Women of Color on Campus: Coalitions and Alliances for Survival and Success

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> "Being a token, being denied one's individuality, and being the voice for "the people" can lead to the one of the most difficult challenges for women of color to face on campus: professional loneliness. "

The university has the image of being a haven of sorts, a place where ideas can be explored and a person can grow intellectually and personally, regardless of gender or race/ethnicity. Although universities have been historically dominated by men, women have made great gains in the last few decades. Yoder (1999) states women earned more than half of all bachelors and masters degrees and about 40% of all Ph.D.s and professional degrees. More and more women are entering faculty and other professional positions at universities. Does this mean that universities are havens for women, places where we can grow personally and professionally without encountering the barriers that face professional women in business or other work environments?

Unfortunately, this is far from the case. Sexism is still alive and well at universities, though it often persists in more subtle ways (Benokraitis, 1997; Misa, Kennelly, & Karides, 1999). Though it may be easier for women to gain employment at a university, they often face a negative, or even hostile, environment there (Hackney & Bock, 1999). Stalker (1994) wrote that women continue to struggle with questions about how they will fit into patriarchal institutions such as universities and become part of them or alternatively, resist fitting in and risk anonymity and marginality. Two women college teachers (Anonymous, 1999) wrote about "the devaluation and hostility junior women faculty experience working in that [oppressive] climate (p. 91)."

Faculty and professional women at universities who are also members of underrepresented racial/ethnic groups face additional challenges, for racism is as ever-present on campus as sexism (Hune, 1998; Margolis & Romero, 1998). Women of color on campus experience "double jeopardy:" discrimination and negative attitudes towards them based on their race/ethnicity as well as their gender (Lindsay, 1994; Pak, Dion, & Dion, 1991; Sorcinelli, 1994). Aparicio (1999) stated that "women of color face double forms of marginalization in terms of race and gender," including isolation, racial and gender-based antagonisms (i.e., not being seen as an authority) and the devaluation of

their research interests and achievements.

Challenges for Professional Women of Color on Campus

The presence of women of color in professional roles at the university is increasing, but is still fairly small. Because of their small numbers, professional women of color experience unique challenges in a university setting. Bell (1990), in her study of career-oriented Black women, found much strength and stamina in her participants. This was evident in their attainment of professional positions, but the need to manage their lives effectively as women of color in a White male culture placed great stress on them. Denton (1990) stated that obtaining success in what is often experienced as a hostile environment required special skills in coping and adaptation.

Our experience as women of color in professional positions on campus is consistent with the literature. As a Latina assistant professor teaching in a graduate-level counseling program and as an African American psychologist at a college counseling center, we have had to cope with the overlapping effects of oppression related to gender and race/ethnicity at the university. We have identified several specific challenges that have been especially salient to us and have resonated with other women of color in our work environments. These challenges include the over-extension of race/ethnicity as an identifier, having to be the lone "voice" or representative for all people of our race/ethnicity (and at times, for all people of color!), and professional loneliness.

The over-extension of color as an identifier is similar to good old-fashioned stereotyping. Alperson (1975) wrote that women of color in academe were especially vulnerable to stereotyping as "radical chic" by white intellectuals with idealized images of minorities. Failing to live up to the myth led to rejection, while compliance with the image led to "intolerance for individual differences among minority peoples...the radical chic myth serves to lock minorities into yet another stereotype that is no less vicious than the stereotype it places (Alperson, 1975, p. 254)."

More recent research has found similar "idealized" stereotyping with negative effects through the token phenomenon. Misa, Kennelly, and Karides (1999) stated that women and people of color within sociology were stereotyped as having privilege in the academic job market due to affirmative action policies and the relative scarcity of "minority" Ph.D.s. Their study found that, despite this perception, "disadvantages still exist for European-American women, minority men, and most especially [our emphasis], minority women." Additionally, they found that European-American men were not disadvantaged in the academic labor market and "continue to enjoy positions of privilege in the academy (Misa, Kennelly, & Karides, 1999, p. 245).

Women of color are often made to feel wanted because their race/gender makes them double tokens, i.e., able to fill two affirmative action categories. However, being a token is not a path to success. Comas-Diaz and Greene (1994) wrote, "being a token...is a form of racism because it implies that the women of color with professional status is not qualified for her position (p. 353)." Tokens often alternate between being showcased by employers to "take care" of minority issues, then having their individual accomplishments ignored.

