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The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in Academe

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Yolanda Flores Niemann

The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in Academe

Ethnic/racial minority faculty continue to be underrepresented in the U.S. professoriate, representing only about 6 percent of all professors in the academy.[1] Obstacles for reaching the academy abound, including institutional racism, socioeconomic barriers, and, for Latinas, traditional gender role expectations.[2] Once Latinas overcome these obstacles and "make it" into the academy, they, like other faculty of color, face yet another set of obstacles, including experiences of racial tokenism, overt and covert racism, and stigmatization. These experiences are generally grounded in the undermining attitudes and behaviors of people within the institution.

Largely as a result of these experiences, faculty of color may also undermine their own competence. That is, they may fall victim to stereotype threat, which is defined as being vulnerable to internalizing the negative stereotypes about one's own group in a given situation, even when one does not endorse these stereotypes.[3] A prevalent stereotype about Latinas/os and African Americans is lack of competence in academic domains, making faculty from these groups particularly vulnerable to the self-undermining effects of stereotype threat.[4] This situation reflects a threat and vulnerability independent of the behavior and attitudes of colleagues. As a result, the obstacles faced by faculty of color involve interactive forces of two types of undermining—that done by others, and the self-undermining of competence.

Such was the case with my first faculty experience. I went from having strong feelings of self-efficacy in the academy to wondering why I had the arrogance to think I could succeed in an academic career. Only distance from that experience has enabled me to analyze the processes that occurred during those first four shaky years as an assistant professor. Based on a daily journal I kept during that time period, the following is an analysis of that situation in which I illustrate how

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the insidious, psychologically damaging processes of stereotype threat, tokenism, stigma, and related racism may occur. While publishing this personal essay represents a certain amount of personal risk, I believe it is important to openly discuss the effects of what is a reality for many people of color in academia. It is my hope that this article will help illuminate these processes such that others either just entering academia or struggling to survive in the academy may benefit from enhanced awareness of pitfalls associated with being a scholar of color. Awareness can lead to prevention and facilitate coping. Institutions attempting to recruit and retain minority scholars may also gain insight on the undermining processes that might occur for faculty of color at various levels of the institution.

The Recruitment Process

Until I was offered a tenure-track position, my graduate experience in a rigorous social science program of a large, predominantly white, urban university was relatively uneventful. I was a very successful graduate student, having defended my master's thesis, sailed through most of my course work, completed my doctoral minor, successfully completed my comprehensive exams, and moved my way toward defending my dissertation proposal—all within a three-year period. I had also lobbied for, and been allowed to develop and teach, the first course on ethnic/cultural issues in the department. My advisors referred to me as a "star student" in the program. Then, in my third year of the program, and two weeks before my dissertation pre-orals, the chair of the department (who was also my principal advisor, chair of my dissertation committee, and director of the program) called me into his office, and everything about my experience at the university began to change—from very good to very bad. Yet the day began with seemingly good news for me.

The chair informed me that a junior faculty had just tendered her resignation (she left for a more prestigious university). He further stated that the dean had given the department permission to replace that faculty member, but with the very strong encouragement that the department hire a Mexican American or African American faculty member. At that time there were about thirty tenure-stream faculty in the department—all white, and only a handful of women. The department had been under fire from the faculty-of-color associations on campus for this lack of representation. The chair enthusiastically reported that the faculty wanted me to apply for the tenure-track position and that they believed I could be successful in achieving tenure at the institution. He further elaborated that under no circumstances should I think I was getting the opportunity because I was Mexican American; it was just a coincidence that my ethnicity met with the dean's preference. I asked the chair about the extent of the search, and he replied that they had other applications on file to consider and that they would be working hard to put out feelers for others, but that I was considered the leading candidate.

I was surprised, as the university was not known to hire its own students, and I was quite flattered by what I then interpreted as my faculty's faith in my competence and their eagerness to keep me around. In terms of the ethnicity requirement, I reasoned that because affirmative action was still a viable hiring tool in most universities, my ethnicity would likely have been a factor at any institution. I was then too naive to realize that the dean's ethnicity preference was undermining me before I even interviewed, especially given the anti-affirmative action sentiment in that department.

There is strong documentation for the idea that a stigma of incompetence arises from the affirmative action label,[5] especially when the label carries a negative connotation in the hiring department.[6] Once tagged as an affirmative action hire, colleagues may discount the qualifications of the hiree and assume she was selected primarily because of her minority status,[7] thus leading to the presumption and stigma of incompetence. Beginning with the recruitment and hiring process, academics of color may be vulnerable to stereotype threat and begin consciously or unconsciously to internalize stigmatizing myths and stereotypes relative to academia.[8] In my case, the stigma of incompetence and my tokenization began almost immediately with the dean's strong request that the new faculty be African American or Mexican American. However, I was then unaware of the processes taking place that would undermine my competence and my colleagues' perception of me. Unawareness equaled blindness and exacerbated my vulnerability.

In retrospect, the signs of my harsh future in the department were glaring. For instance, a white, female junior faculty member spent the entire interview time with me relaying how much she was against affirmative action. I dismissed her behavior by convincing myself that if she knew how competent I was, she would not think of me as an affirmative action hire. Another sign of future trouble was that an unusually small number of the faculty showed up for my colloquium. This was particularly unsettling because, in this rigorous research department, the faculty generally wanted to know if potential faculty members could conduct and discuss research. They couldn't evaluate me as a scholar if they were not present to assess my performance in the colloquium.

