
The Pain of Performative Professionalism

Emotionally Embodying Business as Usual

ABSTRACT This essay is the personal and professional perspective of the National Communication Association Organizational Communication Division's awards chair during the 2019 convention. It explores issues of emotion, work, professionalism, silence, embodiment, symbolic violence, and intersectional precarity from the vantage point of an outsider within the academy and the discipline of communication studies. **KEYWORDS** Emotion; Professionalism; Precarity; Symbolic violence; Top Paper Panel

I work in a position of intersectional precarity. I am a black, American, woman, untenured scholar who works at a predominantly white institution in a predominantly white discipline employed in a heteronormative, patriarchal profession.

Rewind to summer 2019. The National Communication Association (NCA) Distinguished Scholars controversy (DSC) had me questioning the longevity of my formal career as a scholar in the academy. Scrolling through the pages of distinguished scholars, seeing faces that did not look like mine plainly revealed the intersecting nature of racism and sexism. This year my participation in NCA was different since I had been elected to serve the Organizational Communication Division (OCD) as awards chair. I was feeling a sense of empowerment and obligation to serve my discipline.

Our division leadership conducted a climate survey in response to the DSC. I have mixed feelings about climate surveys because, for me, completing them has often amounted to experiencing a series of microaggressions.¹ Also, I have witnessed institutions using climate surveys to justify maintaining the status quo. Yet, there is utility in having an anonymous way to ask about the identities, perspectives, opinions, and experiences of a collective group. The development of the survey took considerable work on behalf of the committee. As a critical interpretive scholar, and the only (at the time) executive board member inhabiting a brown body, I spoke up often as we deliberated. Our deliberations

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required emotion work, emotional labor, emotion with work, and emotion toward work on the executive committee's behalf.²

Fast-forward to November 2019. I mustered up the courage and began to pore over the 200+ responses. Many comments aligned with my experiences, yet, others were worse than anticipated. The qualitative data was heart-wrenching. As I read, my stomach turned, embodying the pain written into the responses. People had suffered, were suffering, and likely would continue to suffer as part of their experiences with the OCD and the NCA. I had a lot of emotion about my role in the larger systems and structures of our discipline, particularly as an executive board member and faculty at a predominantly white institution. I was part of this system of suffering, perpetuating it despite my desire and efforts to change it. The OCD executive board distributed a summary to the division, promising to present more details during the business meeting. All of this was anxiety provoking, but it was past time to face, name, and grapple with this ugly part of our profession.

Fast-forward to the NCA annual convention. For me, this year's conference was emotionally charged. On a high note, I received the 2019 outstanding journal article of the year award from the Ethnography Division of the NCA. I was humbled and honored by this recognition. Later that day at the conference, I attended a memorial for one of my former peers from graduate school, Dr. Emily Rauscher, who passed away unexpectedly at the age of 36. Her untimely passing caused me significant grief. The next day was the OCD Top Paper Panel and immediately following would be the business meeting, during which I would perform my role as awards chair. I disclose this to contextualize my experience. I was already emotional, stressed, and harried when I walked into the Top Paper Panel.

I was late. I had difficulty finding a working printer to print my comments honoring the award recipients. I hurried to the Top Paper Panel, especially since friends and scholars I admire were presenting. I stood in the back of the room listening. The papers were intriguing, bold, analytically compelling, and pushed my thinking about our discipline, but for me their arguments rang true with my experience in many ways. The response followed.

As I heard the response, my thoughts oscillated between the audible words I was hearing and my internal reactions. I heard the tone policing (i.e., fiery language), the implicit definition of white supremacy exclusively referred to as the presence of neo-Nazis, jokes about sexual harassment, references to the 45th US president's campaign slogan, as well as the dismissal of intersectionality. I found myself in disbelief. I gradually moved to distaste and then progressed into disappointment, which escalated to disgust.

It was happening *again*. Another incident, reminding me, I do not belong. The space felt hostile. I was in shock. The public commentary hurt, harmed, and excluded already marginalized identities, bodies, and experiences. People walked out in protest. People I admire, respect, and support. Metaphorically, it felt like the response had gut-punched me while I was anticipating an embrace. I wanted the top papers and business meeting to open up dialogue about inclusion and identity in organizational communication. But now this! I can't. I'm out. I went into the hallway and joined a community of people who took a stand offering support to one another.

I wanted leave. I thought about resigning my position, leaving the profession altogether. I stopped myself. These top papers and other award recipients deserved recognition. Also, I was holding financial checks for graduate student awards. I remembered the poverty of graduate school. I convinced myself to stay. People were depending on me. But I didn't know how I would go sit at the front of the room and conduct "business as usual" sitting next to the division chair who had just communicatively gut-punched me and my people. It didn't feel safe. Yet, I had a sense of obligation to a structure (i.e., discipline, higher education) that was never designed with me in mind.

I was emotionally moved by everyone who protested the response yet walked back into the business meeting. It gave me hope. During the business meeting, the floor was opened up, inviting top paper authors to respond to the response. Peter R. Jensen and Jenna N. Hanchey stepped forward. Heewon Kim also spoke. I felt grateful for their leadership and fearful for any retaliation they might experience as untenured faculty. When they were done, I wanted to speak. I had a lot to say. I reached for the microphone, but felt the emotion welling up and tears forming in my eyes. I pulled back. In a split second, I analyzed my intersectional precarity in a flash-forward. If I spoke, I would cry. If I cried, my future career could be jeopardized. When senior scholars received a request to be an external reviewer for my tenure case next summer, these scholars might remember *this* moment—possibly thinking of me as a hysterical, irrational, black woman who spoke out at NCA, negatively coloring their interpretation of my dossier. I was not prepared to take that risk. I have worked too hard. I am standing on the shoulders of ancestors who have worked too hard to make my career a possibility. There are people counting on me to help fix this historically created mess in the academy and our discipline. I am an outsider within.³ I can't help fix this mess if my tenure case is denied and I am not here in the future. So, I swallowed that emotion, that message, and those tears. I regret doing so.

I believe if I had spoken, it would have made a difference, but I also feel my tears should not have to be exploited for my profession and the academy to change. So, I sat quietly and to the best of my ability I performed “business as usual,” not communicating the message that should have been said. Periodically throughout the meeting, I made eye contact with my people. Those moments of solidarity gave me strength to keep fighting this good fight. After all the emotional labor and performative professionalism that evening, I returned to my hotel room and wept. I wept for hours. I wept for the pain I was experiencing, the prejudice that persists, the inequity that prevails, the suffering of outsiders within and those who are pushed to the margins, and for my part in this system of symbolic violence. I am committed to being part of the positive change. Maybe one day the academy and the communication studies discipline will understand, as Brenda J. Allen, Mark P. Orbe, and Margarita Refugia Olivias put it, “the complexity of our tears.”⁴ ■

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NOTES

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2. Katherine I. Miller, Jennifer Considine, and Johnny Garner, “Let Me Tell You About My Job’: Exploring the Terrain of Emotion in the Workplace,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2007): 231–60.
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4. Brenda J. Allen, Mark P. Orbe, and Margarita Refugia Olivias, “The Complexity of Our Tears: Dis/Enchantment and (In)Difference in the Academy,” *Communication Theory* 9, no. 4 (1999): 402–29.