Graduate Students of Color: A Storied Path to the Professoriate

Kathy D. Lohr
North Carolina State University

Audrey J. Jaeger
North Carolina State University

Graduate Students of Color: A Storied Path to the Professoriate

Kathy D. Lohr & Audrey J. Jaeger
North Carolina State University

Keywords: Narrative, Graduate Students of Color, Professoriate

Abstract: This article shares the knowledge we gained from the stories of graduate students of color as they discussed their career choices. It provides an emerging understanding of how a graduate student's background and cultural values influence his or her decision to pursue a faculty career.

Introduction

The lack of an ethnically diverse faculty limits opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds to have faculty role models and mentors who may share similar cultural experiences (Singh & Cooper, 2006). According to the most recent data by National Center for Education Statistics (2009), only 7% of full time faculty are African American, 4% are Hispanic, 6% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% are American Indian/Alaska Native. Doctoral degree attainment does not necessarily explain this paucity of faculty of color. The Survey of Earned Doctorates indicates a 45% increase of earned doctorates by minority students between 1996 and 2006 (Denecke, Frasier, & Redd, 2009). Some scholars (Tuitt, Martinez, & Salazar, 2009) suggest that the pipeline in and of itself is not the problem. Instead, research points to a variety of elements that present obstacles for students of color, including campus climate, curricular issues, and lack of support. Doctoral students, as suggested by Antony and Taylor (2001) feel a need to prove their academic ability and to counteract the racially stereotyped research through their own work. The authors suggest education that counteracts stereotype threat including challenging expectations, affirmation of belonging to the intellectual community, and an emphasis on multiple perspectives.

Recent research by Haley, Jaeger, and Levin (2010) suggests that students' social cultural identity is a critical factor in why students of color avoid careers in the academy. We build on that work by focusing on the unique voices of graduate students of color. Experiences are reclaimed through a process of reflection in the form of storytelling. The act of remembering past experiences in which difficulties were faced and successfully negotiated assists the storyteller in exploring, deconstructing, and reintegrating memories into a more meaningful and cohesive personal identity narrative (Cozolina, 2008; Pellico & Chinn, 2007). This act of storytelling provides a lens for viewing an experience in a new, renewing, instructive, or even transformational way (Rossiter, 1999; Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007). "Narrative delves beneath the outward show of behavior to explore thoughts, feelings and intentions" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 16). The stories of those who have been treated unfairly are critical to explaining inequality (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). It is this process of selecting, reflecting, ordering and making sense of our stories that make for a meaning-making experience (Seidman, 2006).

NOTE: Most of the current literature uses the term minority student or underrepresented minorities in their work to represent populations that have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education. Another term, students of color, that is used interchangeably with minority

students is a more appropriate term for our research site because the campus is very diverse and includes significant populations of African American, Asian American, and Latino students.

Methodology

The research site was a public, comprehensive, high research activity university with a highly diverse undergraduate population (80% students of color) and graduate population (23.8% students of color, 34.8% international students). Approximately 242 graduate students identified as Latino, African American, or Native American, 227 students identified as Asian, and 772 as Caucasian. The primary method of data collection for this project was semi-structured interviews because these allow for the exploration of the experience based on perspectives (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Nine students of color from the interviewed population of 26 were chosen to be part of this study as they were articulate about their cultural identities and created their stories within the interview. Criteria used to select such participants included: mention of telling their story as "transformational" "meaningful" and noting graduate study as an important event in and of itself. Pseudonyms were used for all of the participants to assure anonymity. Since we name multiple characteristics, pseudonyms were even more critical (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	College	Age	First Generation	Career
Calistro	Hispanic	male	Engineering	32	yes	faculty
Danielle	Black/African American	female	Sciences	24	yes	research
Darius	Multiracial	male	Engineering	24	yes	industry
Genista	Hispanic	female	Humanities	25	no	faculty
Hilary	Hispanic	female	Sciences (post-doc)	35	no	faculty
Lana	Native American	female	Social Sciences	42	yes	faculty
Paul	Hispanic/Persian	male	Sciences	25	no	administration
Shakina	Canadian/Black	female	Sciences	25	no	faculty
Verena	Mexican	female	Education	26	yes	faculty

Although narrative analysis was not incorporated into the design of the larger study from which the data were drawn, the open-ended interview questions encouraged stories to emerge. Narrative analysis involves the collection of personal stories that

discuss and articulate how individuals make meaning of important moments (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Josselson & Lieblich, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; and Riessman, 2008). Interview data was analyzed using a narrative technique that views participants' life stories as sequential, contextual, and plot-driven. Particular attention was paid to themes of agency (or independence) motives versus communion (or relationship-oriented) motives (Bakan, 1966). The forces of separation and union have been storied for centuries (McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, and Day; 1996).

