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Understanding student evaluations : a black faculty perspective.

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Understanding Student Evaluations: A Black Faculty Perspective

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Abstract: Student evaluations of faculty teaching are critical components to the evaluation of faculty performance. These evaluations are used to determine teaching effectiveness and they influence tenure and promotion decisions. Although they are designed as objective assessments of teaching performance, extraneous factors, including the instructors' race, can affect the composition and educational atmosphere at colleges and universities. In this reflection, we briefly review some literature on the use and utility of student evaluations and present narratives from social work faculty in which students' evaluation contained perceived racial bias.

Keywords: student evaluations, black faculty, teaching performance, race, bias, educational atmosphere, college.

Teaching is a fundamental responsibility of educators in institutions of higher learning. The scholarship of teaching is broadly defined as "the ideology, pedagogy and evaluation of teaching" (Hobson & Talbott, 2001, p. 26). Although there are several methods used to evaluate the quality of one's teaching, student evaluations (SEs) are the primary instruments used by colleges and universities when attempting to quantify the quality of an instructor's teaching as well as solicit feedback pertaining to the students' educational experience in a course. In addition to providing valuable feedback to administrators and instructors, SEs also play an important role in the promotion, tenure, and job security of professors in colleges and universities (Littleford, Ong, Tseng, Milliken & Humy, 2010). Consequently, extraneous factors, such as the race of instructors, can affect the composition and educational atmosphere at colleges and universities. Therefore, this article presents narrative reflections from three Black social work faculty to examine the role that perceived racial bias plays in student evaluations of teaching.

Literature Review

In their study on SEs, Littleford et al. (2010) found that students' first impressions of their professors, even when they are based solely on their instructors' race, do influence their judgments of their professors' perceived bias and, consequently, their perceptions of professors' subjectivity and expertise; thus, a professor's race/ethnicity can directly influence student evaluations given the type of course taught. For example, students assume that African American professors have more content expertise to teach about "racial" issues or "race-focused" courses; however, students expect African American professors to be more biased (subjective/judgmental) than European professors when discussing "racial" issues and/or "race-focused" content. Littleford et al. (2010) found that students who felt more comfortable with cultural diversity rated their African American instructors positively. These students also anticipated learning a great deal about racial issues, particularly if they were female students regardless of race or ethnicity, who generally viewed African American professors more positively than did male students.

However, African American instructors who teach race-focused courses are likely to present topics (e.g. racism, White privilege, and prejudice) that challenge students' self-concept and worldviews and induce discomfort, anger, and guilt. Thus, students may express their resistance to courses that focus on race-related content in multiple ways, including displaying anger and resentment, remaining silent or exhibiting mistrust and hostility toward their instructors. However, the most common way to express resistance is to assign low ratings to instructors who teach race-focused courses (Littleford et al., 2010). Littleford et al.'s (2010) findings highlight the importance of measuring multiple domains rather than one global indicator to evaluate instructors who teach courses that focus on race-related content, otherwise, these instructors "can expect to

receive negative ratings in some of these areas" (p. 242).

Relatedly, the intersection between race and gender can significantly impact the ratings on SEs. Bavishi et al., (2010) found that students who hold stereotypical views, as explained by "occupational role/status characteristics theory," of faculty of color may avoid classes that those individuals teach and evaluate such individuals more negatively compared to Asian and Caucasian professors on SEs (p. 247-8). Utilizing "social role theory" as a framework, Bavishi et al. (2010) found that women of color often face a "double stigma" or "double jeopardy" because of students' perceptions of their level of competence, interpersonal skills, and legitimacy (p. 252). In other words, African American women instructors are denigrated for being both "women and minorities" (p. 252).

The results of these previous studies highlight the role that racial bias plays in impacting student evaluations. Moreover, these studies also point to the need for more studies focusing on the qualitative experiences of faculty of color related to SEs. Therefore, the purpose of this brief reflection is to begin to chronicle qualitative experiences through narratives from Black faculty members who have received students' evaluations with feedback containing negative and disparaging comments that were perceived by the faculty to be driven by racial/cultural bias. The reflection concludes with a discussion of racially/culturally biased SE feedback and its implications for faculty development, retention, and teaching.

Narrative Reflections

The narrative reflections presented below were drafted by three social work faculty teaching at two different universities in the Midwest and Southeastern United States. Combined, they have been teaching at the college level for 42 years. Their experiences include teaching core curriculum courses such as social work practice, social welfare policy, human diversity, human behavior and the

social environment, and research methods at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The first two narratives describe and discuss specific incidents, while the last narrative takes a broader look and identifies themes that have emerged in the professor's evaluations over time.

