Chapter 23

The Making of a Token

A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in Academe

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Ethnic/racial-minority faculty continue to be underrepresented in the US professoriate, representing only about 6 percent of all professors in the academy (Garza 1993). Obstacles to reaching the academy abound, including institutional racism, socioeconomic barriers, and, for Latinas, traditional gender-role expectations (Martinez Aleman 1995; Gandara 1995; Niemann, Romero, and Arbona 2000). Once Latinas overcome these obstacles and make it into the academy, they—like other faculty of color—face yet another set of obstacles, including experiences of racial tokenism, overt and covert racism, and stigmatization. These experiences are generally grounded in the undermining attitudes and behavior of people within the institution.

Largely as a result of these experiences, faculty of color may also undermine their own competence. They may fall victim to stereotype threat, which is defined as being vulnerable to internalizing the negative stereotypes about your own group in a given situation, even when you do not accept these stereotypes (Steele 1997). A prevalent stereotype about Latinos/as and African Americans is lack of competence in academic domains, making faculty from these groups particularly vulnerable to the self-undermining effects of stereotype threat (Niemann et al. 1994). This situation reflects vulnerability independent of the behavior and attitudes of colleagues. As a result, the obstacles faced by faculty of color involve interactive forces of two types of undermining of competence—that done by others, and self-undermining.

Such was the case with my first faculty experience. I went from having strong feelings of self-efficacy in the academy to wondering why I had the arrogance to

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think I could succeed in an academic career. Only distance from that experience has enabled me to analyze the processes that occurred during those first four shaky years as an assistant professor. Based on a daily journal I kept during that time period, the following is an analysis of that situation illustrating the way the insidious, psychologically damaging processes of stereotype threat, tokenism, stigma, and related racism may occur. While publishing this personal essay represents a certain amount of personal risk, I believe it is important to discuss openly the effects of what is a reality for many people of color in academia. It is my hope that this chapter will help illuminate these processes so that others either just entering academia or struggling to survive there may benefit from enhanced awareness of pitfalls associated with being a scholar of color. Awareness can lead to prevention and facilitate coping. Institutions attempting to recruit and retain minority scholars may also gain insight on the undermining processes that may jeopardize faculty of color at various levels in the institution.

The Recruitment Process

Until I was offered a tenure-track position, my graduate experience in the rigorous social science program of a large, predominantly white, urban university was relatively uneventful. I was a very successful graduate student, having defended my master’s thesis, sailed through most of my coursework, completed my doctoral minor, successfully finished my comprehensive exams, and moved my way toward defending my dissertation proposal—all within a three-year period. I had also lobbied for—and been allowed to develop and teach—the first course on ethnic/cultural issues in the department. My advisors referred to me as a star student. Then, in my third year of the program and two weeks before my dissertation pre-orals, the chair of the department (who was also my principal advisor, chair of my dissertation committee, and director of the program) called me into his office, and everything about my experience at the university began to change—from very good to very bad. Yet the day began with seemingly good news for me.

The chair informed me that a junior faculty member had just tendered her resignation (she left for a more prestigious university). He further stated that the dean had given the department permission to replace that faculty member but with the very strong encouragement to hire a Mexican American or African American. At that time, there were about thirty tenure-stream faculty in the department—all white—and only a handful of women. The department had been under fire from the faculty-of-color associations on campus for this lack of representation. The chair enthusiastically reported that the faculty wanted me to apply for the tenure-track position and believed I could be successful in achieving tenure at the institution. He elaborated that under no circumstances should I think I was getting the opportunity because I was Mexican American; it was just a coincidence that my ethnicity coincided with the dean’s preference. I asked the chair about the extent of the search, and he replied that the department had other applications on file to consider and would be working hard to put out feelers for others, but I was considered the leading candidate.

I was surprised because the university was not known to hire its own students, and I was quite flattered by what I then interpreted as my faculty’s faith in my competence and their eagerness to keep me around. In terms of the ethnicity requirement, I reasoned that because affirmative action was still a viable hiring tool in most
universities, my ethnicity would likely have been a factor at any institution. I was then too naïve to realize that the dean’s ethnicity preference was undermining me before I even interviewed, especially given the anti-affirmative-action sentiment in that department.

There is strong documentation for the idea that a stigma of incompetence arises from the affirmative-action association (Heilman, Block, and Lucas 1992), especially when it carries a negative connotation in the hiring department. Once tagged as an affirmative-action hire, colleagues may discount the qualifications of the applicant and assume she was selected primarily because of her minority status (Heilman, Block, and Lucas 1992; Dovidio and Gaertner 1996), thus leading to the presumption and stigma of incompetence. Beginning with recruitment and hiring, academics of color may be vulnerable to stereotype threat and begin consciously or unconsciously to internalize stigmatizing myths and stereotypes relative to academia (Pratkanis and Turner 1996). In my case, the stigma of incompetence and my tokenization began almost immediately with the dean’s strong request that the new faculty member be African American or Mexican American. However, I was then unaware of the events taking place that would undermine my competence and my colleagues’ perception of me. Unawareness equaled blindness and exacerbated my vulnerability.

In retrospect the signs of my harsh future in the department were glaring. For instance, a white, female, junior faculty member spent the entire interview with me repeating how much she was against affirmative action. I dismissed her behavior by convincing myself that if she knew how competent I was, she would not think of me as an affirmative-action hire. Another sign of future trouble was that an unusually small number of the faculty showed up for my colloquium. This was particularly unsettling because—in this rigorous research department—the faculty generally wanted to know if potential members could conduct and discuss research. They couldn’t evaluate me as a scholar if they were not present to assess my performance in the colloquium.

I learned later that the program’s faculty had been “explaining the situation” to those in other department programs and lobbying them to vote for me. In essence, then, the decision to hire me was made before my colloquium. Still, I could not bring myself to think that this lack of interest in my research skills meant they didn’t see me as a scholar. I convinced myself that many of the department faculty already knew me and respected my ability.

