

Book Review

Rethinking Diversity Frameworks in Higher Education

By Edna B. Chun and Joe R. Feagin

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Edna B. Chun and Joe R. Feagin issue a challenge to professionals working in higher education to look more critically at the context in which “diversity” work is done, and to look at the systemic underpinnings of racial (and gender) inequality in higher education in general, and specifically at Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCUs).

They begin by discussing the national context of a looming white racial minority, high levels of racial and residential segregation, and the function of the hegemonic ideology of colorblindness to preserve the racial status quo. Chun and Feagin go on to make the connection between the combination of decreased state funding and the increasing college tuition costs borne upon students to the increase in nonwhite attendance at HWCUs. Skeptics might argue, on this point, that correlation does not mean causation, and that is true. At the same time, in the United States, public support for welfare programs declined when those programs were presented as disproportionately assisting people of color as opposed to white Americans. It follows that changing university demographics, de-funding public higher education, and attacks on affirmative action could very well be related phenomenon, and this is the point that Chun and Feagin make.

They also discuss the lived experience on HWCU campuses, emphasizing the power of narrative in accurately assessing the magnitude of microaggressions or microinequities, which they argue are inappropriately named. For example, on most HWCU campuses, the authors note that the first amendment is frequently used to defend racist hate speech, white supremacist and/or antiblack incidents are relatively commonplace, and women and people of color deal with discrimination and with little to no recourse. This often results in the experience of racial battle fatigue for faculty of color on HWCU campuses.

All this leads into the authors’ primary critiques of the existing prevailing diversity frameworks; the central argument is that discussions of implicit or unconscious bias and microaggressions are deeply problematic and too specific in ignoring the broader contexts of systemic racism and sexism.

Instead, the authors suggest a paradigm shift, drawing on Feagin's work surrounding the white racial frame and its corollary male sexist frame and shifting to a language of macroaggressions and macroinequities within a systemic racism framework. Additionally, they criticize the use of implicit or unconscious bias and microaggressions as obfuscating the responsibility of institutional decision makers, usually elite white men.

Chun and Feagin go on to summarize prominent critiques of the implicit associations test (IAT), one of the primary instruments used to measure implicit or unconscious bias. Some important critiques are that the IAT and the idea of implicit bias tends to biologize and individualize racism, takes attention away from explicit bias, and that there is a dearth of evidence indicating a link between unconscious bias and discriminatory behavior. This is a significant observation, as much of the work surrounding unconscious bias workshops in higher education focus on strategies for mitigating the impact of unconscious bias on behavior. While they are critical of unconscious and implicit bias, the authors concede that it "can reduce white defensiveness while providing a context for offering modest strategies for overcoming individual racial stereotypes and other commonplace racial framing (p. 111)." Still, this framework, they argue, does not create space for discussions of substantial structural change that HWCUs require to best serve their diverse populations, especially women and people of color.

In regards to the criticisms of the microlanguage, Chun and Feagin include an enlightening discussion on the history of these terms and their use. The authors contend that a single microaggression is significant and that the modifier "micro-" minimizes that impact and lend itself to criticisms of hypersensitivity and overreaction for the targeted individuals. This critique would have carried more weight if the authors more explicitly discussed the cumulative impact of microaggressions, as research indicates the host of problems that targets of microaggressions face, however, they still make a strong case for the significant impact of a single microaggression.

Additionally, because this language (unconscious, implicit, and micro-) generally removes intent from the equation, it is incapable of dealing with the more overt forms of racist and sexist behaviors that have increased in prominence since the 2016 presidential election. The authors make several references to the statements and behaviors of the 45th president to give the national context for the trends we witness on HWCU campuses across the United States.

The book concludes with several concrete solutions and examples of best practices for advancing diversity work on college campuses. Broadly, they recommend advocating for public funding of higher education, conducting a diversity audit, and explicit action plans with timelines and outcomes.

On the whole, this book provides a compelling argument for a shift in the paradigm of diversity and inclusion work at HWCUs. At the same time, they admit to some utility of the existing framework, and in doing so, provide strong options for utilizing the existing framework for maximum impact and additionally supplementing and challenging some of the more problematic aspects of the hegemonic diversity framework. If people expect to advance real, meaningful change in HWCUs, this type of critical perspective is needed; while unconscious

bias and microaggression workshops are ubiquitous, we must contend with the impact of elite white decisionmakers, historical and contemporary systemic racism and sexism, and the white racial and male sexist frames, which continue to contribute to significant inequities for women and people of color.