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A Black Woman's Journey Into a Predominately White Academic World

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The paucity of Black women at predominately White institutions of higher education is well recognized. Like me, some Black women survived the gauntlet of coursework, qualifying examinations, and dissertation research and writing in pursuit of doctoral degrees, followed by the whirlwind campus visits that are integral to the faculty recruitment process. Upon our arrival, we were confronted by the challenges of being African American and female in a majority White university community. This article is a personal journey that spans 40 years of my life—from an 18-year-old freshman to a tenure-track assistant professor—at the same university.

Keywords: *African American women; institutions of higher education; negative stereotypes*

I thought I was immune to the heat and humidity that are characteristic of summers in the Midwest. After all, I was born on Chicago's South Side and lived there until 1962, when my family moved to the suburb of Harvey, Illinois. I knew all about insufferably steamy hot weather—heat indexes so high that you could actually see waves of heat rising from the asphalt as you sat in rush-hour traffic on the Dan Ryan Expressway. But standing on the endlessly long lines of students snaking their way through the maze of rope that ran the entire width and length of the track inside the Armory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in late August introduced me to another kind of sweltering heat.

I was 18 years old. Just the day before, I had stepped off a train and clambered my way out of the station lugging as many suitcases and tote bags as I could manage. Following the lead of my fellow travelers, I hailed one of a dozen or so taxicabs that were lined up in front of the station's main entrance. After a short 15-min drive, I emerged at the Student Services Building.

Assigned to temporary living quarters, I made my way to Allen Hall. Following a brief search, I found my room—which, by the way, was located in the basement of this recently constructed dormitory. I tried to make myself as comfortable as possible. However, the task proved to be a bit more daunting than one might imagine. You see, just that morning, I had awakened surrounded by the familiar. The aroma of freshly brewed Maxwell House coffee mingled with the unmistakable smell of bacon sizzling in our ancient cast-iron skillet. The house vibrated with the anticipation of the events that were to take place that day. My parents would soon be driving me to the Illinois Central Railroad station in Homewood, where I would board the City of New Orleans southbound train. Mr. and Mrs. Hill's middle child, their only daughter, was going away to college. Like the women of the Joy Luck Club who all had "a daughter just like me . . . a creature that became more than what was hoped for" (Tan, 1991, p. 18), my parents placed much of their hope in me. But that was earlier that morning. Now the daylight was waning.

As I unpacked my freshly washed, ironed, and meticulously folded clothes and other personal belongings, the heaviness of the task before me became quite clear. I carried much more than just the things in my suitcases that day as I left home. I also carried the hope of my family all bundled up and neatly tucked away inside where no one else could see. I was keenly aware of my precious cargo. I knew this journey had already extracted a cost from my family and would continue to do so in numerous negligible to significant ways. However, I faced an even greater responsibility. As one of just a handful of African American youths who were positioned to attend college, I felt an obligation to my people—to contribute to the "racial uplift" of African Americans (hooks, 2003, p. 80). I felt obligated to compete successfully, despite the reality that the playing field was anything but equal. So, there I was—in the basement of a residence hall on a Big Ten college campus in a community that, unbeknownst to me, would become my home for the next 40 years.

1968: What a Difference a Year Makes

Although my task felt immense and truly ponderous, I was not the only one embarking on a unique and life-altering journey that summer. I was a young Black girl from a racially mixed working-class south-suburban Chicago neighborhood registering for classes as an undergraduate student—the proverbial *first in my family* test case. But the university campus was about to experience an unprecedented event as well. In the preceding days and for weeks to come, this bastion of primarily middle- and upper-middle-class White young men and women—those making up the majority of the student body—was preparing for the arrival of a significant number of racial/ethnic minority students, most of whom were incoming freshman. We were primarily from working-class and poor families, and all but a few of us were African American. The university's administration had implemented an innovative program to increase the number of minority students, targeting economically poor African Americans, through the Special Educational Opportunities Program (SEOP). The largest recruitment effort of its kind, SEOP had as its goal the enlistment and admission of 500 economically disadvantaged students (Williamson, 2003). Hence, this highly ambitious initiative came to be known as Project 500.