At about that same time, the director of an ethnic studies program asked me to apply for his program’s postdoctoral fellowship. We both reasoned that the postdoc would allow me a year of distance from my advisors before becoming their colleague. New PhDs often covet postdoc positions as a way of moving toward independence from training professors and getting their research off the ground before fully engaging in a tenure-track position. This turn of events seemed fortuitous. I informed my department chair that I was also applying for the ethnic studies position and—since he was my principal advisor—I would need a letter of recommendation from him. He said he would write one, but reluctantly because my program was counting on me.

Shortly after my colloquium, I was offered both positions. My department’s vote had been unanimous, with one abstention. I was later told by a voting faculty member that someone at that meeting had asked about my possible postdoc and the
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The day after the department’s vote, I received anonymous racist hate mail in my department mailbox. I immediately took the letter to the department chair, who stated that he was horrified at the content but took no action. He advised me to ignore it, saying it could happen anywhere. He said he wanted to keep the letter, and I naïvely gave it to him. Incredibly, I felt ashamed and somehow responsible for having received hate mail, a symptom of stereotype threat.

I was so embarrassed that I didn’t even tell the dean about the hate mail. I did tell him that I wanted the year of postdoc, followed by the tenure-track position in my department. He told me that such an arrangement was not unusual and universities often waited for a new faculty member who had a fellowship and/or was on leave. He agreed that the extra year to get my research off the ground would give me an edge, especially since I was completing graduate school so quickly. The dean further said that he could arrange it so that my tenure clock would not begin until after the year of postdoc and, as far as the college was concerned, I would be a department faculty member on a year’s leave of absence so that my faculty position would be secure. I was excited; things seemed to be taking a turn for the better.

This excitement was replaced with the foreboding of coming trouble when I subsequently met with the department chair. He told me in no uncertain terms that the department’s wishes were that I accept only its position. He further stated that I should consider that memories die hard and the department could hold it against me on my future tenure vote. He explained that I should keep in mind that the current dean might or might not have the power to help me in the future. He also stated that a senior program faculty member, who was quite powerful because he brought in extensive grants (let me call him Dr. Grant), had lobbied the department heavily for me, and I should be grateful.

My reaction—kept to myself—was that I would have preferred it if the faculty had voted for me because they had been impressed with my colloquium and competence, not due to political lobbying. I felt stigmatized to learn that someone had had to lobby department faculty to vote for me. Was I a charity case? Now my ego was beginning to feel the blow. I slowly started to question my own competence. After all, these were smart people with experience in academia. Did they know something I did not? Besides affecting me personally, the stigma of incompetence, facilitated by the lobbying, consciously or unconsciously allowed my future colleagues to begin thinking of me as a token minority, rather than a fellow scholar.

The prospect of staying at that university now seemed unappealing. I dearly wished I had immediately said no to the chair when he had first made the offer and that I had never mentioned it to my family or the ethnic studies director. At the time of the offer, however, the temptation to stay in that department was great for several reasons. For instance, I would not have to endure the stress of going out on the job market the following year as I had anticipated. Job hunting is an anxiety-provoking experience for most graduate students, and I was no exception.

However, my most compelling reason to stay was my family. My husband had a well-paying job, and our children—then fourteen and eleven—were happy and settled and had established long-term friendships. When I told them about the offer to stay in my current department, they were thrilled. They would get to stay in school
with their friends and continue with their sports teams. They were so relieved not to have to move out of town. My husband had faithfully supported me—economically and emotionally—throughout graduate school. After my announcement of the job opportunity, we started talking about the way—with both of us employed—we could finally pay our debts and save some money for our children’s college education.

I had dealt with role strain as a graduate student, making sure that I attended all of my children’s extracurricular activities. Consistent with Latino/a values, my family had always come first. As I began to see ominous signs of trouble for me in the department, I was put to the test: should I do what was in my professional interest, or what seemed best for my family’s interest? From the time I told my family about the job opportunity and heard their reaction, I really did not believe I had the option of applying for a job in another city.

Other role strain also affected my decision, especially my position as a student with strong ties to the chair of the department, who had been my principal advisor for three years. Until this situation, he had treated me respectfully and had spoken highly of my course work and research. The ties between graduate students and advisors are strong, but the power is always with the professor. His authority in that role was still very evident when he asked me to apply for the job. However, his ability to advise me was now diminished. He was chair of the department and director of the program at the same time, so he acted on behalf of both interests. A lesson here for future job candidates is that—when the offer is in your department—your advisor may find it difficult to be loyal both to the department and to you.

In terms of deciding which position to accept, the pull involved personal and political loyalty to the ethnic studies program, which had been very generous in supporting me. I wanted the postdoc year to get my research started without the ticking of the tenure clock. On the other hand, I still wanted eventually to be successful in the social science tenure-track position. I remembered the chair’s threat—what if the faculty made me pay by denying me tenure?

It seemed to be widely known in the department that I was strongly considering the ethnic studies position. A senior faculty member called me into his office and said I needed to answer one question: “What are you, a scholar or a Mexican American?” He said that if I answered Mexican American, I should take the postdoc but not follow it with the department position because “the department is only interested in scholars, not Mexican Americans.” I replied that I hadn’t ceased to be Mexican American by becoming a scholar any more than he had stopped being a man when he had gotten his PhD. He retorted that it wasn’t the same thing and I should give the matter serious thought. He also said that other faculty members shared his views.

It had never occurred to me to choose between my ethnicity and my identity as a scholar—it was neither possible nor logical. Before this experience, my holistic identity included being mother, wife, scholar, social scientist, friend, Mexican American, and woman. Separating them would be like expecting my major organs to work independently of each other in my body. I was bewildered.

This struggle to separate aspects of themselves likely affects other ethnic/racial minorities applying for academic jobs. It is critical for ethnic/racial minorities to understand that the forced duality (scholar or Mexican American) is a façade. For women, in particular, identity includes, at a minimum, issues of being female in a male-empowered academic workplace and personal (e.g., mother and wife) and
professional role definitions, as well as ethnicity. Nevertheless, the forced duality reinforced my feelings of tokenism and, by extension, stigmatization and stereotype threat. The professor had made it seem as if being Mexican American was a disease.

