Negotiating Power, Developing Trust:
Transgressing Race and Status in the Academy

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Exploring the experiences of African American students engaged in doctoral studies reveals disturbing realities. In this article, we use narrative inquiry to engage in a collaborative project between two White faculty members and three African American graduate students. Transgressive pedagogy provided a conceptual framework for both our initial study and our subsequent reflections on the need to create supportive networks for graduate students of color in the academy. In the project we conversed and reflected about how our understanding of race and status had an impact on our experiences in the academy. Our study contrasted student experiences in environments in which students expressed feeling like “casualties of war” with those in which they expressed feeling like valued colleagues. We found that unspoken assumptions about race and status often created a turbulent climate for the participating African American doctoral students and White faculty members who shared values of inclusivity.

Many researchers have explored issues faced by African American graduate students or graduate students of color (Carter-Obayuwana, 1995; Cheatham & Phelps, 1995; Chism & Pruitt, 1995; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Dowdy, Givens, Murillo, Shenoy, & Villenas, 2000; Ellis, 1997; Morris, 1993; Steele, 1999; Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991). Through our review of the research literature, we uncovered three key themes:
1. A relative lack of faculty mentors and professional opportunities for African American graduate students

2. A devaluation of scholarship on Black history and culture

3. A relative exclusion of Blacks from mainstream intellectual discourse

In addition, we noticed that much of the literature focuses on the challenges facing African American graduate students as written by researchers removed from the experience or by graduate students engaged in the experience. However, little has been written from the perspective of graduate students and faculty working in collaboration—across race and status lines. The absence of such collaboration is itself a signal that we need to address the complexities of how race and status collude to create difficult learning situations for African American students and the faculty who work with them.

We realized that there is rarely any forum within the traditional structures of an academic department to explore these issues. Our casual conversations quickly evolved into a collaborative research project aimed at understanding African American graduate students and what faculty can do to support them both within and outside the classroom. Throughout our project, we reflected upon how our understanding of race and status had an impact on our experiences within the academy. The study contrasted environments in which students articulated feeling like “casualties of war” with those in which they expressed feeling like valued colleagues. We found that unspoken assumptions about race and status often created a stormy climate for African American doctoral students and White faculty members who share values of inclusivity (Anderson-Thompkins, Gasman, Gerstl-Pepin, Hathaway, & Rasheed, 2003).

This article highlights the conversations that we engaged in as we dealt with issues related to race and status in the academy. We documented our research journey using various methods of narrative inquiry. The following questions guided our reflection: How were we able to work across the boundaries of race and status in order to talk about difficult issues? In our conversations, how was power negotiated, how were topics raised, and how were we able to work through our differences?

TRANSGRESSIVE PEDAGOGY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR CONVERSATION

Transgressive pedagogy provided a conceptual framework for both our study and our subsequent reflections on transforming graduate student experiences in the academy. In Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, hooks (1994) recalls her own experience in graduate school to
explain how faculty teaching styles can harm students of color: “The vast majority of our professors often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power” (p. 5).

hooks provides a way of conceptualizing the classroom as a site of political and personal struggle over knowledge. Her work highlights how the structure of classes—including the selection of readings, the treatment of topics, and the setup of classroom interactions—can lead students to feel silenced, excluded, and as if their racial and ethnic identity is of little consequence.

hooks’s work evolves out of feminist, postcolonial, and critical theory, her own identity as an African American woman, and experiences as both a student and teacher in the academy. Particularly, she draws on the work of Paulo Freire—for example, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970/2000)—and Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism (hooks, 1994) to conceptualize “a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit.” (hooks, 1994, p. 14). This form of pedagogy is aimed at the pursuit of freedom and social justice via praxis—the intentional joining of theory and practice to strive “not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (hooks, 1994, pp. 14–15). As Freire (1970/2000) notes, the aim of a praxis-based pedagogy is to liberate students in order to transform society: “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 60).

hooks (1994) challenges those working within the academy to create supportive learning environments by developing a pedagogy that transgresses boundaries. Using hooks’s (1994) work as a starting point, we as students and faculty openly acknowledged the power differential in terms of our status in the academy, which was intertwined with race, ethnicity, and gender. In our conversations, we discussed our differences to examine the possibilities for creating classroom environments in which all students’ perspectives are valued.

A REFLECTION ON COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Our initial research project was designed as a collaborative qualitative study using autobiographical methods. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) contend that collaborative research has emerged as a form of resistance to more conventional research practices that have historically been viewed by the oppressed “as acts of colonization—that is, as means of normalizing or domesticating people to research and policy agendas” (p. 572). Unlike more traditional research practices, this approach to research can
bring together broad social analyses: . . . the self-study of practice, the way language is used, organization and power in a local situation, and [social or political] action” (p. 568). Thus, social transformation is accomplished through critical self-reflection of the participants/researchers with respect to the language, values, and intentions associated with educational praxis.

To that end, we employed autobiographical methods including personal narratives, subject journaling, participant observations, and informal conversations (Creswell, 1998). Creswell suggests these methods facilitate “the study of groups of individuals participating in an event, activity, or an organization” such as graduate education (p. 134). Also, autobiographical methods provided participants an opportunity to theorize or make sense of their experiences through critical self-examination or self-reflection. These methods were especially important in establishing voice for women and people of color who have historically experienced silence, exclusion, and powerlessness within the academy.

In this article, we extend our critical reflections by using narrative inquiry to further interrogate issues of race, power, and status. Ellis and Bochner (2000), in their description of narrative inquiry, point to “confessional tales” in which the “researcher’s experience of doing the study become the focus of the investigation” (p. 740). This kind of research can be empowering because it “breaches the conventional separation of researcher and subjects” and fosters the disclosure of “hidden details of private life,” highlights emotional experience, and thus challenges the absence of subjectivity in traditional forms of research (p. 744). Ellis and Bochner also note that the “narrative text refuses the impulse to abstract and explain, stressing the journey over the destination” (p. 744).