We hailed from Chicago and East St. Louis, Illinois; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Holmes County, Mississippi; and the "North End"—the historical Champaign-Urbana Black community. Approximately 1,300 students submitted applications. More than 750 applicants were offered admission, and an unanticipated 565 registered to begin classes during the 1st year of the program's implementation. The administration had not expected the enrollment of Project 500 students to constitute 10% of the incoming freshman class until 1972 (Williamson, 2003). Nonetheless, in the 1st year of the SEOP initiative, the targeted goal of mostly Black youths from working-class and poor families, many of whom were first-generation college-bound students, was surpassed. It was to be the first of many unforeseen occurrences that would reshape the university as an institution of higher education. "Black student attempts to use Black Power ideology and principles to reform the University of Illinois bore fruit and changed the campus permanently" (Williamson, 2003, p. 134).

With the convergence of this band of "newbies" in the summer of 1968, a kind of collective culture shock seemed to blanket the entire campus. The reactions accompanying the shock began to take shape immediately, swelling to tidal-wave proportions. Behaviors emanating from students, as well as faculty and staff, exposed the reality that both sides were overwhelmed by feelings of fear, distrust, skepticism, and disapproval.

My foray into the terrain of higher education began in this highly charged environment. Therefore, it is in this context that I choose to launch a description of my experiences as an African American woman at a predominately White institution. My story involves some rather unique nuances dating back to those hot, humid days in late summer 1968 on the UIUC campus and culminating with my appointment as a tenure-track assistant professor at the same institution 38 years later. That said, I hope I have aroused your interest just a little. If, in fact, you find yourself even slightly intrigued, please sit back, get comfortable, and read on.

Before there was the Internet, text messaging, or the iPod shuffle, registering for classes involved standing in those interminably long lines at the Armory. You had to search the plethora of banners overhead to find the department of choice, then wait in line until the next available student helper could assist you by checking to see if the course you were interested in taking was still open. If the gods were smiling down on you that day, you could still get into one of several required courses for your major at a reasonable time of day— that is, anything but an 8 o'clock class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings.

It was in just such a line that I encountered what may have been my first glimpse of the anti-SEOP sentiments of some of the university faculty. For a very young, inexperienced incoming freshman enrolling in college courses for the first time, the entire registration process could not have seemed more complicated, confusing, and frustrating. I struggled to understand how to complete the course-enrollment forms, make certain I was registering for enough credits to satisfy full-time status requirements, and enroll in courses that appealed to my interests. I looked up toward the high arching ceiling of the Armory and spotted the Psychology banner. Making my way to the inevitable waiting line, I quickly scanned the long list of psychology courses listed in my fall 1968 timetable. Eureka! I found one. It sounded interesting and met at a time that did not conflict with the other courses for which I had signed up.

Before long, I found myself standing in front of a young White female student, not much older than me. As we made eye contact, I muttered, "I'd like to sign up for Introduction to Social Psychology 201." Sweat dripped down my temples as I whispered a quiet little prayer to the god of course enrollment: "Please let me get into this class." The student helper ran her finger down the sign-up sheet and found there was space left. However, as I handed her my enrollment form, she noted my status—FRESHMAN. The change in her facial expression immediately informed me that there was yet another barrier that I would need to hurdle. She waited until a distinguished white-haired gentleman in a white shirt, necktie, and navy blue jacket who was seated just to her left was available for a brief consultation. "She wants to register for Psych 201, but she's a freshman," she said. Of course, many of you may think, "Well everybody knows 200-level courses are not always appropriate for an 18-year-old incoming freshman, especially if there's a prerequisite." Ah yes! But you must remember that I was a first-generation college student. I did not know that. Neither of my parents knew that. As a matter of fact, no one in my family, immediate or extended kin, knew that. The young student helper knew it. What is more to the point and more important, the distinguished white-haired gentleman knew it.