The duality further played out in the tug-of-war for me between the social science department and ethnic studies program. The pull was so great that the department chair asked a respected Mexican American tenured professor to arbitrate between the department and the ethnic studies program and convince the program director to persuade me to accept only the department position. I now felt guilty because there was disagreement among campus Mexican American faculty about my situation. I felt as if everyone was talking about me. This sense of extreme visibility is consistent with the experience of tokenism (Kanter 1977; Niemann and Dovidio 1998a; Pollack and Niemann 1998). My identity as Mexican American was more salient to me than ever before in my life, and my holistic sense of self was being shattered.

I began to have trouble sleeping and focusing on my classes (I was still a third-year graduate student). My close friends, most of whom were also students in the department, were greatly concerned about me. The stress showed so much that the professor of the department’s ethics course—the only female full professor in the department—approached me to discuss my options. She was quite fair and said she believed the postdoc would give me the needed distance from my advisors before I became a member of the department faculty. She also thought the year would give me more respectability (someone else valued my work) and diffuse the perception that the department was being strong-armed into hiring me without a search. I had not yet even gotten the job and already I was stigmatized and tokenized by the perception that the department was being forced to hire me. The reality was that the department faculty did not take the time and effort to widely solicit other candidates for the position. I was the one paying the price for their reliance on convenience.

The ethics professor was so concerned about the political ramifications of my accepting the postdoc that she made arrangements to become my dissertation chair (replace my current chair) if I took the position. That might minimize reprisals from the faculty. She had reason to be concerned about my future as a student. I had rapidly gone from being a star in my program to being thought of as a potential problem. She explained that the department faculty felt a sense of benevolence for having offered me the tenure-track position. She told me that they were incredulous that I would consider postponing working with them to become involved with the ethnic studies program for one year.

My Experience as a Faculty Member

I accepted the social science department position and turned down the postdoc. I convinced myself I could make this situation work in spite of my newfound awareness of the racism of some members of the department. As a Mexican American woman raised in economic poverty and the daughter of two people with third- and seventh-grade formal educations, I had overcome obstacles before. Although my identity was in turmoil, and I felt stigmatized by the hiring process, I had retained substantial confidence in my ability to achieve tenure and believed things would be different after I was “one of them.” It didn’t occur to me that I would never feel as if I belonged there.

My competence had not yet been completely undermined. I defended my dissertation in July (having collected all the data, analyzed it, and written the results and
discussion since my pre-orals in April). One month later—after only three years as a social science graduate student—the tenure clock started ticking, and my life in the department went from a bad hiring experience to an even worse faculty situation. I was about to feel the interactive, psychologically damaging effects of others’ and my internalized racism.

**Stigmatization**

The social science department’s failure to conduct a national search for my position had created legal problems for the university administration, which had received complaints about my hiring process. One of the Mexican American faculty members from the law school had to present legal precedents to the administration for my hiring to be approved. It seemed that the circumstances surrounding my appointment had become common knowledge in the university. I thought that when people saw me, they believed, “She’s the one the dean forced the social science department to hire.” I felt lonely and stigmatized.

I also believed I had alienated the ethnic studies faculty, who might now see me as a traitor for not taking their postdoc. In the social science department, except for some polite greetings, I had little or no conversation with colleagues. The faculty distanced themselves from me and made no attempt to mentor me or facilitate my road toward tenure. As for the ethics professor, I was not sure whether she had the interests of the department, rather than mine, foremost in her mind, so I did not trust her. I did not trust the department. I did not know whom or what to trust!

This inability to trust is debilitating for junior faculty who are still in the early stages of their professional development. Generally feedback allows us to improve, but in situations where colleagues may be two-faced and/or racist, it becomes meaningless. Improvement thus happens much more slowly because we have less feedback to work with. This situation is exacerbated for faculty of color and can permeate all professional interactions, in and out of the institution. Research indicates that due largely to the societal prevalence of racism, people of color often make attributions about race when considering feedback or reactions of others to them, whether the feedback is positive or negative (Crocker et al. 1991). Once the boundary of distrust has been crossed, we cannot will ourselves into believing again in that environment. The cycle of not trusting any feedback continues, even when it is self-defeating.

For instance, I received fairly positive reviews with a request for a revision of a paper I had submitted to one of the top journals in my field of social science. However, that feedback was inconsistent with the racism and stigmatization I felt from the department. The positive reaction was therefore disorienting. I did not know what to believe. I had begun undermining my belief in competence and did not have the confidence to submit a revision. I later learned that the editor had put that paper in a file indicating the revision had a 70 percent chance of acceptance, but he never got my rewritten paper, an example of self-undermining behavior.

**Tokenism and Covert Racism**

During my first year, I was the only faculty of color in the entire department. My colleagues seemed content with that situation and oblivious to its effects on me. I was told, “Now that we have you, we don’t need to worry about hiring another minority member.” This sentiment is an example of covert racism in academia,
which includes the “one-minority-per-pot syndrome” (de la Luz Reyes and Halcon 1997). This tokenism also occurred with social science graduate students. For instance, in my first year as faculty, I argued to bring in two Latina graduate students with excellent credentials, though other program faculty disagreed with me. After I persuaded faculty to conduct a person-to-person interview with these women, both were judged acceptable, but I recall Dr. Grant arguing that “one minority is enough.” I accused him of tokenism and insisted that both women get into the program. The faculty reluctantly agreed.

One of the effects of tokenism is what is known as the pressure of a double-edged sword: “simultaneously, a perverse visibility and a convenient invisibility” (Tierney and Rhoades 1993). I was inordinately visible as a minority female in a predominantly white, male department. I was also visible when it was in the department’s best interest to have an ethnic scholar, so my name, teaching, and research were brought up during visits of the national program-accrediting association, international scholars, and elected officials of color. Even some of the well-meaning faculty seemed oblivious to this tokenism. For instance, after one of these visits, one of my senior colleagues pulled me aside and excitedly said, “We told them all about your class and your research! They were really impressed with our diversity.” I believe this colleague was well intentioned and that his comment was meant to be encouraging and supportive. However, the statement made me feel tokenized and devalued as a scholar. I felt representative of all ethnic/racial minorities and believed that the department cared only about the appearance of diversity without actually valuing it. In such a manner, people who are well meaning and unaware of their own racism contribute to a racist climate.

