Chapter 11
Molding Me in Their Image

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how the paternalistic nature of academia shaped the author’s development as a graduate student and as a young professor. Overcoming the oppression of a paternalistic culture is challenging for any woman, but even more so for women of color who are assumed to need even more steering, shaping, and molding. It is ironic that the discipline in which the author chose to pursue advanced studies, sociology, is a discipline that has a core goal of examining and challenging inequality. This, however, does not make it impervious to perpetuating inequality. This chapter examines how long it took to take control of shaping the author’s own image and to learn to navigate a culture that is still heavily influenced by patriarchal standards.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of a doctoral degree is an uncommon experience. Less than two percent of the population completes a Ph. D. program (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2016). Completing a graduate program, presents challenges to all who choose this path, but the challenges are layered for women of color. Many women of color are first generation college students (Pitre and Pitre, 2009; Falcon, 2015), so attending graduate school is probably not viewed as an obvious choice. It is well documented that women struggle to find consistent and productive mentoring relationships in graduate school and as junior faculty (Chandler, 1996; Quinlan, 1999; Valian). This is, especially, true for women of color who face difficulty in connecting to mentors with shared experiences and research interests (Turner

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and Thompson, 1993; Thomas, Willis, and Davis, 2007). Women of color also face the added challenge of not being perceived as authority figures, because the general culture frequently suggests that they lack expertise, authority and autonomy (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). In the paternalistic environment of academia, it can be challenging for the authentic voice and identity of women of color to emerge. In the moment, this overbearing guidance is tolerated, because the goal is to complete the program and launch a career. But ignoring the problem allows it to fester. This paternalism does not disappear. In fact, left unchecked, it continues even after you are a fully credentialed academic. Examples of how the paternalistic culture of academia rerouted my focus and my career are highlighted in this chapter.

THE INITIAL SHAPING

Twenty-three years ago, I left my home base in metropolitan Atlanta to pursue graduate studies in sociology. I really had no idea what I was embarking upon. Only a few people in my family had attended college. There was no one in my family with graduate-school experience. Other than teachers, I didn’t know anyone personally who had embarked on the path I was about to take. Looking back on this time, I struggle to recall what made me think pursuing an advanced degree in sociology was the path for me. Ultimately, I think it was a combination of being raised in a family that always valued my intellect, treating me as an expert to be consulted on many matters; and falling in love with a discipline that lent itself to advanced training opportunities. I had just graduated from Boston University (BU) with a bachelor’s degree in Journalism, and somehow I got the idea that I was supposed to be an authority or expert in something.

During my time at BU, I added sociology as my second major, but I was two electives shy of the required credits to receive the two degrees. I graduated with a minor in sociology, having fulfilled all of the required courses for that major, but not interested in prolonging my stay in college. Thus, I was on my way to becoming an expert. I knew that to assume my status as expert, I would need to go to graduate school. During my time at BU, I met a young woman who was pursuing her master’s degree in journalism. She was taking the same course that I was taking as an undergraduate. I thought to myself, “Why would anyone pursue an advanced degree in journalism? There is nothing else that they can teach you about how to be a good journalist in graduate school that they did not already teach you as an undergraduate.” From that moment on, I knew that if I went to graduate school, it would be to pursue sociology. Three years later, that is what I did.

I did not go straight to graduate school after graduating from Boston University. I took two years off to work and research graduate programs and options for funding

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