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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions of African American faculty on their socialization to the academic professional culture, and is based on the premise that the process of such socialization is circumscribed by the organizational culture. Taking a qualitative research approach, the study used a three-part interview process. The focus of the first interview was on establishing the context of interviewees' experience; the second part was structured to foster participants' reconstruction of experiential details; and the final interview encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. The study involved 19 African American faculty; 11 held tenure-track appointments, 2 were adjunct or non-tenure track assistant professors, 4 were associate professors, and 2 held administrative as well as faculty positions. Analysis of the data defined three processes socialization, adaptation, and devaluation by which organizations socialize members and impart values and goals. Following a focus group interview, a fourth category, guarding the gate, emerged. While the study confirmed the notion that academic freedom was a unifying core value, some participants felt that white colleagues discredited or devalued their scholarly contributions and reported that they felt pressured by the academic environment to compromise their research interests to conform to values associated with Eurocentric mainstream research. (Contains 47 references.) (CH)

African American Faculty Perceptions of the Academic Culture and their Professional Socialization

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African American Faculty Perceptions of the Academic Culture and their Professional Socialization

Introduction

In 1965, Caplow and McGee wrote, "Discrimination on the basis of race appears to be nearly absolute [in the academic marketplace]. No major university in the United States has more than a token representation of Negroes on its faculty, and these tend to be rather specialized persons who are fitted in one way or another for such a role...." (p.194). When Caplow and McGee made that statement, the majority of African American faculty members were at historically Black colleges or universities (Rafky, 1972; Moore & Wagstaff, 1974). Today, although their numbers are small, African Americans can be found in faculty and/or administrative positions on most of the major college and university campuses. Their increased presence at historically white institutions appears to have mirrored the racial and social integration of African Americans in other aspects of American life.

Concurrent with the increase in African American faculty in higher education institutions, higher education scholars have increasingly studied various aspects of the experiences of minority and female faculty in academe. However, with the exception of a few research studies and unpublished dissertations (Allen-Brown, 1994; Hendricks, 1996), the factors that may influence the successful or unsuccessful professional socialization patterns of African American faculty have not received the same scholarly attention in the higher education literature as compared to research on female faculty (Ugbah & Williams, 1989; Tack & Patitu, 1992). Further, trends in the distribution of faculty by race/ethnicity and academic rank support the existence of a "revolving door" for African American faculty (Tierney & Rhoads, 1994). African Americans are consistently hired into the academic ranks of instructor, lecturer, or assistant professor, but then often do not achieve the more prestigious ranks of the academic organization (Finkelstein, 1990; Tack & Patitu, 1992; Tierney & Rhoads, 1994). Studies have revealed that a higher percentage of African American faculty have become discouraged and

leave the tenure track prior to a decision (Silver, Dennis & Spikes, 1988), or are denied tenure more often than their white counterparts (Rafky, 1972; Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Collins, 1990).

Over the last, approximately 30 years, considerable attention has been given to the concept of organizational culture as a paradigm to understand the various groups or subcultures within academe (e.g., Clark & Trow, 1966; Clark, 1987a, 1987b; Becher, 1987&1989, Kuh & Whitt, 1988, Rhoads & Tierney, 1992). Kuh and Whitt (1988) offered the perspective of organizational culture that best fits the present study. They viewed organizational culture at higher education institutions as being reflected in "the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus" (pp.12-13).

As an under represented group in higher education, African American faculty "face an over-riding organizational culture that often is formed on historical and social patterns that are both white (Eurocentric) and male.... the result (is frequently) alienation and departure" (Tierney & Rhoads, 1994, p. 64). Socialization into the academic culture is often problematic for African Americans by virtue of their color and the marginal social status conferred upon them in American society (Cazenave, 1988; Conciatore, 1990; Sutherland, 1990).