I learned later that the program's faculty had been "explaining the situation" to faculty in other department programs and lobbying them to vote for me. In essence, then, the decision to hire me was made before my colloquium. Still, I could not bring myself to think that this lack of interest in my research skills meant they didn't see me as a scholar. I convinced myself that many of the department faculty already knew me and respected my ability.

At about that same time the director of an ethnic studies program asked me to apply for his program's postdoctoral fellowship (post doc). We both reasoned that the post doc would allow me a year of distance from my advisors before becoming their colleague. Post doc positions are often coveted by new Ph.D.'s as a way to begin achieving their independence from training professors and to get their research off the ground before becoming fully engaged in a tenure-track position. This turn of events seemed fortuitous. I informed my department chair that I was also applying for the ethnic studies position and, since he was my principal advisor, that I would need a letter of recommendation from him. He said he would do it, but reluctantly, because my program was counting on me.

Shortly after my colloquium I was offered both positions. My department's vote had been unanimous, with one abstention. I was later told by a voting faculty member that someone at that meeting had asked about my possible post doc and that the chair had immediately said the department wasn't interested in that for me, and it was not to be discussed. Still, I convinced myself that the department was just afraid to lose me.

The day after the department's vote, I received anonymous racist hate mail in my department mailbox. I immediately took the letter to the department chair, who stated that he was horrified at the letter's content but took no action on the letter. He advised me to ignore it, saying it could happen anywhere. He said he wanted to keep the letter, and I naively gave it to him. Incredibly, *I felt ashamed* for having received such a letter, a symptom of stereotype threat. I felt somehow responsible for having received hate mail.

I was so embarrassed that I didn't even tell the dean about the hate mail. I did tell him that I wanted the year of post doc, to be followed by the tenure-track position in my department. He told me that such an arrangement was not unusual and that universities often waited for a new faculty member who had a fellowship and/or was on leave. He agreed that the extra year to get my research off the ground would give me an edge, especially since I was completing graduate school so quickly. The dean further said that he could arrange it so that my tenure clock would not begin until after the year of post doc and, that as far as the college was concerned, I would be a department faculty member on a year's leave of absence, so my faculty position would be secure. I was excited; things seemed to be taking a turn for the better.

This excitement was replaced with the foreboding of upcoming trouble when I subsequently met with the department chair. He told me in no uncertain terms that the department's wishes were that I accept only their position. He further stated that I should consider that memories die hard and that the department could hold it against me on my future tenure vote. He explained that I should keep in mind that the current dean might or might not have the power to help me in the future. He also stated that a senior program faculty member, who was quite powerful because he brought in extensive grants (hereafter referred to by my pseudonym for him, Dr. Grant), had lobbied the department heavily for me, and I should be grateful.

My reaction, kept to myself, was that I would have preferred it if the faculty had voted for me because they had been impressed with my colloquium and competence, and not due to political lobbying. I felt stigmatized to learn that someone had to lobby department faculty to vote for me. Was I a charity case? Now my ego was beginning to feel the blow. I slowly began to question my own competence. After all, these were smart people with experience in academia. Did they know something I did not know? Besides affecting me personally, the stigma of incompetence, facilitated by the "lobbying," consciously or unconsciously allowed my future colleagues to begin thinking of me not as a fellow scholar, but as a token minority.

The prospect of staying at that university now seemed unappealing. I dearly wished I had immediately said no to the chair when he first made the offer and that I had never mentioned it to my family or to the ethnic studies director. At the time of the offer, however, the temptation to stay in that department was great for several reasons. For instance, I would not have to endure the stress of going out on the job market the following year, as I had planned. Job hunting is an anxiety-provoking experience for most graduate students, and I was no exception.

However, my most compelling reason to stay was my family. My husband had a well-paying job, and our children, then fourteen and eleven, were happy, settled, and had established long-term friendships. When I told them about the offer to stay in my current department they were thrilled. They would get to stay in school with their friends and continue with their sports teams. They were so relieved not to have to move out of town. My husband had faithfully supported me, economically and emotionally, throughout graduate school. After my announcement of the job opportunity, we started talking about how, with both of us employed, we could finally pay our debts and save some money for our children's college education.

I had dealt with role strain as a graduate student, making sure that I attended all of my children's extracurricular activities. Consistent with Latina/o values, my family had always come first. As I began to see ominous signs of trouble for me in the department, I was put to the test: do what is in my best professional interest, or what seemed to be in my family's interest? From the time I told my family about the job opportunity and felt their reaction, I really did not believe I had the option of applying for a job in another city.

Other role strain affected my decision, especially my role as a student with strong ties to the chair of the department, who had been my principal advisor for three years. Until this situation, he had treated me respectfully and had spoken highly of my course work and research. The ties between graduate students and advisors are strong, but the power is always with the professor. His power in that role was still very evident when he asked me to apply for the job. However, his ability to advise me was now diminished. He was chair of the department and director of the program at the same time, so he acted on behalf of program and department interests. A lesson here to future job candidates is that, when the job offer is in your own department, your advisor may find it difficult to be loyal both to the department and to you.

In terms of deciding which position to accept, the pull involved personal and political loyalty to the ethnic studies program, which had been very generous in supporting me. I wanted the post doc year to get my research started without the ticking of the tenure clock. On the other hand, I still wanted eventually to be successful in the social science tenure-track position. I remembered the chair's threat—what if they made me pay by denying me tenure?

It seemed to be widely known in the department that I was strongly considering the ethnic studies position. A senior faculty member called me into his office and said I needed to answer one question: "What are you, a scholar or a Mexican American?" He said that if I answered Mexican American, I should take the post doc but not follow it with the department position because "the department is only interested in scholars, not Mexican Americans." I replied that I didn't cease to be Mexican American by becoming a scholar any more than he ceased to be a man when he got his Ph.D. He retorted that it wasn't the same thing and that I should give the matter serious thought. He also said that other faculty shared his views.