In this article, we hope to highlight various aspects of our conversations during our research journey that offer insights into how faculty and students can work across race and status lines, developing trust and negotiating power among themselves.

Lastly, for the purpose of clarity and flow, we tell the story of our collaboration using the device of a narrator. Although the narrator is represented through the voice of Marybeth, it is ultimately representative of all our voices.

OUR PERSONAL NARRATIVES ABOUT RACE

Due to the personal nature of our work, we think it is essential that you as the reader become familiar with us—who we are as researchers/participants, where we come from, and why this project is important to us.
SIBBY

I am a 4th-year doctoral student in research with a specialization in qualitative methodology. Prior to graduate school, I spent several years in college administration serving as an assistant dean of students/academic affairs at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and as an associate dean of student affairs at Hampshire College in Amherst, MA. My interest in this particular project was prompted by my professional experiences in higher education, which have focused on challenging social inequities such as violence against women, racial discrimination, and educational injustices faced by students of color. These experiences, along with my own struggles as an African American female doctoral student, have shaped my current research agenda: exploring critical questions relating to gender, race, culture, and identity within the academy.

KARRY

I am a 4th-year African American male doctoral student with a concentration in higher education and a special focus on African American literature. I am an English instructor at Georgia Perimeter College, where I also serve as assistant chair of the humanities department. My interest in this project relates to my personal experience as a Black male in higher education. My research interests center on Black males in colleges and universities, Black male sexuality, and faculty/student mentoring among Black males. This project is particularly important for me because it is crucial for faculty and students to engage in meaningful dialogue on valuing African American students’ research interests.

LISA

I am an African American female graduate student with 5 years of experience in college admissions, and I am a licensed clinical social worker. My current research interests include historical analysis of African Americans in higher education with a particular emphasis on women. The topic of this article is particularly important to me because of my life experiences as an African American female. As a practicing social worker, issues of race, class, and gender, social equality, access, and advocacy are central to my profession, but these issues are often marginalized within the academy.

MARYBETH

I am an assistant professor in higher education. I am a White female and I consider myself primarily a historian. My research interests include historically Black colleges, philanthropy, African American giving, and
Black leadership. My interests in this project stem from a concern for the future of both the professoriate and administration of our colleges and universities. I think it is crucial that we as faculty members offer nurturing experiences if we are to provide a collegial environment for students that is reflective of their backgrounds.

CINDY

I am an assistant professor in educational foundations and leadership. As a White female, my interest in this project dates back to graduate school. I was fortunate to work with a diverse group of students who challenged me to see the ways in which the academy can constitute an oppressive space—for example, how Westernized forms of knowledge are privileged. Opening my eyes to the subtle forms of discrimination that permeated seemingly benign classroom issues—such as the selected readings, pedagogical style, methods of assessment, and which viewpoints are privileged—made me aware of the power that faculty members wield. This awareness now permeates my teaching and interactions with graduate students.

THE CONTEXT OF OUR CONVERSATIONS

Our research journey began as casual conversations—conversations among faculty members, conversations between students and faculty members, and conversations among students. These conversations took place in many different settings over the course of a year. They were at times enjoyable, sometimes frustrating, but always probing. These conversations took on increasing meaning as the year progressed. As a result, we decided to make them more formal and develop a collaborative research project for the purpose of sharing our experiences and adding to the dialogue about covert forms of racism within the academy. Although we each agreed to participate in this process, for some of us it was the first time of sharing a private kind of exchange. At times, we were misinterpreted; at other times we said things that we later corrected, and on certain occasions we were forced to acknowledge our genuine disagreements.

To begin our formal discussion and to create a foundation that could withstand conflict, we met to set parameters for our project. We each decided to contribute at least one journal entry to our project a week—more if we were able and felt inspired. We decided that e-mail was the most effective way of making our journal entries, since it allowed each of us to have immediate access to what each person wrote. For six weeks, we contributed to the journal—sometimes writing independently—but often responding to each other. Our entries were direct and quite often
they reflected an emotional intensity. We agreed that not everything written had to be shared publicly, but we discovered that generally we felt comfortable about what we had written. When one of us wrote something that made another uncomfortable or that provoked intense emotion, we addressed our concerns immediately and did not let them fester. This process and our discussions about confidentiality helped to solidify a sense of trust in our relationships with one another. After 6 weeks, we met as a group—over good food, of course—and chatted about our journal conversations and began a new round of discussions.

IT STARTED WITH A CONVERSATION IN A DOORWAY

As new members of our department, Cindy and I often stood in each other’s doorway talking about our experiences and offering each other support as we tried to negotiate our role as assistant professors. The idea for this project began when one conversation in particular alerted us to the fact that we were both aware of racial tensions in the department. We found ourselves talking specifically about African-American students and how they seemed to be dismissed by some of our colleagues. As I said during one of our conversations, “Black students are experiencing alienating instances of stereotyping and discrimination. In the classroom, students often tell me they feel slighted or offended because some faculty members seem indifferent, disinterested, and avoid issues of race.”

