

Race, Gender, and the Politics of Pedagogy in Psychology

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A general discourse on the status of African Americans within the professoriate almost certainly involves some exposition of the confluence of historical, sociopolitical, and cultural factors that has served to shape academe’s uneven landscape. This contextual perspective is necessary because it provides a basis for understanding, for example, why there is a paucity of African American PhDs in psychology; why there is a disparity between African American and Anglo American faculty at the assistant, associate, and full professor ranks; and why African American junior faculty experience excessively high turnover and burnout rates. In a very large way, these factors serve to inform the academic community regarding issues relevant to its majority and minority constituency.

If we begin by assuming that the lens through which we view various outcomes related to African American faculty (e.g., national percentages, promotion and tenure success, and extended faculty roles) has provided some contextual clarity, the prevailing framework is still one that suggests African Americans within the professoriate are passive participants. That is, within this framework, there exists a dominant view that African Americans are objects being acted upon by establishment foes, both visible and invisible. This epistemological view of African American faculty stigmatizes them as scarce, inadaptable, and overburdened. Having said this, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that African American faculty at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are often besieged by what we term “indeclinable requests” to participate on departmental, college and university-wide committees focused on diversity. However, these requests are not representative of the burden experienced; instead, the failure to produce change is what eventually becomes burdensome.

We contend that rather than functioning as passive participants in academe, African American faculty are inherently active in that they possess agency and purpose. Hence, the burdens they experience are not necessarily the kinds that involve latent, hegemonic forces that cause paranoia, uncertainty, and academic paralysis, leading to an eventual demise associated with not receiving tenure or promotion. Instead, it is often the inherent responsibilities that accompany the role of the African American academician—such as the responsibility to transcend the limitations of one’s specific discipline in order to provide integrity perspectives—that function to tax the energies of this faculty. This includes first determining one’s place within psychology’s historical and racial landscape, and then educating and enlightening students and other faculty in order to move beyond the constraints and limitations of the discipline. For example, African American psychologists, historically, have never been psychologists in the strictest sense; a cursory examination of the literature reveals that African Americans who hold PhDs have been, and continue to be, part-anthropologist, part-sociologist, part-political scientist, part-

economist, as well as educator and social change agent. In order to provide counter-evidence to Western claims of Black inferiority (e.g., genetic and cultural inferiority), African Americans had to venture outside the sphere of psychology to provide a solid rationale accounting for relevancy, history, and social context and policy (for examples, see the works of Herman Canady, Horace Mann Bond, Kenneth & Mamie Clark, and James Bayton).

In addition to carrying the mantle of interdisciplinarian, contemporary African Americans in academic psychology seek to educate and enlighten others about the rich legacy of African American scholars and their contributions to a particular field, even when it is not necessarily popular to do so. These inherent responsibilities extend from fundamental cultural values related to honoring the tradition of elders in the field as well as remaining true to one's disciplinary roots, in spite of pressures to adopt more mainstream perspectives. Furthermore, African American academicians have accepted the responsibility of mentoring minority students—not just African Americans—at PWIs, and (a direct and positive result of 1954 and 1955 court decisions influenced in part by Kenneth and Mamie Clark's psychological research). This is best exemplified by African American psychology faculty who—irrespective of major discipline or area of expertise—decide to take on the unique responsibility of advising and mentoring unassigned minority students, as well as minority student groups, clubs, and organizations (e.g., Black student unions, sororities, and fraternities). Many African American faculty at PWIs readily accept this tremendous responsibility of mentoring all minority students and guiding their organizations, often without any recognition.

Framed by the perspective that African Americans within the professoriate possess a sense of agency and exhibit a unique communalistic disposition toward similar others, critical discourse is warranted. This sense of communalism is exemplified by the fact that African American faculty often give of themselves even though there is no materialistic or tangible gain for their services and commitments. Acknowledging this in our thinking about the role of African Americans in academe preserves the intellectual and cultural integrity of this group and begs for a new set of questions: First, how do we reconcile psychology's historical legacy in terms of race and gender with our current notions of agency; and second, how do we translate this dialectic tension into a pedagogy that benefits our students?