In my second year as faculty, an African American woman was hired in another department program. Her presence helped diffuse some of the attention from me. However, her research and teaching were considered mainstream while I was considered the ethnic researcher. This label also meant that my research was undervalued and not considered scholarly, an experience consistent with that of other faculty of color who believe that they, and their research, are underrated and seen primarily as affirmative-action appointments and only secondarily as scholars in their own right (Garza 1993).

My increasingly salient ethnic identity continued to play a role in my relationships with colleagues. In program faculty meetings, I was the only person who openly argued in favor of admitting minority graduate students. The other faculty members wanted to “be objective” and “color blind.” One of the biggest ironies of this whole situation was that the department party line was that the faculty were oblivious to color and saw only people. This attitude, in conjunction with racist behavior, is consistent with what has been called aversive racism. Aversive racists are people who outwardly proclaim egalitarian values but express racism in subtle, easily rationalized ways, such as unfair hiring procedures for nonwhite group members (Dovidio and Gaertner 1996). It was hypocritical, then, that the department paid attention to race/ethnicity when it was in their interest.

For instance, one of the Latinas whom I was successful in getting admitted into the program had worked with me as an undergraduate and wanted me to be assigned as her advisor. However, Dr. Grant argued that he needed minorities on his team to help get grants and had her assigned to him. In a related occurrence, I learned that Dr. Grant had listed me as an unpaid consultant for a grant where
the agency required ethnic/racial expertise—without ever asking my permission or discussing this grant with me.

I was also told that Dr. Grant routinely made negative, cutting remarks about me personally, about my teaching, and about my research. I learned about many of these remarks from the people who worked for him because he did not seem to have any qualms about openly disparaging me. As one of my colleagues told me, “Dr. Grant is not your friend. Watch your back.” When I discussed Dr. Grant’s behavior toward me with the department chair, he advised me just to dismiss the remarks and not take him seriously. He argued that, after all, no one would really listen to such comments from Dr. Grant. The chair was wrong, as became clear later in my third-year review.

I was furious with the chair’s response but did nothing. I didn’t have the courage or know-how to file a claim with the university center for human rights. This lack of action went against my sense of personal integrity, and, consequently, my self-esteem plummeted further. I contained my anger and gained forty pounds, most of it within my first year as an assistant professor. I began to question why I had ever thought I would do well in academia. If I was struggling, I reasoned, it must be due to my lack of competence. Of course, I also blamed the program faculty for not supporting me. However, I reasoned that if I were really good enough, I wouldn’t need their support. In the midst of this experience, I could not see what external forces in my situation were doing to me, even though my academic training had prepared me to do so.

This lack of awareness is particularly ironic because the hallmark credo of my field of study is that behavior is a function of the person and the environment and that—when it comes to explaining behavior and attitudes—the situation matters. Still, the effects of stereotype threat, stigmatization, tokenism, and racism are so insidious that I couldn’t see how they related to me at that time. That I undermined my sense of competence is particularly indicative of the power of the situation because by then I had begun studying the psychological effects of tokenism. Though I was well versed in the scientific literature, I was nevertheless too immersed in the situation to apply that knowledge to my situation.

Evidence of Tokenism and Racism—Undermining by Workload

My teaching and advising load was unprecedented for recently hired junior members of the department. In the four years I was a member of that department, I taught four different graduate seminars and three different undergraduate courses. From my discussions with colleagues, I learned that most new professors in the department taught only one or two graduate seminars in their area of specialty, which they continued for the first few years before they added others. Included in my teaching load were both of the core graduate courses in my field. My experience was consistent with documented disparities in the teaching load assigned to women as compared to men (Johnsrud 1993). These disparities—evidence that your scholarship is not valued—are exacerbated for women of color.

I was also the principal advisor for eight graduate students as well as chair of their thesis and/or dissertation committees. Two of the students assigned to me had been considered problem students previous to my becoming faculty. Two of the other program faculty, both full professors, had only two graduate students each, and one of them later transferred to me. I also supervised and advised approximately fifteen undergraduate students as members of my research team.
This workload contrasts sharply with that of the faculty member I replaced. She was white, a graduate of an elite university who was hired after an extensive national search, and the department had high expectations of her. Although she taught two critical graduate courses, she had been sheltered from extensive advising responsibilities. After three years in the department, she was formally advising only one student, a workload consistent with department standards for junior professors. The difference in the department’s perception of us was obvious from the disparities in our workloads.

I was assigned complex and time-consuming administrative tasks necessary for the program. What this workload meant was that there was little time for research. I was working every day and late hours at home every night to try to complete manuscripts, prepare classes, grade papers, and do program administration. I wanted so very badly to succeed. The more overwhelmed I became with nonresearch responsibilities, the more incompetent I felt.

The assigned teaching and administrative load became significantly heavier because of unassigned responsibilities and obligations. As a woman of color, I felt duty-bound to respond to students who felt marginalized in the institution, especially ethnic/racial minorities. These students often sought me out to advise their campus organizations and listen to their experiences of racism, sexism, or homophobia in the university. Sometimes they asked me to help them take action about their discriminatory experiences. For instance, I assisted a white female student who was being sexually harassed by a professor. Several Latino/a students sought guidance as they experienced conflict between their academic goals and their families' financial needs.

Of course, at one level, I did have the choice of turning these students away. Emotionally, however, I felt pulled to respond to them. I believed that if I did not, no one else would listen to their issues. Furthermore, I would not have been able to face myself if I had turned my back on these students, especially knowing about the difficulties for students of color in predominantly white institutions. This work was necessary and important—and even fulfilling—because I knew my response to them, at the very least, validated their needs and concerns. Nevertheless, it was emotionally draining to hear constantly about students’ experiences with discrimination, especially because I was also experiencing the effects of racism.

When I discussed the overwhelming teaching/advising/administrative load with the chair, he explained that the social science faculty were very busy with administrative duties so I had to carry the load. He said he wanted me to know that the faculty appreciated my service to the department. I only knew that my assigned duties and unassigned obligations as a woman of color were draining my time and energy. It was a situation I felt powerless to change, and it made me feel increasingly incompetent as a faculty member.