Narrative 1: Female Professor Teaching in a School of Social Work

Laura (pseudo name) was a 22 year old White female with an undergraduate degree in psychology who was admitted full-time to a prominent Pennsylvania university graduate program in fall 2009. The first semester, she took four courses, generalist practice, human diversity, social welfare policy, and research methods. In two of these courses, I served as the instructor. Laura received grades of F and C respectively in these courses. According to Laura, she received a B- and B in the other classes. The following spring semester, the student scheduled a meeting with me to discuss her lack of progress in my courses and the accompanying grades. Prior to our scheduled meeting, I requested that the student bring a copy of the syllabus and her graded assignments to begin the discussion. In the course of our discussion, the student acknowledged her mistakes in the submission of her papers and graded tests.

Despite her substandard performance, she pressed me to submit a passing change of grade of B in both classes, indicating that I had the power to change the grade on my own without additional work from her. Laura further stated that she had failed another class that same semester and the professor, a White female, gave her a passing grade of B. A discussion ensued between us in my office regarding my unwillingness to change her grades. My opposition to a grade change was based on the fact that no mathematical error occurred in calculating her grades, nor did her papers reflect the concepts and responses necessary to receive a passing grade. Consequently, Laura changed the direction of the conversation to personal difficulties of financing her education. By repeating a course, she would no longer receive

assistance from her parents and would have to assume sole responsibility for financing her education.

At the beginning of the subsequent spring semester, I received notification from the Master of Social Work Director that Laura was officially grieving her grades through the department and graduate school. She wrote a letter insinuating that I was racist, unprofessional, and judgmental in my grading of her assignments. In my 17 years of teaching in academia, largely in predominately White institutions, this was the first incident where I actually felt a sense of "double jeopardy" which could negatively affect my professional career. At my university, a criterion for promotion requires the Deans' favorable ratings of excellence in teaching (SEs), research and service. Being labeled a racist surely would negatively affect my prospects for promotion, not to mention my credibility with the newly appointed Deans of the college and graduate program. Therefore, I was concerned that they would question my competence as a professor for lacking sensitivity to students' needs. I became more concerned once I learned that Laura's letter was not shared with me until two months after she filed the grievance. Since the student filed an official grade appeal with the graduate department, an official review was initiated between her student advisor, program director, herself, and me. During the meeting, a copy of her grades, submitted assignments, tests, course syllabi, and her appeal letter were shared with all parties. The program director started the formal meeting requesting clarification of her written statement that I was racist towards her in the classroom.

The student remarked, "She always seemed to be talking about me in class" and her second remark, regarding my being racist was, "I asked to meet with her after class, and she didn't want to meet with me." After asking and receiving clarification on my remarks, I explained to the group how the student may have misconstrued some portions of the class lectures and why I was unable to meet with

her one day after class. On the day in question, I had several students hanging back in class wanting to meet with me to get clarification on a group assignment. Meeting with this group was much more efficient than attempting to meet with them all individually, so it was an easy accommodation. In an attempt to protect Laura's confidentiality, I chose not to meet with her in the presence of other students. Therefore, I requested that we meet in my office. Unfortunately, Laura never took my offer to meet with me at my office and as a result, she continued to have a poor performance in the classroom and with assignments. After providing this explanation, Laura's academic advisor changed the subject and we moved to discuss her final policy paper. Her academic advisor asked her to explain various sections of her paper and the associated policies. Laura was unable to respond adequately to this question and was, in fact, speechless.

Near the conclusion of the meeting, the program director suggested that another faculty member review a copy of Laura's work and recommend a grade on the papers. All parties agreed to this resolution. At the completion of the review, the independent faculty reviewer suggested a grade of "F" in the policy course and a grade of "C" in the social work practice course, the exact grades that I initially assigned.

Narrative 2: Male Professor Teaching in a School of Social Work

The incident in question occurred during the fall 2008 semester in an undergraduate social work course. At the time, I was in my late 20s and in the first year of a new, full time tenure track faculty appointment. My practice experience was primarily in the area of child protective services. Therefore, students would often inquire into my methods for engaging clients, especially involuntary clients. While discussing the process of establishing a rapport with clients, I mentioned "meeting the clients where they were." Specifically, I discussed my strategies for connecting with the children on my caseload who had been removed from their homes, which included talking with them about their interests, and highlighting those that the

clients and I shared. Largely due to the fact that the agency was located in an urban area and its client population was disproportionately African American, many of the kids I served listened to hip hop/rap music. Being a self-proclaimed hip hop aficionado, this common interest often opened the door for ice breaking conversations, facilitated the engagement process, and ultimately helped me collect much needed data for assessment purposes.

