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A Case Study: Contemporary Forms of Bias and "Prejudice" and How it Negatively Impacts Scholars of Color Within the Academy

Elizabeth J. Achieng Siwo-Okundi B.A.
Chair, Department of Sociology, Austin Peay State University

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Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Black Women Student Leaders on a Predominantly White Campus

Abstract

This session will focus on issues faced by black women student leaders on predominantly white campuses. From leadership identification, advice to other black women student leaders, coping mechanisms, failures and successes, the presenter will discuss the complexity of the often-ignored black women student leaders who find themselves "Between a Rock and a Hard Place."

Elizabeth J. Achieng Siwo-Okundi, B.A.
Denison University, Granville, Ohio

Humanizing Dialogue As A Research Strategy

As a research method, I decided to engage three black woman leaders on my own predominately white campus in open-ended interviews. Because of my experience as an African black woman leader on a predominately white campus, I decided to include myself in the research. In essence, my presence and my honesty would be creating an environment that would help the women participating in my study to feel free to honestly examine the complexity of their experiences as well.

To begin the process, I held informal discussions with potential interviewees on the campus to learn about their leadership roles in very general terms. From these discussions I made judgments about who would be ideal individuals to talk with further about their experiences. In my initial discussion I shared experiences and offered my own dilemmas and difficulties as a point of departure. They could choose to explore with me the commonalities and emotional intersections with what they were also going through. Nothing in these conversations was recorded, but simply a preliminary to my selection of interviewees to approach later and to gain their agreement to participate in this study. I engaged in this exploration and informal discussion for several months. These conversations were not planned, took place spontaneously in settings such as: the cafeteria, the Women's Resource Center, walking to classes, before meetings began and in our dormitory rooms.

I refer to this deepening exposure as an incremental immersion experience. These discussions took place throughout the greater part of a semester prior to my actual interviews.

From these discussions I developed a series of fifteen questions that constituted my interview protocol. The major themes covered by the interview protocol are:
- Family background, socialization
- Leadership development, identification and mentoring
- Race, gender history of the position
- Difficult leadership issues and responses by various constituencies across race and

gender
- Perceived presence of racism, sexism, classism and methods for coping and resolving issues stemming from these interlocking oppressions
- Adversarial dynamics, disappointments and betrayals in the leadership sphere
- Systems of social support for coping with leadership dynamics and difficulties
- Situations leading to a sense of satisfaction, affirmation and accomplishment
- Things the interviewees wished they had known prior to beginning their positions
- Advice the interviewees would now give to other black women who attain their same leadership position
- Availability of appropriate role models, especially of the same race and gender
- Approaches for transforming negative situations into positive outcomes
- Sources for psycho-spiritual strength
- Effects of the women's leadership roles on personal relationships
- Metaphors the women use to describe their leadership experiences

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Specific questions covered the above themes.

Deep Women, Strong Women, Multi-tongued Women: The Interviewees for This Study
Because the term "leader" is so general, it can be problematic to define and set the parameters of to whom it applies. In this study I selected women student leaders who were Presidents or Executive Board members of their respective organizations. I also wanted black women leaders from different backgrounds (socially, economically, racially, geographically, etc.) and who were in leadership roles within student organizations representing constituencies across diverse populations.

The incremental immersion experience led me to interview three black women student leaders (conversations were taped with permission from the students). The three women included a representative from a student extra-curricular advocacy group, an institutionally endowed program and a student political advocacy group. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the black women were multi-tongued and were able to address questions through the black vernacular and just as easily address them through the common American English.

My Expectations
In talking with other black women student leaders, I expected to find some common themes including that each:
1. Was identified early on by members of her community as a leader
2. Encountered difficult dynamics of resistance to issues surrounding the acquisition of her leadership position
3. Experienced few direct role models who had direct experience in positions similar enough to generate the dynamics study participants encountered
4. Felt isolation with respect to some degree of who she could trust as confidantes
5. Encountered problems with personal relationships
6. Had a strong spiritual center
7. Had ways in which she relaxes and allows her leadership roles to ease into the

background for a moment

8. Would relate to playing the role of a superwoman.

I conclude the research with an open letter to other black women student leaders on predominately white campuses.

Presenter

Elizabeth J. Achieng Siwo-Okundi is a native of Kendu Bay, Kenya East Africa. Siwo-Okundi is a recent graduate (May 2001) from Denison University (Granville, Ohio) where she received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Black Studies. While at Denison, Siwo-Okundi became the first black female student government president. Her senior research project focused on black women student leaders on her own predominately white campus. She has received numerous honors including the Dean's Distinguished Leadership Award, the Black Student Union Distinguished Leader Award and was the student speaker at her university commencement ceremony. She has also been featured in several newspaper articles for her activism. Siwo-Okundi plans to expand on her research, receive a law degree and return to Kenya to become involved on the political forefront.