Overt Racism and Isolation

I endured overtly racist comments from a few department faculty members. For instance, one senior faculty member stopped me in the hall one day and asked—regarding a graduate student fellowship the ethnic studies program was offering—“If one of our students accepts that fellowship, will they have to do Mexican shit, or can they do real research?” I replied that research on Mexican Americans was real—period! Then I simply turned and walked away. These types of incidents happened
to me regularly. I wished I had had the courage to say more. What had become of the feisty and confident person I had been only recently? I would often sit in my office and think about things I could have—and wished I had—said in response to racist statements. Of course, I knew this was not a productive use of time. The more I ruminated about racist comments, the more incompetent I felt.

Another example of departmental racism occurred when I was serving on a thesis committee for a student working on depression. During his defense, I pointed out that he had not conducted any analyses by gender or race/ethnicity. Although it was typically considered disrespectful to contradict other faculty member during student defenses, one of the other committee members replied, “Why in the world would gender or race make any difference? A brain is a brain!” This devaluing of the central importance of ethnicity in the human psyche, a role now recognized by the American Psychological Association, appeared to me to be another example of aversive racism in the department: prejudice disguised as color blindness.

In my third year, I applied for and received a one-semester fellowship from the university ethnic studies program. As protocol required, I asked the department chair’s permission to go on a one-semester leave. He replied that I was valuable to the department and he would approve the leave as long as I continued to advise my many students during the semester. He also said that—unlike other fellowships—this one would not be considered prestigious for me because it was assumed I had attained it only by being Mexican American, not due to my accomplishments. What an ironic twist. I believed he had hired me, in part, because I was Mexican American. Now he seemed to be telling me that an otherwise-prestigious fellowship was meaningless for my evaluation because it was intended for Mexican Americans. Nevertheless, I took the leave and continued to meet with my graduate and undergraduate students throughout that semester. I did not know that it was not necessary, nor was it the norm, for faculty to continue meeting with and advising students while on leave.

I must point out here that the overt racism I experienced came from a relatively small portion of the department members: a few powerful full professors who created a hostile department climate for minorities. While the more junior faculty did not seem to agree with these attitudes, they were not in positions of power to confront the full professors. It also did not seem to me that the fair-minded, nonracist full professors in the department attempted to keep their racist colleagues in check, nor did they create a support system for those affected by the hostile climate. It seemed impossible that they could be unaware because some racist statements were made during faculty meetings. Thus, racists and nonracists contributed directly and/or indirectly to the negative department climate.

Some Companionship and Support

I eventually sought out and found companionship and mentoring among the Mexican American, African American, and Puerto Rican campus faculty members. Whatever feelings there may have been among the ethnic studies faculty because I had not accepted the postdoc were now replaced with an expressed desire for me to succeed. These groups of faculty members supported me emotionally and offered professional opportunities, such as speaking engagements, collaborative research, small grants, and a fellowship. Within my social science department, one white, male full professor befriended me and seemed to have my interest, rather than that of the
department, at heart. He listened and offered to prereview my manuscripts, which I did not give him. I still could not bring myself to trust anyone on the department faculty. Fortunately I did rely on my close friends from graduate school. Having trusted friends listen and validate my reality helped me maintain a sense of sanity.

Stereotype Threat

In spite of this support, I quickly became resistant to positive feedback as my negative self-perception increased. For instance, over the course of my four years at this institution, I became well acquainted with three highly esteemed, internationally known and respected, widely published scholars in my discipline, each of whom worked at different institutions. Each one gave me positive feedback regarding my research ideas, writing, and potential. I even began publishing with two of them and planned collaborative research with the third. Each of these professors was more highly esteemed in the discipline than any of my faculty colleagues. Even so, when they praised my work, I reasoned that they were good, generous men who just felt sorry for me but didn’t really believe I was competent. This is another example of the disorienting effects of feedback when you do not know whom to trust. An esteemed woman faculty member from another university in a closely related field also stayed in contact with me and practically pleaded for me to leave my university. She argued that I could not possibly flourish under these conditions. I reasoned that she liked me enough not to care whether or not I was competent. By discounting this feedback from people who were trying to help me, I undermined myself in several ways. Most especially, I slowed my professional development by not trusting their input.

In retrospect discounting the input these esteemed, decent scholars gave me about my work and potential was one of the most obvious symptoms that my self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy in the academy had suffered great harm. I no longer recognized the person in the mirror. The energetic, healthy, enthusiastic person I had been up until the time I had become a faculty member seemed to have disappeared. I wondered what I had done to destroy her. This self-blaming is a mark of the effects of stereotype threat, stigmatization, racism, and tokenism. Yet, at the time—even with my social science professional training—I could not account for what was happening to me.

Third-Year Review—Oops! We Forgot!

The worst of my experiences, but the one that finally sent me on the road to physical and psychological health, centered on my third-year review. My department forgot to administer the review, an unprecedented occurrence. That my review was forgotten indicated that the department had never acknowledged my identity as a scholar. The third-year review was a university requirement designed to facilitate faculty’s successful movement toward tenure. I was told that this forgetfulness had occurred because of transitions in the department. By the end of my third year, the dean who had insisted on hiring me had been fired and transferred (I don’t know if there was a connection between my hiring and his dismissal), and the department chair, my former advisor, was named dean. Therefore, my third-year review was administered during my fourth year.

From all accounts by other department faculty, my review was conducted like none other. The established general procedure was for the review committee to
meet individually with faculty members in the reviewee’s program and then determine where there was consensus. The committee was also supposed to read the person’s published work, third-year review statement, and teaching evaluations and ascertain the probability of success should he or she continue on the current track. It was generally considered a helpful—though stressful—process, expected to guide the reviewee toward tenure. In my case, however, the committee met with the entire department faculty at one time, including the very powerful, very vocal Dr. Grant, who everyone knew had made disparaging remarks about me since I had been hired. Immediately after the review committee met with my program faculty, it was my turn to meet with them.