It had never occurred to me to choose between my ethnicity and my identity as a scholar—it was neither possible nor logical. Before this experience, my holistic identity included being mother, wife, scholar, social scientist, friend, Mexican American, and woman. Separating them would be like expecting my major organs to work independently of each other in my body. I was bewildered.

This struggle to separate aspects of themselves will likely affect other ethnic/racial minorities applying for academic jobs. It is critical for ethnic/racial minorities to understand that the forced duality (scholar or Mexican American) is a facade. For women, in particular, identity includes, at minimum, issues of being a woman in a male-empowered academic workplace, personal role issues (e.g., mother and wife), professional roles, as well as ethnicity. Nevertheless, the forced duality reinforced the feelings of tokenism and, by extension, of stigmatization and stereotype threat. The professor had made it seem like being Mexican American was a disease.

The duality was further played out in the tug-of-war for me between the social science department and ethnic studies program. The pull was so great that the department chair asked a respected Mexican American tenured professor to "arbitrate" between the department and the ethnic studies program and convince the program director to persuade me to accept only the department position. I now felt guilty because there was disagreement among campus Mexican American faculty about what should be occurring with my situation. I felt as if everyone was talking about me. This sense of extreme visibility is consistent with the experience of tokenism.[9] My identity as Mexican American was more salient to me than ever before in my life, and my holistic sense of self was being shattered.

I began to have trouble sleeping and focusing on my classes (I was still a third-year graduate student). My close friends, most of whom were also students in the department, were greatly concerned about me. The stress showed so much that the professor of the department's ethics course, the only female full professor in the department, approached me to discuss my options. She was quite fair and said she believed the post doc would give me the needed distance from my advisors before becoming a member of the department faculty. She also thought the year would give me more respectability (someone else valued my work) and diffuse the perception that the department was strong-armed into hiring me without a search. I had not yet even been hired, and already I was stigmatized and tokenized by the perception that the department was forced to hire me. The reality was that the department faculty did not take the time and effort to widely solicit other candidates for the position. I was the one paying the price for their reliance on convenience.

The ethics professor was so concerned about the political ramifications of my accepting the post doc that she made arrangements to become my dissertation chair (replace my current chair) if I should accept the post doc. That way, reprisals from the faculty might be minimized. She had reason to be concerned about my future as a student. I had rapidly gone from being a "star student" in my program to being thought of as a potential problem. She explained that the department faculty felt a sense of benevolence for having offered me the tenure-track position. I was told that they were incredulous that I would consider postponing working with them to work with the ethnic studies program for one year.

My Experience as a Faculty Member

I accepted the social science department position and turned down the post doc. I convinced myself I could make this situation work, in spite of my newfound awareness of the racism of some members of the department. As a Mexican American woman raised in economic poverty and the daughter of two people with third- and seventh-grade formal educations, I had overcome obstacles before. Although my identity was in turmoil, and I felt stigmatized by the hiring process, I had retained substantial confidence in my ability to achieve tenure and believed things would be different after I was "one of them." It didn't occur to me that I would never feel like I belonged there. My competence had not yet been completely undermined. I defended my dissertation in July (having collected all the data, analyzed it, and written the results and discussion since my pre-orals in April). One month later, after only three years as a social science graduate student, the tenure clock started ticking, and my life in the department went from a bad hiring experience to an even worse faculty experience. I was about to feel the interactive, psychologically damaging effects of others' racism and my internalized racism.

Stigmatization

The social science department's failure to conduct a national search for my position had created legal problems for the university administration, which had received complaints about my hiring process. One of the Mexican American faculty from the law school had to present legal precedents to the administration for my hiring to be approved. It seemed that the circumstances surrounding my hire had become common knowledge in the university. I felt that when people saw me they believed, "She's the one the dean forced the social science department to hire." I felt lonely and stigmatized.

I believed I had alienated the ethnic studies faculty who might now see me as a traitor for not taking their post doc. In the social science department, except for some polite greetings, I had little or no conversation with colleagues. The faculty distanced themselves from me and made no attempts to mentor me or facilitate my road toward tenure. As for the ethics professor, I was not sure whether she had the interests of the department, rather than mine, foremost in her mind, so I did not trust her. I did not trust the department. I did not know whom to trust!

This lack of trust is debilitating for junior faculty who are still in the early stages of their professional development. Generally, feedback allows us to improve, but in situations where colleagues may be two-faced and/or racist, feedback becomes meaningless. Improvement thus happens much more slowly because we have less feedback to work with. This situation is exacerbated for faculty of color and can permeate all professional interactions, in and out of the institution. Research indicates that due largely to the societal prevalence of racism in society, people of color often make attributions about race when considering feedback or reactions of others to them, *whether the feedback is positive or negative.*[10] Once the boundary of distrust is crossed, we cannot will ourselves into trusting again in that environment. The cycle of not trusting any feedback continues, even when it is self-defeating.

For instance, I received fairly positive reviews with a request for a revision on a paper I submitted to one of the top journals in my field of social science. However, that feedback was inconsistent with the racism and stigmatization I felt from the department. The positive feedback was therefore disorienting. I did not know what to believe. I had begun undermining my competence and did not have the confidence to submit a revision. I later learned that the editor had put that paper in a file indicting the revision would have a 70 percent chance of acceptance, but he never got my revision, an example of self-undermining behavior.

