Insider-Out/Outsider-In: A White Woman's Reflections on Attending a Historically Black University

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This narrative describes positive educational experiences of a white woman at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). The author's particular experience of being an outsider or "the only one" is explored here. Points about differences in classroom settings, relationships with professors, and instructional characteristics of the HBCU as related to a Predominately White University (PWU) are discussed. Changes in the author's pedagogical approach to social work education are noted.

In 2001 I was accepted to a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) to pursue a doctoral degree in social work. My most recent degree up until 2001, Master's of Social Work, was granted in 1976 from a Predominantly White University (PWU). Thus, I had no experience with being a minority student. I am a white, middle-aged woman who had practiced social work for a number of years, but had many anxieties about being intellectually competent enough to perform adequately in Ph.D. courses. Nonetheless, I was attracted to the school by the quality of faculty who taught there, and by the financial aid incentives offered by the school. The HBCU had numerous professors who possessed immediate name recognition in the field of social work education; for this reason, and others, I applied for admission.

As a disclaimer, I make no pretense of special knowledge about attitudes, behaviors, experiences, or cultural differences between African American and whitepeople. The experiences and observations reported here are my personal perceptions and are not generalized in any fashion.

Background and Preparation

It was a good time in my life to return to academia. My significant others were entrenched in their own studies and businesses, and were less dependent on me as a spouse and mother. While I had enjoyed a viable social work practice for over two decades, I continued to identify heavily with traditional female social roles. But I felt that I needed to do something for *me;* to expand my mind and take a different tack in my career path. I reasoned that the family members who were accustomed to my caretaking would learn to fare for themselves, and while change is never easy, thankfully, they rose to the occasion.

From a personal standpoint, I was worried about being able to do well academically; after all, I had been out of school for 25 years. The anxiety and concern I felt about my potential for academic achievement was my primary focus as I entered the Ph.D. program. The prospect of statistics, research, and writing courses were frightening eventualities; the expectation that the educational journey to achieve the Ph.D. would be rigorous was at the forefront of my concerns.

I did not give much thought as to how I would "fit" with the school. I hoped that I would find supportive acquaintances within my cohort. But, I tried to prepare myself that this might not happen if I was too different: too white, too old, too middle-class. My previous educational experiences at three PWUs had taught me to conform to whatever norms were in place, and I expected that life at an HBCU would not differ significantly from those experiences, at least in terms of educational functioning. I had little expectation of great friendships formed during my matriculation; I

reasoned that students would be entrenched in their studies with little time for socialization.

I asked an African American colleague who was also a student at this particular HBCU to help me prepare for the upcoming experience. In addition to describing coursework, texts, and expectations of various professors, he shared stories about how other white people had fared (or not fared) in the program. But I did not "get it." It was hard to understand what those experiences had to do with me and what I was trying to accomplish. He warned me about maintaining a good attitude (i.e., open, flexible, optimistic, pleasant) and to be aware of others' perceptions and scrutiny of my behaviors. But he also encouraged me—rather tepidly in those early days—by saying, "You'll do fine." His words seemed vague and I was not quite reassured.

Beginning Experiences

Not long after enrolling at the HBCU, I began to notice some differences in my previous educational experiences at PWUs and those at the HBCU. One of the first differences I noticed was the level of social politeness and warmth that African American students and faculty exuded. My previous educational experiences in PWUs did not include this warmth. At the HBCU, faculty and students greeted one another warmly and business was conducted after appropriate greetings were exchanged. This norm differed considerably from my experience at PWUs where professors often entered the classroom and began a lecture with a cursory greeting, if any at all. Similarly, PWU professors often left a classroom without speaking to anyone in a personal manner and frequently seemed either distracted or irritated if asked a question by a student. This difference has been discussed in the literature (Cooper, Massey, & Graham, 2006) as possibly related to a heavy research agenda at PWUs, rather than the teaching focus of HBCUs. However, all the professors at the HBCU I attended were heavily involved in both teaching and research, some having prolific publication records.

Another difference I noted was that of collegiality and friendliness. As classes got underway and socialization not only occurred

but was a regular part of the experience ("Where are we going for lunch?" "Do you need anything from Kinko's?"), I was surprised. At PWUs it was a common occurrence to walk along a sidewalk and have no interpersonal interchanges with other students, faculty, or visitors on the campus. In contrast, at the HBCU individuals greeted one another politely (including me): neither age, race, class, nor gender seemed to affect the friendliness of greeting one received.

My previous experiences with higher education occurred at small universities and colleges. I had attended undergraduate school at two different PWUs: a women's college with an enrollment of about 3,000 students; and a coeducational university with an enrollment of about 10,000. My graduate education occurred at a PWU of about 8,000 enrollees. The HBCU where I studied for the Ph.D. had about 7,000 students at the time I was enrolled. I do not believe that the size of the university or college was a major influence on the different levels of collegiality that I experienced. If intimacy of setting is a prerequisite for increased collegiality, then the women's college of 3,000 students would have been more cordial and welcoming. I did not find this collegiality to be the case at that particular women's PWU.

