space’, we argue that powerful White actors may boost the rhetoric on achieving racial equality (Ballard et al., 2020; Muzanenhamo & Chowdhury 2021), however, social and organizational spaces remain breeding grounds for anti-Blackness and (liberal) White supremacy (Bell et al., 2020). Consistent with Chowdhury (2020: 4) we regard a noncooperative space as a “highly restrictive, disadvantageous, or even harmful” organizational and social environment that undermines intellectual activism and racial equality, despite its portrayal by powerful White agents as a victim-friendly and protective setting. In reality a ‘noncooperative space’ is dangerous for individuals who (dare to) challenge racism.

We ground our analysis in intersectionality, drawing on an inductive theory analysis of an in-depth interview with a Black African female scholar and, subsequently, her

autoethnographic account of a racially motivated domestic violence experience. Our study emphasizes how *courage* helps Black female intellectual activists to cope. However, courage, a traditionally manly attribute (Jablin, 2006; Rate & Sternberg, 2007), is fragile and never omnipresent. Courage fades and regenerates, resulting in temporary loss and (re)gaining of voice. To overcome noncooperative spaces and advance racial equality, we suggest ‘courageous collective action’ and cooperation among Black, Brown and White scholars (allies).

While the significance of leadership and courage has been acknowledged within MOS, the topic of gender and courage remains poorly studied (Tkachenko et al., 2018). Therefore, we seek to contribute by closing this knowledge gap, specifically focusing on debates on intellectual activism and racial equality within the broader area of diversity and inclusion. In this article, we review scholarship on intersectionality prior to an analysis of ‘noncooperative space’ and its consequences (by scrutinizing an in-depth interview and autoethnographic materials). We then conclude our paper with implications for organizations and practitioners.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

### Intersectionality

Scholars apply intersectionality in multiple and, often, inconsistent ways (Jordan-Zachery, 2007) to explore the experiences of marginalized global communities (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2020) such as Asian cis-heterosexual male leaders (Liu, 2019), gay and queer individuals (Rahman, 2010) and niche scientists (Styhre, 2018). However, we view intersectionality in line with Kimberle Crenshaw’s original conception, as “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences” (Crenshaw, 1991: 1244). Categorically, intersectionality operates as an analytical framework for studying the interlocking of the dimensions of gender, race and class to produce a unique experience of violence – racism and subjugation – for Black women within organizations and society (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989; 1991).

Broadly observed, Black individuals and (all) women – and individuals who identify as Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer (2SLGBTQ+) – face discrimination in social and professional settings. However, all women or all Black people are not the same, implying that Black women’s experiences are not adequately captured by either of these two broad social categories (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). The social location of Black women at the intersection of not only gender, race, class and ethnicity, but also ability and nationality (Yuval-Davis, 2006) means that they are subjugated to multiple types of violence that produce unique experiences for the respective female bodies (Crenshaw, 1991).

To substantiate the above stated observations, compared to Black women, White women structurally benefit from White privilege, defined as better life chances and outcomes for all White individuals due to their race, regardless of the state of their life conditions (Taylor Phillips and Lowery, 2015). This means that, structurally, White women have better access to opportunities, resources and power than Black women (and Black men). Furthermore, social hierarchies position Black women below Black men and White women, rendering them the first group to be eliminated from organizations in times of economic hardship (Crenshaw, 1989).

Furthermore, Black women’s lived experiences of subordination and subjugation must be understood within the specific contexts where they are produced (Jordan-Zachery, 2007) to expose how a particular socially constructed dimension implicates others constitutive of the powerless identity of a Black woman within the given location. This draws

attention to the intersection between place-based identities – such as African – and a Black woman.

### **Noncooperative Space**

Black women's "antiracist, anti-sexist" and "postcolonial" (Mirza, 2009: 2) voices are constantly undermined by the 'noncooperative spaces' (Chowdhury, 2020), within which the voices are developed and articulated (Cornelius et al., 2010). While voice can be interpreted as "speaking up behavior" proactively exhibited by employees when they suggest ways for achieving change (van Dyne et al., 2003: 1369), noncooperative spaces inhibit racialized individuals' voices and capacity to transform racist structures jointly with powerful White actors who are opposed to any form of social injustice. We subsequently identify three ways in which noncooperative spaces inhibit intellectual activism.

First, noncooperative spaces are not overtly racist, as hegemonic actors may implement policies and initiatives targeting racial equality, yet not achieving any tangible change within their organizations. Second, Black individuals may (be empowered to) speak up against racism, but still no transformation materializes. Rather, their voices may attract negative consequences such as loss of employment not directly attributed to racism by the powerful White actors. As noted by researchers like Ahmed (2012), the hegemonic agents who create, organize and manage noncooperative spaces may claim commitment to the development of a safe space for all where anyone can participate in debate and live a dignified life; yet such spaces are often perilous to the racialized individuals and their non-Black allies (c.f. Chowdhury, 2020).