Nearly 40 years ago, but I can still see his face so clearly in my mind's eye. The kind, dare I say benevolent, face looked from the sheet the student helper held before him to my glistening brown face stretched tight with anxiety. He smiled in such a way that I actually felt reassured. After a brief exchange of glances, he spoke. "I think she'll be all right." That said, I exhaled an all-too-familiar sigh of relief as the student helper jotted my name down, enrolling me in the Introduction to Social Psychology 201 class sans the Psychology 100 prerequisite.

I am sure that the reader has already discerned the outcome. I failed the course despite my best efforts to meet at least the minimum expectations. It took me quite some time to

come to the realization that the distinguished gentleman may not have had my best interests at heart. Perhaps he was being patronizing instead of holding me to the same standard he would have applied to an upper-middle-class White student. On the other hand, he may very well have been among the faculty, staff, and administrators who disapproved of the SEOP program altogether.

Racial Differences: Dilemma of College Admissions

In her book *Black Power on Campus*, Williamson (2003) discussed a published letter written by Lloyd Humphreys (former professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) in which he "characterize[d] Negroes as less intelligent than Caucasians" (p. 102). According to Williamson, further comments by Humphreys conveyed his belief that most of the Black students who were admitted to UIUC under the SEOP initiative were "intellectually unqualified [and therefore] had a negative impact on student quality" (p. 102).

In the letter, which was published in the October 1969 issue of the journal *Science*, Humphreys wrote, "Negroes have a distribution of intelligence, or readiness to do college work, that has a mean approximately one standard deviation below the Caucasian mean" (p. 167). He further claimed that genetic differences between the races could not be ruled out as a possible causal explanation for this intellectual disparity in that "there seem to be biological differences leading to intellectual deficit, however, that have been attributed to the prenatal environment [and] deficiencies in the home and neighborhood" (p. 167). In the same letter, Humphreys couched his assertions within a disclaimer by adding, "Although the facts are clear, there is no established scientific explanation" for the unequal *distribution of intelligence* between Blacks and whites (p. 167). In his concluding paragraph, he suggested that programs like SEOP—which he referred to as a "crash recruitment program"—may in fact prove harmful to young Black students because they placed "young people . . . in a situation in which they are, by and large, obviously inferior" (p. 167).

It was into this fricassee of conflicting beliefs, values, and opinions, combined with political dissonance on the local, state, and national levels, that I became acquainted with a predominately White institution of higher education. So why come to such a place instead of a historically Black college or university? The answer is to be found in my working-class striving for upward social mobility background. From my earliest memories as a high school freshman, the guidance counselors, deans of students, and teachers I encountered in my college preparatory track had spoken of UIUC in almost reverent tones. Admission into UIUC spoke volumes in reference to one's success as an academic high achiever. And lest we forget, recall that I wanted to be "a daughter just like [my parents] . . . a creature that became more than what was hoped for" (Tan, 1991, p. 18).

Despite the crash landing and subsequent hard knocks I confronted as I stumbled through the maze of how to negotiate the university campus environment, I succeeded in completing my undergraduate degree program. With diploma in hand, I set out to establish a career path. I was drawn to working with children and eventually found my niche as a social worker. I spent 21 years working in a private residential treatment facility that served children, youths, and young adults with special needs. The majority of these young people were wards of the state, having been the victims of child maltreatment. Many had also experienced multiple out-of-home placements. It was during my tenure with this agency that I returned to UIUC to obtain my graduate degree. As a nontraditional student with a number of years of practice experience under my belt, I was reluctant to accept without

question whatever theoretical, process, or content material the faculty and academic professionals—frequently with little or no experience working with clients—chose to espouse as gospel. So it may not come as a surprise when I share yet another anecdote that is shrouded in, let's say, "interesting" if not just plain old dubious objectivity.