Reconciling Psychology's Past in Terms of Race and Gender

Over the course of the past 100 years, psychology, perhaps more so than any other scientific discipline, has been responsible for the translation of pseudoscientific laboratory research into a social discourse bent on the racial and cultural nihilism of those of African descent (e.g., Azibo, 1996; Harrell, 1999; Kambon, 1998). Although the degree to which psychology helped shape public policy and practice in the United States remains debatable, there is no question that the discipline played a principal role in the maintenance of Jim Crow laws and de facto segregation. As a consequence, psychology as a discipline has suffered a long series of indictments from leading African American scholars, most notably in Robert V. Guthrie's (2003) seminal work, *Even the Rat was White: A Historical View of Psychology*. Without providing a full explication, suffice it

to say that Guthrie expounds on the significance of cultural, institutional, and individual racism (Jones, 1972) within Western epistemological frameworks and reveals how it functions to undergird scientific inquiry, resulting in notions of Black inferiority. Scientific racism, or pseudoscience as others (e.g., Graves, 2000) have described it, remains the large elephant in the room when present-day scholars debate mental health, academic achievement, or the relevance of intelligence testing, to name just a few.

African Americans in academe grapple with notions of Black inferiority by attempting to resolve two successive and recurring crises. First, African American psychology faculty strive to reconcile their personal and shared histories with the history and progression of the discipline, and thus seek to redefine the terms by which these two opposing forces merge. Second, African American psychology faculty strive to empower their students by committing to a transformative pedagogy structured by the experiences of the preceding crisis. Conceptually speaking, many African American faculty endeavor to produce the dialectical tension that involves both conflicting and contradictory elements, so there is movement, progression, and transcendence. This means pushing the envelope and creating opportunities to engage issues introspectively; it also means having with others more meaningful conversations regarding the intersections between race and psychology. In many ways, African American faculty function as change agents because many of them are willing to experience the discomfort that arises from self-reflection, as well as open criticism and active marginalization from colleagues, in order to initiate a discourse that is essential to the progression of the discipline.

There is also an interesting dynamic to this reconciliation that is specific to African American women. To begin with, African American women in academic psychology not only have to contend with the discipline's historical legacy regarding race, they also have to struggle with a psychology that has historically deemphasized their contributions as women. Although there is merit to the argument that women in general have been marginalized and to some great degree continue to be undervalued within psychology (Billman-Mehecha, 2004), it should also be understood that when considering race, being an African American woman ultimately translates into a greater degree of invisibility. For instance, most psychology faculty would have little trouble recalling the names Mary Whiton Calkins and Margaret Washburn; fewer, however, would probably recognize the names Inez Prosser and Ruth Howard, both of whom were also trailblazers. What is more, African American women are confronted by an academic power structure that continues to essentialize them as being aggressive and hostile, and as a threat to the Anglo American male leadership structure (Niemann, Jennings, Rozelle, Baxter, & Sullivan, 1994). Therefore, as it would appear, reconciliation for African American women involves a complex negotiation of race, gender, and power.

Channeling this Tension into a Transformative Pedagogy

African Americans in academic psychology strive to make sense of their experiences in order to build pedagogical models that are not only progressive but also transformative. bell hooks (1994) wrote in *Teaching to Transgress* that "...teachers must be actively involved and committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (p.15). As active

participants in their own experiences, African Americans seek to gain a critical understanding of how race, gender, and power intersect with the historical legacy of psychology. In doing so, they construct a teaching lens, or perspective, that is focused on much more than achieving curriculum objectives; they essentially create opportunities for themselves and their students to engage in a “collaborative critical inquiry” of sociocultural issues (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p.155).

Transformative pedagogy—defined by Cummins and Sayers (1995) as the utilization of critical inquiry to relate student experience to broader social issues and to promote them to take action—provides the framework through which many African American faculty engage their students. The primary use of this framework (and related others, such as teaching to transgress) by African American faculty centers on validating personal experience and accommodating diverse worldviews and perspectives. The capacity to approach social issues from multiple perspectives is the hallmark of any great academician and, among contemporary African Americans in academic psychology, represents a logical extension of the work of the elders who fashioned interdisciplinary hats (i.e., Herman Canady, Inez Prosser, Horace Mann Bond, and others).

So what happens when African Americans in academic psychology are not successful in producing a change that is beneficial for students? Our perspective is that African American faculty, being active participants in their own experiences, of course, adapt to their contexts. Nevertheless, in accepting their responsibility to educate students, African Americans still endeavor to push the envelope forward, in spite of this obstacle, in order to generate a discourse that also transforms and enlightens the burden. This method of instruction is not always popular with students who are resistant to change, and oftentimes results in backlash in the form of disrespect, animosity, and contempt in the classroom. Research shows that for African American woman, in particular, the backlash can be career-threatening. For example, African American women are significantly more likely than African American men to have lower student compliance ratings and receive lower scores on student evaluations of teaching, even in classrooms where they employ prosocial tactics that encourage students and elicit cooperation (Elias & Loomis, 2004). Thus, the cycle of two successive and recurring crises continues—reconciliation and commitment to a transformative pedagogy.

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