Third, noncooperative spaces induce fear and anxiety in subjugated individuals who challenge racism (e.g., Dar, 2019; Harlow, 2003; Settles et al., 2019), as well as White individuals who might otherwise speak out against marginalization as inferred from studies on bystander intervention (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008; Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Fear is a "hidden, controlled, and privately lived" (Haas, 1977: 156) anticipation of sanctions from powerful actors for violating their rules or deviating from their prescribed behavioral standards (Higgins, 1987). This is linked to the aspect that rules and standards designed to suppress anti-racism voices are rarely articulated explicitly. Rather, they are implied in the hegemonic agents' and other White individuals' (in)actions, most of which induce fear of reprisals, demotions and job losses among Black scholars (Dar, 2019) and their non-Black allies. These undesirable outcomes of speaking out, a pessimistic assessment of personal risk linked to action and heightened sense of being controlled by their situation (Lerner & Keltner, 2001), means that individuals consequently avoid or withdraw their voice (DeCelles et al., 2020) from achieving racial equality. However, silence may protect the self from punitive consequences (van Dyne et al., 2003), while also guarding noncooperative spaces from disruption.

We identify more social injustice contexts reflective of noncooperative spaces beyond racism. For example, refugee contextual arrangements that appear to support entrepreneurship, yet are dominated by hegemonic actors, resemble noncooperative spaces (Chowdhury, 2020). Noncooperative spaces may also entail judicial structures that insensitively (and knowingly or otherwise) 'revictimize' (Smith & Skinner, 2012) and traumatize rape victims (Resick, 1984), when 'rape is rape' (Raphael, 2013). Therefore, these observations merit the analysis of how actors who fight for social justice, particularly Black female scholars (intellectual activists) who seek racial equality, cope within noncooperative spaces.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To depict the coping approaches potentially adopted by Black female scholars, we trace the journey of an aspirant intellectual activist (referred to by a pseudo name, as Alice), using an in-depth interview and inductive theory development (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), and autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis, 1999; Ellis et al., 2011). Due to space constraints, we summarize our autoethnographic materials rather than present them verbatim.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Alice's story depicts her as an immigrant Black African woman starting an academic career on a temporary contract at a Western business school. Racialized experiences compel Alice to embrace a moral obligation towards 'representing' Africans and all other Black people as equal to any other 'race'. Thus, Alice regards herself as an aspirant intellectual activist adopting Black scholarship, and she appears to start drawing global attention as she is invited to join high-level academic panel discussions on racial equality. However, Alice exposes how 'White Power' (temporarily) disrupts her aspirational intellectual activism, following a racially-motivated domestic violence experience that she encounters from a White woman, her co-tenant during the Covid-19 pandemic. 'Let down' by both the Western judicial system and housing estate system, Alice devolves into a 'falling star' (that was just starting to emerge) and goes through a temporary loss of a safe home, confidence and voice, as well as withdrawal from all public (digital) spaces. In her seclusion, Alice holds an internal dialog with herself regarding her silence, other silenced Black victims, and the possible sacrifices made by other Black (female) scholars who choose to speak out. Alice's narrative projects (regaining) courage as central to Black female scholars' intellectual activism within a noncooperative space. Notwithstanding, courage is fragile. Courage vanishes, resulting in (temporary) loss of voice. Yet courage is replenishable, especially where individuals have role models to draw from, and are collectively pursuing a noble good.

## DISCUSSION

### Intellectual Activism in a Noncooperative Space

Racist processes and experiences that seem disjointed, and that seem to transpire in isolated contexts, often target the same Black bodies as exemplified by Alice's journey documented in our study. Racially-motivated domestic violence and work experiences of racism (targeting the same individuals) prevail due to a system of noncooperative spaces established by seemingly disaggregated actors. Within the context of this study, the Western judicial system, housing estate system and a racist academia are separate entities – yet they invisibly conspire and collude in the establishment of a noncooperative space.

Notwithstanding, as history testifies, Black scholars do not appear to surrender; rather, they utilize *courage* in performing intellectual activism in pursuit of racial equality. Contrary to *bravery* that implies boldness and determination or an ability to fearlessly – and often intuitively – confront danger or pain (Kinsella et al., 2017), *courage* involves acting deliberately – and following reflection – in the presence of perceived risks, threats and obstacles in pursuit of a collectively valued moral goal (Goud, 2005; Rate & Sternberg, 2007; Koerner, 2014). As extant studies reveal, (potential) Black intellectual activists risk physical, psychological and professional damage on a daily basis, and they are afraid of the consequences of challenging racism. Yet they speak out (e.g., Christian, 2017; Dar, 2019). Notwithstanding, their courage is fragile and never omnipresent. Courage fades and regenerates, resulting in temporary loss and (re)gaining of voice.

