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How We "Fit": African-American Faculty at a Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education: A Case Study of a Small Liberal Arts College in Virginia

Abstract
This session will address historical, sociological, and psychological perspectives that should lend insight into fostering the effective performance of culturally diverse individuals within a predominantly Euro-American institutional setting. Research-based implications will be shared through the lens of three African-American female professors within such a context.

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Assimilation continues to be of significance for culturally diverse individuals striving to succeed within predominantly Euro-American institutions. The environmental context is most usually defined by the majority society with little understanding of, or appreciation for, the complex challenges that must be creatively negotiated by others, i.e., African-American females in this case. Personal and research-based interpretations of the impact of this "integrated" academic setting will be explored from each of the professional disciplines of the presenters, specifically historical, sociological, and psychological.

From the perspective of an historian, African-Americans persevered with enduring faith from slavery to freedom, standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before. Prior to the Civil War, under the institution of slavery, African-Americans were property controlled by others. With redemptive legislations and litigations into the 21st century, African-Americans continue to struggle under the lasting effects of dejure and defacto segregation which promote sustained subjection. For most, education has been historically viewed as an important and significant avenue to empower African-Americans. African-American females, in particular, have gained voice and power through scholar-activists, such as Anna Julia Cooper. Cooper asserted that "only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole … race enters with me.'" Female academicians must mobilize an educational movement with support from their communities, the "village". Implications from this perspective offer considerations for sponsoring activities that validate the presence of black females on campus, producing a workplace culture that insures gender equity, mentoring programs, and community activism.

From the perspective of a sociologist, it is an undeniable fact that racism exists in the United States on many levels. Because this is a nation of immigrants, the experiences of

individuals belonging to distinctive racial and ethnic groups presents a valuable lesson on how "people of color", in particular African-Americans, cope with prejudice and discrimination day-to-day. The educational institutions, in particular colleges and universities, are microcosms of the larger society, and as such, reflect the racism extant in the wider culture. African-American faculty in predominantly white institutions faces multiple issues when trying to become respected and fully accepted members of their academic communities. They must deal with age-old stereotypes of being intellectually inferior, poor, ill-tempered, and loud. Such perceptions put them in precarious positions within the college environment. There is constant pressure for them to prove their "worth". African-American faculty must apply the coping skills learned during their youth to the academic environment. The most important lessons, however, are in learning how to make their academic careers successful and passing that information on to the next generation. African-American faculty members at our nation's institutions of higher learning are role models for generations to come.

From the perspective of a psychologist, individual African-American faculty members will demonstrate similar as well as disparate responses to racism, even the extent to which the phenomenon is perceived, if at all. Although psychosocial stressors, such as discrimination, may exist in all predominantly white institutions of higher education, the reaction of individual African-American faculty could differ due to intra-individual variables. These may include varying levels of acculturation and ethnic identity; perceptions of locus of control and locus of responsibility; conscious and subconscious awareness of, and adherence to, stereotypical gender roles; and overt and covert determinants of worldview. These variables, then, serve to create and introduce discrepant outcomes from similarly appearing contexts. Thus, the context, the unique trait variables, and the person-environment transactions all warrant conscientious consideration. The effective performance and success of African-American faculty, females in particular, are the product of a rather complex set of cognitive, socio-emotional, and sociopolitical processes. The impact of these stressors and complex processes on the psychological wellbeing of the individual African-American faculty member is equally as intricate, while even more disturbing. Both internalizing and externalizing patterns of coping can result in diminishing returns. Are these psychic costs too great?

The joint analysis of these combined perspectives produces insights for reflection and recommended strategies for fostering increased success within predominantly Euro-American institutions for African-American faculty. One such insight centers on solid intra-communication systems and mutual support. We must be able to trust enough to share critical information and experiences with our African-American colleagues in higher education as well as with those within our African-American villages and across generations. Collaboration and networking within our extended families have offered substantial support and collective benefits in the past and have been viewed as strengths within our communities. The success of this strategy, however, requires high levels of ethnic identity and shared values and goals. Other implications and recommendations will be discussed as well.

Presenters

Loretta C. Jones, Ed. D., is an associate professor in the School of Education and Human Development at Lynchburg College in Virginia. She also served a four-year stint as Dean of the School. Her teaching responsibilities include graduate and undergraduate courses in special education, counseling, and developmental psychology. Her subspecialties include testing/assessment, family intervention, domestic multiculturalism, and multicultural counseling. Dr. Jones has provided consulting services for several local public school divisions as well as for the planning district's infant stimulation program. She received a B.S. degree in psychology from Lynchburg College, master's and educational specialist degrees in school psychology from James Madison University, and her doctorate in school psychology with cognates in infant/family intervention and counseling from the University of Virginia. She is active in campus, community, and church affairs and has served on several local boards including the Mental Health Association, Crisis Line, Community Services, and the Racial Disparity Task Force for Fetal/Infant Mortality.

Carolyn E. Gross, M.A., is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Lynchburg College in Lynchburg, Virginia. She received her B.A. in sociology from the University of Maryland-Eastern Shore and M.A. in sociology from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Her areas of specialization are marriage and family, race and ethnic relations, domestic violence, and gender. Ms. Gross currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Black Theatre Ensemble, Inc., of Lynchburg, VA. She has served as a group facilitator of a woman's support group for survivors of domestic violence. Ms. Gross has also authored upcoming articles on feminism, peace education, and domestic violence.

Dorothy A. Smith Akubue-Brice, Ph. D., is an associate professor in the History Program in the School of Humanities and the Social Sciences at Lynchburg College. She served as History Program Coordinator/Chair for five years. Her teaching responsibilities include undergraduate teaching at the college, university and community college levels and advising. She has experience as a public school teacher at the elementary, junior high and high school levels. Her teaching expertise has included African History, African-American History, American History and World History. She received her undergraduate degree from Bluefield State College in social science and secondary education, Master of Arts degree in social studies from Marshall University and her Ph.D. degree from West Virginia University in history with fields in East African History, specifically Kenyan History, African-American History and Education Administration. She is active in campus, community and church affairs, community volunteer for Big Brothers and Sisters, American Red Cross and Central Virginia Training Center as a Court-Appointed Guardian. She has served on several boards including the Anne Spencer Museum and Gardens and campus committees.