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# **In Our Counterstories, Race and Ethnicity Trump Gender**

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**Abstract:** Data from dialogue journals, audio-taped conversations, and written life narratives of an assistant professor and graduate student of color reveal that racism has permeated their lives. This study is grounded in CRT and also depicts how bias based on race and ethnicity has had distinct affects on them versus bias based on gender.

## **Purpose**

This research study began by accident. Patsy was a newly hired assistant professor of Puerto Rican descent teaching an online graduate course on Workforce Development when she received an e-mail from one of her students, Karen, an African American woman studying for her degree in the Adult Education Masters Program that included the following statement: "It's the first time in college I've had a professor of color." This initial e-mail sparked continuous verbal and written dialogues between them. At some point they realized that their written and verbal conversations were data and a formal research study ensued with the purpose of exploring the experiences of a professor and a student of color as they navigate the corridors of academe and beyond. Although there are several findings in this study, the one that is elaborated upon in this paper is that race and ethnicity trump gender.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework utilized was Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Solorozano & Yasso, 1998; Valdes, McCristal Culp & Harris, 2002). CRT fit appropriately with the narrative analysis style of this research study. According to Ladson-Billings (2004) four tenets encompass CRT. One of them proposes that in order to deal with racial hegemony storytelling is used to challenge the dominant construction of race via the voice of experience of people of color and is a legitimate means of scholarship to critique the accepted social order. Delgado (2000) maintains that storytelling is part of the cultural capital of many people of color and in the CRT literature is referred to as counterstorytelling. Those who are marginalized can counter the accepted knowledge of the dominant culture by "creating a new narrative that is visible to all and, perhaps, alters perceptions in their community and in the larger culture" (Williams, 2004, p. 168).

## **Methodology**

Data consisted of e-mail messages which evolved into dialogue journals, audio taped conversations and written biographical essays. The form of qualitative research utilized during this study was biographical narrative analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Merriam, 2002). This type of approach allowed for their stories to be "analyzed in terms of the importance and influence of gender and race, family of origin, life events and turning point experiences" (Merriam, 2002, p. 287). Furthermore, this methodology permitted them to utilize their "life experiences to generalize to a larger group or culture" (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 737).

They began data analysis before they had established that CRT was the theoretical framework utilized and while they were still collecting data, which is a common approach in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). They first developed categories that delineated the topics

they had discussed which led to them to understand to the extent that their data were revealing that race and ethnicity were overriding factors in their dialogues. Using race and ethnicity as an overarching category, they then developed broad categories (Merriam, 1998), and as they further analyzed the data those categories were narrowed and revealed the different venues where they encountered racism.

### **Searching for a Theoretical Framework**

Settling on our theoretical framework was an adventure. They did not begin this endeavor as part of a formal research study, but once it was evident that we they heading in that direction, they needed to envelop their data in theory to keep them from merely being the ruminations of two women of color. Initially they assumed that they would frame the findings by drawing on Black feminist theory (Collins, 1998, 2000; hooks, 1989, Wing, 2003) and on the Latina feminist literature (Anazdua, 2007; Arredondo, Hurtado, Klahn, Najera-Ramirez & Zavella 2003) because they assert that class, race and gender intersect. Moreover, those frameworks allow researchers to situate themselves within their scholarship (Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005). Yet, as they examined the data, it was clear that they were sublimating their experiences as females and highlighting those that were linked to racial and ethnic discrimination.

They were quite surprised by this finding because they have no qualms with the proposition that race, class and gender intersect. Once it was clear that in the counterstories that were generated revealed that their most painful experiences with bigotry illustrated that race and ethnicity were at the forefront rather than gender, Karen and Patsy decided to explore this quandary more fully. Hence, they decided to deliberately respond to the following question: When have you experienced discrimination as a female?

They reflected and wrote narratives and participated in tape-recorded dialogues responding directly to that question. They compared those narratives and dialogues side-by-side with the previous ones that focused on race and ethnicity. Below they differentiate between the two sets of counterstories.