The Unintended Consequences of Low Expectations

As was frequently the case, I was one of a small number of racial/ethnic minority students in my graduate classes. The incident I am about to describe took place in the mid-1990s. I was taking a program evaluation course that was taught by one of the senior faculty, who had long ago earned a reputation as a pioneer in the social work research community. On this particular day, the lecture turned to a discussion of the infamous report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* by Moynihan (1965). Our professor presented a brief synopsis of the report and a summary of the responses from the general public. He explained that many in the Black community, along with others who were invested in studies on African American families and the impact that such research could have on subsequent policy decisions, railed against the report as being biased, derogatory, and grossly inaccurate. It was here that this well-respected scholar of social work research added what I have come to regard as his own personal commentary. The professor stated that despite the lambasting incurred by Moynihan at the time the report was issued, some 25 years later, Moynihan was being hailed as prophetic, as evidenced by the current state of the Black family.

Unlike most of my fellow students, I had actually read the Moynihan report and felt compelled to voice my disagreement with the professor's declaration that Moynihan's conclusions of the early 1960s had come to fruition during the 1990s. The events that followed my open disagreement with both Moynihan and the professor have indelibly imprinted my sensibilities as a researcher and academic in the field of social work. The professor asked if I had read the report, and when I replied that indeed I had, he asked if I would be willing to present what I perceived to be the flaws that were inherent within the document to the class the following week. Now I cannot be sure whether the professor actually wanted me to agree to this additional assignment. However, I heartily accepted the task and spent the next several days pouring over the report and developing a response.

The following week, I walked into class locked and loaded. I was prepared! My fellow students expressed their desire to hear what I had to say, which was actually reassuring and bolstered my already-elevated enthusiasm and momentum. However, the professor lectured as usual, reserving the last 15 min of class time to the presentation of a brief summary of the report, which he had assigned to another student, and my response. Although I was disappointed, I was undaunted in my resolve to present as much as possible in the few precious minutes that were allotted to me. As I moved through my notes, trying to cover as much information as possible without compromising the essence of my presentation, I was keenly aware that I had captured the attention not only of my fellow students but of the professor as well. There was a flurry of questions as the last few minutes of class time ticked away. No one began shuffling papers or packing up his or her belongings during the final minutes of the class period—something we have all experienced whether sitting among fellow students or standing in front of the classroom. At the hour when many of us had to proceed to another class, I concluded my presentation. Several of my classmates voiced their congratulations for a job well done, as comrades are apt to do. As the professor approached,

his face visibly conveyed his approval before he even began to speak. He also congratulated me on a comprehensive and thoughtful presentation. At this point, he stated that had he known I was so thoroughly prepared, he would have reserved more class time for my work.

Several things have struck me as I have replayed the events of that day in the program evaluation class. First, I have always marveled that this accomplished and skilled researcher and scholar of social work could consider Moynihan's (1965) report, which includes the following statements, accurate and prophetic in its portrayal of Black family life at any point in time:

- Nonetheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the [Negro] family structure . . . it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation (p. 30).
- A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife. . . . Whereas the majority of White families are equalitarian, the largest percentage of Negro families are dominated by the wife (pp. 30–31).

It may be difficult for anyone who is not a member of a racial/ethnic minority, a woman, or another generally devalued social group to understand completely the impact of hearing a person of authority, not to mention one who has taken up the mantle of teacher, announce, in a public arena no less, that although the violence, attempts to dehumanize, and degradation of slavery, post–Civil War America, and Jim Crow are certainly at the historical root of the "poverty and deprivation" experienced by your people, the current "aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behaviors" so commonplace among you is the clear result of a "tangle of pathology" and accurately describes Black family structures. But from the standpoint of an African American woman raised in a working-class family, I can assure you that the aftertaste blends with the accumulated bitterness of previous assaults to one's self-esteem, and the burden just gets that much heavier. As hooks (2003) noted,

When I was a college student most of the black students I knew were striving hard to excel. At times crippling self-doubt, often engendered by the way we were treated by unenlightened professors, white and nonwhite, chipped away at self-esteem, and students . . . began to falter and fail. (p. 16)