The coding of narratives can range from data reduction according to linguistic structure to a more holistic reading involving the entire text. Our analytic approach was a socio-cultural inquiry providing a broader interpretive framework of happenings in context (Grbich, 2007). It integrated Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber's (1998) holistic content process. The choice of this method was to probe the significance of a story (or stories) as a whole. This method concurs with McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, and Day's (1996) conclusion that these self-defining stories give unity and purpose to the teller's lives.

All stories adhere to and are shaped by cultural convention. Researchers of culture strive to represent those they study, however, the researcher's role in shaping the encounter must be acknowledged. The research team for this study consisted of tenured and tenure-track faculty, and graduate student researchers. The research team included individuals from underrepresented backgrounds as well as those with an affiliation and those without affiliation to the site. This permitted the opportunity for both breadth and depth in the investigation. Several researchers in this study were from within the professoriate. This was both a limitation and strength. As researchers, we were consulted and considered knowledgeable about the professoriate yet there was still separation due to the authority convention of higher education.

Findings

The graduate students in this study represented both males and females from a diversity of ethnicities and included international as well as domestic students. A composite narrative reflecting these graduate students' lives included a childhood rich in role modeling and family expectations; a struggle to choose a field of study; and a defining of purpose that honored both independence and interdependence.

Many of the stories reflected parents as role model. For Shakina,"my father was a research scientist and he sort of instilled that love of looking at things and being in nature and wondering how certain things can change" while Darius remembered his dad's interest in computers being matched by his own. "I've always been interested in computers. I was one of those kids who takes things apart and puts them back together." Paul saw his father's profession as supporting a lifestyle he too wanted someday. "When I was younger, I thought I wanted to become like my dad, a civil engineer. I liked that he was always home at 5. He was my soccer coach since I was like five." Genista had danced all her life and wanted to keep it an active part of her life but growing up in a family of educators - her mother, her grandmother and her great grandfather – she knew she wanted to teach. It was an aunt who had a Ph.D. in dance history who provided the model Genista needed to pursue teaching and dance in higher education.

In addition to role modeling, parental expectations were expressed when it came to education. "I was kind of just told that I was going to college," said Darius. Paul points to his split decent in understanding educational expectations. His father is Persian and his mother Hispanic. "For Persians, education is very important. My mom, on the Hispanic side, is very into

'you have to have an education' but they care more about being successful than the education. One of my uncles doesn't have a bachelor's but he is doing very well and he has his own business so he is doing fine." Hilary pointed out differences within the Latino community. "There are very different immigrant backgrounds amongst Latinos and I met students whose family was not supportive for education and one student in particular who was president of the Society [for Hispanic Professional Engineers] for awhile, really good student, her family didn't want her to go to school, they wanted her to go work and make money."

Calistro and Lana were the first in their families to attend college. Both are now pursuing doctorates and aiming for faculty positions. But it wasn't easy. "Since I was young, my parents always emphasized education," stated Calistro. By his senior year in high school, Calistro did not have a clue on what he was going to do. He was bouncing back and forth between his divorced parents in California and Michigan when some clarity came to him. "I was getting into trouble and I saw a lot of my friends not necessarily dropping out of school but going to remedial schools and eventually going to jail." His dad was supportive but as Calistro explains, "you have to understand, we don't really know anyone who went to college, nobody in the family." Calistro was listening to stories, "success stories about how people had taken a path to college and how things turned out really well…at the same time, I heard how it is harder than anything you have ever done before and it was mixed feelings." A friend provided the turning point. "He was already accepted into a school and he was going to go there and asked me what I was going to do...He was like, you should come, I will be there and we can hang out and be roommates so it sounded perfect." Lana, like Calistro, did not have anyone to turn to with questions regarding finances, applications, or as she phrased it, "the process; the bureaucracy of it all." That did not change the expectation. Lana's mom worked a variety of low-skill jobs. "It was my mom that was 'you need an education if you want to do anything else, if you want people to respect you'."

Up to this point, each participant mirrored typical development, demonstrating that communion in youth is dominated by a connectedness to family and friends as well as a loyalty to an authoritarian expectation (Leonard, 1997). However, the identification of a field of study that recognizes the individual's versus the family's wants and needs reflects a move toward agency, a need to separate. "If you don't know what you want to do but you are decently smart, the two defaults are medical school and law school," said Paul, who had grown up thinking he would follow his dad into engineering. Instead, he chose neuroscience knowing he could go either into medical school or on to a Ph.D. Although Paul was flipping between the two paths, his parents, both college graduates, were only aware of the medical school option. "Finally, I told my mom and dad I was thinking about going to do my Ph.D. and these are the reasons why. Then my dad said the funniest thing. He said, 'you know what, I am fine with that, you will always have your plan B' and my sister is like, 'only in our family is plan B a Ph.D.'"

