Women of Color in Higher Education

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Abstract

This essay examines Vargas’s (2002) and Stanley’s (2006) primary and secondary theses. I examine the primary thesis of each text as the experience of women faculty of color in the classroom, namely their relationship and interactions with predominately White classrooms. I then examine the secondary thesis of each text, which focuses on the limited support faculty of color receive in contrast to White faculty, specifically through such means as mentoring.

Introduction

The books by Vargas (2002) and Stanley (2006) provided a glimpse into the world of female faculty of color. This world is presented through the narratives of the women themselves, describing their journey through the doctoral process, being hired as professors, striving to reach tenure, and interactions with students. Through these stories, readers learn more about the experience of “recruitment, research, mentoring, institutional climate, and relationships with colleagues and students” (Stanley, 2006, p. xiii). The setting of these narratives is predominately White colleges and universities to highlight the struggles faculty of color face overall, then narrowing to the unique experience of female faculty of color.

Although many experiences are examined for women faculty of color, the relationships built and described through their own voices leave the greatest impression. The interactions with White students provide the primary thesis and guiding message throughout the books. The women described the challenges and highlights of this work environment. These women faculty of color were hired for research and teaching, but their stories speak to their work as much more than just a job.
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In addition to relationships with students, other relationships these women discuss are the connections or lack thereof with faculty. New professionals in a career area need support and these women faculty of color are no different in that desire. What they often found was lack of guidance in how to teach and manage classroom dynamics, especially in regard to racial and gender discrimination. The secondary thesis of the Vargas (2002) and Stanley (2006) books spoke to this desire to connect with peers, specifically through a mentoring relationship. The following text provides a reflective analysis of the primary and secondary theses of the Vargas and Stanley books, highlighting the importance of the narrative voice and recommendations for future research.

Interactions with Students in the Classroom

Throughout the stories in the Vargas (2002) and Stanley (2006) anthologies, a key recurring theme is interactions with students in predominately White classrooms. The women in these stories fought through gender and racial oppression to gain positions as professors only to be faced with this same resistance from the students they are trying to teach. First-person recollections of the challenges faced in the classroom include not being referenced by the title of “Dr.” whereas male faculty were addressed by that title, being told that their “accent” was too hard to understand and therefore they were not a proper instructor, and being aggressively questioned about their knowledge of a subject (Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, & Frey, 2009; Pittman, 2010b; Vargas, 2002). Pittman (2010b) noted additional research that found themes such as lack of respect, challenging authority, and teaching effectiveness as the challenging experiences of female faculty of color.

The stress of teaching in any classroom is high, especially for new academics. There is never a perfect environment, as any learning situation should encourage discourse, but when race and gender tensions are a consistent stressor in classroom dynamics, the ability to teach and learn is affected. As one professor noted, “you feel like you are putting on armor” (Perry et al., 2009, p. 89). This stressful
work environment and the reactions of students to women faculty of color are, in many ways, hidden stories only brought to light through the qualitative research that emphasizes the experience of women faculty of color (Perry et al., 2009; Pittman, 2010b; Stanley, 2006; Vargas, 2002). Their work in the classroom, although challenging, should be acknowledged, as should their accomplishments for the change in society that occurs through teaching.

Although the majority of stories recounted the struggle for women faculty of color, some mentioned successes in reaching White students. In the effort to bring greater racial understanding to the classroom and keep the dialogue open between the students, some faculty of color would act as “translators” for White students struggling to convey their thoughts on race (Pittman, 2010a). As a result of this advocacy, White students were more open to learning a new perspective and did not feel shut down as they would in other classrooms. Additionally, some narratives included comments about student feedback that acknowledged a greater perspective and understanding of the world. Through the classes taught by female faculty of color, students learned more (Stanley, 2006; Vargas, 2002). Seen here are glimmers of the ultimate goals that these professors were trying to accomplish by staying in these oppressive situations.

**Mentoring**

In addition to interactions with students that women faculty of color described in the Vargas (2002) and Stanley (2006) texts, a second theme regarding their interactions with other faculty was also mentioned frequently. Specifically, this theme was the lack of support and mentoring new faculty of color received in comparison to their White colleagues. Comments in the narratives ranged from subtle desires for more guidance as a new professional, to the missteps taken when trying to following the guidance of well-meaning but misdirected White professors, to outright calls to action from other faculty of color to seek out and be mentors to others (Stanley, 2006; Vargas, 2002). One academic specifically noted, “mentoring that emphasizes the value of teaching and the significance of expos-
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ing students to ideas that challenge stereotypes is essential” (Stanley, 2006, p. 172).