Tokenism and Covert Racism

During my first year I was the only faculty of color in the entire department. My colleagues seemed content with that situation and oblivious to its effects on me. I was told, "Now that we have you, we don't need to worry about hiring another minority." This sentiment is an example of covert racism in academia, which includes the "one-minority-per-pot syndrome."[11] This tokenism also occurred with social science graduate students. For instance, in my first year as faculty, I argued to bring in two Latina graduate students with excellent credentials, though other program faculty disagreed with me. After I persuaded faculty to conduct a person-to-person interview with these women, both were found acceptable, but I recall Dr. Grant arguing that "one minority is enough." I accused him of tokenism and insisted that both women get into the program. The faculty reluctantly agreed.

One of the effects of tokenism is what is known as the pressure of a double-edged sword: "simultaneously, a perverse visibility and a convenient invisibility."[12] That is, I was inordinately visible as a minority female in a predominantly white, male department. I was also visible when it was in the department's best interest to have an "ethnic scholar," such that my name, teaching, and research were brought up during site visits of the national program accrediting association and during visits of international scholars and elected officials of color. Even some of the well-meaning faculty seemed oblivious to this tokenism. For instance, after one of these visits, one of my senior colleagues pulled me aside and excitedly said, "We told them all about your class and your research! They were really impressed with our diversity." I believed this colleague was well-intentioned and that his comment was meant to be encouraging and supportive. However, the effect of the statement was one of feeling tokenized and devalued as a scholar. I felt representative of all ethnic/racial minorities and believed that the department cared only about the *appearance* of diversity without actually valuing diversity. In such a manner, people who are well-meaning and unaware of their own racism contribute to a racist climate.

In my second year as faculty, an African American woman was hired in another department program. Her presence helped diffuse some of the attention from me. However, her research and teaching were considered mainstream while I was considered the "ethnic" researcher. This label also meant that my research was undervalued and not considered scholarly, an experience consistent with that of other faculty of color who believe that they, and their research, are underrated and seen primarily as affirmative action cases and only secondarily as scholars in their own right.[13]

My increasingly salient ethnic identity continued to play a role in relations with colleagues. In program faculty meetings, I was the only person who openly argued in favor of admitting minority graduate students. The other faculty wanted to "be objective" and "color-blind." One of the biggest ironies of this whole situation was that the department "party line" was that they were color-blind and only saw people. This attitude, in conjunction with racist behaviors, is consistent with what has been labeled "aversive racism." Aversive racists are people who outwardly proclaim egalitarian values but who express racism in subtle, rationalizable ways, such as unfair hiring procedures with respect to nonwhite group members.[14] It was hypocritical, then, that the department paid attention to race/ethnicity when it was in their interest.

For instance, one of the Latinas whom I was successful in getting admitted into the program had worked with me as an undergraduate and wanted to be assigned as my advisee. However, Dr. Grant argued that he needed minorities on his team for the sake of getting grants and had her assigned to him. In a related occurrence, I learned that Dr. Grant had listed me as an unpaid consultant for a grant in which the granting agency required ethnic/racial expertise—without ever asking my permission or discussing this grant with me.

I was told that Dr. Grant routinely made negative, cutting remarks about me personally, about my teaching, and about my research. I learned about many of these remarks from the people who worked for him, as he did not seem to have any qualms about openly disparaging me. As one of my colleagues told me, "Dr. Grant is not your friend. Watch your back." When I discussed Dr. Grant's behavior toward me with the department chair, he advised me just to dismiss the remarks and not to take him seriously. He argued that, after all, no one would really listen to such comments from Dr. Grant. He was wrong, as was evident later in my "third-year review."

I was furious with the chair's response but did nothing. I didn't have the courage or know-how to file a claim with the university center for human rights. This lack of action went against my sense of personal integrity, and, consequently, my self-esteem further plummeted. I "contained" my anger and gained forty pounds, most of it within my first year as an assistant professor. I began to question why I ever thought I would do well in academia. If I was struggling, I reasoned, it must be due to my lack of competence. Of course, I also blamed the program faculty for not supporting me. However, I reasoned that *if I were really good enough*, I wouldn't need their support. In the midst of this experience, I could not see what external forces in my situation were doing to me even though my academic training had prepared me to do so.

This lack of awareness is particularly ironic because the hallmark credo of my field of study is that behavior is a function of the *person and the environment*, that, when it comes to explaining behavior and attitudes, *the situation matters.* Still, the effects of stereotype threat, stigmatization, tokenism, and racism are so insidious that I couldn't see them relative to myself at that time. That I undermined my sense of competence is particularly indicative of the power of the situation because by then I had begun studying the psychological effects of tokenism. Though I was well versed in the scientific literature in the area I was nevertheless too immersed in the situation to apply the knowledge to myself.

Evidence of Tokenism and Racism—Undermining by Workload

My teaching and advising load was unprecedented for recently hired junior members of the department. In the four years I was a member of that department, I taught four different graduate seminars and three different undergraduate courses. From my discussions with colleagues I learned that most new professors in the department taught only one or two graduate seminars in their area of specialty, which they continued teaching for the first few years before they added others. Included in my teaching load were both core graduate courses in the field. My experience was consistent with documented disparities in the teaching load assigned to women relative to men.[15] These disparities, evidence that one's scholarship is not valued, are exacerbated for women of color.

I was also the principal advisor for eight graduate students as well as chair of their thesis and/or dissertation committees. Two of the students assigned to me had been considered "problem students" previous to my becoming faculty. Two of the other program faculty, both full professors, had only two graduate students each, and one of those students later transferred to me. I also supervised and advised approximately fifteen undergraduate students as members of my research team.