The first question they asked me was, “What do you have to say about your poor teaching evaluations?” I was astounded. I knew from the department data that my teaching evaluations were not only outstanding but were among the highest in the department. I had also been nominated as an outstanding teaching fellow in the university. My teaching evaluations had been so high that during the previous fall, they were more than one standard deviation above the department norm and had thus prompted a raise in salary. I asked if the committee had read my teaching evaluations. The committee chair—the same person who had earlier said “a brain is a brain”—pulled out what may have been the only two negative evaluations in the stack (I had taught hundreds of undergraduate students and about forty graduate ones). As I made this known to the committee, the chair stated that my faculty members had indicated that people had complained about my teaching. I was later told that Dr. Grant had made a negative statement about my teaching of the only course on ethnicity and race conducted by a tenure-stream department faculty member; my more mainstream courses were not mentioned. Also although I had a couple of publications in top-refereed disciplinary journals, a chapter in press, and several other manuscripts under review (all in mainstream, peer-reviewed journals), I was told that my faculty colleagues had questioned the quantity and quality of my research.

Later that evening, two of the persons present at the meeting told me that most of the talking had been done by one person—Dr. Grant—and I learned most of what he had said. Among his statements was “she’ll never be a superstar. She doesn’t fit in this department.” Let me point out that in this department—as in most others in public universities—the majority of the faculty members were not superstars, so I was being judged by unique and stringent standards. They also said that—because of political ramifications—with the exception of one retired professor, the other full professors, who were my former advisors, did not speak up to contradict Dr. Grant or defend me.

The day after my meeting with the review committee I placed a call to the chair and told her that it seemed to me that the review had been extremely negatively biased. She agreed and told me that in her opinion I would never be able to shake the circumstances surrounding my hire and the department resentment was still deep. She stated that Dr. Grant would never evaluate me fairly and the committee had no choice but to listen to his opinion because he was now director of the program. She further stated that my case would be better if I agreed to disassociate myself from any ethnically/culturally related research and teaching.

I needed help. Still in shock from the unfair review, that weekend I met with my former advisor, then dean of the college, who was among the faculty with whom the committee had met. I told him that I had heard what had transpired in the meeting.
and I was not receiving a fair evaluation. I also told him I had been extremely disappointed and hurt to learn that he had not spoken on my behalf and against Dr. Grant. He replied that he had been embarrassed to hear Dr. Grant go on but when Grant was in the room, it was pointless to try to get a word in. He explained that the committee had made a big mistake by meeting with the entire faculty at one time. However, he also stated that the review committee had the final word, and he really had no say in their conclusions. He had no response to my argument that the committee’s conclusions had to be biased by what had been said—and not said—by my colleagues during the review meeting.

The following week I met with the new department chair and told him what had transpired in the review and about my other negative department experiences, including the hiring process. The new chair seemed genuinely surprised and unaware of my situation and expressed anger over the way the review had been handled. He, too, stated that the faculty should have been interviewed separately because they do not usually contradict each other in meetings of this nature. However, to my knowledge, there was no subsequent attempt to reinterview faculty individually.

In retrospect the way my work was evaluated is consistent with literature that indicates that stigmatization results in negative expectations. Heilman, Block, and Lucas (1992) found that negative expectations of individuals spawned by a stigma of incompetence could cause distorted perceptions of their behavior and work performance. This situation demonstrates one of the perils of being a Latina faculty member, 80 percent of whom teach courses and conduct research related to their specific ethnic group (Garza 1993). Although 90 percent of Latino scholars consider themselves intellectuals and 85 percent are committed to the rules and standards for scientific pursuits, most also believe that their research is seen as academically inferior and illegitimate (Garza 1993). They cite the taboo of “brown-on-brown” research as one of the top reasons why they are denied tenure (Major, Feinstein, and Crocker 1994).

Also, in retrospect, for my colleagues to have spoken up about my extensive advising and service would have admitted the way they were using me to fulfill program needs while pursuing their own agendas. It would also have meant defending me before faculty who knew they had pushed for my hire in spite of department resentment. I came to believe that my faculty colleagues would only have felt redeemed in the eyes of the department if I had achieved superstar status in only three years.

My Decision to Leave and Return to Identity Integration

I was devastated by the events of the third-year review. Throughout my time teaching, I had increasingly lost self-confidence because my research was constantly described as “ethnic stuff” and not real science. The publication of my articles in prestigious journals indicated that several reviewers and editors did consider my work good. However, I did not think about that positive feedback. I had begun to have difficulty focusing on my writing, something that had previously come easily to me. My lack of confidence had become such a problem that—in a couple of cases where editors had recommended that I revise and resubmit a manuscript—I convinced myself that the quality of my work was not good enough to rewrite. All of this was symptomatic of the effects of tokenism, stigmatization, racism, and stereotype threat. It was also an example of the way attributed ambiguity made me question whether I had ever deserved to be hired or published (Niemann and Dovidio
Thus, my state of mind resulted from the negative attitudes and beliefs I had internalized as well as the behavior and attitudes of others.

After the review, I began to believe that the department had used me with no intention of keeping me on as a tenured faculty member. I conferred with friends and scholars from other universities who had become aware of and come to be concerned about my life in that department. They all agreed that—because of the way it had been handled—the review could not be considered valid. However, there was also consensus that the review was evidence of my department’s perception of me—I would always be regarded not as a scholar, but as the token minority the department had had to hire. I started to understand that in this department, I would likely continue to be overwhelmed with advising responsibilities and trivial, nonprestigious administrative duties, leaving little time for my research. I came to the difficult and painful conclusion that I had to leave to regain my holistic identity. That week I sent out job applications.

Transition from Mexican American to Chicana

The Mexican American faculty reacted negatively to my intention to leave the university. They wanted me to stay and legally fight what seemed an inevitable negative tenure decision in a couple of years. Their contention was that if I left, the department would win. The department would have used me to appease temporarily those who had demanded racial/ethnic representation and then discarded me. The department would claim that it had hired a Mexican American, and she had chosen to leave. Better to stay—some Mexican American faculty argued—and make the department own up to its members’ behavior toward me, especially since I had documented their treatment in my journal. The ethnic studies program was even supportive to the extent of offering me another fully funded, one-year fellowship. The director of that program argued that with the fellowship year, I could get more publications in press, and he would fight to keep that year off the tenure clock, thus buying me one additional year before my final review.