Our experience with the over-extension of race/ethnicity as an identifier has been related to both to the "radical chic" myth and tokenism. We have found that in our various positions as professionals, we were identified almost exclusively by our gender and race/ethnicity. One of us recalled that in her first career-related job, she had no training in "recruitment or retention of minority students" but was hired as a counselor at a university department that had been criticized for not graduating enough people of color. She was hired, not for her expertise, but because she was Hispanic. When students of color continued to fail and drop out, the department wondered if they should also hire a Black counselor. They did not discuss hiring more faculty of color or educating their current faculty about racism/multiculturalism, which seemed to be the real problem with retention in their department. Alperson (1975) pointed out this problem when she wrote "it is ironic that the minority individual placed in this position is often the person with the least power to effect administrative changes needed (p. 253)."

We have also experienced the over-extension of race/ethnicity as an identifier when we have been grouped together with other women of the same race/ethnicity and expected to be "friends" with them even when we have very little else in common. Early in her career, one of us recalls always being coupled with another Black intern at a university counseling center. It was assumed that since they were both Black women they would have instant camaraderie. When they did not, their colleagues were puzzled. They did not realize that the two women were individuals first and then women of color. Some White colleagues have even treated us as if we were interchangeable: one Latina faculty member sat through her entire first year evaluation with the departmental chair addressing her by the first name of someone else: the other Latina faculty member.

Another salient challenge we have frequently experienced is being asked to be the voice for all people of our race/ethnicity, also known to us as "the voice of the 12%". Throughout undergraduate, graduate school and in other White-dominated environments, we were frequently asked to confirm, deny or state the viewpoints of our particular racial/ethnic group. Today, in faculty and staff meetings, eyes predictably turn toward us when the topic is "minority" students, clients, and issues of any kind: "What do you think?" Thinking about it makes us weary. Being expected to be an expert in all things minority makes us weary. Comas-Diaz and Greene (1994) wrote that "regardless of their professional expertise, women of color may be asked to provide an ethnic minority perspective, or a woman's perspective, or both...they may do so at their own individual expense (p. 355)."

Embracing this role can have positive effects such as allowing the needs of clients and students of color to be considered. On the other hand, Comas-Diaz (1994) pointed out that professional women of color make themselves easy scapegoats "if what they say makes those in power uncomfortable or contradicts their view of themselves as liberal minded (p. 355)." Aparicio (1999) wrote that "both junior and senior faculty shared painful experiences ranging from being considered the 'ghetto appointment--that being the person of color hired to do the Black stuff' (p. 124)" to being harassed by students. She noted their warnings about the costs to being the voice for people of color: costs that ranged from having one's research and teaching marginalized from the central curriculum to being attacked or punished for speaking out about uncomfortable issues.

Being a token, being denied one's individuality, and being the voice for "the people" can lead to the one of the most difficult challenges for women of color to face on campus: professional loneliness. We experience professional loneliness as a combination of exclusion and isolation: exclusion from what would normally be one's identity within a professional group, and isolation from finding mentoring and other collegial connections. In a comparison of African American women and men faculty and administrators, Singh, Robinson, and Williams-Green (1995) found that the women felt less accepted in the academic community and a greater sense of isolation on campus. Margolis and Romaro (1998) found frequent instances of stigmatization and exclusion in their interviews of women of color in Ph.D. programs. Lindsay (1994) reported racist and sexist exclusionary practices experienced by deans who were women of color, including vice presidents who refused to support them, tensions with new provosts, and being consistently undervalued.

The feeling of not knowing where to turn for help when we need it, overhearing the camaraderie of others while realizing you never quite fit in (as part of the "in group") creates professional loneliness. We often find ourselves having a stronger sense of connection to students, clients of color, and administrative staff than to our peers. One of us recalls being told by a superior to "hang out" more with the other (predominantly white male) faculty: "Perhaps you can go to some of the university's football games." Another colleague of color had a superior warn her that she should not spend time socializing with the administrative staff because people would not take her professional position seriously. Such exclusionary practices have lead us to feeling isolated, feeling isolated because we are isolated. While this loneliness can be survived, it can cause a incalculable toll on the individual and her sense of effectiveness in her profession.

Much literature about women and women of color (Hune, 1998; Lindsay, 1994; Ponterotto, 1990; Thomas & Asunka, 1995; Witt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999) discusses the importance of social and professional support for career success and survival. Participants in Peterson's (1997) research on minority career achievement pointed out the importance of significant relationships for emotional support. Mentoring and mentoring-type relationships have also been discussed as an important relationship for women and people of color (Harding-Hidore, 1986; Kerl, 1995; Perna, Lerner, & Yura, 1995), yet many professional women have difficulty in establishing mentoring relationships. Women of color often have a preference for collaboration, yet it is difficult to find people in one's department with whom they can collaborate. Loneliness and isolation can hinder, even arrest, continued professional growth.