This workload may be contrasted with that of the faculty member I replaced. She was white, a graduate of an elite university who was hired after an extensive national search, and the department had high expectations of her. Although she taught two critical graduate courses, she had been sheltered from extensive advising responsibilities. After three years in the department, she was formally advising only one student, an advising load consistent with department standards for junior professors. The difference in the department's perception of us was evident by the disparities in our workloads.

I was assigned complex and time-consuming administrative tasks necessary for the program. What this workload meant was that there was little time for research. I was working every day and late hours at home every night to try to complete manuscripts, prepare classes, grade papers, and do program administrative work. I wanted so very badly to succeed. The more overwhelmed I became with nonresearch responsibilities, the more incompetent I felt.

The assigned teaching and administrative load was made significantly heavier by *unassigned* responsibilities and obligations. As a woman of color, I felt duty-bound to respond to students who felt marginalized in the institution, especially ethnic/racial minorities. These students often sought me out to advise their student organizations and to listen to their experiences of racism, sexism, or homophobia in the university. Sometimes they asked me to help them take action on their discriminatory experiences. For instance, I assisted a white, female student who was being sexually harassed by a professor. Several Latina/o students sought guidance as they experienced conflict between their own academic goals and their family's financial needs. Of course, at one level, I did have the choice of turning these students away. Emotionally, however, I felt pulled to respond to them. I believed that if I did not, no one else would be receptive to their issues. Furthermore, I would not have been able to face myself if I had turned away these students, especially knowing about the difficulties for students of color in predominantly white institutions. This work was necessary and important, and even fulfilling, as I knew my response to them, at the very least, validated their needs and concerns. Nevertheless, it was emotionally draining to constantly hear about students' experiences with discrimination, especially as I was experiencing the effects of racism myself.

When I discussed the overwhelming teaching/advising/administrative load with the chair, he explained that the social science faculty were very busy with administrative duties, so I had to carry the load. He said he wanted me to know that the faculty appreciated my service to the department. I knew that between my assigned duties and unassigned obligations as a woman of color my time and energy were being drained. It was a situation I felt powerless to change, and I was feeling increasingly incompetent as a faculty member.

Overt Racism and Isolation

I endured overtly racist comments from a few department faculty. For instance, one senior faculty member stopped me in the hall one day and asked, regarding a graduate student fellowship being offered by the ethnic studies program, "If one of our students accepts that fellowship, will they have to do Mexican shit or can they do real research?" I replied that research on Mexican Americans was real research—period! Then I simply turned and walked away. These types of incidents happened to me regularly. I wished I had had the courage to say more. What had become of the feisty and confident person I had been only recently? I would often sit in my office and think about things I could have, and wished I had, said in response to racist statements. Of course, I knew this was not productive use of time. The more I ruminated about racist comments, the more incompetent I felt.

Another example of departmental racism occurred when I was serving on a thesis committee for a student working on depression. During his defense, I pointed out that he had not conducted any analyses by gender or race/ethnicity. Although it was typically considered disrespectful to contradict other faculty during student defenses, one of the other committee members, replied, "*Why in the world would gender or race make any difference? A brain is a brain!*" This devaluing of the central role of ethnicity in the human psyche, a role now recognized by the American Psychological Association, appeared to me to be another example of aversive racism in the department, a racism disguised as "color blindness."

In my third year, I applied for and received a one-semester fellowship from the university ethnic studies program. As protocal required, I asked the department chair's permission to go on one-semester leave. He replied that I was "valuable" to the department, and he would approve the leave as long as I continued to advise my many students during the semester. He also said that, unlike other fellowships, this one would not be considered prestigious for me because it would be assumed I attained it only by being Mexican American and not due to my accomplishments. What an ironic twist. I believed he had hired me, in part, because I was Mexican American. Now he seemed to be telling me that an otherwise prestigious fellowship could mean nothing for my evaluation because it was intended for Mexican Americans. Nevertheless, I took the leave and continued to meet with my graduate and undergraduate students throughout that semester. I did not know that it was not necessary, nor was it the norm, for faculty to continue meeting with and advising students while on leave.

I must point out here that the overt racism I experienced came from a relatively small portion of the department members, a few powerful full professors who created a hostile department climate for minorities. While the more junior faculty did not seem to agree with these attitudes, they were not in positions of power to confront the full professors. It did not seem to me that the fair-minded, nonracist full professors in the department attempted to keep their racist colleagues in check, nor did they create a support system for those affected by the hostile climate. It seemed impossible to me that they could be unaware, as some racist statements were made during faculty meetings. Thus, racists and nonracists contributed directly and/or indirectly to the negative department climate.

Some Companionship and Support

I eventually sought out and found companionship and mentoring among the Mexican American, African American, and Puerto Rican campus faculty. Whatever feelings there may have been among the ethnic studies faculty because I had not accepted the post doc were now replaced with expressed desire for me to succeed. These groups of faculty supported me emotionally and with professional opportunities, such as speaking engagements, collaborative research, small grants, and a fellowship. Within my social science department, one white, male full professor befriended me and seemed to have my interest rather than the department's interest at heart. He listened and offered to pre-review my manuscripts, which I did not give him. I still could not bring myself to trust anyone on the department faculty. Fortunately, I did rely on my close friends from graduate school. Having trusted friends listen and validate my reality helped me maintain a sense of sanity.