We became increasingly frustrated with this situation. I had come from a PhD program where there were two African American and two Latino students out of about 50 students and I had become aware that these students often felt ignored or misunderstood. Cindy came from a program that initially had only three students of color out of about 20. Eventually the number changed to seven (African American and Chicano/a men and women), which significantly increased minority representation. Because of the increased diversity, Cindy’s classroom discussions started to deal head on with racism in the academy. She learned a valuable lesson from her classmates about how being White gave her a certain amount of privilege. While she had grown up poor, as a White person she was better able to hide her roots. Cindy’s colleagues could not hide the color of their skin and were forced to deal with forms of racism, subtle as well as overt, on a regular basis. They often felt isolated when they were the token person of color in a sea of white faces. This was a feeling that caught us off guard, since we had initially been drawn to our new university by the diversity of its faculty, students, and surrounding community.

Our awareness of racism in the department was heightened by our experiences on departmental search committees. During her second year in
the department, Cindy served on a search committee where any discussion of a candidate’s race was labeled racism, which effectively silenced any possible discussions around race. Yet when candidates were dismissed because they were studying topics not acceptable to “white” academia, any attempt on her part to bring up the racist aspect of this assumption was ignored and silenced. Grounded in the literature on critical race theory, Cindy knew that academic belittling of topics associated with persons of color was a cultural and institutional form of racism that privileged Eurocentric knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Such racism pertaining to what constituted legitimate knowledge was often handled by simply pretending that it did not exist.

Likewise, when an African American candidate with outstanding credentials that fit the norms of what was considered an acceptable academic area of study visited our department, my own support for the candidate was, at times, dismissed by certain colleagues. As one colleague commented, “Oh you’d vote for her just because she’s African-American” [implying that I could not make an unbiased decision since African American history is my area of research]. In our attempts to deal with racism in education, we were often frustrated by a lack of willingness on the part of some faculty to discuss these matters more openly.

At the same time, we had both witnessed various ways in which faculty members silence students of color. While we did not attempt to get the department to engage in any open discussion about racism, we began to talk about how we might better support students of color. We realized that if we, as privileged White women, sensed this racism, then students of color who were in a more precarious position needed our support. This led to our desire to collaborate with students and to explore how we could make our classes more welcoming and supportive of students generally and students of color in particular. Although not in any formal kind of way, both Cindy and I discussed our ideas with an older African American mentor in the department. Due to his international reputation, he traveled quite often, and thus was not in the office every day—but he was still keenly aware of the way that students were treated by some of our colleagues. He encouraged us to pursue our work with students. After discussions with this mentor, we contacted each of the students individually and asked whether they wanted to participate in this project.

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE BY DEVELOPING TRUST

When we asked students to work with us, we were initially met with resistance. Given their past experiences with some members of the
department, they were obviously concerned about our intentions. One of the students, Lisa, mentioned her apprehensions regarding our invitation:

I think that you, Marybeth, approached me individually. And I was skeptical about who you might be working with so I wanted to know who else was involved. Because at that point in the program, I was entertaining thoughts about either taking a year off or just not finishing the program. When I found out the other faculty member was Cindy, I felt comfortable. I had her for ethnography and she was wonderful. I felt okay with the both of you facilitating this project. And I think the topic was very timely because as I reflect on the project, that probably helped me stay here. At that juncture I was saying something has got to go, something has got to give – it has to be me or the program.

Sibby, having experienced a similar situation, agreed with Lisa:

I can’t recall how many conversations I have had where a Black female doctoral student in education shared that, at some point, she had considered quitting. When we started this project, I, myself, was at a point in the program where I was somewhat disillusioned. I was in a program area of the department where I really didn’t feel valued. I had a very tense relationship with a faculty member. What is it about the academic socialization process that leaves so many of us feeling less like valued colleagues and more like casualties of war? I felt I was in combat—constantly attacked. I felt like I was being accused of engaging in some sort of guerrilla warfare with this faculty member. I was really at a point similar to Lisa that something had to give. Either I was going to leave the department or at least find another concentration.

Ultimately I found another concentration—this decision was facilitated by a few supportive faculty members in the department and specifically, by my relationship with you, Marybeth, because you had really been so important in helping me get through that process—I trusted you. If we were going to engage in this research process which is somewhat risky, I knew it would be handled in a way that would be productive not only for you as faculty but for me as a student. I needed to interrogate these issues because I did not think my experience was unique. I thought that too often we don’t talk about these issues because they are so risky.”

Karry had also experienced a chilly climate in the program. His understanding of his present situation, however, was actually shaped by
an experience he had had in his masters program at another institution. In his words,

I think my negative experience actually started before I entered the Ph.D. program. It began in my master’s program where I was the only Black male in the program. Talk about isolation and alienation—I was just trying to find answers in terms of my own research on Black males. Many faculty and other students were telling me that I couldn’t do that or that there was no need to talk about Black male issues in high school. During my masters program, I worked at a high school for a year and had 13 Black males in a sophomore English class. Seven of them dropped out. None of the school administrators wondered why or where they had gone. And when I started to investigate and ask questions, I found that many of the administrators were closing doors in my face saying, “Well, they’ll come back if they want to.” They came back to school. One guy had gotten his girlfriend pregnant. And he dropped out of school because he said that he had to take care of his responsibility, which is a noble thing to do, but at the same time when you don’t have somebody to step in and say, “Well, here are some other alternatives that you might consider,” you drop out of high school and never return. I got the student into an evening program and he graduated about three years ago. So when I started to pursue a Ph.D., I wondered if I would encounter some of the same kinds of situations. Here, I have had a similar experience to that of the students I tried to help.

Karry elaborated:

Two summers ago I had an incident that really shocked me. It was one of those times when I felt like I was set up or made an example of. I was taking a class and the professor was very laid back about the assignments. I think everybody had the same kind of concerns in terms of what we were getting from the course. The faculty member validated my paper topic and used it as an example of what we needed to pursue for our final papers. When I turned in the paper, it was a different story. He seemed to mock my choice of a topic. I had a conversation with the professor via phone and he was shouting on the phone. And, you know, at that point I just asked him to tell me what to do so I could finish the course. So, like all of you, this project and its topic and timing were good because I had an opportunity to talk about my experiences. In the past, I have shared my experiences with four of the five Black males in this program and have talked about what they have been going through. I think often times we walk around
with this kind of stuff in us and it builds up; it becomes hostility and anger. Then we start to lash out or we leave the program all together instead of pursuing our research.

