Chapter 9

What’s Respect Got to Do With It?
A Black Woman’s Experience With the Role of Respect in Academia

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, drawing from the research of the literature and personal experience, the author intends to analyze the intersectionality of race and gender in relation to respect, as well as explore institutional barriers with regards to respect from colleagues and students in and out of the classroom. Keeping in line with the theme of this edited book, forms of microaggressions will be explored as a way of understanding the impact of discrimination and obstacles to feeling respected by colleagues and students. Suggested strategies for an accommodating environment and an academic fit for women of color will be presented.

INTRODUCTION

Having the opportunity to write a chapter that focuses on an area of scholarship that could be perceived as challenging to some, but eye-opening to others, is quite an honor. This chapter is being written with the hope this journey will provide some insight for a woman of color. The expectation is this will assist someone who may have questions or doubts about his/her own academic standing in an environment that may not always feel welcoming. As a scholar in the academy for over a decade,
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the author has experienced many moments of questions and doubts, ranging from student interactions to collegial relationships and navigating the tenure process. The questions and doubts began early in the author’s academic career, during graduate school, as one of a few people of color in a graduate program. Doubt came from moments of not feeling respected and isolated by professors and classmates. As an example of disrespect, the author remembers being called the same name of the only other black female in the class and thinking, why? This was a surprise because it was happening not only with professors, but with classmates as well. The relationships developed were believed to be supportive and collegial, but at times felt isolating. The author, mentally pushed aside the thought that this behavior was actually marginalizing, in order to complete the program and accept the realities of being one of a few black women attending this program.

This experience and others have shaped the author’s life, but they did not discourage her from continuing along the journey of an academic career. Years later, the opportunity for an academic position at a large private university in the New York City area came about. This author was among the first generation that has earned an advanced college degree and taken on a scholarly position, this event was as a proud moment for the generations to come. The author was unaware of and naïve to what would be ahead, since this job offer occurred at the beginning of her academic career. She had no guidance on how to navigate the academic obstacles of teaching, tenure, and promotion. As a black woman, she immediately felt the academic struggles for finding an identity within the department and college. For instance, the author introduced a specific research topic of interest that her department perceived as not the norm, and some of her colleagues immediately discouraged her to explore other topics. One colleague recommended that she write about “safe topics”, to ensure a path to tenure. The author quickly learned that she would have to devise a plan for surviving the throws of what the world of academia was going to present.

In academia, respect comes as part of the distinguished role of the professoriate. Garnering respect is important to foster relationships with colleagues, administrators, and students, in academic institutions. This comes in the form of acknowledgment of a scholar’s work, being seen as an expert in his/her area of research and in appropriate student/professor interactions. This expected respect can be unequally based on race, ethnicity, and gender. Based on the experience of the faculty of color in academia, the concept of respect is also met with forms of microaggressions. The relevant literature overwhelming reflects that faculty of color often experience isolation, alienation, and marginalization (Sue et al., 2011) in and out of the classroom. These are just a few examples of disrespect that black faculty, and women of color, in particular experience in higher education. In higher education, disrespect is expressed in varied ways. For example, subtle discrimination, a lack of acknowledgment of scholarly
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