While most of my students were able to see the value in probing into clients' personal interests to aid in developing trusting, professional relationships with them, one student was staunchly opposed. This particular student was a Caucasian female who appeared to be in her late 30s to early 40s. In expressing her opposition, the student defiantly stated that she was not from the "ghetto" and had no interest in or plans to practice with "ghetto clients," so she didn't see the relevance of the anecdote that I shared. The student further exclaimed that she had paid "good money" for her tuition and did not expect, nor appreciate having valuable class time taken up with discussion of "childish ghetto music."

Despite being a little taken aback by the ferocity with which this student seemed to express her opinion, I saw this as a teachable moment from which the entire class could benefit. Therefore, I attempted to help this student in particular, and the class in general, understand that first and foremost, per the NASW Code of Ethics, we [social workers] are ethically obligated to take a non-judgmental stance with regard to the clients we serve. Beyond that, I also explained that the point of the anecdote was not about any specific genre of music. Rather, the point was about facilitating the engagement process through the use of asking probing questions and emphasizing commonalities instead of differences. Even after my attempt to clarify the point of the example, the student remained fixated on my reference to hip hop music. Nevertheless, in an attempt to move the class forward, I

proposed that we agree to disagree and then I transitioned into the next topic.

I assumed that although the student and I did not come to a consensus on the merits of talking with clients about their interests, the disagreement was over and would not have any lasting impact. It was not until I received my teaching evaluation that I realized that my assumption was incorrect. While I was rated quite favorably overall (4.72 on a 5 point scale), there was one negative rating on several of the items for the quantitative measures of teaching effectiveness. In addition to the one negative rating in several different quantitative categories, there was also a negative and seemingly personal comment in the open response, qualitative section. To be specific, the comment read as follows, "I believe this instructor is very young. He does not really know himself very well and therefore, it is hard to please him with classwork. I hope to take this class later from a mature teacher."

Given the anonymous nature of the evaluations, I could not definitively connect the negative comment to the student who was vehemently opposed to my discussion of using hip hop music to engage my clients. However, my suspicion was that negative comments came from the student in question based on the similarities between the proceedings of the initial in-class confrontation related to "childish ghetto music" and the subsequent written SE questioning my self-awareness and emotional maturity. I readily acknowledge that I could have reached this conclusion erroneously. Nevertheless, upon reading the evaluation as a whole, I felt good about the fact that the overwhelming majority (and by overwhelming majority, I mean all of student ratings except one) appreciated my efforts to make their educational experience as rigorous and authentic as possible. However, I could not help but feel a little disheartened by my suspicion that one of the students would allow personal bias to cloud what was supposed to be an objective judgment of me as a professional. Even more troubling was that the student was in training to become a social worker, and in all likelihood, would soon be charged with

engaging and serving all types of client populations, even those from the "ghetto".

Narrative 3: Female Professor Teaching in a School of Social Work

I am a tenured professor of social work and I have taught both undergraduate and graduate social work students at predominantly White institutions. During this time, I have found that perhaps no other subjects can be more difficult to teach and engender more emotional student responses than those related to race. In my experience, students' responses to race- related material covered in class have often been reflected in my course evaluations.

These responses are set against a backdrop in which my current place of employment has embraced a plan created by the state's Council on Postsecondary Education to ensure that African Americans have the same opportunity as others to attend and succeed within the state's public system of higher education. The plan was established in 1997 and was based on the state's violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by failing to dismantle the racially segregated system of public higher education. Moreover, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has required that material related to diversity be included throughout the curriculum of each accredited social work program. A lack of understanding regarding these differences can have profound and adverse consequences for clients whom students are being educated and trained to serve. For these reasons, my course readings and assignments are planned to expose the students to a wide array of diverse groups, learning experiences and environments. Over the years, I have observed that many students have not had exposure to populations unlike themselves and unfortunately, as evident by comments on my student evaluations, not all students within my profession truly value human diversity. My sense that some of my students do not share my or my profession's appreciation for human diversity is grounded in comments such as "She is always talking about African Americans," "You can see her true colors,"

and "I have become more racist after dealing with her than I ever even thought possible" that I have received after exposing students to Afrocentric material.

