



Education Review

Reseñas Educativas

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August 2, 2023

ISSN 1094-5296

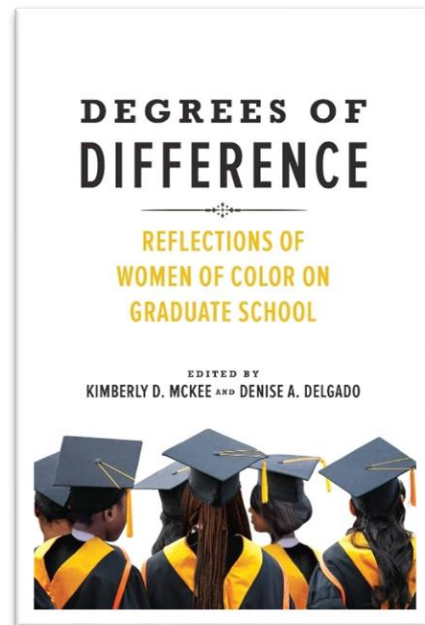
McKee, K. D., & Delgado, D. A. (2020). *Degrees of difference: Reflections of women of color on graduate school*. University of Illinois Press.

Pp. 200

ISBN: 978-0-252-08505-5

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Despite extremely high racial tensions across the globe, many might assume that higher education would be an environment free from racism, discrimination, and microaggressions. In *Degrees of Difference*, McKee and Delgado thoughtfully and carefully point out this is simply not the case. They use the art of story-telling to share the experiences of an incredibly diverse group of eight women, with a focus on their obstacles during their time in graduate school. The authors weave themes and commonalities throughout the chapters and portray a clear image of the challenges that women of color face in institutions of higher education.



As shared in their introduction and epilogue, editors McKee and Delgado use their lived experiences to fill a gap in the literature around this topic and expose the multitude of gendered and racialized issues within higher education, particularly for women of color. Their conversations about their own experiences during graduate school lead to the creation of this book. Their goals for this edited volume are to make these issues public and to provide advice to allies and mentors within the university setting, both of which may benefit those already in graduate school and those future graduate students. Arguably the most valuable aspect of this book is that it offers a space for women of color to share their experience and claim the position that they have rightfully earned.

One limitation of this book worth noting, which is pointed out by the editors in full transparency, is the underrepresentation of women in STEM's experiences. The offerings in this book are provided mainly by women in the humanities and

social sciences. The practicality of this limitation makes perfect sense as there are far less women in these programs and those in these positions are often unable to speak out against the injustices they have likely faced. It would be interesting to see if the experiences from women in STEM mirror or are even more problematic than those experienced by women of color in other disciplines.

Beyond this underrepresentation of women of color in STEM, the major themes of this book seemingly transcend disciplines. Contributors from this book represent a variety of disciplines, and regardless of discipline, women reported and experienced very similar issues within higher education. One of the most notable obstacles facing women of color in higher education are microaggressions, originally defined by Chester M. Pierce as “the insidious, hard to identify, subtle racist injuries that we must pay attention to if we are to understand or combat racism” (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013, p. 435). Through stories we learn about the well-intentioned microaggressors who are unable to recognize their own privilege and are completely unaware of how their words or actions impact others. During instances where microaggressions occur, silence is often viewed as compliance. Many of the contributors describe the microaggressions they faced from their professors, administrators or individuals within their cohort. As one might imagine, experiencing microaggression after microaggression will have a negative impact on one’s mental and emotional health, their sense of belonging, their productivity, and their overall experience in higher education. Other obstacles faced by these women relate to imposter syndrome, when one feels doubt of their abilities and feels as if they do not deserve to be in the position they are in. Alienation and/or isolation and difficulty achieving work/life balance were other common themes. These women often discussed cultural and gender expectations and how pursuing a degree in higher education was not seen as an appropriate path for them. Lastly, women in this book touch on tokenism, and how they were called “affirmative action” admissions by members of their own cohort. Reading this collection of stories, it becomes clear that each obstacle does not exist in a vacuum. Many of these obstacles are interrelated and often pile on these graduate students in layers.

Degrees of Difference has many strengths. The diversity among races, ethnicities, religions, and the sexualities of the contributors is immense. For example, readers will hear from Black women, an Arab woman, a queer woman, and an Asian American woman. It is also clear that McKee and Delgado actively worked to provide a diverse representation of experiences. Another strength is the transformational power of story-sharing. People’s lived experiences and the powerful anecdotes they were willing to share in this book paints a very clear picture of the broader issues within this institution. Lastly, this book is full of proud feminist kill-joys. Without these women willing to air the dirty laundry within a department or larger university-setting, the broader population will not know the severity of these issues. The sharing these stories provides the opportunity, as Sara Ahmed (2010) says, to “give the killjoy back her voice” (para. 9) and to call out privilege. It also allows the opportunity to examine the assumption that the university would be a place where intersectional identities

would be welcomed and celebrated. These women's stories, however, provide example after example that this is not the reality.

Degrees of Difference is an important read for anyone working in or attending higher education. It provides practical and sensible advice for women in graduate school, for prospective students, BIPOC students, allies, professors, mentors, and university administrators. More specifically, women of color will be able to see their experiences represented in print, and those in positions of power who read the book will gain an understanding of the obstacles placed on individuals simply due to their demographics, and hopefully, better support their minority peers and students.

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About the Reviewer

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