Lisa added,

Acknowledging that the issues associated with race, status, and gender seem to go unnoticed in the academy, it is no wonder that African American students often feel muted, marginalized, and eventually contemplate self-destructive demonstrations like dropping out or responding with displaced anger. If an African American student decides to leave a doctoral program, then the academy claims that the student was ill prepared, overwhelmed, and lacked serious commitment to the endeavor. Yet to pursue a dialogue about race, status, and gender is all too often regarded as taboo. We felt compelled to move beyond what is happening to what should happen. In doing so, we created a liberating atmosphere for praxis and transformative learning.

We all came to this project because we realized that we were seeing and feeling things related to race in our department that seemed problematic. In order to engage in this project, we had to first develop trust across racial, gender, and status lines. Karry, Lisa, and Sibby came to the project with a personal interest in looking at issues of race, gender, status, and sexuality in the academy. As faculty members, Cindy and I had a personal interest in these same issues that permeated our teaching, interactions with students, and research projects.

TAKING RISKS IN THE ACADEMY

While we each shared a common interest in the topic and felt a need for this project, we also realized that this project required that we be willing to take risks. Cindy and I had to be willing to let go of some of our power as professors in order to share our own personal stories of race. Lisa, Karry, and Sibby also had to take risks as African American students who had had several bad experiences with other faculty members. They had to be willing to trust that Cindy and I, as White faculty members in the academy, would be sensitive to their needs and experiences across race, status, and gender lines.

According to Lisa,

When we initially talked about how we wanted to do this, I thought that there was a lot of risk involved. There is a risk because the three of
us didn’t know each other, and personally I’m a private person and I often make boundaries. If I don’t want you to know something, I’ll just say, “It’s none of your business. I don’t want to tell you.” So, to be vulnerable to the point of thinking about leaving the program and really having some very heartfelt discussions with my husband about leaving—that’s a risk to share. I was tentative about this project initially and about speaking which doesn’t happen too often. But I think coming together made it easier because even though we had been in classes together—a few at that point—people wear a face. They wear a persona that they bring to class. I remember the first class the three of us had together where we had to write in a journal. What people in the class thought about diversity in higher education (and wrote in their journals) was different than what they said around the table. It was like night and day. We didn’t really have any genuine conversations about race. So I think coming together here was easier because I could get a better sense of the risk factors and really ask myself would I be willing to take those risks. In class, you don’t have time to elaborate on your ideas or comments. If you are misinterpreted, people get mad and hold grudges. During our conversations—yes, we were sometimes misunderstood and sometimes we offended each other or made false assumptions—but we stayed to work out our differences, and more importantly, we built a foundation on which to have these kinds of conversations. The reason why conversations regarding race do not typically work in the classroom is that there is not a solid foundation, a grade is at risk, and you have not built a relationship based on trust with your classmates and professor. With this project, I wanted to get a better idea of my peers’ experiences. I would never have known about Sibby’s adversity or Karry’s. The other part about meeting in familiar space, I think, is very important because we met at places that were equal. Every time that we’ve met in a conference room, no one has sat at the head of the table. I don’t know if any one’s noticed that, but we’ve all sat across from each other so we have face-to-face dialogue. Even just the proximity of how we are and where we are and our relationship in space to one another I think is really important. We sit close like good friends.

CREATING CARHARTIC CONNECTIONS

When we moved to e-mail journaling, I noticed that the students’ e-mails were often sent after something negative happened to them and the messages showed an immediate outpouring of emotion. With respect to the e-mail journaling, Lisa commented,
I thought we were taking a shortcut at first, but it turned out to be very valuable because at any time I could put a thought down. Sometimes it would be after 1 a.m. and I would be up and think, “Oh, I need to write this down.” And I could and if someone wanted to, they could respond the next day. That my thoughts didn’t have to be confined by time or space was important and made me feel that we were on equal ground.

Karry agreed:

It was a way to think through issues. If I was reading at the time and came across something that reminded me of an experience I had had, there was a way for me to talk through my pain and frustration right then. Your problems either become worse, you find a way to silence them, or you find a way to just manage them, which is what I have done the past several years. The e-mail journal was a way for me to clear a space to talk about things that I had not had the opportunity to talk about. I really had an audience of people who could listen and say, “Well, I’ve had some of the same kinds of experiences.” Knowing that your experiences are not unique makes a difficult situation a lot better as well. When you feel like you’re experiencing a negative situation by yourself, as I was in my master’s program, you feel like you’re in a box. You don’t have anywhere to go or anybody to talk to.

Sibby agreed, but felt that the e-mail process was more than a way to clear her mind:

I agree that this project was an outlet to talk about things, things that happened in the past or make connections to something I read, but I was also thinking about something else. Like Lisa mentioned, I want to comment on the mask we construct to protect ourselves in the classroom (to protect ourselves from ridicule, jealousy, and racism). I know that the mask that I have carefully constructed in this doctoral program protects me because of past hurts. And like Karry or Lisa, I have been very careful about what I say in class because I have been penalized in the past. And so by engaging in the e-mails, we’ve been more truthful. I have shared more truthfully what I think and how I think than I ever have in a class.