Perhaps universities are less formal now than in the decades I attended. Research indicates that less formal methods are more satisfactory for students and produce increased understanding of the material presented, as contrasted with long lectures that are often boring or irrelevant to the contemporary student (Beishline, 1997; Bethune, 2006; Biggs, 1999; Costa, van Rensburg, & Rushton, 2007; Heath, 2000; Wakefield, 2001).

Frequently, the HBCU students would take breaks between classes or go to meals with each other. I was always included. On one occasion, our professor wanted to eat at an African American restaurant in the city, a short distance from our campus setting. He had driven his large, immaculately restored, vintage American car to campus that day and wanted to drive the students to the restaurant. We set off from campus on the

interstate, in this iconic automobile, listening to Motown music, sitting on plush dark green upholstery. It was blissful. When we arrived at the restaurant, the staff did not seem happy to see us. They had planned to close soon and were quite irritated with our requests for substitutions on the menu items or to refill our beverages. As I listened and observed the manner in which our professor handled the conflict with the wait staff, I was struck by the differences in his approach and the approaches I have seen in my own social circle. He took the lead with our interactions and made amusing comments as the wait staff grouched at us about our requests—even coaxing a few smiles from the staff. We did not get the substitutions we wanted. But I remember thinking how unpleasant the meal could have been without this style. And how often my family and friends have left a restaurant if the service staff was unfriendly or seemed unwilling to serve us.

Notably, this professor is a very urbane and well-traveled intellectual. He may have experienced such episodes numerous times and dealt with them accordingly; however, the impression that he made on me that day was indelible: that one can enjoy encounters with others, even when not entirely pleasant, and maintain one's dignity and enjoyment of life simultaneously. Parenthetically, never had I been invited to dine with a professor in a PWU. That level of socialization was foreign to me.

On another occasion, I dined with two African American males: a professor and another student. As we entered a delicatessen occupied entirely by white people, they stared at us, creating the awareness that I was in the company of the only African Americans in the business. We ate our meal, had pleasant conversation, and lingered over coffee. Not once did my companions seem uneasy or glance about at other diners (as I did). After we left the restaurant, I commented to them about the irritation that I felt at being gawked at by other patrons and asked them if they ever felt similarly. They shrugged and said, "You get so used to it that you don't even notice after a while." I wondered if I were not a member of the majority culture would I

have become accustomed to that level of scrutiny by total strangers.
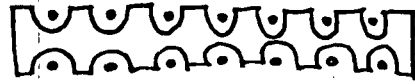
Building Community

The sense of community and relationship that was created by these outings and other experiences increased my understanding of my professors and cohorts. I felt included, even though I was an outsider; trust and respect developed over time. bell hooks (1994), well-known feminist theorist and educator, wrote about the community of education. hooks' ideas were shaped by the philosophy of Paulo Freire who struggled to achieve education for oppressed populations in Brazil (Bauer, 2000; Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994; Lutz, 1993). hooks' ideas also strike me as similar to the Aristotelian and Socratic idea that learning occurs depending upon the relationship between teacher and student (Muir, 2000; Tate, 2007). I benefited immensely from the community that developed and the relationships with my professors at the HBCU and experienced exponential academic growth.

hooks (1984, 1994) and Freire (1972) noted the responsibility of academics to raise the poor and oppressed to higher levels of empowerment. As a feminist, hooks included men (including imprisoned African American men) in her outreach (Lutz, 1993). She viewed no topic as "sacred:" all is revealed, discussed, and processed both in her classrooms and in more public arenas (Bauer, 2000). This pedagogy is also similar to the philosophies of Plato and Socrates; the idea of the discussion going wherever it might, without a plan but with considerable analysis and critique (Muir, 2000).

Perhaps the professors that I encountered at the HBCU believed in and practiced the individual connection that is apparent in Socratic pedagogy as well as in hooks' works. Our discussions were free range: pop culture, theories, movies, books, food, cars... the list was seemingly endless. As the semesters progressed, from first year to second, and then

to Ph.D. candidate, I felt included in the community of educators and students.

Differences and Similarities

In my first semester of classes at the HBCU, a perplexing difference that I observed was that I was not called on in class to answer a question or provide input until after the African American students had spoken. As I had this experience regularly, I thought about how their experiences at PWUs must compare. Were they called on last? Or were they ignored by faculty? As students at PWUs, were they fulfilling a societal expectation to not speak up first? As a white student at the HBCU, was I fulfilling an expectation not to be more assertive? Was I "people-pleasing?" I had no reference point in my cache of life experiences to place this phenomenon. I decided that I would not be offended but would continue to observe and see if the practice continued. And, it continued throughout my matriculation with few exceptions. However, this experience caused me to reflect upon my ethnocentric expectations of being up-front and visible to others. This practice also made classroom participation (a highly valued component) much more difficult; I had to reach deeper into the material to find something of value to contribute to the discussion. Thus, in a real sense, this practice yielded better honed study skills and an enriched understanding of much of the material required for the classroom.