Courage is traditionally attributed to White men belonging to the upper social class (Jablin, 2006), as traced to the thinking of early Western and Eastern philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle (Rate & Sternberg, 2007). Notwithstanding, Black female scholars who pursue racial equality demonstrate, and must possess, courage. Noncooperative spaces means that Black female intellectual activists may stumble and fall, yet these individuals are “extraordinarily committed” to their Black social group (c.f. Jablin, 2006: 100), and have a higher purpose that allows them to re-emerge, or at least try to. More fundamentally, their actions bear influence upon other Black scholars and diverse individuals within society, potentially effecting positive change.

Black female intellectual activists’ courage may entail humiliation by White (female) individuals (c.f. Jablin, 2006), as suggested by Alice’s narrative on being physically assaulted. Thus, managing humiliation, fear and risks appears central to the courage of Black female intellectual activists fighting for racial equality within a traditionally noncooperative space. We suggest that this requires those impacted to overcome one obstacle at a time, recovering from humiliation and taming anxieties by reflecting on ‘the bigger picture’ that embraces a collective sense of purpose, collective goals, and the contributions made by other Black female (and male) intellectual activists (the role models), and selecting the appropriate action to be taken (c.f. Goud, 2005).

Black women (and men) are historically at the forefront of the fight for racial equality in general, yet, alone, these individuals lack sufficient resources to disrupt noncooperative spaces and eliminate racism from organizations, domestic settings, and society.

## Implications

The agency of ‘good’ White individuals with a desire to live in a more equitable society, in fighting for racial equality cannot be understated. As noted elsewhere, “when good people do nothing (i.e. when they fail to act when the situation necessitates an *appropriate* action)” (Rate & Sternberg, 2007: 4), they allow noncooperative spaces to continue thriving and engender racism. Henceforth, it is imperative for ‘good’ White individuals in particular, given their position of power and privilege (e.g., Meyerson & Scully 1995), to have courage and to cooperate with Black (and Brown) intellectual activists in reforming noncooperative spaces to eliminate racism. We suggest *cooperation* based on *collective courage* among Black, Brown and White scholars (allies) as the mechanisms for dismantling noncooperative spaces, and for achieving racial equality. Our conception of cooperation is influenced by the philosophical ideas developed by Tuomela (2013). Quinn and Worline’s (2008) study of the USA 9/11 terror attack also inspires our thinking on collective courage.

*Cooperation* requires individuals to participate in tackling racism voluntarily as opposed to being coerced (Tuomela, 2013). This signifies that White bodies ‘act together’ and ‘act collectively’ (c.f. Tuomela, 2013) with Black and Brown intellectual activists to reform noncooperative spaces and make them truly conducive to action targeting racial (and other) inequality. Providing intellectual activists with a friendly space can move organizations and society closer to achieving racial equality. Cooperation also means that White scholars must form a joint plan for joint action with non-White bodies, and mutually agree on a part that they can genuinely play. One way for White individuals to cooperate is to speak up against the hostility of the spaces within which the issue of racism is raised and interrogated. As White individuals tend to be closer to powerful White (male) actors due to their shared collective identity, their voice yields relatively more influence than that of non-White bodies.

Another way for White individuals to cooperate with Black and Brown intellectual activists involves mobilizing resources in unconventional ways that allow intellectual

activism to flourish (c.f. Quinn & Worline, 2008). Most fundamentally, in so far as the mentality of ‘us (White individuals) versus them’ (non-White individuals) prevails, combating racism will remain an immense challenge. Therefore, a third way for White scholars to cooperate with Black and Brown scholars is to jointly engage in the creation of collective inter-university and inter-sectorial narratives that foster shared identities and guide action for eliminating racism (c.f. Quinn & Worline, 2008).

Currently, we do not find any transparent common identity narrative that addresses racial equality across universities and other organizations. However, as Quinn and Worline (2008) note, individuals often tap into broader social narratives when engaging in collective courageous action (c.f. Quinn & Worline, 2008). Furthermore, the prevalence of noncooperative spaces compels us to express our stance that, in so far as White individuals and organizations do not believe in racial equality then, ideally, they should not pretend to do so. Otherwise, they lack *authenticity* and *commitment* to eliminating racism: It is apparently the hypocrisy of some powerful White voices who purport to stand for racial equality which sustains noncooperative spaces, and racism in academia and society.

## CONCLUSION

Fighting for racial equality can never be a mistake or a misguided ideology. It is a moral good that must be achieved through noble manners. Accordingly, while we are aware of the highly subjective nature of autoethnographic inquiry which cautions us against generalization, evidence abounds on the commonality of the experiences of racism and subjugation that Black (female) scholars endure within Western-centric contexts (e.g., Dei, 2018; Nkomo, 2016; Settles et al., 2019; Stanley, 2006). Nonetheless, we hope that our work invites MOS scholars to engage in honest debate about the prevalence of noncooperative spaces and their effects on increasing inequalities for marginalized individuals. By doing so, we hope to contribute to, and enrich the discourse on intellectual activism and racial equality within the broader domain of diversity and inclusion.

**REFERENCES ARE AVAILABLE FROM AUTHORS ON REQUEST**