His argument strongly appealed to my political identity. After the “third year” I had made the transition in identity from Mexican American to Chicana, the description used by politically conscious Mexican Americans. My university experiences had changed me from a naïve, politically insulated, and unaware Mexican American to a person whose consciousness about racism and its effects had been raised to heights I had not previously imagined.

I met with the university provost, who had already heard about my situation from Mexican American faculty on campus. She seemed embarrassed about and apologized for the delay in my third-year review. She offered to extend my tenure clock by one year to make up for that mistake. However, she did not agree to stop the tenure clock for the one-year fellowship from ethnic studies. Additionally, when I told her about Dr. Grant’s role in my bad experience, she avoided the subject by discussing how important grants were to the university.

I was now convinced more than ever that if I stayed, my shattered sense of competence and identity might not recover. I believed that it was in my best personal and professional interest—and, by extension, my family’s interest—for me to leave. At the time, I needed badly to win for myself; then later—through my future success—I could make contributions to my ethnic community. I no longer wanted just to survive; I wanted to thrive—a sign that I was recovering.
That spring I made the short list for positions at two university social science departments and one ethnic studies department. I accepted the latter. My writing is once again focused and consistent. I have published about a dozen articles—most of them in mainstream, refereed journals—and have obtained roughly seventy-five thousand dollars in grants in the two years since I left the first institution. I feel respected and valued. I am productive and once again ambitious and motivated. My identity seems integrated. I once again recognize and like the person I see in the mirror. I feel personal peace.

Recommendations

Several recommendations for faculty of color and institutions hiring them are already evident in this chapter. In addition, I offer the following:

Faculty of color must be aware of the consequences of putting themselves in a situation where they become vulnerable to the effects of tokenism, racism, stigmatization, and stereotype threat—all related concepts. These effects can be psychologically, physically, and professionally damaging. If you do want to continue working where you were trained, I recommend insisting on two things. First, temporarily leave your training institution for at least a one-year postdoc to gain distance from your advisors. Leaving for a period of time also lets your faculty know that your work is valued elsewhere. Second, to keep from having your sense of competence undermined, insist on an extensive, national search. When you come out on top, your own sense of worth will be heightened, as will your colleagues’ perception of you. Contentment as an academic does not depend upon your working in an ethnic studies department. It relies on working in an accepting and validating climate.

I recommend accepting a position in a department where you are not the only minority member and not the only faculty person conducting research and/or teaching on ethnic/racial issues. My research on tokenism indicates that solo minorities are less satisfied with their jobs than those who have colleagues (Kanter 1977). People who feel like tokens tend to believe they are always representatives of their ethnic groups—constantly in the spotlight and living in a glass house—and they often have reason to think that their white colleagues are threatened by their accomplishments (Dovidio and Gaertner 1996).

It is also important to look for signs of overt, covert, and unconscious racism among potential colleagues; racists cannot evaluate ethnic/racial minorities fairly. For instance, do comments indicate an assumption that minorities are not as qualified as whites? Does the department undervalue publications in ethnic studies journals? Is the department under pressure to hire a minority person? Does the department showcase its only minority faculty members? These are signs you may become a department token with detrimental psychological consequences. Inquire about the reactions of faculty when a colleague makes a racist or sexist statement. Do others just stand by and say and do nothing, or do they take action. Remember that those who just stand by help maintain a negative climate.

Institutions can infer that this chapter suggests that affirmative action is inherently detrimental. I do not believe that is the case. Research indicates that when affirmative-action policies are framed in a positive manner (e.g., increasing our diversity will contribute different, valued perspectives to the discipline), the potentially stigmatizing effects of the policies may be avoided (Dovidio and Gaertner 1996). Additionally, because departments often do contain racist members, “good
intentions are not sufficient to guarantee that equal opportunity will insure equal
treatment" (Dovidio and Gaertner 1996), thus rendering affirmative-action policies
necessary. Therefore, the university administration must encourage departments to
frame affirmative-action hiring in a positive, nondetrimental fashion. It is impor-
tant for nonracist members of departments—especially the more senior, powerful
ones—to be aware of the pitfalls that faculty of color face and ensure support and
mentorship for them. It is not acceptable to rationalize that if someone is not per-
sonally racist or unfair, then the behavior of others is not his or her business. It
is incumbent on the powerful members of departments to use their influence to
develop a positive working climate for faculty of color and, by extension, all faculty.

It is also important to recognize the detrimental effects of covert racism, such as
tokenism, which often occurs concurrently with denial of the importance of race/
etnicity (for example, color blindness). Denying the role of race/ethnicity for
members of socially oppressed groups is negating their realities. This denial may
be especially harmful for Latinos/as and African Americans, who are particularly
stigmatized in the realm of academia.

It is critical for administrators and colleagues to understand that faculty of color
have responsibilities and obligations to respond to students who seek them out pre-
cisely because they are faculty of color. This situation is exacerbated for women of
color, who are also befriended by white women in predominantly male departments.
Due to gender-role expectations, women often do not feel the freedom to maintain
distance from students. Latinas, in particular, often feel that to be successful they
may have to behave in a manner contradictory to their cultural values. The extant
feminist literature indicates that women who behave in a culturally consistent femi-
nine are considered unprofessional. To be successful women faculty must conform
to, and accommodate, cultural values outside of their gender role (Aleman 1995).

Keeping in mind these added obligations, easing the assigned load for these fac-
culty is not a sign of favoritism or lowered expectations. It is a recognition of their
additional responsibilities, especially to communities of color. It is also critical dur-
ing evaluations to emphasize that these interactions enhance the reputation of the
department. Additionally, administrators and faculty must understand that depart-
ment and institutional climate can affect individual performance.

Finally, it is absolutely critical for faculty of color to understand their role in
undermining their competence. This self-undermining is often a result of others’
racism or at least interacts with the behavior and attitudes of others. However, aware-
ness of your attitudes and behavior in these situations can empower you to diffuse
self-undermining behavior.