### **Counterstories: Race and Ethnicity**

That CRT was the appropriate theoretical framework was clearly confirmed when they began to write their autobiographies. They wrote their first recollections of experiencing racism. Karen's story was particularly painful and demonstrated the callousness of bigotry.

The first time that I have memories of discrimination was when I was about 8 or 9 years old. It is odd, because I remember it so vividly. I was in Brownies and the troop that I was in was made up of all little Black girls from my little dirt road community. I am not sure how it transpired, but our troop had a joint meeting with an all White troop at their church to make crafts for some kind of Christmas bazaar they were having. We were all so excited and had been admonished to be on our very best behavior, which naturally we were. When we arrived we learned that we were going to paint ceramic Santas and Mrs. Clauses. We painted with all the energy and passion of Picasso. Our leaders helped us paint and made sure our samples were perfect. I remember thinking that they were simply beautiful and wonderfully showcased our likeness. My troop painted our figures' hair black, their skin brown, and their eyes brown. If we made a mistake our leader would repaint them, touch them up. We were so thrilled with our work! We were in one part of the room, and the White girls were on the other side, so we never really saw what they were doing and they never really saw what we were doing. When we completed all of ours, we laid them out to dry on a table with all the White girls' creations. Well, ours were

black, and theirs were all white. The White leader looked at ours and started laughing and said to the other White troop leaders, “These will never do; nobody would buy anything that looks like a darkie.” She and the other leaders laughed and laughed, then picked all of our figurines, and threw them in the trash. Our leader said nothing to them, but told us to get our coats, and get ready to go home. We cried all the way home and asked what we had done wrong? Her only response was, “It is nothing for you to worry about it. That is just how some people are.”

Patsy’s recollection about her initial encounter with prejudice was not as compelling as Karen’s, but she has come to realize that it was the first time that she became aware that institutionalized racism existed and that she had been othered.

I was about 7 years old and my brother was very sick—had a high fever and was vomiting. We walked the few blocks to Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital. Although the hospital was located in the midst of Spanish Harlem, there were never any Spanish speaking personnel at the intake desks. My brother and I had become accustomed to translating for my mother who only spoke and read Spanish at that time. My brother, who was older than me by 11 months, generally translated the written forms, but he was ill, so on this day that task was left for me. We quickly filled out the first few lines of the form where I showed my mother where she should write her and my brother’s names, our address, age of patient and other such information until I encountered a checklist that I did not understand. Next to each little checklist box were the following four categories: Black, White, Puerto Rican and other. I asked my mother, in Spanish, “Mommy, what should I put here? She told me that although we were white, we should check the box next to Puerto Rican. I asked why and she told me, “Because we are Puerto Rican.” I continued to ask her questions, but she told me that we needed to fill out the form and once that was done, she tended to my big brother, disregarding my confusion. Until that day, I had believed I was a little White girl.

The written narratives related experiences with racism chronologically and could fill a book. Karen recalled that in high school she was known as the “Black cheerleader” and remembers a teacher saying that there “would be an uproar” if there wasn’t at least one African American girl on the squad. Karen concluded, “I never knew if I made the squad on my ability or if I was just a plain token.”

Patsy revealed that when her family moved from the projects in East Harlem to another in the Bronx where the inhabitants were primarily Caucasian, they were met by a White woman at the elevator who wanted to spray their furniture with the roach spray she was holding. More recently, after conducting a training workshop for adult literacy providers in Colorado, she was sent a letter from one of the participants who was not satisfied with the training and wrote that although her boss should be “commended for allowing a minority to conduct national training, he should make sure that the person is capable of performing the task.”

### **Counterstories: Gender**

When they decided to delve into the data and deliberately investigate if gender was at all central in the counterstories, Patsy questioned Karen about the following passage which they had coded as an example of race discrimination. She had described a situation that occurred when she worked in the corporate world in a male-dominated technical support department.

I wrote an article for the department bulletin. When I showed it to my boss, he liked it very much although I felt that he seemed surprised that I had written it. When it appeared

in the newsletter, it had his name as the sole byline. I was furious. When I asked why, he responded that the information would be better received from someone who was just like him.