When Sibby made this statement, my immediate comment was, “It’s interesting that you feel that way considering that e-mail is written and in class there isn’t a record of what we say.” And she replied,
Well, you know what, we say there’s not a record but there is a record because it’s an oral record and people seem to remember. People seem to have very long memories and the worst part is that the classroom has been a risky place to share at times because it’s not written. People can misconstrue, they misunderstand, they misinterpret and that’s the record they construct and there is no opportunity to set the record straight. Whereas when it’s written, it’s written exactly as we intended. And also for me because maybe my background is in creative writing, this is a more comfortable way to express myself. I didn’t feel bound by the way that we’re supposed to construct a research paper. In my e-mails I could express myself in the way that was most comfortable to me. So the e-mail journal has been a really good way to share with the group things they would never know about me otherwise.

In Lisa’s words, the e-mail journal was a “cathartic connection”:

Because it provided the opportunity to get something off your chest, literally, or off of your back immediately and have feedback and a sense of connection because there’s commonality in terms of the experience. Also in terms of not being constrained to a specific type of persona. For instance, I’ve been in classes where I’ve offered a comment and my comment has been reconstructed based on what the professor thinks that I should say. But that’s not what I said. And then after it’s been restated in the way that the professor feels that it should be, there’s a self-affirming comment which is, “Right.” So I’m supposed to agree with the fact that my interpretation has been reorganized, reconstructed, maybe even butchered in the process. It’s not what I offered originally. And it’s when that happens that it feels corrective. Like you’re off the beaten path—you’re off the track so let me restate this so that it’s appropriate. The professor rephrases my comment so that it is more palatable to the whole class.

Karry added to Lisa’s explanation:

Or even in classroom discussions things that are unique to you in terms of race and gender are not unique to your professor so a lot of times some of the things I’ve wanted to say, I’ve sort of felt restricted and didn’t say because I knew there was going to be some kind of redirection. Some professors, depending on who they are, don’t see your experience and don’t value your experience. So your comments are dismissed. And the professor goes back to the discussion in terms of the majority students in the classroom. So a lot of times you feel you have so much to offer but then you get there and you say, “No, they
are not going to accept my perspective or they don’t know what I’m talking about.” Or they say, “Well, this is not in the research. This is not what the book says so what you’re saying has no merit. It doesn’t add up because it’s not here.” And you know that your experience has not been written about because of who is writing and who is publishing the writing. As a member of this research group, I felt free to express myself, challenge others, and change my mind.

The following e-mail conversation, in which the students discuss stereotypes of African American students in the classroom, exemplifies the cathartic nature of our interactions.

*Sibby:* Recently, I had a conversation with a dear friend who has become frustrated with the behavior of her advisor. Like many black doctoral students, she, I think, is experiencing what Claude Steele calls the “stereotype threat.” Steele talks about how “the academic performance of high-achieving blacks and women [students] is compromised by the stereotype threatening experience in circumstances of academic pressures” (Steele, 1999, p. 92). That is, the strongest students in the academy face a social-psychological threat that Steele argues “arises when one is in a situation . . . [in which] a negative stereotype about one’s group [exists]” (Steele, 1999, p. 94).

For my friend, I know she does not fit the stereotypes that exist about blacks or women students. Her intellectual performance challenges these very stereotypes. However, like many high-achieving blacks and women students, her experience has had a cumulative effect—“causing doubts on the extent of one’s abilities, on how one will be accepted, on one’s compatibility with the domain [the academy], and so on” (Steele, 1999, p. 118).

For many of us just dealing day to day with pressures and limitations of the academy can be daunting. It is compounded by the fact that for many black and women students, our very identity, who we are, is intertwined, bound with our intellectual pursuits.

*Lisa:* Your comments are very insightful. I find that being outspoken is often a negative trait in the classroom. I can see how the concept of the stereotype threat is applicable. It’s like the conversation we had last week about being perceived as intimidating when actually what is happening is that I am expressing my point with passion. The passion is easily misconstrued as “attitude”. Attitude fits the stereotype for what society expects from a strong black woman (whatever it is). Intellectual thought with passion seems to be the antithesis of that stereotype.
Karry: Both points are well taken, Sibby and Lisa. I’ve actually toned down since my master’s-level days. I used to be much more outspoken than I am now. While working on my masters, many times, in the classroom, I got very frustrated because not one of my professors was willing to look at other perspectives. All of what I learned was Eurocentric. Whenever my classmates, professors, and I talked about issues of race in class, I brought it up. So, particularly to white males in the program, I was aggressive, outspoken, and very opinionated. And I never understood their reasoning until a couple of years ago. Their responses really didn’t have anything to do with me; their responses were resistance. They, including the professors, were not willing to talk about African American perspectives in the classroom, in research, or anywhere else. And too, I was the only black male in my entire program . . . which still blows my mind.

But we are getting at years of oppression and labels. Aggression, particularly in black men, and outspokenness, particularly in black women, are characteristics that have been attached to us for many years. So to others, we are acting like what they see as typically black. When, really, we are fighting the same uphill battle many before us have fought. So regardless of how we respond, it’s going to almost always be in opposition—be it aggressive or loud—because we are taught Eurocentric ideologies, which often times don’t include the minority perspective, so we add that perspective, it’s generally in opposition; therefore, we come across as too aggressive or too outspoken.

Cindy: I know what you mean when you discuss the white student reaction to you in class. It took me awhile to see this when I was in graduate school—it took my graduate student colleagues who were willing to point it out—to let us [White students] know what our response was like. Culturally, I think that many of us are taught to express ourselves differently and because of who’s in power, one way of expression is considered the norm. However, I think for many students and faculty, your experiences and perspectives adds a richness and depth to the classroom that would otherwise not exist.