The purpose of this study was to examine African American faculty perceptions on how they become socialized to the culture of the academic profession. The study was based on the premise that the process of socialization of African American faculty is circumscribed by the culture of the academic organization. To understand how academic communities may influence the professional socialization of African American faculty, the concept of organizational culture--the shared values, beliefs, practices, and ideologies that members of an academic organization hold--was used as a framework for "determining the contextual clues necessary for interpreting the behaviors, words, and actions of faculty" (Hall, 1976, pp. 13-14). The theoretical framework for this study, therefore, was based on research which views institutions of higher education as unique organizational cultures (Masland, 1985; Clark, 1987, Peterson & Spencer,

1990; Rhoads & Tierney, 1992), and faculty as culture bearers who shape and are influenced by institutional values and beliefs (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Austin, 1990). Further, two core values of higher education organizations provided the nexus between professional socialization and perceptions of academic culture: academic freedom, defined as the formal mechanism by which faculty are assured the freedom to pursue research and teaching; and intellectual freedom, defined as the informal value to explore ideas in an environment free from infringements on professional autonomy.

Method

This study described participants' perspectives, attitudes, values, and feelings concerning the academic culture and their socialization into the academic profession. Given the descriptive and interpretative nature of participant responses, it was determined that qualitative research, specifically grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), was an appropriate research method because it is concerned with explaining and understanding the meaning of phenomena, rather than reducing the phenomena to a statistical summary of results as in quantitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Grounded theory has been used in related studies; such as, to examine the achievement of African American women faculty and administrators (Allen-Brown, 1994) and to identify the factors related to persistence of minority students in professional programs (Hendricks, Smith, Caplow, and Donaldson, 1996). The grounded theory method was slightly modified to include an in-depth, phenomenological interviewing strategy using the Dolbeare and Schuman model (as cited in Seidman, 1991) for interviewing. This model uses a three-part interview process with the focus of the first interview on establishing the context of the interviewees' experience. The second interview is structured to foster participants' reconstruction of the details of their experience within that context; and the final interview encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences.

The participants in this study were 19 African American faculty who, at the time of the study, were members of a national professional association that focuses on research and

scholarly activity in a field in education. The majority (n=13) were assistant professors with eleven of those holding tenure track appointments, and two who were adjunct or visiting non-tenure track assistant professors. Four of the interviewees were associate professors and two held administrative as well as faculty positions.

Two in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with each participant (parts 1 and 2 of the Dolbeare and Schuman model described above), and six of the interviewees participated in a follow-up focus group interview (part 3 of model) to verify participant statements and perceptions, and to encourage participants to further reflect on the meaning of the perspectives.

Data collection and analysis was a simultaneous process as categorical relationships were expanded and checked regularly against emergent meanings and explanations. Memo writing took place throughout the interviewing process from coded notes of the interviews to the operational and theoretical notes during the integration of concepts and categories in the selective coding process of the focus group interview. The final analysis involved the development of explanations about the interaction between African American faculty's perceptions of academic culture and their professional socialization.

Results

The analysis of culture for this study was based on an interpretive search to uncover recurring, meaningful themes among African American faculty at higher education institutions--cultural themes that are linked by shared values, perceptions and attitudes. An analysis of the data generated by individual interviews with the participants resulted in the emergence of three major themes: a) *socialization*; b) *adaptation*; and, 3) *devaluation*. In addition, six of the study participants shared their perceptions in a face-to-face focus group interview. During this focus group interview, the major themes were discussed with participants and they were encouraged to clarify, elaborate, and synthesize the major findings of the study. As a result of this focus group interview, a fourth category; *guarding the gate*, emerged that explains how African American faculty perceive their socialization to the academic culture.

Socialization

How do members of an organization develop the values, beliefs, and attitudes inherent in the culture of the organization and what influence does this process have on their expectations of their place in that culture? The primary mechanism through which organizations impart values and goals in such a way as to make members want to believe in and conform to those goals and values is through the process of socialization (Van Maanen, 1976; Manning, 1977; Owens, 1991). The purpose of socialization is to reconfigure the organization as new members enter the association; to introduce the organizational hierarchy, and to build loyalty and commitment to the culture and the organization (Manning, 1997; Tierney and Rhoads, 1994). Informally, the process of socialization is assumed to begin whenever an individual associates with others under a common symbolic label... (Manning, 1997, p. 182). Formal organizational socialization is usually viewed as a product of social relations and the social structure (Manning, 1977). To understand the impact that organizational culture and the socialization process may have on minorities in academe, Tierney and Rhoads (1994) identified five sources of socialization problems: 1) inadequate anticipatory socialization, 2) weak mentoring relationship, 3) fewer networking opportunities, 4) divergent priorities, and 5) additional expectations and demands.

