

BLACK WOMANHOOD AND FEMINIST STANDPOINTS

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At the intersection of race and gender stand women of color, torn by the lines of bias that currently divide white from nonwhite in our society, and male from female. The worlds these women negotiate demand different and often wrenching allegiances. As a result, women of color face significant obstacles to their full participation in and contribution to higher education. (Moses, 1989, p. 1)

On certain dimensions, Black women may more closely resemble Black men; on others, white women; and on still others Black women may stand apart from both groups. (Collins, 1991, p. 207)

Being Black and woman engenders complex ways of knowing and being. In this article, I discuss challenges and consequences of being a member of two historically oppressed groups in the United States. To frame the discussion, I rely on feminist standpoint theory—a distinctive element of contemporary feminist thought about how we construct knowledge (Longino, 1993). I focus on U.S. academe as a discursive site for constructing identity. I recount some of my experiences as a tenure-track faculty member to illuminate issues and to afford the reader a glimpse of my everyday reality. Although my experiences do not necessarily represent those

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of other Black women or women of color in predominantly White institutions, numerous others have described similar experiences and perspectives (e.g., Etter-Lewis, 1993; Jones, 1994; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Moses, 1989; Nieves-Squires, 1991; Olivas, 1997).

I begin with an overview of feminist standpoint theory, after which I describe my standpoint. Next, I discuss examples and interpretations of my experiences as a Black woman academic. Finally, I discuss implications of the issues that I have raised.

FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

Proponents of feminist standpoint theory contend that we should solicit women's perspectives on social reality to construct knowledge and to critique dominant knowledge claims (which usually are based on White men's lives). Socialist feminists developed this concept as an extension of Marxist notions of the standpoint of the proletariat: "Like the lives of proletarians in Marxist theory, women's lives in Western capitalist societies also contained possibilities for developing a critique of domination" (Hartsock, 1997, p. 168). Feminist standpoint theory enjoins us to view women as "strangers" or "outsiders" whose experiences might provide insight that is invisible to "natives" (usually White men) who are too immersed within dominant institutions to detect the patterns and behaviors that comprise reality (Hennesey, 1993).

Feminist standpoint theory does not essentialize the category "woman." Rather, it encourages us to solicit stories from many types of women (Buzzanell, 1995). Due to the interlocking web of oppression that stems from belonging to two disenfranchised groups, women of color may enact the role of outsider or stranger differently from White women (e.g., Beale, 1970; Bell, 1992; Dill, 1979; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; hooks, 1984; Houston, 1994; Spelman, 1988). Therefore, women of color should prove to be valuable resources for acquiring a variety of perspectives and narratives about how oppression operates and about how women resist oppression.

Consistent with general feminist goals, feminist standpoint theory focuses on gender differences and strives to emancipate women. Researchers assess women's historically shared group experiences, and they emphasize social conditions that construct oppressed groups (Collins, 1997; Harding, 1991). Thus, feminist standpoint situates women's lived, concrete experiences in local contexts, while also linking them with broader social and institutional issues (Allen, 1996). It goes further, however, by seeking to expose oppression and to highlight acts of resistance. As a result, women who verbalize their struggles and victories may experience "consciousness raising" (Smith, 1987).

Thus, feminist standpoint theory holds great promise for feminist studies and activism. When we privilege the knowledge of the oppressed or outsiders, we reveal aspects of the social order that previously have not been exposed. Consequently, we might gain information and insights that will help us to describe and theorize about how we construct and maintain social order. Moreover, we can envision and begin to enact more just social practices (Hartsock, 1997).

MY STANDPOINT

I am an African American woman.¹ I place primacy on these socially constructed aspects of my identity because of (a) their physical salience, (b) the accompanying likelihood that I will encounter oppression and discrimination based upon how others see me, and (c) my acute awareness of having been socialized into Black womanhood. Although space constraints prevent me from extensively describing my identity and background, to adhere to tenets of feminist standpoint theory, I offer a brief autobiographical sketch to contextualize this essay.