E-mail is an alternative form of communicating that was both liberating and restrictive at the same time. On the one hand, this format gave us time to process each other’s responses in a substantive way (a way that is not possible in a 2.5-hour class). On the other hand, writing about these issues on a computer screen and then hitting the send button was sometimes frightening. Without the personal face-to-face contact as a gauge of whether our words were being interpreted in the way we intended, there was always
a concern that our words would be misunderstood. Yet because we had already established trust through our previous face-to-face discussions, these e-mail conversations were rich and honest. I remember a time when I responded to Sibby’s frustration regarding a failed chair search in our department. She didn’t agree with my response—she felt it was too pragmatic. I was trying to get her to move beyond the situation and she wasn’t ready. She told me so and it was a good lesson for me. Sometimes easing the situation or moving past it doesn’t work. Sibby needed to understand her frustration and I needed to let her deal with the situation rather than trying to make her feel better. She felt comfortable disagreeing with me and we had different interpretations of the departmental situation, but through honest—and cathartic—dialogue our relationship was strengthened.

NEGOTIATING POWER

Too often discriminating factors in the classroom are encoded in the syllabus—biases come into play in terms of the curriculum, suggested readings, and pedagogical format. This project moved away from the prescribed and preferred techniques of instruction. The use of narrative is akin to oral histories in that the storyteller is the authority. In addition, collaborative research implies a sharing of power. We realized that we had to cross not only racial boundaries but also overcome our unequal status as professors and graduate students. While Cindy and I had more experience conducting research and publishing, Karry, Lisa, and Sibby were far more knowledgeable about how race had an impact on student experiences. Hence we all brought to the table the expertise based our own experience. This acknowledgment and sharing of power had to be negotiated throughout our conversations and reflections.

Lisa elaborated:

I think the other part of this discussion is that this research opportunity in this group means something at another level, because it is research about my experience; it’s research that’s specific to my experience. It’s about me and it’s about now, so the relevance is very, very high. Because of Cindy and Marybeth, I didn’t feel the hindrances of being redirected into a category—it has to be qualitative, it has to be quantitative, and it has to have this type of theoretical framework. I didn’t feel constrained in that way. And I think the whole way that we met, how we talk, the way that we sat and ate together and teased each other says a lot about what we want to come from this experience which is that you can openly discuss
matters of difference on terms that offer equality and a place comfort for each person.

Sibby added, “I would say that it has only worked because the two professors have also participated in the disclosing of very personal information.”
Lisa interrupted, “They weren’t merely observing us.”
Sibby continued:

There was no observer-researcher-participant distinction as well. I think the willingness on the part of the professors to take risks and put themselves out there and to share their own experiences whether in graduate school or in facilitating a classroom experience enabled us to get to a place where we felt comfortable and at ease sharing and collaborating in the way that we have. I found it reassuring to know that Cindy and Marybeth had—and still have—some of the same fears that I have about working in the academy—for example, gender stereotypes and bias toward young faculty with children. The fact that Cindy and Marybeth were willing to share their frustrations helped me to be more open with our group.

I observed, “I’m not sure why this process works. Cindy and I agreed that if we are asking you to take risks, it was only fair that we take those same risks. This we believe helps to facilitate an equitable relationship.”

Unlike the classroom, where there is often great fear in challenging the professor, within our research group the students and faculty were able to speak freely, to challenge, and to express disagreement. Because of our official roles, it was difficult to erase the status lines of professor and student. However, we were able to get closer to an egalitarian relationship by committing to confidentiality and creating safe meeting places.

Lisa responded:

I think it works because, number one, Marybeth, you have a genuine interest in African American issues as they relate to higher education. So for me you were already primed for a project like this because you have done numerous interviews and oral histories with African Americans. Your sense of getting to know a person and your sensitivity to African American history is genuine. It’s not just from an investigative standpoint that I need to collect this data or collect the facts. I think, Cindy, your advantage is the fact that you are an ethnographer with a grounded sense of ethics about what it means to benefit from research that originates from other people and a sense of giving back. And so because of that it makes it much easier for you to
be a participant-researcher rather just a researcher alone. I am drawn to the faculty in the department who share this mentality.”

Sibby interjected, “Yes, my advisor, for example, is very sensitive to the experiences of graduate students. She reveals much of her intent and motivation in the classroom. She also has an honest concern for students of color. She meets us on common ground in the classroom.” She added, “I don’t know about you guys, but I have been thinking that this (our expectations of faculty) is cultural. In a way there is something about us African-American doctoral students, I feel like we don’t necessarily come in with this notion that just because you’ve earned a PhD that puts you at a higher status. I’m not sure how to articulate it, but I feel like within the African American culture the idea of respect is something you earn and that it doesn’t come with superficial titles. Just because you’re a PhD doesn’t mean that we are going to look at you as the knowledge holder.”

Part of our original interest in conducting this project was based on our observations of race being dismissed as a critical issue in our departmental interactions. This theme strongly presented itself in our conversations as we could all call upon examples of when and where we had made these observations. By bringing our isolated experiences together, we were able to see that these experiences were shared by others and that much work remained to bring this issue to light for others.

Karry commented:

You can look at it as the serious desire that the student has for his or her research agenda because you trade all of that in for the sake of the professor’s views. Okay, I can’t step on anybody’s toes because I have to get an A. So if the professor says, “Don’t do this topic because you’re going to be considered too Black.” The student says, “Okay, no problem.” She doesn’t question that. She says, “I’ll do this.” And it hasn’t anything to do with Blackness. Some students just trade all of that in for white acceptance. You have to question yourself—you’re in higher education trying to get a PhD. What is your foundation? What are you willing to stand behind? How far are you willing to go to sell your soul just to get out of the program? And then when you’re out, who are you? What’s behind the Ph.D.?