The literature on organizational socialization and the African American professor indicates that African American graduate students are considerably less successful than other minority populations, particularly women, in using graduate school as a socialization tool for entering into the academic profession (Finkelstein, 1990; Astin & Villalpando, 1996). The results of this study supported this literature. Only three of the nineteen participants discussed how they were encouraged by undergraduate professors to continue their education beyond the bachelors degree. Likewise, the participants who indicated they were encouraged to pursue academic careers as graduate students was only slightly higher-- six participants discussed how graduate school faculty supported their efforts to pursue positions in academe. These participants recalled fairly positive early initiation experiences into the academic profession. They spoke about being "welcomed," "embraced," and "nurtured" as new assistant professors.

They also felt that they made a smooth transition from graduate school into the academic profession. Their descriptions of how they were socialized into faculty careers confirms research suggesting that successful early initiation into the academic profession is a continuation of the anticipatory socialization process begun in undergraduate and graduate school (Feldman, 1976; Corcoran & Clark, 1984, Tierney & Rhoads, 1994).

The majority of African American faculty in this study, however, did not follow the traditional career progression from undergraduate education through graduate school to academic positions. Consequently, graduate school was not the primary socialization mechanism for entry into faculty positions. For example, in contrast to the six interviewees who identified their graduate school experience as a contributing factor in their decision to pursue an academic career, and the five study participants who reported joining the faculty ranks purely by "happenstance" or unintentionally, the majority or eight of the study participants began an academic career after considerable work experience in other arenas of education; such as, counseling, teaching in public schools, or student affairs.

The time it takes an African American student to assume a faculty position may further aggravate or complicate some of the issues related to the socialization of minorities into academe. A long delay may disrupt already weak mentoring relationships or academic contacts developed during the anticipatory socialization phase of graduate school. Given these circumstances, it may not be surprising that the participants perceived that the challenges of faculty life involved negotiation and adaptation to the academic culture.

Adaptation

Participants discussed the highly charged, and sometimes illusory and transitory process by which new members adapt to an academic environment. Several participants noted the tension between asserting their professional and intellectual autonomy and conducting their "work" in a manner which conformed to the expectations of colleagues and the cultural norm. In general, the participants viewed the academic culture and climate as one in which there was

potential for the suppression of ideas and collaborative intellectual pursuits, rather than as one where there were actual infringements on professional autonomy.

Lawrence and Patton (1997) ascertained that African American faculty often experience support and acceptance problems in academe because of the "negative, preconceived notions of colleagues, students, and staff regarding their abilities and capacity for performance" (p.6). Many of the participants in this study described encounters with faculty colleagues that support the findings of Lawrence and Patton. One interviewee related how he applied for a faculty position at a research university in the rural mid-west, and deliberately failed to identify his race/ethnicity on the personnel affirmative action form. He had a stellar record of publications in higher education and excellent recommendations from former colleagues and employers in academe. During the interview, the participant recalled how he was received by the campus community after accepting an invitation to visit: "*when I got there you could see the expression on some of their faces...because I hadn't self-identified and because of my experience and record of publications in academe, their assumption was that I was a white person. I got very mixed reactions in the unit where I was to be employed.*"

As a result of the preconceived ideas that the participants perceived their white and/or male colleagues had about their abilities as scholars and professors, several of the participants characterized themselves as intellectually and socially disconnected from their departmental colleagues. This sense of disconnection, in part, resulted in their feeling intellectually marginalized at times by colleagues who didn't understand their research agendas. The reports of feelings of marginalization are consistent with the finding of Finkelstein (as cited in Lawrence & Patton, 1997) who noted that "*many Black faculty do not feel close to their white colleagues within their departments....and as a group, Black faculty have made considerably less progress than white women in terms of their participation in academe and their acceptance by their white male colleagues*"(p. 5).