I am a heterosexual, first-generation college graduate who was raised by my Black mother in the 1950s and 1960s in a lower-class, Black, midwestern U.S. community. When I was almost 40 years old, I earned a doctoral degree in communication at Howard University, a historically Black university. In 1989, I was the first person of color to be hired in the tenure track of a department of

communication at a predominantly White, Western research institution that was actively seeking to increase the numbers of faculty women and members of racial-ethnic plurality groups. My "only" status has not changed during my 8 years in the department.

Finally, I view myself as an "outsider within" the academy, as Collins (1991) explains:

The exclusion of Black women's ideas from mainstream academic discourse and the curious placement of African-American women intellectuals in both feminist and Black social and political thought has meant that Black women intellectuals have remained outsiders within in all three communities. . . . The assumptions on which full group membership are based—whiteness for feminist thought, maleness for Black social and political thought, and the combination for mainstream scholarship—all negate a Black female reality. Prevented from becoming full insiders in any of these areas of inquiry, Black women remain outsiders within, individuals whose marginality provides a distinctive angle of vision on the theories put forth by such intellectual communities. (p. 12)

I agree with Collins (1991) that "the marginality that accompanies outsider-within status can be the source of both frustration and creativity" (p. 233). My solitary and often lonely position as outsider-within and as the only person of color or Black woman in my department presents numerous challenges and consequences. Next, I share stories and insight from my intellectual autobiography to illustrate this point.²

CHALLENGES/CONSEQUENCES OF BLACK WOMANHOOD IN ACADEME

CONFLICTUAL ENCOUNTERS

I have experienced numerous situations that reflect the interlocking nature of racism, sexism, or both. For instance, I have encountered the attitude that I was a "twofer," someone hired because administrators could count me as a female hire and as a racial minority. Not long after I assumed my tenure-track position, one of my colleagues

told me that someone said I was an affirmative action hire and not qualified for my job. Yet another person reported that someone in my department said I was not a good writer. Just about every sister scholar (woman of color academician) I know has a story of being mistaken in an academic setting for anyone but Dr. So-and-So, and I am no exception. These flagrant and subtle messages reveal oppressive attitudes that question my credibility as a member of the academy.

I have endured countless interactions in which I found myself second-guessing the other person's intentions (i.e., I wondered if he or she was being racist, sexist, both, or neither). For example, the first day that I convened an introductory course in organizational communication, a White male student informed me that he was going to drop the course because, he said, "I have already taken a course to fulfill my ethnic studies requirement." In providing an overview of the course, I had never said a word about ethnicity. Then there was the time that I shared what I thought was a great idea with the chair of my department, who barely acknowledged it. However, when a White male colleague made the same suggestion, the chair immediately put it into effect. Once, a White woman at a social gathering of academics asked me to sing a Negro spiritual that she loved. Another time, a White store clerk blatantly avoided touching my hand as she handed me change. As a final example, in a local grocery store, a White woman grabbed her purse from her shopping cart both times that I entered a section where she was browsing.

Of course, I never will know these persons' actual intentions. Some White persons discount my interpretations of these types of encounters by observing that they have had similar experiences. However, I do not think they understand how I feel as someone who repeatedly deals with these types of exchanges across numerous contexts, and who finds herself spending valuable mental and emotional energy trying to process them.

Due to tokenism, I frequently endure demands on my time that other faculty members in my department do not face.³ People seem to expect that I can or should provide insight as a representative of women, people of color, women of color, Black people, or Black

women. Thus, I sometimes feel more like a symbol or representative than an individual. When I was hired, the chair of my department warned me that I would be asked to "sit on every damned committee," and he was right. I have learned to be more discerning about when to say yes, but I still spend time deciding whether I should accept an invitation.