The evidence for a mentoring gap is not only presented through personal stories in the Vargas (2002) and Stanley (2006) anthologies, but through additional research by Holmes, Land, and Hinton-Hudson (2007). Their work began by noting that African American women are the least represented group among tenured professors. Among the findings chronicled through the narratives collected by Holmes et al. were that mentored women had a better sense of the process of achieving in the academic job market and becoming tenured; they felt better prepared to succeed. The point at which mentoring is established does not seem to matter, as long as the mentoring occurs, and although having a mentor of the same race/ethnicity and same gender did have positive effects from the mentoring relationship, cross-cultural and cross-gender mentoring was also beneficial (Holmes et al., 2007).

Although the mentoring offered to women faculty of color may be far behind that of their White counterparts, resources are emerging to address the needs these women are requesting. Websites such as Refuse the Silence act as a support mechanism for women of color in academia (Richardson, 2011). Although no formal mentoring is offered, blogs, shared stories, and experiences offer insight for women of color. A more formal mentoring opportunity is offered through Sistermentors, a group of women of color who support each other through the doctoral-dissertation process (Lewis, 2010).

Importance of Narrative Voice

Quantitative research can provide concrete and absolute “proof” supporting or refuting almost any topic. However, when it comes to personal experience, numbers seem shallow and incomplete. The narrative voice in research is important, as evidenced by the Vargas (2002) and Stanley (2006) texts. A third party stating that women faculty of color face discrimination and challenge in the classroom does not begin to capture the impact of a statements such as “I wouldn’t describe the climate around [colleges and universities] as ‘chilly,’ I would describe them as ‘subzero’” (Stanley, 2006, p. 95).
The women in both anthologies provided descriptions of vulnerability inherent to being a female faculty of color that statistics cannot. The stories are singular and individual, yet carry many of the same messages of oppression, struggle, and accomplishment. Here, qualitative research can provide the greatest gains. It connects the public with the individual through the story, but provides repeated messages that help others understand the ultimate messages with greater clarity than would numbers on a page.

These stories are especially important because of who wrote them. Women of color are doubly oppressed. Their voices and stories have been rarely heard throughout history and are often silenced today. The gathering of these stories provides power to women of color. Their voices can be heard. Their struggles can be noted, and hopefully change will come for future female faculty of color.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

The most obvious recommendation for further study would simply be for more study of all kinds in relation to women faculty of color. The Vargas (2002) and Stanley (2006) anthologies, along with the growing number of journal articles on the experiences of faculty of color, are a start, but more needs to be done.

One area in which I would especially like to see specific programs created and research enacted is mentoring programs for PhD students of color and new faculty of color. What would their experiences be throughout their academic tenure if there was more support? Additionally, research of the experiences of faculty of color in historical Black colleges and universities or any university with a majority student population of color would be an interesting contrast to the experiences of faculty of color in predominately White colleges and universities. How are the experiences different or similar?

What are the expectations of the faculty of color? How can these universities learn from each other to support faculty of color? Recommendations throughout the Vargas (2002) and Stanley (2006) texts mentioned recruitment factors, not only in hiring new faculty, but in retaining faculty of color. Lack of creativity and outreach in hiring,
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lack of support, which leads to isolation, and lack of equal resource
distribution were all cited as reasons there were few faculty of color at
predominately White colleges and universities (Stanley, 2006; Vargas,
2002). I have heard many myths and stories about the academic hir-
ing process, none of it appealing. It may be time to put a critical lens
to the hiring process for all faculty, but especially faculty of color.

Conclusion
Throughout the struggles women faculty of color face, they
persevere and stay on to change the lives of the students they teach,
probably in ways the students could never fully understand. When
these women have opportunities equal to other faculty, they make
great strides to change the world. Brayboy and Estrada (as cited in
Stanley, 2006) addressed the question of why faculty of color stay
in oppressive teaching environments by noting that through their
teaching they can help White students understand their privilege on
an individual and societal level. They can retain the hopes that their
students will have a new view of their world and ideally work to
change the current oppressive systems.
References