The African American faculty members in this study managed to adapt to their environments and sought to overcome feelings of marginalization in various ways. Several

asserted their professional and intellectual autonomy and "ignored" the sexist or racist comments of colleagues. Others conducted their teaching and research in a manner which conformed to the expectations of colleagues and the cultural norm. Despite feelings of disconnectedness, all of the faculty members in this study behaved in ways that they thought would help them adapt to the academic culture. The study participants viewed adaptation as one of the inherent challenges faced by African American faculty as they moved through the socialization process from initial entry into academe through promotion and tenure. Similarly, Turner, Myers, and Cresswell (1997) described the experience of African American faculty as a succession of exclusions occurring at all stages of their academic careers. Despite these challenges, the African American faculty in this study felt they had adapted quite successfully. Many were either tenured or going through the tenure process at the time the study was being conducted.

Devaluation

Successful membership within the academic organization depends upon a faculty member's ability to freely express himself/herself as a member of a "learned" profession. The term "devaluation" was used in this study when an analysis of the data revealed repeated reports by interviewees that their faculty colleagues had either questioned or devalued the intellectual legitimacy of their teaching and/or research interests. In order to interpret the meaning of these reports, the study participants were asked to define intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom is a concept that has been used to defend a variety of speech and various forms of inquiry. In a legal sense, when one speaks of intellectual freedom, it is usually in reference to the First Amendment rights protecting the freedoms of expression, inquiry, and thought. On the other hand, when the study participants spoke of intellectual freedom, the concept often became inextricable linked with the notion of academic freedom. The following representative sample of participant responses regarding intellectual freedom demonstrates how facets of the standard definition of academic freedom are intertwined with the concept of intellectual freedom:

Intellectual freedom is the privilege granted to intellectuals or academia's search for truth and the dissemination of findings without interference. It is the freedom to engage.

Intellectual freedom is the freedom to explore any area that an instructor or professor wants to examine.

The right and freedom to engage in scholastic and intellectual inquiry. Free thought. Research, writing, and teaching that promotes your line of research without penalty.

The freedom to teach and conduct research were the common threads that linked participants' definitions of intellectual freedom with the concept of academic freedom. The majority of participants reported that academic freedom means being "unencumbered" in one's work and research. Comments from the study participants indicated that intellectual and academic freedom are concepts which have a central place in their professional lives. All of the interviewees felt that they were socialized to value academic freedom. Their participation in an academic environment and acceptance of the culture was also reflected in the value that they placed on the notions of a community of scholars, the transfer of knowledge, and professional and individual autonomy, Nonetheless, many reported that although people of color generally adhere to the values of the academy, they often do not share equally in the benefits. They believed that African American faculty do indeed have the same rights and responsibilities as majority faculty, but often do not experience the same sense of intellectual freedom to pursue research they deem important or interesting:

It's not that we don't have the same rights. It's the fact that what we do is not valued. What is (or is not) valued in academe is what creates the intellectual and academic freedom problems. For example, at my university, white faculty can write and publish whatever they want, because generally they are going to publish what people are going to perceive as important issues. For African Americans and other ethnic groups, if you write about something that is important to you, one or two things will happen: The old notion about brown on brown research or black on black research will come to the forefront. That type of research is undervalued and not encouraged. If I published my work in the Journal of Negro Education, it would not be valued.

Since the cultural values of an organization are generally passed on through the socialization of its members, the African American faculty members' adaptation to academe is

likely to be more favorable when their values, beliefs, and norms accord with those of the academic culture. The participants in this study indicated acceptance of the concept of academic freedom as a unifying core value embraced by the academic profession.

Although the participants in this study indicated that they adhered to the values of the academic profession, they expressed feeling of resentment when their white colleagues discredited or devalued their scholarly contributions by insinuating that the standards for academic scholarship were not met if their research and publications focused on racial differences, gender orientation, or issues of diversity. The majority of participants in this study reflected sentiments exemplified by the statement of one interviewee: "*If they [White colleagues] study us [African Americans], it's scholarship. If we study them, it may be scholarship. If we study ourselves, it is definitely not scholarship.*" This view of how the culture of the academic organization can devalue the African American faculty member's autonomy in decisions related to intellectual freedom is consistent with other research findings. Research by Tierney and Bensimon (1996), for example, verifies that "*minority faculty in the social sciences whose research and publications fall under the general rubric of 'ethnic/race/post colonial' studies encounter obstacles that...are symptomatic of 'academic ethnocentrism'*" (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996, p.112).