Sibby added:

I think it goes back to integrity because I’m earning this Ph.D. for a reason. I have a research agenda and I don’t waver and I’m not really looking for the approval police. I think it comes down to integrity . . . .
I’m here to study a particular topic. I’m not going to waver just because it’s not the popular thing to do . . . . What is there to fear?

Lisa concluded, “Status quo—disruption of the status quo.”

As for disrupting the status quo, when I talked with colleagues about doing this project with the students, some of them asked, “How are their experiences really different?” In fact, I was on a committee of the college and was trying to explain why it is important to have African-American faculty members and graduate students in our program and someone asked a similar question, “Well, how is their contribution any different than a white faculty member or a white graduate student?” And I replied, “I don’t understand your question.” And they said, “Well, isn’t that preferential treatment?” And I said, “No, people from various backgrounds, ethnicities, races, religions and cultures bring different kinds of perspectives and experiences into the classroom and everyone benefits from that.”

Lisa enthusiastically commented,

My problem with questions like that is there are so many assumptions that are at work for you to even ask something like that. The first is that there’s a level playing field. The second is that it’s just like White. Why do you immediately go to the comparison of White? Well, in an unspoken way of thinking, you’ve already assessed that the White candidate is the standard. Now why is the White candidate the standard? Because of what? They’re more qualified—they’re this, they’re that, that’s a more legitimate candidate—there are so many things at work when somebody asks a question like that. I think with this topic there are several things at work. One is that you can’t say that all African American students are the same in any context.

**TRANSGRESSING RACIAL BOUNDARIES VIA COLLABORATION AND DIALOGUE**

In this project, professors and students attempted to get to know each other intimately by listening to each other’s interests, experiences, ideas, and analyses related to higher education, pedagogy, and ideology. This experience required all of us to take risks by asking much from within ourselves and much in conversations between ourselves. The project required us to move out of familiar and prescribed spaces in order to forge new relationships based on honesty, equity, reciprocity, respect, and integrity. Essentially, we created a nurturing community with an expressed intention to cultivate scholarship. Each researcher-participant discussed past academic experiences that challenged accepted socialization processes,
curriculum offerings, and legitimate topics for class discussions. By asking what was missing and why, the necessity for our project was born out of negation. Among ourselves, we examined basic assumptions about how socializing doctoral students is promoted within the academy.

As a form of critical inquiry, examining assumptions led to entertaining possibilities that are considered atypical for the academy and its dichotomous practice of assimilation or marginalization for African-American doctoral students. While the description of these relationships and subsequent climate that prevailed may seem elusive, perhaps the mysterious answer for “how to” rests quietly in the actual efforts and attempts to try. We (all of us) were not easily satisfied with the superficial but allowed for disagreement, took risks and tried to vary the traditional student/faculty relationships. The recipe for “how to” results in a feast for all provided that primary ingredients—honesty, trust, integrity, reciprocity, equity, and respect—are present (see example below).

The following e-mail conversation that pertains to potential threats directed at Black intellectualism, took place during the time that Cornell West was contemplating a move to Princeton University from Harvard University.

*Cindy:* It is very disturbing to me when I read about students who are made to feel so uncomfortable by faculty that they consider leaving their programs. I was just listening to an NPR story about how Cornel West and the African American Studies Program at Harvard battled for respect with the new president. The reporter said that the story, which gained national attention, had had an interesting impact on young African Americans. Many were saying they now “Wanted to be like West” as in Cornel West. The interesting part of the piece was that the reporter was saying that young African Americans now had role models who were recognized for their intellect (rather than physical skill as in the case of Michael Jordan). The reporter said that institutions such as Harvard and Princeton were fighting over these academics because of their minds and that this had a big impact on the perception that education was undervalued in many African American communities. I think this story struck a chord with me because it shows just how important diversity in the academy is. As academics we are responsible for the knowledge production for future generations not only in higher education, but in K-12 as well. Sibby, Karry, and Lisa, you are amazing students with so much to give. I hope you will continue to consider academia as a viable option.

*Karry:* Cindy, I think your post is so accurate. I just finished reading Cornell West’s article on Black intellectuals, which partly focuses on Black scholars not being taken seriously. This is such a serious issue,
inside and outside the classroom. In the classroom, Black Ph.D. students are not just learning; they are fighting to become serious scholars, fighting to prove their academic abilities, fighting to write about black issues, and, sadly, fighting to become scholars. It is such a battle, and it perpetuates aggression in Black students because they are constantly competing against white students and other Black students. It is tough when you walk through the door and you are already looked upon as “not serious” or “a problem”. It reminds me of the research I do on black males. At every end, I seem to perpetuate the anger, the violence, the “isms” the research attaches to black males. But when you are thought of as a “problem”, whatever you do to correct the problem is going to be conflicting. But I know there are positive black men who do wonderful work, and those are the stories I want to tell.

Marybeth: How do we get students and faculty to understand the issues raised in our e-mails? How do we get others to understand what happens to students of color in the classroom? How can faculty be made aware of their actions and the results of their actions? When I read the contributions today, I kept asking myself these questions. I think the answer is two-fold (at least for right now, this is murky territory). I think we need to have more faculty who weave social justice and multicultural issues into their classes. I find it interesting that most institutions don’t have courses on college teaching. How do we learn to teach? How do we learn not to exclude during our teaching?

Karry: This is a simple question you raise, Marybeth, but I think we make it so complicated. One of the main focuses of my own classroom is to incorporate as many diverse topics as I can—sexuality, race, gender, etc. But there is so much resistance. In response to race, many of my students feel Blacks—my students think racism is only in black and white—should stop complaining because things are not the way they used to be. Many of them feel strongly that black people are more racist than white people. And when I try to explain to them the politics behind race, the economics of racism, they get very angry. I often tell them that black people simply do not have the economic power to be racist. Many of them also feel guilty, apologetic. I know some of it is just ignorance, but there is a bigger question: Who is shaping their mentality about race?

