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Article 8

The Imposter Phenomenon Among African American Women in U.S. Institutions of Higher Education: Implications for Counseling

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The literature on the counseling and psychotherapy of African American women is relatively new. This author has been examining the imposter phenomenon, i.e., an internal experience of intellectual phoniness (Clance & Imes, 1978), among high achieving African American women since the early 1980s (see Trotman, 1984). Counselors must be aware of this phenomenon and its antecedents if they are to effectively assist all women who may seek their expertise. Counselors must fully understand the pain and emotional distress often inflicted on and experienced by their African American female clients in academic careers. Johnetta B. Cole, first female President of Spelman College, giving the keynote address at Smith College, stated that

In our country... all black folks are doomed to be intellectually inferior to all white folks. Thus, the last image that many Americans would have of an African American woman is that of an intellectual, an academic, a college president, a person of academy. (Cole, 1997)

The Imposter Phenomenon

Several years ago, the concept of the imposter phenomenon was used to attempt to explain some of the conflicts and turmoil plaguing many high achieving African American women. Black women in the United States have experienced the imposter phenomenon by virtue of being both black people in white America and women in a male-dominated culture. Indeed, “black women have been doubly victimized by scholarly neglect and racist assumptions. Belonging as they do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society—blacks and women—they have been doubly invisible” (Lerner, 1973, p. xvii).

In an effort to decrease the cognitive dissonance caused by an attempt to reconcile the institution and maintenance of slavery in a land founded on principles of liberty and justice for all human beings, the dominant culture attempts to diminish its resultant guilt and discomfort by postulating that African Americans are not really human. “Dehumanization involves first forming an idea of another living person as a ‘*thing*’ so as to sustain one’s dehumanized conception of [her]” (Kovel, 1970, p. 36). The seemingly cyclical rise of the IQ controversy as support for the genetic inferiority of African Americans, despite its having been repeatedly debunked and repudiated (Trotman, 1977), is perhaps one of the most blatant attempts at dehumanization that periodically emerges from the hallowed halls of the academy.

One’s self-concept must be affected and self-esteem is likely to suffer as a result of such damaging appraisals by the society into which the black girl child is born. The effects of the imposter phenomenon are particularly virulent for those African American women who have chosen careers in higher education.

The subtle and not-so-subtle attacks on the African American woman as a student, a professor, or an administrator in U.S. institutions of higher education can seem relentless. “The perception that African American women are incompetent pervades much of their career, forcing upon them the undeserved stress of providing a

defense they should not need to give and fighting to prove merit when merit is unquestionably apparent” (Myers, 2002, p. 21-22).

Throughout the 20th century, obstacles to upward mobility and equal life chances have confronted African American women. No other racial or ethnic group in the United States has been as enslaved or faced such perpetual racial segregation and discrimination in all institutional domains. Certainly, in those institutions which pride themselves on intellectual superiority, the black woman may be inclined to feel a sense of ‘intellectual phoniness’ (Wilkinson, 2000).

Counseling Implications

Other volumes (Trotman, 1977, 1978, 1984, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2005, 2006) have explored various approaches and ramifications of counseling and psychotherapy with African American women. The salience of the race of the therapist, the importance of cultural and social class of the therapist, the effect of therapist attitudes, same sex versus opposite sex of therapist, and the importance of role models have been identified as significant in the counseling and psychotherapy process of black female clients.

Wechsler (1997) reminded us that all new groups that have entered white male-dominated, Christian-based higher education have always been met with suspicion and trepidation. The African American woman is not only relatively new to the academy, but also brings with her the added stigma of presumed intellectual inferiority and incompetence. Counselors must understand the antecedents and consequences in order to be able to empathize with her plight and not add to her burdens by questioning her perceptions. In the white male dominated ivory tower, how does the ebony woman manage to survive the constant assaults on her academic contributions, her intellectual capacity, and her humanity without doubting herself and feeling like the imposter that many in the academy seem to perceive?

Assaults on her self-esteem can be combated with authenticity and assertiveness. The African American woman must demand respect

and say ‘out loud’ what she knows is true. Yet when African American women exhibit any level of assertiveness, they are frequently labeled as “loose cannons” or trouble-makers who are dealing too much in triviality, or ‘playing the race card.’ Misconceptions and stereotypes about race and sex lead to the treatment of and interaction with African American women as labels, thus mystifying the real persons behind the stigma and encouraging self-fulfilling prophecies crafted by the sex and race that hold power (Kawewe, 1997). Myers (2002) contends that “white males show much more favor toward white females and black males than toward black females. This is even truer when the female is outspoken, independent, and assertive” (p. 66).