Patsy asked Karen if this was an example of gender bias. She responded,

I just assumed when he said, “someone just like me,” he meant someone who was White. It never occurred to me that it was because he was a man. My lens has always been Afrocentric. I always feel like I am being judged due to my race!

They both concluded that both variables played a role. Yet, what was particularly interesting in documenting their experience as females was that Patsy could related numerous occasions when she felt discriminated as a female—especially when she was a child.

In Puerto Rican households, when a female is born it is common for the parents to say that they now have a “chancleta.” That’s a slang word for slipper, an item that makes one feel good--I happen to love my furry slippers--but is not really a necessity. Every time a female was born in my family the word chancleta was bandied about. It always felt like, “Whoa is me. Now I have a burden on my hands.” On the other hand, when boys were born the main topic of conversation was the size of their genitals.

Patsy’s narratives were full of instances when her mother was trying to mold her into what she perceived was the role of a woman. The following is an illustration:

I could rarely go outside to play without some conditions being placed on me. For example, I often had to iron my brother’s clothing before I could go out and play. So, there I would be, gloomily ironing while my brother was enjoying himself in the playground. I eventually rebelled and would not iron and just found a way to entertain myself in the apartment.

Yet, Karen insisted that she could not think of occasions when she was discriminated as a child because she was brought up in a female-dominated household and community. She said, “I observed strong Black women in my house and neighborhood all the time. Patsy concurred that she was raised in a household where it was clear that a man was the head of the household and perhaps her gender-biased issues were more apparent. Nonetheless, she could not believe that Karen had not experienced any bias due to her gender. A key phone conversation took place when Patsy called Karen and challenged her:

Karen, you could not attend last year’s AERC to present a paper with me after we had already made plans to attend, because your husband decided to attend a training workshop and childcare defaulted back to you! Wasn’t that an example of gender bias?

Karen pondered the question and said she would return Patsy’s call. When she did, she said, “Well, when you put it that way...” They both agree that we have to continue to explore this issue.

### **Discussion**

Patsy and Karen acknowledge that their decision to focus almost exclusively on race and not gender does not correspond with modern Black and Latina critical feminist ideologies (Collins, 1998, 2000; hooks, 1989; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Wing, 2003). Yet they realize that a single-axis framework that does not take the intersectional relationship between race and gender cannot accurately address the manner in which woman of color are subordinated (Williams Crenshaw, 2003). However, this journey that they are undertaking is just that—a journey—and the location where they are presently positioned compels them to explore issues of race and ethnicity rather than gender. Karen and Patsy embrace their “otherness” in relation to the White-

dominated culture (Alfred, 2001) and for them that is what bears examining at this time. They acknowledge, however, that as they continue with this endeavor issues of gender may play more prominent roles in our counterstories. Moreover, they cannot forget the nature of the triple oppression of race, gender and class in which they exist in this society (Segura, 1990). Patsy concludes:

I've begun thinking why I have this need to explore this construct as opposed to that of being female. I guess that being Puerto Rican is what makes me oppositional to being White—not being a female. And the oppression, or the bigotry that has been overtly directed at me has had to do with my ethnicity—not my gender. Sure, I have suffered personal oppression because I was a female—but that has taken place within familial or other personal relationships. For example, during my doctoral studies, I was mentored quite well by men.

As they stand now, their counterstories, especially the written narratives where their most painful memories emerged, demonstrate the menacing remnants of racism. They have been marginalized for much of their lives, yet in terms of their present economic status in society, they are quite mainstream. Karen says, “We are two women of color who live in neighborhoods surrounded by White people, and here we are, obsessed with race.” That is the point. Their experiences are not mainstream and counter the race-neutral perspective that posits that there is no distinct privilege to being White (Merriweather Hunn, Williams, 2004). Moreover, as Johnson-Bailey (2001) established in her study of Black reentry women, gender was not advanced “as a restraint to their lives or educational endeavors (p. 109), but was a factor in how those women approached their lives. This is also the case for Karen and Patsy.

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