Second, I still wonder whether the professor actually expected or wanted me to accept the task of reporting on what I considered problematic in the Moynihan report. If he was being less than sincere in his proposal, what then am I to make of his intentions? Was it merely an intimidation tactic that was intended to dissuade me from articulating any future challenges in his classroom? I am left to draw my own conclusions on this matter and therefore choose to believe that his proposition was indeed genuine. That being the case, my third point of confusion revolves around his surprise that I approached my assignment in earnest—that I prepared a comprehensive and insightful response to present to the class. Why the surprise? What had he expected instead? Did he simply "look at black folks using a substandard measurement" (hooks, 2003, p. 65)?

In retrospect, I believe it is possible that my consternation at my professor's surprise that I exhibited competence may have been indicative of what many Black students in predominately White institutions have experienced. It is possible that I had fallen victim to *stereotype threat*, described here as

> a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists. . . . Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. (Steele, 1997, p. 614)

Certainly, the presence of negative stereotypes about the academic abilities of African American women abound. Steele further elucidated on the phenomenon of stereotype threat by adding "for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening" (p. 614).

My professor and I have had several chats about the accuracy and prophetic quality of Moynihan's conclusions since that day. These brief discussions have convinced me that the professor was certainly not intentionally racist in his thinking. However, I am just as convinced that he, too, had fallen victim to a threatening phenomenon. Perhaps the threat to which he succumbed was the failure to "[divest himself] of racist thinking and practice . . . [and] of White supremacist thinking" (hooks, 2003, p. 60), no matter how unintentional. I have no other explanation for why he could find any legitimacy in statements such as this: "In essence, the Negro community . . . because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole" (Moynihan, 1965, p. 29).

Following my graduate program of study, I continued to work in the area of child welfare until I decided to earn my doctorate in social work from—yes, that's right—UIUC. This part of my journey proved to be one of the most arduous yet exhilarating experiences of my life. One of four students in the fall 1999 doctoral program cohort, I was immediately immersed in a group of women with whom I would share a range of events and all the various and commensurate emotions. There was laughter, camaraderie, and tears of joy. We shared almost unparalleled levels of anxiety, weariness, exhaustion, and sheer unmitigated terror. At times, it seemed that we redefined the term *stressed out*. Huddled together, connected at the hip, we clawed our way through a process experienced by a very small percentage of the world's population—even smaller if you are a Black woman.

This was an academic sphere fraught with moments of insecurity, uncertainty, and self-doubt that could have rendered me helpless and whimpering, curled up somewhere in a fetal position. It did not! I responded to the rigors of my doctoral degree program with a commitment and determination not only to complete the program, but to "finish strong"—a phrase that my husband used whenever I needed encouragement.

Defiance: An Intergenerational Legacy

Finishing strong required me to draw on strategies that I had learned from watching the heroes of my childhood as they plodded their way through a life riddled with harsh experiences and tenuous circumstances. I paid attention as they confronted obstacles on an almost daily basis. One of the most effective and positive outcome-producing strategies at their disposal was their use of defiance. A legacy passed down through generations of my maternal and paternal bloodlines, defiance was one way that my family responded to race-related obstacles. As a child, I heard numerous accounts of instances in which defiance was the response of choice when my parents were confronted with the curveballs that life can throw at you. My mother told me stories about going to the fields as a 9-year-old child, working alongside men and women, and how she could pick cotton as fast as any male child her same age—often doing so in friendly competitions. Defiance!

One story in particular holds a special place in my heart. It is the story of how my aged great-grandmother would have one of her grandchildren carry a chair out to the fields, where she would sit and pick cotton. This way she was able to continue to make a contribution to the family's survival despite her age and the effects of chronic exposure to racism, sexism, poverty, and illiteracy. My great-grandmother maintained her viability in the face of these seemingly insurmountable risks while enduring a long-standing battle against breast cancer. Defiance! I offer this final noteworthy detail just in case the reader needs more evidence of the power of defiance as a survival strategy.