Coalitions and Alliances for Professional Women Of Color

Given that they are often the only woman and/or person of color within their university department, professional women of color need to be proactive in seeking out ways to develop relationships in their work environment. Building coalitions and alliances with women of color and White women across the university can give them the support they need to succeed in their careers at the university. Albreach and Brewer (1990) state that coalitions are groups or individuals that come together around a specific issue to achieve a specific goal. Most coalitions are temporary: upon completion of the goal, they often dissolve and the groups or individuals go back to doing their own work. Alliances are more lasting: they are built upon more trusting relationships and the level of

commitment is deeper than in coalitions.

Why should professional women of color in universities consider coalitions? Essed (1996) wrote that coalitions are helpful for women who find themselves in vulnerable situations. Coalitions shield individuals from hostilities and can provide places for people who are isolated. As discussed previously, the university climate for women of color is often described as being "chilly" or hostile, and women of color often become isolated in their departments. Women of color are vulnerable in such environments.

Isolation can also mean being isolated from potential resources within the university. Coalitions in university settings can help members to discover potential resources (i.e., grant opportunities, service projects, teaching strategies, etc.). They can assist in forming relationships with people who have access to places you may want to go. In our case, having one of us at the counseling center and the other in the counseling department allows us to have communication and involvement between the two settings, including assistance when we need it. For example, when we organized a coalitions to target depression on campus, we were able to get plenty of student volunteers to do the screenings to promote the services of the counseling center due to our various connections.

One of the most valuable reasons to form a coalition is that it "can be empowering because it is a way of breaking the silence of lost hopes and frustrations. Together, women can voice wishes and discuss problems and needs that would otherwise remain unsaid (Essed, 1996, p. 141)." Breaking the silence has the potential to be the best way to "reality-test" our perceptions of events and exchanges we experience in the university. Many times we have felt as though we must be paranoid or overly sensitive in the ways that we react to things others consider "normal." However, coalitions of women of color and White women allow us to check our perceptions with others. We often find that White women and women of color have empathy and understanding, and we experience this understanding as a gift and a validation.

Some people are hesitant to form coalitions for a variety of reasons. Bunch (1990) believed that a major factor in preventing effective coalitions is fear of diversity. She wrote that "fear and distrust of differences are most often used to keep us in line. When we challenge the idea that differences must be threatening, we are also challenging the patriarchal assignment of power and privilege as birthrights (Bunch, 1990, p. 50). Resistance to acknowledging our own dominance and privilege is another factor that can destroy otherwise strong coalitions. It is important that we discuss and understand the overlapping forms of dominance and oppression in its various forms (i.e., race, class, heterosexism, age, disability) rather than oversimplifying oppression using only one dimension (Anzaldua, 1990; Bunch, 1990). Accordingly, one of the key aspects of forming a successful coalition is to see diversity as a strength, and to honestly build an atmosphere of respect for one another.

Several researchers (Bunch, 1990; Coffman, 1990; Essed, 1996; Triandis, Kurowski, Tecktiel, & Chan, 1993) have suggested that having commonalties are also important in building successful coalitions. How is it possible to value and respect diversity while trying to connect using common ground? Watkins & Rosegrant (1996) wrote that "parties

are motivated to join 'natural' coalitions when they have either shared interests or compatible interests that can be advanced through cooperative action (p. 49)" but that the shared interest is not sufficient for the coalition to form. In order for that to happen, the goals of the coalition need to be made explicit. Bunch (1990) wrote that "coalition is not abstract. It functions when groups or individuals are working together around something that each cares about...(p. 56). She also wrote that members of coalitions need to be clear about its bottom line, to "know what we need in order to survive in a coalition and how to communicate that to others (Bunch, 1990, p. 56)."

Hackney & Bock (1999) wrote that traditional models of mentoring have been characterized more by exclusion than inclusion, but that "women can effect change in the culture by establishing coalitions among themselves and trusted others (p. 4)." They propose a model of "inclusion, egalitarianism, and the exploration and encouragement of new ideas (Hackney & Bock, 1999, p. 4), and stress the need for acceptance and appreciation of all members.

For us the bottom line is that we need each other to survive--and succeed--in our professional roles at the university. For this reason, we begin coalitions along smaller, more concrete issues, and through them form alliances that sustain us through the difficult paths we face along the way to professional growth. Anzaldar (1990), in her chapter on alliances with lesbians-of-color, wrote, "En fin quiero tocarlas de cerca, I want to be allied to some of you. I want to touch you, kinswomen, parientas, companeras, paisans, carnalas, comrads, and I want you to touch me so that together, each in our separate ways, we can nourish our struggle and keep alive our visions...(p. 230)." We echo her words.

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