I also expend energy monitoring my emotions, masking them, or both. For instance, a high-ranking administrator told what I considered to be a derogatory joke about football players. I was the only person of color at the meeting, and the only person who did not crack a smile at his joke. I wanted to tell him that I was insulted, but I held my tongue. I often am careful not to display negative emotion (e.g., sadness, despair, anger, disagreement) because I do not want to enact negative stereotypes. For instance, I might suppress my anger because I do not want to be seen as a militant Black person or as a domineering, loud Black woman, or as a bitchy woman. As Marshall (1993) observes:

Sensitivity to context is imperative to allow women to survive in an alien world, and yet it marginalizes and disempowers them. They are often trying to anticipate difficulties and to screen out unacceptable aspects of their heritage of female values, or trying to manage the disturbance they create. (p. 135)

Being both woman and Black compounds these tensions for me, particularly when it seems that other people do not seem to be sensitive to my feelings or to my value systems.

Collins (1991) notes that a dialectic of identity can occur when women of color have to negotiate the contradictions of dual membership. Moreover, "they can even experience pressure to choose between their racial identity and their womanhood" (Moses, 1989, p. 1). I experienced this type of conflict when one of my former students, an African American man, was accused of rape. Some members of the Black community wanted me to support the student when he was barred from campus subsequent to his trial, whereas women's groups wanted me to support their position that the student should not be allowed on campus.⁴ I sidestepped the situation by not doing anything.

Fortunately, the rape example depicts an extreme case. However, I often confront less distressing situations in which I feel torn between being identified because of my race-ethnicity or my gender. For instance, when I was the only Black woman on a job search committee, the lone Black man often sought my support on racial matters, and the White woman often looked to me for support regarding issues related to female applicants.

DIALECTIC TENSIONS IN THE ETHIC OF CARING

Collins (1991) asserts that material conditions of oppression may generate some uniformity in the epistemologies of subordinate groups. For instance, she propounds a particularly acute convergence in Black women of an ethic of caring that African Americans (see also Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Foeman & Pressley, 1987) and women (see also, Buzzanell, 1994; Marshall, 1993; Wood, 1993) often exhibit. Collins (1991) cites three interrelated components of this ethic of caring: (a) an emphasis on individual uniqueness, (b) freedom to express emotions, and (c) a capacity for empathy. I often epitomize this convergence during interactions with others and as I develop myself as a feminist scholar.

I usually assign students to write an autobiography, so that I can view each person as an individual (as opposed to entertaining a common stereotype at the university that they are rich, White kids who only want to party). I am expressive, and I frequently use humor. I allow my enthusiasm to show, and I also express anger and disappointment. Basically, my approach to teaching stems from the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." As a Black woman, I do not want to be stereotyped. I wish to be treated as an individual, even as others recognize that I come from a *different* (not deficient) cultural background than most of them.

In the classroom, I employ an interactive style, somewhat similar to the "call and response" tradition of Black churches. I also take a collaborative, cooperative approach to teaching and learning. However, I run a "tight ship," displaying an attitude described in a saying from my Black neighborhood: "I joke, but I don't play." Although

students (especially White ones) tend initially to struggle with my style (I often am their first Black teacher), after a couple of sessions most of them get into it. Often, they tell me that my class is the only one that they attend regularly, and many students have expressed gratitude for how I challenge them to think for themselves.

I also display an ethic of caring by spending a lot of time in one-on-one interaction during office hours with students, who often discuss personal problems. Students of color who are not in my classes also visit me to discuss their personal as well as school-related concerns. Some of my colleagues also visit me to discuss various issues. My mother calls me Mary Worth (after the character in the funny papers who always helps others, including strangers) or Ann Landers because I am always trying to assist other people with their life problems.

This propensity toward an ethic of caring holds negative and positive consequences for my advancement as an academician. I realize that I may have shortchanged other aspects of my role when I was an assistant professor, particularly research and writing. Moreover, those persons who evaluate me for reappointment, merit raises, or promotion are not likely to know, care about, or credit these activities. However, based on cards, letters, and gifts from students, as well as departmental and university-wide teaching awards, I am certain that I have made a positive difference in many students' lives, and this gratifies me.

