

**Commentary**

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# **The Invisible Man: Exclusion, Relegation, and Minimization of the value of African American Men in Tenure-Track Social Work Faculty Roles**

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## **Introduction**

Social work as a profession purportedly prides itself on advancing equity, justice, and inclusion. These values are enshrined in the NASW Code of Ethics, embedded in accreditation standards, and regularly highlighted in public statements. Yet, a troubling contradiction persists within many schools of social work. That is, the profound underrepresentation, exclusion, and marginalization of African American men in tenure-track and tenured faculty positions. This absence is more than a demographic gap. Rather, it is symptomatic of systemic inequities that undermine the integrity of the social work profession.

In this commentary, I reflect on the ways African American men are routinely under-valued in academic social work landscapes. Further, I explore the implications of this exclusion and call for a recalibration of institutional commitments to diversity and justice. My aim is not to inflame, but rather to illuminate and highlight a quiet crisis that diminishes both the profession and the communities it serves.

## **Historical Context: Persistent Exclusion**

The exclusion of African American men from tenure-track roles in schools of social work cannot be understood in isolation. It reflects a broader historical pattern in higher education, where systemic racism, implicit bias, and entrenched gatekeeping mechanisms have restricted pathways to academic advancement.

While many schools have made progress in recruiting diverse cohorts of students, faculty diversity lags behind. This is particularly so with respect to African American men. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), African American men represent 3% of tenure-track faculty across disciplines, and social work is no exception (NCES, 2022). This would seem to suggest that instead of being recognized as essential contributors, African American males are often isolated as “exceptions” within overwhelmingly white faculties. The paradox is striking. A profession once again purportedly dedicated to dismantling structural inequities too often reproduces those very same inequities within its own halls.

## **Relegation and Minimization in Practice**

Beyond numbers, the experiences of African American male faculty frequently involve relegation to peripheral roles

and minimization of their contributions. This manifests in several ways:

### **1. Invisible Labor**

African American male faculty are often expected to serve as visible symbols of diversity while simultaneously being excluded from the decision-making spaces where meaningful change can occur. They are overburdened with mentoring, committee work, and diversity initiatives that, while important to be sure, are seldom recognized in tenure and promotion processes.

### **2. Devaluation of Scholarship**

Research agendas focused on race, equity, or African American communities are too often dismissed as “niche” or “advocacy” work, rather than being recognized as central to the advancement of knowledge in social work. This devaluation sends a powerful message about whose scholarship is valued and whose is not.

### **3. Stereotypes and Bias**

African American men contend with deeply ingrained stereotypes that cast them as threatening, hypermasculine, or intellectually suspect. Within faculty cultures, these stereotypes surface in subtle ways. This includes colleagues questioning credentials, minimizing expertise, or disregarding intellectual contributions during meetings.

### **4. Isolation**

With so few peers who share their experiences, African American men often work in environments where their perspectives are not only underrepresented but frequently misunderstood. The result is professional isolation that hinders productivity, job satisfaction, and long-term retention.

## **Why Representation Matters**

The underrepresentation of African American men in tenure-track social work faculty positions has significant consequences for the profession and its students. To be sure, representation is not merely symbolic; it is substantive.

- For Students: African American men in the

classroom provide students with role models who embody the profession's stated values of diversity and inclusion. Their presence broadens the intellectual horizons of all students and affirms the identities of students of color, particularly African American men, who rarely see themselves reflected among faculty ranks.

- For the Profession: The absence of African American men weakens the discipline's credibility. A profession that claims to fight systemic oppression but fails to dismantle it internally risks losing moral authority.

- For Communities: Social work must prepare practitioners to serve diverse populations with cultural competence and humility. Faculty who brings lived experiences and cultural knowledge expand the field's ability to meet the needs of marginalized communities. Excluding African American men limits this capacity.

## **The Emotional and Professional Costs**

The toll of this exclusion is not limited to professional outcomes. African American male faculty often navigate daily microaggressions, a constant need to prove themselves, and a lack of institutional support. The result is a heightened risk of burnout, attrition, and disillusionment. Moreover, the minimization of African American male faculty creates a chilling effect for future generations. That is, African American (male) graduate students potentially considering academic careers may internalize the message that the academy is inhospitable to those that look like them. This further perpetuates the cycle of underrepresentation.

## **Beyond Tokenism: Toward Structural Change**

Too often, institutions respond to critiques of faculty diversity with tokenistic efforts such as hiring one or two individuals from underrepresented groups without addressing the systemic barriers that threaten their success. What is needed is not symbolic representation, but rather structural transformation.

### **1. Reexamine Hiring Practices**

Search committees must interrogate their own biases and expand their definitions of excellence. Candidate pools should be intentionally diverse, and evaluation criteria must value community-engaged scholarship and research that addresses racial equity.

### **2. Support Retention and Advancement**

Recruitment is only the first step. Schools of social work must provide mentorship, resources, and equitable workloads that allow African American men to thrive. This includes recognizing and rewarding diversity-related service as meaningful scholarly contribution.

### **3. Value Diverse Scholarship**

The profession must move beyond devaluing scholarship that challenges dominant paradigms. Research centered on race, inequality, and marginalized communities

should be seen as central to social work's mission rather than peripheral.

## **4. Foster Inclusive Faculty Cultures**

Institutions must cultivate environments where African American men are not only present but fully included. This means addressing microaggressions, dismantling stereotypes, and creating space for authentic contributions.

## **A Call to the Profession**

The minimization of African American men in tenure-track social work faculty roles is not simply an employment issue. It is rather a test of the profession's integrity. Once again, social work cannot credibly advocate for social justice in the broader society while replicating exclusion within its own institutions.

As educators and practitioners, we must confront the dissonance between our values and our practices. Schools of social work should lead higher education in modeling equity, yet too often they lag behind. The absence of African American men from tenure-track roles diminishes our students, our scholarship, and our credibility.

This is beyond a matter of optics or compliance. It is instead a matter of justice, integrity, and professional survival. If social work is to remain relevant in a rapidly diversifying society, it must embody the values it espouses. This means not only recruiting African American men into tenure-track roles but creating environments where they are valued, supported, and able to flourish.

## **Conclusion**

The exclusion, relegation, and minimization of African American men in social work faculties represent a profound contradiction at the heart of the profession. At stake is more than the careers of individual scholars. What is at stake is the integrity of social work's claim to stand for justice and equity.

By moving beyond tokenism and embracing structural change, schools of social work can align their practices with their values. The presence of African American men in tenure-track roles is not a matter of symbolic diversity. Rather, it is essential to the future of the profession and to the realization of its highest ideals. The time for half-measures has expired. The question is not whether social work can afford to prioritize the inclusion of African American men in its faculties, but whether it can afford not to.

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