"My dad wanted to be a microbiologist so that's what he wanted me to be, but that is very different…far away," said Genista, who is pursuing a doctorate in dance. For Shakina, her father wanted her to follow a different path than his scientific research. "In my extended family, it is the joke that our parents want us to be one of three things, you can be a doctor, you can be a lawyer, or you can be an engineer. My parents actually would like me to go to medical school and they are still hoping"

While many parents of the students in this study wanted their children to have more earning potential than themselves and in some cases, a more culturally respected profession, many students are motivated by a larger community. Lana is studying anthropology. "It can be a conflict. I have lots of native [American] friends who are like why would you choose

anthropology because anthropology has done some pretty uncalled for things in native communities." Lana sees it differently. Through anthropology, she can do community-based participatory research. "All my aunts had diabetes and I had cousins who died from it, so it's a big deal. I want to focus on health ideas and things like that. You should help the community."

Verena, an International student from Mexico is in the curriculum and instruction department. "I really want to do something for my country. I'm very conscious that in Mexico there's a great need of people who have a better understanding about education. There are very good opportunities in my country to do something to improve the education system." Her commitment to return to her home country does not leave her American connections behind upon completion of her doctorate. "One of my intentions is to foster networks between Mexican and American scholars."

Darius, wants to help "color" the professoriate. He and several other students provide counter-stories to the White environment they discovered in the halls of academia. "In engineering I think we have one Black faculty. I think the number is low because if you don't have role models then you don't go that path. People are comfortable when they are around people like them. Having heard the ridiculously low number Black students, male and female, which is like one percent, I was like, you know I should try and change that."

Shakina's awareness of treatment related to race began with her parents and almost shifted her direction away from the professoriate. "My parents have always been like you need to be better than everyone else in order to be equal. Going through my masters and struggling in terms of not seeing anyone that looked like me in a position of power…are they going to think that I got here because I worked for it because they needed to hire someone of color, to fit into their quota." Her epiphany came during a lecture by a Black male professor from Harvard. "I noticed that the people in the crowd weren't looking at him as that smart Black professor, it was just that smart professor." Shakina spoke with this professor afterwards. "He was talking to me about his experiences and it was exactly like mine…He has the same kind of social problems…so now in terms of a future in science, I do see myself becoming a professor."

Calistro is following in Darius and Shakina's footsteps. "When I came here I saw one Hispanic professor, teaching Spanish but I never saw one in science and that to me, well I think at times it discouraged me but one I put forward the effort for graduate school…part of my decision…I think to want to be a faculty member to make that change."

Stories emerging from the graduate students of color participating in this research illuminate the pressures and conflicts felt by these scholars in relation to their families, communities of practice, cultures of origin, and internal drives. Implications for research include the study of programs promoting faculty diversity, career counseling throughout the educational process, and mentoring practices.

References

Antony, J. S., & Taylor, E. (2001). Graduate student socialization and its implications for the recruitment of African-American education faculty. In W. G. Tierney (Ed.), Faculty work in schools of education: Rethinking roles and rewards for the twenty first century (pp. 189-210). Albany, NY: Student University of New York Press.

Bakan, D. (1966). *The duality of human existence*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Cozolina, L.J. (2008). The healthy aging brain: Sustaining attachment, attaining wisdom. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
Delgado, R. (Ed.) (1995) Critical race theory: the cutting edge (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press).
Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2001) Critical race theory: an introduction (New York, New York University Press).
Denecke, D. D., Frasier, H. S., & Redd, K. E. (2009). The Council of Graduate Schools' PhD completion project. In R. G. Ehrenberg & C. V. Kuh (Eds.), *Doctoral education and the faculty of the future* (pp. 35-52). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Grbich, C. (2007). *Qualitative data analysis: An introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Haley, K. J., & Jaeger, A. J., & Levin, J. (in press – 2012). Not all going in the same direction: The effects of social identity on graduate student career choices. *Journal of College Student Development.*
Josselson, R. & Lieblich, A. (1999). *Making meaning of narratives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Leonard, R. (1997). Theorizing the relationship between agency and communion. Theory Psychology, 7, 823-835.
Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Marshall, C. & Rossman, G.B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research, 4th Ed*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
McAdams, D.P., Hoffman, B.J., Mansfield, E.D. & Day, R. (1996). Themes of agency and communion in significant autobiographical scenes. *Journal of Personality, 64*(2), 339 – 377.
Mishler, E.G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *Digest of Education Statistics,* 2008, Chapter 3. U.S. Department of Education.
Pellico, L. H. & Chinn, P. L. (2007). Narrative criticism,: A systematic approach to the analysis story, *Journal of Holistic Nursing 25*, 58-65.
Pfahl, N. & Wiessner, C. (2007). Creating new directions with story: Narrating life experience as story in community adult education contexts. *Adult Learning, 18*, 9-13.
Polkinghorne, D. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
Riessman, C.K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Rossiter, M. (1999). Understanding adult development as narrative. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 84*, 77-84
Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
Singh, D. K., & Cooper, T. L. (2006). *Ivory tower of the brave new world*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education.

Tuitt, F., Hanna, M., Martinez, L. M., & Salazar, M. d. C. (2009). Teaching in the line of fire: Faculty of color in the academy. *Thought & Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal, 16*, 65-74.

Webster, L. & Mertova, P. (2007). Using narrative inquiry as a research method. New York: Routledge.