There may be other explanations for my experience with being the last called-upon student in the class. However, I am flummoxed to decipher what they may be. While enrolled at the HBCU, I was a member of a small cohort with negligible differences in our chronological ages. While I possessed more social work experience and was the only clinical social worker in the cohort, other students had experienced more variety in their career paths and had worked outside the field of social work, whereas I had not. Both male and female students were present in almost all of the classes. I was about the same chronological age as about half of the professors in the school of social work, with the other half being older and considerably more experienced in social work education. Most of the professors to whom I was assigned were female.

Thus, I believe that neither age nor gender issues in the differences that I experienced figured into the equation. Possibly, the practice was unintentional on their part, and I was sensitive to the effects of "the only one syndrome" noted by Cooper, Massey, and Graham (2006) in exploring the experiences of Black persons who attended PWUs. I identify with their discussion of feeling different in a fundamental way from their professors and peers at the PWUs they attended.

Although I have remarked on the differences, I found many similarities between the HBCU and the PWU where I work now. The quality of the education that I received at the HBCU was impeccable. There was the rigor of the research and statistics classes, fierce dedication to the APA writing style, intimidating classroom assignments, and the exhausting process of preparing for comprehensive examinations. The education that I received was life changing. My worldview has been altered and I am a happier, more fulfilled person. I feel tremendous respect and admiration for the professors who taught me and I emulate their teaching styles in my own work.

Effects on Teaching Style

In my current role as a full-time assistant professor at a PWU, I teach classes with a notable percentage of African American students. Most of the people in the classes are traditional college students with a very few non-traditional students. Many of the African Americans are first-generation college students, as are a sizeable percentage of the White students. I agree with hooks (1994) and Freire (1972) that educators have a responsibility to address oppression and powerlessness in education. I believe, like hooks, Freire, and others that education should be liberating for people whose voices need to be heard (Narayan, 1999).

Some of the powerlessness and oppression in the university is subtle. For instance, first-generation college students have challenges that need to be addressed in the

academy. hooks (1994) wrote of this phenomenon in her personal experiences at Stanford. Others (Clarke/Keefe, 2006; Oldfield, 2007; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007) have noted the chasm that exists between the uninitiated first-generation students and those of families who are prepared from an early age to enter the university. These students benefit from the philosophies of hooks, Freire, and others in very personal ways.

My personal experiences as a first-generation student and later as the only White student in my cohort have altered the ways I approach classroom participation. I am much more sensitive to the learning patterns, styles, and needs of all students, with particular attention to those of African Americans and first-generation students. Possibly, the mid-life experience of being a student once more has now sensitized me to the needs of students in general.

However, I believe it has been important to make a few adjustments in my interaction and teaching style to improve the quality of the classroom experience for the students I teach. For example, I learn the names of all the students in class and use their names when addressing them to provide a more personal level of communication. I have adopted the practice of greeting everyone in class and taking a few minutes to speak with them prior to the beginning of the lecture. I have noticed that often the students do not speak readily in class unless asked to do so. I try to encourage their participation without embarrassing them or putting them on the spot by saying, "[Name], would you like to comment?" and if they do not care to comment, to quickly move to someone else. This practice seems to elicit more participation in classroom discussions on an equitable level with the other students. And I often tell the story of my experience at the HBCU so that students will realize that we all have something to contribute to each other's learning and that no one race, ethnic group, socioeconomic group, or culture predominates.

Unsettled Question: Insider-Outsider

However, one area involving my education remains unsettled. When white people ask where I received the Ph.D. and I give the name of the HBCU, they invariably ask, "Why?" I have found no successful response to this question. My questioners either change the subject of the conversation or they suggest that I could have attended a PWU. I do not feel compelled to explain the motivations for my choice. I received an excellent education, made contacts with people I would not have known in any other avenue of my life, and experienced a different way of learning. If my goal was to do something for myself in pursuing this educational path, then I think that has been accomplished. Now, I eagerly share what I learned with the students (white, black, or other) who attend the PWU where I teach. And, I remain receptive to learning from them: insiders and outsiders alike.

As I entered the HBCU to study for the doctorate in social work, I expected to be an outsider; I did not expect to have the opportunity to be included and accepted on such a nurturing level. I did not expect the insider experience. While I seldom take sufficient time for self-reflection, it is necessary for personal growth and development and, in this case, has underscored my gratitude for my experiences at the HBCU: both as outsider and insider.

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