I also am giving myself the benefit of the ethic of caring. Following the lead that feminist standpoint theory furnishes, I have begun to look for (and create) acts of resistance in my intellectual autobiography. The most obvious example is my decision to change my area of study from computer-mediated communication to feminism. By centering my research efforts on Black women, I have given myself permission to focus my career on a marginal, potentially volatile area of study. I also allow myself to feel and sometimes express the emotions that arise from delving into this area of study.

Furthermore, although I certainly do not deny that I am oppressed because of my gender, my race-ethnicity, and their intersection, I conscientiously reject the status of "victim," and "stig-

matized other" (see Buzzanell, 1994; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). Rather, I celebrate the positive consequences of having been socialized as Black and woman, and I am determined to help other women of color to view and value themselves similarly. I believe that I am blessed and I am a blessing. Thus, the process of using a feminist standpoint to speak my intellectual autobiography has been transformative.

IMPLICATIONS

Although the issues I raise only begin to reveal the complexities and challenges of Black womanhood, my preliminary efforts elicit numerous practical implications for organizational communication processes—not only in academe but also in other professional settings. In a comprehensive report on Black women students, administrators, and faculty members in higher education, Moses (1989) makes several recommendations that relate to this essay. For instance, she encourages readers to acknowledge Black women's comments or suggestions because we often feel that others ignore our input. I have felt slighted to the point of being discouraged from sharing my ideas, which can be detrimental not only to my morale but also to the growth of my academic unit, which will not reap benefits that my ideas might generate.

Moses (1989) also cautions university employees to "assume the best when colleagues work together. Too often, interchanges between male and female colleagues are viewed as sexual liaisons, collaboration among women in general is seen as 'plotting,' and collaboration among Black women is seen as 'separatist'" (p. 14). She further suggests that administrators endorse support networks among women of color, although she warns them not to expect that every woman of color would want to be involved. Finally, she encourages personnel committees to engage in rigorous job searches and to let others know that a Black woman is qualified for her position.

I recommend that concerned individuals should not assume that a woman of color is interested in dealing with diversity issues. Even

when she is, acknowledge her other skills and areas of expertise. In addition, recognize that addressing and valuing diversity should be everyone's responsibility: Do not burden us with the task. For instance, identify and use resources (on your campus and from other sources) that are designated to assist faculty, students, and staff with understanding diversity. Also, strive to incorporate diversity issues into your curriculum. However, do not reserve your attention for a separate unit within your courses. Rather, seek examples (e.g., case studies, films, illustrations, guest speakers) that depict people of color in a variety of positive roles that do not always concentrate on their race, gender, or both.

I also encourage you to check yourself for stereotyping and assumptions. Recognize that Black women and other women of color are not all alike. Try to strike a balance between viewing us as individuals while realizing that, due to our shared histories, many Black women in professional situations endure similar sexist and racist attitudes and interactions. Related to this, try to understand that women of color experience varying types and degrees of sexism and racism, according to their racioethnic background (e.g., people might expect Asian women to be quiet and subservient).

I hope that I have illuminated the issues that Moses (1989) and Collins (1991) raise in the opening quotes of this essay. I also hope that my stories and recommendations inspire and guide you toward creating and maintaining work climates where every person feels valued and validated.

NOTES

1. I use Black and African American interchangeably, although the current politically correct term seems to be African American. Black connotes an important time in my life and in U.S. history, when many Negroes (or colored people) began to assert pride in their racial background. Thus, I prefer to refer to myself as Black.

2. For more examples and analyses of some of my experiences, please see Allen (1996).

3. See Kanter (1977) for a discussion of characteristics and professional consequences of being a token (i.e., a representational figure of a particular group).

4. Rape is a particularly controversial topic between Black and White feminists because of complex sexual politics that stem from the U.S. historical legacy of slavery, where White men routinely raped Black women and viewed them as animals (see Collins, 1991). In

contemporary society, Black women are socialized to view their bodies negatively, to be concerned more about the welfare of family and community than themselves, and to protect Black men from the criminal justice system's propensity to severely punish Black men. Statistics reveal that Black women are more likely than White women to be rape victims, less likely to report rape, and less likely to see their accused attacker convicted of the crime (Joseph & Lewis, 1986).

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