Stereotype Threat

In spite of this support, I quickly became resistant to positive feedback as my negative self-perception increased. For instance, over the course of my four years at this institution I became well acquainted with three highly esteemed, interna-

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tionally known and respected, widely published scholars in my discipline, each of whom worked at different institutions. Each of them gave me positive feedback regarding my research ideas, writing, and potential. I even began publishing with two of them and planned collaborative research with the third. Each of these professors was more highly esteemed in the discipline than any of my faculty colleagues. Even so, when they praised my work I reasoned that they were good, generous men who just felt sorry for me but didn't really believe I was competent. This is another example of the disorienting effects of feedback when one does not know whom to trust. An esteemed woman faculty member in a closely related field from another university also stayed in contact with me and practically pleaded with me to leave my university. She argued that I could not possibly flourish under those conditions. I reasoned that she liked me enough not to care whether or not I was competent. By discounting this feedback from people who were trying to help me, I undermined myself in several ways. Most especially, I slowed my professional development by not trusting their input.

In retrospect, my discounting of the input these esteemed, decent scholars gave me relative to my work and potential was one of the most obvious symptoms that my self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy in the academy had suffered great harm. I no longer recognized the person in the mirror. The energetic, healthy, enthusiastic person I had been up until the time I became a faculty member seemed to have disappeared. I wondered what *I* had done to destroy her. This self-blaming is a mark of the effects of stereotype threat, stigmatization, racism, and tokenism. Yet, at the time, even with my social science professional training, I could not account for what was happening to me.

Third-Year Review—Oops! We Forgot!

The worst of my experiences, but the one that finally sent me on the road to physical and psychological health, centered around my third-year review. My department "forgot" to administer the review, an unprecedented occurrence in the department. That my review was "forgotten" was indicative that my identity as a scholar was never acknowledged by the department. The third-year review was a university requirement designed to facilitate faculty's successful road toward tenure. It was explained to me that this forgetfulness had occurred because of transitions in the department. By the end of my third year the dean who had insisted on my hiring had been fired as dean and transferred (I don't know if there was a connection between my hiring and his dismissal), and the department chair, my former advisor, was named dean. In my *fourth year*, then, my "third-year" review was administered.

From all accounts by other department faculty, my review was conducted like none other in the department. The established general procedure was for the review committee to meet individually with faculty in the reviewee's program and then determine where there was consensus. The committee was also to read the reviewee's published work, third-year review statement, and teaching evaluations, and ascertain the probability of the reviewee's success should he or she continue on their current track. It was generally considered a helpful, though stressful, process, expected to guide the reviewee toward tenure. In my case, however, the committee met with the entire department faculty at one time, including the very powerful, very vocal Dr. Grant, who was known to have made disparaging remarks about me since I had been hired. Immediately after the review committee met with my program faculty, it was my turn to meet with the committee.

The first question they asked me was, "What do you have to say about your poor teaching evaluations?" I was astounded. I knew from the department data that my teaching evaluations were not only outstanding, they were among the highest in the department. I had also been nominated as outstanding teaching fellow for the university. My teaching evaluations had been so high that the previous fall they had been found to be *more than one standard deviation above the department norm* and had thus netted me a raise in salary. I asked if the committee had read my teaching evaluations. The committee chair, the same person who had earlier said "a brain is a brain," pulled out what may have been the only two negative evaluations in the stack (I had taught hundreds of undergraduate students and about forty graduate students). As I made this known to the committee, the committee chair stated that my faculty had indicated that people complained about my teaching. I was later told that Dr. Grant had made a negative statement about my teaching of the only course on ethnicity and race taught by tenure-stream department faculty; my more mainstream courses were not mentioned. In terms of research, although I had a couple of publications in top refereed disciplinary journals, a chapter in press, and several other manuscripts under review (all in "mainstream" peer-reviewed journals), I was told that my faculty colleagues questioned the quantity and quality of my research.

Later that evening, two of the persons present at the meeting told me that most of the talking had been done by one person, Dr. Grant, and I learned most of what he had said. I was told that he said, "She'll never be a superstar. She doesn't fit in this department." Let me point out that in this department, as in most others in public universities, the majority of the faculty were not "superstars." So I was being judged by unique and stringent standards. I was also told that because of political ramifications, with the exception of one retired professor, the other full professors, who were my former advisors, did not speak up to contradict Dr. Grant or defend me.

The day after my meeting with the review committee I placed a call to the chair of the committee and told her that it had seemed to me that the review was extremely negatively biased. She agreed and told me that in her opinion I would never be able to shake the circumstances surrounding my hire and that the department resentment was still deep. She stated that Dr. Grant would never evaluate me fairly and that the committee had no choice but to listen to his opinion as he was now director of the program. She further stated that my case would be better if I agreed to disassociate myself from any ethnic/cultural related research and teaching.

I needed help. Still in shock from the unfair review, that weekend I met with my former advisor, then dean of the college, who was among the faculty the committee had met with. I told him that I had heard about what had transpired in the meeting and that I was not receiving a fair evaluation. I also told him I had been extremely disappointed and hurt to learn that he had not spoken up on my behalf and against Dr. Grant. He replied that he was embarrassed to hear Dr. Grant go on but that when Grant was in the room, it was pointless to try to get a word in. He explained that the committee had made a big mistake by meeting with all the faculty at one time. However, he also stated that the review committee had the final word, and he really had no say in their conclusions. He had no response to my argument that the committee's conclusions had to be biased by what had been said, and *not* said, by my colleagues during the review meeting.