What is different about faculty members who actively create comfortable spaces for African American graduate students? How do they do it? What are their motivations? And how do other faculty
members respond? It is difficult to admit your biases and that you
don’t know it all—especially within the academy—an academy in
which you are judged by your peers. It is difficult to confront your
prejudices and your assumptions. And when you decide to try to
counteract these negative forces in the lives of students, some of your
other students and colleagues often feel you “use too many African
American or female authors in a class that is not supposed to be about
race and gender” or “you only respect a faculty candidate because she
is Black.”

In Cindy’s words,

I feel very strongly that in my own teaching I try to support the
concerns of all graduate students (as long as they are not intended to
be hurtful to another student). I constantly struggle with these issues
and how to deal with them in my classes. My personal belief is that
race, class, gender, and other issues around discrimination should be
threaded throughout all classes. I see linkages with research, leader-
ship, policy, foundations, and higher education. Electing to take these
issues on, especially as an untenured faculty member; can . . . feel
risky.”

Sometimes, graduate students of color involved in these collaborative
activities suffer because their peers are envious of their opportunity to have
an open, positive relationship with faculty members. Of course, as faculty
members this is where sharing our experiences and strategies with other
faculty peers becomes important so that they have an opportunity to change
or reflect on their actions and words and offer more opportunities to more
students. Cindy and I attempted to engage in such interactions with many
of our colleagues and they were often receptive to our ideas. For example,
some members of the faculty dined together on a regular basis. During
these lunches, Cindy and I would discuss our project (without mentioning
student names), specifically noting the kinds of experiences that students
were having or not having due to lack of opportunities. As a result of these
conversations, some members of the faculty began doing collaborative
research projects with students. One faculty member, in particular, included
more graduate assistantships in her grant proposals so that students could
have richer experiences.

Recognizing that the academy produces a “chilly climate” for any-
one—but especially faculty and students of color—is important. Creating a
supportive environment in the classroom and among students is a way to
counteract meritocratic assumptions. As faculty members, we need to
assume that students have a right to be in graduate school and have
potential, which may be in direct conflict with certain tacit assumptions of the academy.

This study provides important insights into how graduate faculty can create supportive and nurturing learning environments for African American students. Faculty can encourage students, regardless of their backgrounds, to pursue issues relevant to them personally and, in cases where sensitive topics will be covered, set classroom expectations for discussing issues. Faculty can also acknowledge and value students’ cultural experiences even if they diverge from their own. More importantly, faculty can support students as they find their own voices as researchers and scholars.

**SELF-REFLECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

In this endeavor, we think that self-reflection is critically important. The first responsibility of a faculty member is to acknowledge that the academy is rife with unequal power relationships and embedded with cultural forms of discrimination and oppression (Carty, 1991; Collins, 1998). Being aware of these issues and recognizing your own role and subjectivity in this process as both a teacher and researcher is an important step.

Self-reflection provides space for acknowledging the complexity of oppression and issues of power embedded within the academy, departments, and classrooms. In itself, self-definition means disowning labels, categories, and groupings assigned by society in order to embrace a liberated consciousness of self. As mentioned, Steele (1999) speaks of the "stereotype threat," how students of color are confronted with fear that many faculty members will assume that they are not as intellectually capable as White students. Many will assume that they were admitted to graduate school or hired because of the color of their skin rather than their merit.

There are many ways that what we have attempted to do can be carried out by others in different institutional settings. For example, faculty members, working together in a department, could begin an e-mail dialog specifically for African American students, providing a forum in which students could speak freely about their experiences in the department and not be penalized. Of course, this effort would need to be based on pre-existing, healthy relationships between faculty and students, and faculty members might have to encourage continual writing by prompting discussion.

Faculty and students could also work on a collaborative research project, much like we have done. Although collaboration happens regularly in academic departments, the graduate students are often doing the grunt work rather than being asked to contribute as equal members of a team.
A more collaborative type of interaction on a research project requires more time on the part of faculty members and forces them to bare their own inadequacies so that the student can learn from them. Although there is more time involved, the results have both immediate and long-term rewards—immediately, graduate students stop feeling ignored and abused, and long-term, faculty members have the opportunity of strengthening the future African American professoriate.

There are also rewards for faculty members involved in this type of collaboration; first, we develop stronger relationships with our students, which can make a difference in the classroom as well; second, we gain in the ways acknowledged by the academy: For example, as a result of this project, we participated in two academic presentations and wrote a book chapter in addition to this article. These presentations and writing experiences have benefited all of us involved in this collaborative process.

Our process of writing this article, which was egalitarian and collaborative, is an example of what we suggest that faculty members do to enhance the experiences of African American graduate students. We, as faculty and students, worked together to understand the academic process, to gain conference presentation experience, to write an article, and, most importantly, to explore issues of transgressive pedagogy. We have engaged in this project to encourage faculty to have similar conversations with each other and with graduate students in an effort to prevent African Americans graduate students from feeling like “casualties of war.”

Notes

1 Reducing these issues to race is also problematic. While we are focusing here on African American graduate students, we would like to acknowledge that these issues are not reducible to race alone. We have found that issues such as class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and ableism are deeply intertwined as well.

2 This kind of research has its limitations. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) note that engaging in collaborative research can privilege subjectivity and confuse social action with social research.

3 The tone of this narrative is intentionally conversational.

4 Many of our colleagues cared deeply about African American students and made overtures to them on a regular basis. We are grateful to those colleagues.

References


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