These stories expressed my family's belief that hard work is a valuable attribute. They speak about the importance of taking pride in one's work whatever the task. Deemed worthy enough to instill in their children early in life, these ideals were converted into daily life practices. Constituting acts of defiance, these practices countered the negative stereotypes of African Americans as lazy, unmotivated, shiftless, and unwilling to work that were prevalent in both *that* and *this* context of place and time. So armed with the legacy of defiance and the support of my family, friends, and fellow doctoral students, I progressed through a doctoral program despite the societal expectation and prescription that such achievements are usually reserved for White men and women, most often from the economically advantaged socioeconomic classes.

There are several personal accomplishments that I believe speak to my success as a doctoral student. I passed my dissertation defense hearing with an unconditional pass. The instructor evaluations completed by my students are consistently high each semester. As a doctoral candidate on the job market, a total of nine universities expressed interest in me as a potential faculty member, including UIUC. I had five publications (two as the sole author) and one sole-authored manuscript accepted for publication under my belt while I was still a student. Finally, I am eternally grateful and take great pride in having been accepted in the National Institute of Mental Health-sponsored Council on Social Work Education Minority Fellowship Program.

I do not share these accomplishments as a way to swagger in the public domain. I share them because despite having achieved a level of success measured by the attainment of personal goals set by me, for me, I continue to have moments when I am plagued with self-doubt and insecurity. Was my appointment to the position of tenure-track assistant professor at the UIUC School of Social Work based in my potential for scholarship, including a capacity to conduct research; produce work that will contribute to the social work knowledge base; generate external funding; continue to hone my skills and achieve a level of expertise in teaching; and provide viable service to our school, university, and local community? Alternatively, was I the "chosen one" first and foremost because I am an African American woman who can also bring to the table a well-established reputation and a certain level of respect in the practice community based on my years of work in that community—a little icing on the cake? I second-guess myself much more than I like to admit. I question my potential as a junior faculty member who is capable of achieving tenure at a research university. These doubts, fears, and misgivings seem to surface at each new juncture, and as a novice in the world of academia, there are lots of junctures.

Logic suggests that my past academic achievements—particularly the hard-won victories—should bolster my feelings of confidence and sense of self-efficacy as I scan the horizons of my newfound career path. It seems logical to me as well, but the raw truth is that the qualms, the worries, and the reservations persist. So the question is this: What is that? As I contemplate my experiences alongside the challenges and benefits of being an African American female student and faculty member in a predominately White institution of

higher education, I am reminded of the ancient Asian proverb, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." I began searching for answers to my illogical fears and came upon a theoretical explanation in, interestingly enough, social psychology.

Negative Stereotype Threat Rears Its Ugly Head

Steele (1997) addressed the issue of stereotype threat among African American women in academia, particularly in math. He conceptualized the confluence of the level of identification with the domain of academia and negative stereotypes attributed to specific groups. Steele specifically defined stereotype threat as

> the event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs becoming self-relevant, usually as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one's self-definition. (p. 616)

He further explained that the threat occurs when one is in a situation in which one "can be judged or treated in terms of a racial stereotype" (p. 616).

This enlightening theory resonated with me. As a conceptualization, it provided a viable and reasonable explanation for my ongoing anxiety and fear, one that could help me make sense of a troubling dichotomy. Why is it that despite how much I love my work, I continue to wrestle with race-related stress as it pertains to my particular workplace environment? The good news is that it appears that stereotype threat is not dependent on the internalization of negative stereotypes. The bad news is that simply recognizing that a negative group stereotype could be attached to you within a given context may be enough to trigger the threat. As Steele (1997) noted, "For the domain-identified, the situational relevance of the stereotype is threatening because it threatens diminishment in a domain that is self-definitional" (p. 617), and in the academic environment, it probably affects the person who is more confident in his or her own personal skills and abilities. Steele then described several features of stereotype threat, including the following:

1. The matter of difference based in the stereotype may be more pronounced in settings in which stereotyped and nonstereotyped groups intermingle. However, the sense of threat does not require the actual presence of nonstereotyped individuals. It can seize me by the throat even when I am working on a manuscript alone in my office.
2. One does not have to accept the stereotype or consider it a true representation of oneself to feel the affect of the threat.
3. Domain-identified people may feel extreme pressure to disprove the stereotype, which can be relentlessly arduous.