The following week I met with the new department chair and told him what had transpired in the review and of my other negative department experiences, including the hiring process. The new chair seemed genuinely surprised and unaware of my situation and expressed anger over the way the review was handled. He, too, stated that the faculty should have been interviewed separately. For political reasons, faculty often do not contradict each other in meetings of this nature. However, to my knowledge, there was no subsequent attempt to reinterview faculty individually.

In retrospect, the evaluation of my work is consistent with literature that indicates that stigmatization results in negative expectations. Madeline E. Heilman, Caryn J. Block, and Jonathan A. Lucas, for example, state, "Negative expectations of these individuals that would be spawned by a stigma of incompetence could cause distorted perceptions of their behavior and work performance."[16] This situation demonstrates one of the perils of being a Latina faculty member, 80 percent of whom teach courses and conduct research related to their own specific ethnic group.[17] Although 90 percent of Latino scholars consider themselves intellectuals, and 85 percent are committed to the rules and standards for scientific pursuits, most also believe that their research is seen as academically inferior and illegitimate.[18] They cite the taboo of "brown-on-brown" research as one of the top reasons why they are denied tenure.[19]

Also, in retrospect, for my colleagues to have spoken up about my extensive advising and service would have been an admission of how they were using me to take care of program needs while pursuing their own agendas. It would also have meant defending me before faculty who knew they had pushed for my hire, in spite of department resentment. I came to believe that *my faculty colleagues could only have felt redeemed in the eyes of the department if I had achieved superstar status in only three years.*

My Decision to Leave and Return to Identity Integration

I was devastated by the events of the "third-year review." Throughout my tenure there, I had increasingly lost self-confidence, as my research was constantly referred to as "ethnic stuff" and not "real" science. Again, the publication of my work in prestigious journals indicated that several reviewers and editors did consider my work good. However, I did not think about that positive feedback. I had begun to have difficulty focusing on my writing, something that had previously come easily to me. Once again, my lack of confidence had become such a problem that, in a couple of cases in which editors recommended that I revise and resubmit a manuscript, I convinced myself that the quality of my work was not good enough to revise. All of this was symptomatic of the effects of tokenism, stigmatization, racism, and stereotype threat. It was also an example of how attributed ambiguity made me question whether I ever deserved to be hired or published.[20] Thus, my state of mind resulted from the negative attitudes and beliefs I had internalized as well as the behavior and attitudes of others.

After the review I came to the belief that the department had used me with no intention of keeping me on as a tenured faculty member. I conferred with friends and scholars from other universities who had become aware of and come to be concerned about my life in that department. They all agreed that, because of how it had been handled, the review could not be considered valid. However, there was also consensus that the "third-year" review was evidence of my department's perception of me—that in that department I would always be perceived, not as a scholar, but as the token minority the department had to hire. I came to understand that in this department I would likely continue to be overwhelmed with advising responsibilities and trivial, nonprestigious administrative duties, leaving little time for my own research. I came to the difficult and painful conclusion that I had to leave to regain my holistic identity. That week I sent out job applications.

Transition from Mexican American to Chicana

The Mexican American faculty reacted negatively to my intention to leave the university. They wanted me to stay and legally fight what seemed an inevitable negative tenure decision in a couple of years. Their contention was that if I left, the department would win. The department would have used me to appease temporarily those who had demanded racial/ethnic representation, and then discarded me. The department would claim that they had hired a Mexican American, and it had been *her choice* to leave. Better to stay, some Mexican American faculty argued, and make the department own up to its members' behavior toward me, especially since I had documented their treatment of me in my journal. The ethnic studies program was even supportive to the extent of offering me another fully funded, one-year fellowship. The director of that program argued that with the year of fellowship I could get more publications in press, and he would fight to keep that year off the tenure clock thus buying me one additional year of time before my final tenure review.

His argument strongly appealed to my political identity. After the "third-year" review, I had made the transition in identity from Mexican American to Chicana, the self-identifier used by politically conscious Mexican Americans. My university experiences had changed me from a naive, politically insulated and unaware Mexican American to a person whose consciousness about racism and its effects were raised to heights I had not previously imagined.

I met with the university provost, who had already heard about my situation from campus Mexican American faculty. She seemed embarrassed about and apologized for the delay in my "third-year review." She offered to extend my tenure clock by one year to make up for that "mistake." However, she did not agree to stop the tenure clock for the one-year fellowship from ethnic studies. Additionally, when I told her about Dr. Grant's role in my experience, she avoided the subject by discussing how important grants were to the university.

More than ever, I was now convinced that if I stayed my shattered sense of competence and identity might not recover. I believed that it was in my best personal and professional interest—and, by extension, my family's interest—for me to leave. At the time, I needed badly to win for myself; then later, through my future success, I could make contributions to my ethnic community. I no longer wanted to just survive; *I wanted to thrive*—a sign that I was recovering.

That spring I made the short list for positions at two university social science departments and one ethnic studies department. I accepted the latter. My writing is once again focused and consistent. I have published about a dozen articles, most all of them in mainstream refereed journals, and have obtained roughly $75,000 in grants in the two years since I left the first institution. I feel respected and valued. I am productive and once again ambitious and motivated. I've lost most of the weight I gained in those first four years. My identity feels integrated. I once again recognize and like the person I see in the mirror. I feel personal peace.