Knowing the Client’s Experiences

Counselors of the high achieving African American woman need to appreciate the experience of strong female role models, who from the very beginning were viewed as sources of labor valued for the amount of work they could perform, thus leading to the “black superwoman” image with its concomitant expectation that the black woman must “do all” and “be all,” often ignoring her individual needs. Alice Walker underscores this subtle difference in emotional and intellectual outlook by pointing out that “white feminism teaches white women that they are capable, whereas my [Black] tradition assumes I’m capable” (as cited in Trotman, 1984, p. 36). Rather than exploit her strengths, counseling must help the black woman to get in touch with her challenges and particular needs.

Campus life for faculty of color teaching in predominantly white colleges and universities is often characterized in terms of multiple lenses of marginalities (Aguirre, 2000; Alfred, 2001; Essien, 2003; Harvey, 1991, 1994; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Turner, 2003). Thompson and Louque (2005) reported that disrespect for African American faculty stemmed from some colleagues’ lack of knowledge about black culture in general as well as a lack of respect for African Americans’ academic contributions and their professional

opinions. Hart (2006) noted that feminist voices are still silenced within the academic culture. Counselors must provide the proper environment for African American women to express their sadness, disappointment, pain, and rage by providing an understanding ear, and being knowledgeable about black culture in general and about the presumed incompetence that fosters the imposter phenomenon, so potentially devastating to African American women.

The research literature is consistent. All conclude that black women faculty are the most stressed, the least satisfied, almost the least represented, possibly the least supported, and the most overworked of all faculty in academe (Alexander, 1995; Benjamin, 1997; Graves, 1990; Gregory, 1995; Malveaux, 1998; Peterson, 1990). "What is not found is literature on satisfied, well-respected... black women faculty" (Cooper, 2006, p. 3). The experiences for many faculty of color at predominantly white colleges and universities have been described as negotiating "personal and psychological minefields" (Ruffins, 1997, p.21). Stanley (2006) reports that the literature contains a variety of terms and phrases that determine and reflect the overall experiences of faculty of color teaching in predominantly white colleges and universities, including: 'multiple marginality', 'otherness', 'living in two worlds', 'the academy's new cast', 'silenced voices', 'visible and invisible barriers', 'the color of teaching', and 'navigating between two worlds' (p. 3).

Interaction with other faculty is a key factor in career longevity and success, but it is important to note that the self-worth of African American women cannot be entirely dependent on white faculty. Self-worth and self-reliance must be internally generated, with help from support networks established in and out of the university setting (Atwater, 1995). Group counseling experiences with other African American women can also be extremely helpful (Trotman & Gallagher, 1987). It is in the black women's group that the black woman can experience a safe environment in which she can speak expressively and directly about issues of vital importance to her mental health, while developing and modeling her unique style in the intimacy and love of her black sisters.

Group Therapy and Other Approaches

A black women's group, such as the one described above, can provide a safe setting in which the black woman can begin to re-experience some of the painful and damaging incidents of childhood. Some of the results of racism involve only other black people and are therefore inappropriate for discussion outside "the family" of blacks. Racism as a shared experience of black women can be assumed, and there appears to be little need to discuss it in a black women's group. The black woman can explore her options, e.g., acquiescence versus assertiveness, as a reaction to racial oppression.

The roles that the black woman play can be enhanced, developed, and expanded through the role modeling of the group therapist and the other group members. As black women communicate honesty, sincerity, and love to each other, they also subtly and simultaneously identify the details and mechanisms of their successes, "thereby demystifying success and making it accessible to the [other] black female group members" (Trotman, 1984, p. 105).

It is critical that the black woman suffering the imposter phenomenon feels safe enough and understood enough to share her feelings of fraudulence. A group experience with other achieving black women who risk exploring the commonality of fraudulent feelings is particularly therapeutic in such cases.

Because of their added stressors (Patitu & Hinton, 2003) and unique experiences, and being subjected to the ethnocentrism of the dominant culture, minority group members need group experiences with each other in order to validate their perceptions, help to decrease stress, and prevent illness. American minorities continue to face a multitude of barriers to success in the academic workplace. Despite recent efforts in higher education to increase faculty diversity and to implement multicultural curriculum requirements in educational programs, many American minority groups are still largely underrepresented in academic faculty and administrative positions. Underrepresentation places an additional burden on minority faculty

as they are expected to assume supplementary minority-related responsibilities while continuing to meet the same expectations set for White colleagues (Aguirre, 2000). Various forms of overt and covert prejudices have been identified in the literature, and numerous authors have made recommendations suggesting that change is required and support is necessary for minority academicians. Counseling and psychotherapy support groups should be available to minority group members in the Academy.

Minorities in academia must have the opportunity to meet with other minorities in a group designed to share experiences. Another important strategy is for black women to continue to write about their experiences with racism and sexism. In doing this and assessing similarities in experiences across the country, African American women are better prepared to demand both the institutional and the individual support necessary for changing racist and sexist practices (Smith, 2000).

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