So, in the process of writing this article, I discovered a feasible explanation for the persistence of self-imposed doubt and fear in the face of personal achievements that should serve to sublimate those insecurities and uncertainties.

There was one final challenge that confronted me as a woman of color on the faculty of a predominately White academic community that I would like to address before I conclude. This challenge occurs in direct relation to my role with racial/ethnic minority students attending our university. Since joining the faculty at the UIUC School of Social Work, I find myself facing a dilemma that jars my sensibilities as an African American woman and, indeed, as an African American. It ranks among the more personal challenges that I must

confront on a consistent basis. Perhaps you will find that you have had similar experiences as either a student or an educator.

African American and other racial/ethnic minority students make up a small percentage of the overall student population at UIUC in general and the School of Social Work specifically. As only one of two African American assistant professors at the School of Social Work, I find that the Black students tend to seek me out for both formal and informal consultation, guidance, and mentoring. These are tasks that can consume a considerable amount of time if they are not carefully monitored. Although I am well aware of the fact that I must ration the demands on my time if I hope to develop my research, scholarship, and teaching responsibilities, I find it extremely difficult to limit my contact with these students *because* I, too, am African American. Please understand that this is not a matter of ego, and no, I do not suffer the affliction of a savior complex. My difficulty stems from a personal obligation. You see, I have made a commitment to avail myself to all students as much as is reasonably possible. I believe it to be an undeniable mandate for anyone who voluntarily accepts the mantle of educator. It is this commitment that sometimes thwarts my efforts to hold rigidly to my time allotments. However, I know full well that unbridled availability to students has the potential to hinder my progress toward tenure and promotion. I trust that you see my dilemma.

This challenge that accompanies my status as an underrepresented racial/ethnic minority faculty member certainly is troublesome. However, there is a noteworthy benefit wrapped up inside the layers of this challenge. I recall with clarity how much I needed the counsel of faculty and staff who looked like me when I was that 18-year-old incoming freshman; that 30-something graduate student; and, yes, even that 40-plus-year-old doctoral student. The benefit embedded within this challenging dilemma is a simple one. I am here!

One Final Note

As one who considers the opportunity to teach an honor and a privilege, it is impossible for me to resist sharing what I consider valuable information with others. In that vein, I turn to a teaching strategy that is commonly used in schools of social work—the case scenario. Let us say that you are an administrator of a predominately White academic institution. You have recently established as a priority and made a commitment to address some of the challenges that confront the racial/ethnic minority students and faculty at your university who may be struggling with the potential deleterious affects of stereotype threat. What can you do? Where do you start?

To offer viable suggestions to our fictitious administrator, I turn one last time to Steele (1997) for inspiration. Steele set forth several propositions that he referred to as "wise schooling" (p. 624).

1. Create "optimistic teacher–student relationships"—a form of validation by authority figures that mitigates students' belief that their academic abilities are suspect by nonstereotyped people.
2. Meet students where they are academically and begin to "challenge" them at a rational pace, as opposed to offering "remediation," which could reinforce the negative stereotype.
3. Recognize the "expandability of intelligence," which refers to the "*incremental* nature of human intelligence—its expandability in response to experience and training" (p. 625).
4. Use strategies that may affirm that the person who is a member of the stereotyped group does, in fact, *belong* within the specific domain.

5. Develop strategies that indicate that various and diverse perspectives are valued within the educational institution.
6. Rely on the capacity of role models who inspire, encourage, and instill hope.

These propositions are recommended for administrators of predominately White institutions of higher education who choose to create an environment in which the potential detrimental affect of negative stereotype threat is minimized. But just in case there are no such interested institutions out there, not to worry. We always have at our disposal the legacy of defiance.

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