Lawrence and Patton (1997), Johnsrud (1993) and other scholars in higher education have recognized the claims of participants in this study. They have acknowledged the "Catch 22" paradox that African American professors must confront and negotiate; that is, when institutional norms and the academic culture serve as "gate keepers" by simultaneously supporting scholarly autonomy, yet marginalizing research that is not part of the canon through less recognition, reduced merit pay, or the denial of research funding to the non-conforming scholar.

Guarding the Gate

The focus group interviewees echoed the pervasive theme found in many of the comments provided by the study participants--they were frustrated with an existing academic

culture that valued some intellectual endeavors and areas of research over others. Referring to the research conducted by faculty of color on issues related to people of color, the comments of one focus group interviewee underscored the contradictions and dilemmas experienced by African American faculty:

> *"I want the freedom to teach and research a particular area without worrying if anyone else values my area of interest...academic organizations have not done a good job of communicating the process [for achieving tenure and promotion]. I don't understand statements such as 'just do research and write...publish or perish, publish or perish!' Those kinds of statements send unclear messages about expectations. All those statements tell me (as an untenured Black professor) is that people who have gotten tenure, people who are 'guarding the gate' don't even know what the gate looks like!"*

The work of Anderson (1988), Bronstein (1993), Baez (1997), and Lawrence and Patton (1997) support the group's contention that faculty scholars who comprise the predominantly white academic culture undervalue research on minority issues. Moreover, the statement concerning people who are "guarding the gate" may have some validity. According to Bronstein (1993), legitimizing black scholarship on research related to minority issues may threaten white males in academe and their perceptions of themselves as "gatekeepers" and protectors of the search for true knowledge. Overall, the participants in individual interviews and in the focus group tended to agree with the conclusion drawn by Tierney and Bensimon (1996) that *"the cultural system of organizations offering tenure provides diverse ways of evaluating individuals, but it does not seem to socialize them to survive and thrive in a community based on difference"* (p.36).

Discussion

Since the cultural values of an organization are generally passed on through the socialization of its members, the African American faculty members' perception of the organizational climate is likely to be more favorable when their values, beliefs, and norms accord with those of the academic culture. The participants in this study

confirmed the generally accepted notion that academic freedom is a unifying core value embraced by most members of the academic profession. However, initial socializing experiences led the participants in this study to experience what they perceived to be an academic climate that was characterized as "chilly" at best. This climate resulted in the participants' perceptions that they needed to "negotiate the system." There were four major ways this negotiation was accomplished: 1) asserting professional and intellectual autonomy and ignoring demeaning comments by colleagues; 2) engaging in teaching and research in ways that conformed to prevailing norms; 3) seeking the help and collaboration of senior faculty on projects of mutual interest or benefit; and, 4) using personal influence to engage in faculty governance. Therefore, despite feelings of "disconnectedness" from colleagues, participants indicated that they behaved in ways that would help them to "ride the political tide" and survive the "chilly" climate. They viewed negotiating the type of challenges faced by African American faculty as an inherent part of the socialization process from initial entry through the promotion and tenure process. Despite the challenges, the participants in this study believed that they have used successful strategies to negotiate the politics.

The African American faculty in this study adhered to the value of academic freedom, a core value of the academy, but expressed feelings of resentment when their white colleagues discredited or devalued their scholarly contributions by insinuating that the standards for academic scholarship were not met if their research focused on racial differences, gender orientation, or issues of diversity. Participants in this study indicated that there is an infringement on intellectual freedom when African American faculty find themselves in an academic environment where they feel pressured by the culture of that environment to compromise their research interests and conform to values associated with Eurocentric mainstream research.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide several implications for academic communities attempting to transform the culture of the academy in order to honor intellectual freedom and diversity among faculty. First, the anticipatory socialization phase of the graduate school experience appears to be much more important for ensuring the smooth transition of African Americans into the academic profession than previous research suggests. Also, further research to discover how African Americans are socialized in graduate school would contribute to our understanding of how the cultural values and expectations of the academic profession are communicated. Second, societal issues such as eurocentrism, racism, and marginality, coupled with an increase in the diversity of people and ideas in higher education have raised questions about what is protected by academic freedom and what type of research falls "intellectually" and thus, legitimately within that domain. Studies that compare what majority and minority faculty value as intellectual pursuits and what they perceive as legitimate research and scholarship in the academic community warrants further scrutiny.

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