As an African American female professor, I bring to the classroom a unique perspective that is informed by my heritage, cultural experiences and embrace of an African centered or Afrocentric worldview (Asante, 1998). I teach in a Eurocentric environment, which means that the majority of the administrators, faculty, staff and students are White and by-and-large have lifelong experiences which put White people at the center of significance. Additionally, although most of the curriculum is Eurocentric, my experiences, however, as an African American professor influence all of my academic activities which include teaching, research and service (Alexander & Moore, 2008). Molefi Asante developed a theory of social change which he termed Afrocentricity (Asante, 1980). Asante indicates that people of African heritage have operated under a system of White oppression and domination for centuries which has caused them to embrace western values and culture while simultaneously devaluing African culture and history.

He further asserts that people of African descent, regardless of their geographical location and social position have historically been denied a true and accurate account of their history and contribution to society because of a European model of social science, which, according to Akbar (1984) has been traditionally used as the model of normalcy. In response, I purposely expose students to the works (written, film and through other mediums) of African and African Americans. Class field trips are often taken to agencies and residential areas that have a large concentration of African American people. My specific commitment to and love of not only my heritage but the diversity of humankind, propels me to include content relative to human diversity in my course content. This content includes the African American experience, in an effort to help those who may be unfamiliar with such material be prepared to provide professional social work services in a culturally competent

way and in essence, in a manner that is not harmful to clients (Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2012).

Discussion

The purpose of this reflection was to present three narratives from Black faculty teaching in schools of social work in which they detail the circumstances surrounding both specific incidents and general patterns in their student evaluations of teaching that they felt were negatively influenced by their race. The reflections revealed that these faculty members' race facilitated the receipt of evaluations featuring personal attacks, challenges to their authority and integrity, as well as privileged and entitled comments. The extent to which these and possibly large numbers of other faculty members of color's teaching evaluations are influenced by race has implications for both the faculty members themselves and the colleges and universities that employ them.

On an individual level, receiving student teaching evaluations that are negatively influenced by one's race can have significantly detrimental effects on a faculty member's development. Given that faculty in general receive pressure to secure high ratings on student teaching evaluations, the fact that one's race can negatively influence those ratings at best is an unfair inconvenience, and at worst, potentially disturbing, and anxiety provoking. It is likely that for many, the role that the instructor's race plays in student evaluations forces many African American faculty members to question and second guess themselves and their abilities. This is reminiscent of Dubois' (1897) notion of the double consciousness in which African Americans form their self-concept as a reflection of mainstream stereotypes and prejudice. In this case, the faculty person's effectiveness as a teacher would be severely truncated by the threats and punishments (e.g. unfavorable teaching evaluations, questions regarding competence and integrity, and possible dismissal) associated with being assertive and potentially provocative.

On an institutional level, biased student evaluations of teaching have implications for colleges, universities, and the academic pipeline (Nelson & Perry, 2010). Specifically, receiving unfavorable teaching evaluations impacted by the race of the instructor is likely to limit their tenure and promotion opportunities. Having fewer tenured or tenure track African American faculty on campus means that there may be fewer mentors for African American students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Having fewer African American faculty on campus could also mean that fewer students are exposed to diverse and inclusive content to balance the disproportionate amount of Eurocentric content that many are currently receiving.

Also, it should be noted that when an instructor's race negatively influences the student teaching evaluations of African American faculty, it may also positively influence the student teaching evaluations of other faculty. As explained by Ho, Thomsen, & Sidanius (2009), this occurs as assumptions about the inferiority or incompetence of faculty of color persist while the competence of White faculty is taken for granted. This combination means that the gap between the ratings of Black and White faculty is likely to widen, which serves to reinforce the stereotypes that African American faculty are inferior or to their colleagues.

Conclusion

Racism is a serious charge and to use it frivolously is both irresponsible and divisive. Beyond being irresponsible and divisive, erroneous or frivolous claims of racism or racial/cultural bias cast doubt and skepticism on authentic claims. To that point, we do not pretend to be in a position to label the students in the narratives as racists. However, we do maintain that the race of the faculty in question played significant roles in the incidents and subsequent evaluations described above. If nothing else, we argue that persistent stereotypes about African Americans' work ethic, competence, psychological maturity and integrity conspired to lead the students to

believe that they could/should challenge, question, and confront their instructor on a personal level and that the student evaluation was an appropriate venue to do so. It was for these reasons that we were compelled to draft this reflection so that we as academics and professionals can move beyond the increasingly popular rhetoric of living in a post-racial society and focus more on continuing the genuine discourse about sometimes uncomfortable topics so that real healing and progress can take place.

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