Recommendations

Several recommendations for faculty of color and for institutions hiring them are already evident in this article. In addition, I offer the following:

Faculty of color must be aware of the consequences of putting themselves in a situation whereby they are vulnerable to effects of tokenism, racism, stigmatization, and stereotype threat—all related concepts. These effects can be psychologically, physically, and professionally damaging. If you do want to continue working where you were trained, I recommend insisting on two things. First, temporarily leave your training institution for at least a one-year post doc in order to gain distance from your advisors. Leaving for a period of time also lets your faculty know that your work is valued elsewhere. Second, to help keep from having your sense of competence undermined, insist on an extensive, national search. When you come out on top, your own sense of competence will be heightened, as will your colleagues' perception of you. Contentment as an academician does not depend upon your working in an ethnic studies department. It depends on working in an accepting and validating climate.

I recommend accepting a position in a department in which you are not the only minority and not the only faculty conducting research and/or teaching on ethnic/racial issues. My own research on tokenism indicates that solo minorities are less satisfied with their jobs than those who have minority colleagues.[21] People who feel like tokens tend to believe they are always representative of their ethnic groups, constantly in the spotlight and living in a "glass house," and they often have reason to believe that their white colleagues are threatened by their accomplishments.[22]

It is also important to look for signs of overt, covert, and unconscious racism among potential colleagues; racists cannot evaluate ethnic/racial minorities fairly. For instance, do comments indicate an assumption that minorities are not as qualified as whites? Does the department undervalue publications in ethnic studies journals? Is the department under pressure to hire a minority? Does the department "showcase" its only minority? These are signs you may become a department token, with detrimental psychological consequences. Inquire as to the reactions of faculty when a colleague makes a racist or sexist statement. Do others just stand by and say and do nothing, or do they take action. Remember that those who just stand by help maintain a negative climate.

For institutions, one interpretation of this article could be that affirmative action policies are inherently detrimental. I do not believe that is the case. Research indicates that when affirmative action policies are framed in a positive manner (e.g., increasing our diversity will contribute different, valued perspectives to the discipline), the potentially stigmatizing effects of the policies may be avoided.[23] Additionally, because departments often do contain racist members, "good intentions are not sufficient to guarantee that equal opportunity will insure equal treatment,"[24] thus rendering affirmative action policies necessary at this time. Departments must therefore be encouraged by the administration to frame affirmative action hiring in a positive, nondetrimental fashion.

It is important for nonracist members of departments, especially the more senior, powerful members, to be aware of the pitfalls faced by faculty of color and to insure support and mentorship for these faculty. It is not enough to rationalize that if one is not being personally racist or unfair that the behavior of others is not one's business. It is incumbent on the powerful members of departments to use their power to develop a positive working climate for faculty of color and, by extension, for all faculty.

It is also important to recognize the detrimental effects of covert racism, such as tokenism, which often occurs concurrently with denial of the importance of race/ethnicity (for example, "color blindness"). To deny the role of race/ethnicity of members of societally oppressed groups is to deny their realities. This denial may be especially harmful for Latinas/os and African Americans, who are particularly stigmatized in the realm of academia.

It is critical for administrators and colleagues to understand that faculty of color have responsibilities and obligations to respond to students who seek them out precisely because they are faculty of color. This situation is exacerbated for women of color, who are also sought out by white women in predominantly male departments. Due to gender role expectations, women often do not feel the freedom to maintain distance from students. Latinas, in particular, often feel that to be successful they may have to behave in a manner contradictory to their cultural values for women. As Ana M. Martinez Alemán states about Latinas, "To be womanly is to be unprofessorial. . . . Women professors must conform to, and accommodate, cultural values outside of her gender role."[25]

Keeping in mind these added obligations, easing the assigned load for these faculty is not a sign of favoritism or lowered expectations. It is a sign of recognition of their additional responsibilities, especially to communities of color. It is also critical, at times of evaluation, to value how these interactions serve to enhance the reputation of the department. Additionally, administrators and faculty must understand that *department and institutional climate can affect individual performance.*

Finally, it is absolutely critical for faculty of color to understand their own role in undermining their competence. This self-undermining often happens as a result of others' racism or at least interacts with the behavior and attitudes of others. However, awareness of one's own attitudes and behaviors in these situations can be empowering in diffusing self-undermining behavior.

Concluding Comments

In my view, no one was blameless for the negative department climate and my resulting harsh experience, including myself. Five interactive forces contributed to the sustenance and maintenance of racism, stigmatization, tokenization, and stereotype threat: (1) the negative framing of hiring associated with affirmative action policy that set the stage for tokenization and stigmatization; (2) the overtly biased persons who produced direct, adverse effects; (3) those persons who didn't recognize their negative biases and whose manner of encouragement was in itself indicative of racism and was thus undermining; (4) those persons who were not biased, but stood by and let racist behavior occur without attempts to intervene; (5) my own undermining of my competence. My credentials as a scholar cognizant of these effects did not prevent my susceptibility to the effects of stereotype threat. Being vigilant of these effects on the self in these situations and adhering to one's sense of competence are necessary to overcome these potentially psychologically damaging situations.

In conclusion, people of color who pursue an academic career and conduct ethical research contribute admirably to their ethnic communities and universities in many ways. They are role models and mentors for other students, faculty, and community members. Through their research they can facilitate understanding of and improvements in their communities and more trust in academic institutions, which are often perceived as "ivory towers" with no relation or applicability to surrounding communities. The case study in this article is not intended to scare Latinas or other people of color away from academia. Quite the contrary, if we are aware of the processes that might undermine our competence and physical and psychological health, we can co-opt those oppressive processes in our own interest and in the interest of our communities. As Paulo Freire states regarding the oppressed, "Their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression."[26] With awareness comes power.

I hope this case study description and analysis has been helpful in that regard. Equally, I hope that this narrative facilitates better mentorship of and appreciation for the needs and realities of faculty of color from their faculty colleagues and administrators.

Notes

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