Concluding Comments

In my view, no one was blameless for the negative department climate and my
resulting harsh experience, including me. Five interactive forces contributed to the
generation and maintenance of racism, stigmatization, tokenization, and stereotype
threat: (1) the negative connotations of hiring associated with affirmative action
that set the stage for tokenization and stigmatization; (2) the overtly biased per-
sons who created adverse effects; (3) those faculty members who didn’t recognize
their negative biases and whose manner of encouragement indicated racist attitudes
and was therefore undermining; (4) those people who were not biased but stood
by and let racist behavior occur without intervening; (5) my undermining of my
competence. My credentials as a scholar who knew about these attitudes and behavior did not prevent my succumbing to the effects of stereotype threat. Being vigilant of these effects on you in these situations and adhering to your sense of competence are necessary to overcome these potentially psychologically damaging situations.

In conclusion, people of color who pursue an academic career and conduct ethical, culturally-sensitive research contribute admirably to their ethnic communities and universities in many ways. They are role models and mentors for other students, faculty, and community members. Through their research, they can facilitate understanding of and improvements in their communities and more trust in academic institutions, which are often perceived as ivory towers with nothing in common with surrounding communities. The case study in this article is not intended to scare Latinas or other people of color away from academia. Quite the contrary, if we are aware of the processes that can undermine our competence and physical and psychological health, we can coopt those oppressive forces in our interest and that of our communities. As Paulo Freire concludes, our perception of ourselves as oppressed is impaired by our submersion in the reality of oppression (Freire 1970). With awareness comes power.

I hope the description and analysis of this case study have been helpful. I equally hope that this narrative facilitates better mentorship of and appreciation for the needs and situations of faculty of color from their colleagues and administrators.

Epilogue, July 2011

In 1996, I joined the Department of Comparative Ethnic Studies at Washington State University (WSU) as an assistant professor. At WSU I was afforded the opportunity to develop my scholarship and teaching, as well as my leadership skills. My numerous professional accomplishments have been validated by publications in refereed journals and books and more than twenty-five million dollars in federal grants. I achieved the rank of tenured full professor and have served in various administrative roles, including: vice provost; dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences; special assistant to the dean for assessment and accreditation; special assistant to the provost for diversity and faculty affairs; head of the Department of Comparative Ethnic Studies; and director of Latino/a outreach. I also had the privilege of being an American Council on Education (ACE) Fellow.

Although I am widely published on the subjects of stereotypes and tokenism, none of my work has received as much attention as the account of my first assistant-professor experience, “The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in Academe.” I am humbled by the way this narrative has resonated with so many people. For instance, I have been informed that at various times it has been required reading in some psychology departments. I have received emails from people I don’t know who thanked me for informing them they were not alone and survival was possible. After sharing this story at conferences, a group of people invariably want to speak with me to tell me that they are experiencing some of the same challenges and ask for further advice and guidance. Some of these conversations have resulted in ongoing friendships. The response to this work has been overwhelmingly validating and gratifying.

On the other hand, I have also been informed that I was not considered a candidate for positions in some universities because search-committee members did not appreciate the message in “The Making of a Token,” and/or they feared that I
would write about them some day. So be it. I am relieved that I did not have to learn what it was they feared I would write about. This article has thus served as a mutual "screen test" for me and for those interested in my skills and talents.

Serving in administrative positions has given me an intimate view of the best and worst of the university. The best includes ethical, caring, hardworking, generous, and visionary administrative leaders—men and women across race/ethnicity and gender/sexual identities. The best also includes the large number of dedicated faculty and eager, energetic students who make me smile and remind me why I chose an academic career. I believe that the vast majority of persons in the academic world fit this description.

The worst—those representing a relatively few, but very influential and powerful, minority—include those who can be described as unethical, unprofessional, narcissistic, abusive, and/or bullying people whose words and behavior can sometimes be categorized as psychologically violent assaults. These toxic people use their positions to ensure that they get their way—by any means necessary. They abuse their role by taking advantage of students and engage in vindictive behavior toward faculty, staff, and anyone who is less powerful and does not support their agenda. It is this minority, I believe, that shapes the often-horrific experiences of less-powerful members of historically underrepresented groups in academia.

But this minority cannot stand alone in blame or guilt. Its members would not get away with their unprofessional behavior were it not for the good people who stand by and remain silent. It is only through the silence of the majority that abusive persons can get their way, wreak havoc, and/or destroy careers. In some cases, persons who are very powerful in their own right also remain silent or choose not to take action, thereby keeping their own roads as smooth as possible. These failures to do what is right allow the least powerful within the academic world to be harmed.

I have recently returned to the faculty as a professor of psychology after serving in several administrative positions. Although I continue to be honored by nominations for interesting positions in highly regarded institutions, this time has been a respite from the very political administrative world of academia. I am reflecting on the lessons learned from my experiences and solidifying connections with faculty, students, my scholarship, and the ideals that drew me to higher education. If I return to administration, I will be a better servant for having taken this time to think about how I want to contribute to the mission of institutions of higher education.

My experiences in the administrative world have provided many lessons that are too detailed to be shared in this article. The most important outcome is that I know myself better than ever, resulting is greater self-confidence, a stronger center, and enhanced appreciation for and understanding of my values. I am considerably less naïve about the breath of moral codes represented in the academic world across rank and file. I am more secure about the kind of people with whom I will chose to associate and work. In the future, I will endeavor to serve on leadership teams with people who share my ideals.

I have had the privilege of knowing such leaders. These men and women have been models of the ethical and empowering way to treat others when serving in relatively powerful positions. My role models include faculty colleagues who are welcoming and strive to be helpful to all their peers and students. My heroes include those who have survived extremely challenging situations and, indeed, whose resilience has allowed them to thrive in harsh academic climates. They give
me courage and energy to continue to advocate for access and equitable treatment for all persons.

I continue to be blessed by a loving and supportive husband and our two grown children, a close extended family, and treasured friends and mentors. All of these people facilitate my ongoing idealistic view that, collectively, we can do much better and, individually, we can each make a difference in moving toward a more positive cultural shift in the academic world.