Reconceptualizing Marginality from the Margins: Perspectives of African American Tenured Female Faculty at a White Research University

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Abstract

The concept of marginality is often used to describe individuals and groups who are situated outside the margins of the majority culture. Traditional social science literature portrays the marginal individual as subordinate, outsider, deficient, and she is often seen as a victim of her society. This article presents a more positive conceptualization of marginality, one drawn from the perspectives of five African American female faculty members at a predominantly white research university and from the writings of other African American scholars. Findings from the research reveal that the women positively defined their marginal status in White dominated institutions. This reconceptualization was manifested through positive self-definition, Black cultural identity, having a safe space to escape oppressive forces, and by rejecting externally constructed definitions of their Black womanhood.

African American female faculty members continue to be under represented in White dominated research universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994). According to the 1993 *Digest on Education Statistics*, Black women faculty comprised 2.2 percent of the nation's full-time faculty. Those who are tenured professors make up 0.6 percent full-time faculty and 1.2 percent of all associate and full professors. In addition, the *National Study of Post Secondary Faculty* (1994) reveals that Black women held 1.2 percent of the positions in public research universities and 1.3 percent of the positions in public doctoral universities.

Black women, once employed, perceive numerous problems in the academic environment, especially at predominantly White universities (Price, 1988). They usually find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy and are among the least likely to be tenured (Collins, 1986; Howard-Vital, 1987; Silver, 1988). They are expected to take a subordinate role to Whites, male and female, and to all African American men (Coleman-Burns, 1989). Not surprisingly, Hughes (1992) found Black women to be far more disadvantaged in the academy than any other group, and

McComb (1989) noted that Black women find the academic environment to be hostile or indifferent.

Despite these obstacles, some Black women have become successful at such institutions as evidenced by their tenure and promotion. However, little is known of the strategies the women used to successfully manage and navigate the White academic culture. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine the professional development history of five tenured African American female faculty to gain an insight into the experiences that contributed to their successful career in the White research academy. From the findings, one can begin to understand the experiences of Black professional women as they interact with the White male dominated institutional culture and the strategies they use to successfully manage the culture.

An important finding of the study is the perspective from which the women view their marginality in white dominated institutions. Those individuals who do not fit the characteristics of the majority are often classified as "other," "outsider," "subordinate," "deficient." These labels carry negative stigmas that imply that they do not meet the standards of the majority, mainly white males, who situate themselves in the cen-

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ter. They are, therefore, classified as "marginalized others." This paper, thus, focuses primarily on the participant's conceptualization of their marginality in the white-dominated academic culture. It gives voice to the experiences of five Black women and provides a firsthand account of their perception of their marginal status in the academy—an important strategy to their management of the White academic culture.

Theoretical Framework

African Americans face the dilemma of double consciousness as they struggle to survive in two distinct cultural worlds—one White and one Black (DuBois, 1903). The Black life world consists of the Black community with its demands and expectations of professional women. The White life world is made up of the White institutional structures—the school and the workplace—within which African American women must interact and survive in order to develop professional careers. However, it has been suggested that such bicultural interactions lead the minority professional to a position of marginality in the dominant culture (Stonequist, 1961). To understand the process of these women's interactions within White institutional cultures, the bicultural life structure theory and theory of marginality were used to inform this study.

The Bicultural Perspective

Bicultural life structure is the foundation upon which subordinate groups create both a private and public space where they can resist oppression and at the same time maintain their cultural identity and self-determination. The bicultural perspective focuses attention on the interplay between the two cultures and its effect on the lives of racial minority workers (Jones, 1986). Wolfe, O'Connor, and Cary (1990) define life structure as "the underlying pattern or design of a person's life. . .It allows one to adapt to one's surroundings" (p. 958).

Bicultural life structure theory brings into the analysis, issues of identity and community, inclusion and exclusion, voice and representation, power and subordination in the study of bicultural groups. As Giroux suggests,

The politics of biculturalism must address not merely how cultural identities are constructed differently, but also how they are produced, sustained, and transformed within the structures of power at work in a deeply hierarchical and exploitative society...Biculturalism involves the ongoing process of identity definition, construction, and reconstruction, driven by the collective efforts of subordinate cultural groups to build community solidarity, renegotiate the boundaries of subordinate cultures,

and redefine the meaning of cultural identity within the forces of oppression and majority power and domination. (In Darder, 1995, p. x)

Biculturalism in African Americans is defined as "the ability to function effectively and productively within the context of America's core institutions—the school and the workplace—while simultaneously retaining what many would consider an African identity" (Rashid, 1981, p. 58). A bicultural life experience requires that an African American woman create a dynamic, fluid life structure that shapes the patterns of her social interactions, relationships, and mobility, both within and between the two cultural contexts (Bell, 1987, p. 463). Such a structure allows her to hold on to her African American identity as she interacts with the White-dominated culture. It also allows her to construct and define her own reality and to dispel the theoretical myths that surround her existence in White-dominated institutions, to include the theory of marginality and its application to Black professional women. Several authors, including Gordon (1992), Park (1950), and Stonequist (1961) contend, however, that forming a bicultural life structure leads one to a position of negative marginality in the dominant culture.

Theory of Marginality

Park (1928, 1950) was among the first to conceptualize a theory of marginality, which has been widely used to define the status of individuals and groups that do not fit the mainstream culture. Park (1928) theorizes that individuals who belong to more than one cultural world should be considered marginal people. According to Park, a marginal person is one who is

a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he has sought to find a place. He is a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. (1928, p. 892)

Park, though, did not develop his research with the Black experience in mind. Nonetheless, the marginal man theory has been used to describe the position of Blacks in White America because of their participation in both their Black and White cultural worlds.

Building on Park's theory of marginality, Stonequist (1961) contends that marginality has certain social and psychological properties. The social properties include the factors of migration and racial differences and situations in which two or more cultures share the same geographical area with one culture maintaining a higher status than the other. The psychological properties, he notes, consist of the simultaneous awareness of oneself

as being a member and an alien of two or more cultures. Park (1928) suggests that such psychological awareness of double consciousness results in a marginal personality and feelings of inferiority.

Stonequist agrees that wherever there are cultural transitions and cultural conflict, one will find marginal personalities. Of critical importance is the fact that he does not see this dual personality as problematic, for he notes,

Man is a plastic or teachable being. He comes into the world with a flexible nature and with multiple personalities, which enable him to fit into the most varied culture patterns and social organizations. He generally shows a different side of himself to each group he encounters. (p. 4)

Stonequist (1961) sees this dual personality to be quite problematic for Blacks, however, because in his view, Blacks do not have a traditional culture of their own (p. 106). He argues that upon being taken as slaves to the United States, Blacks were completely uprooted from their particular African culture and had to assume the culture of the White majority. As he notes,

Colored people are forced to express themselves in the only culture they know—that of White America. The Negro efforts to improve himself and his race necessitate his becoming more like the White man, not in differentiating himself. By equaling the White man, he demonstrates his ability and refutes the stigma of inferiority. (p. 107)

Stonequist also suggests that it is by equaling oneself with the White man that the Black person is thrown into a marginal status, and that it is the advanced and educated Blacks who suffer most acutely from problems of marginality.

The arguments, then, that Park and Stonequist present suggest that living in two or more cultures is psychologically undesirable because, according to them, the management of these multiple cultures generates identity confusion, role ambiguity, and normlessness. The current theory suggests, therefore, that Blacks who function within predominantly white institutions run the risk of becoming "marginal persons" who remain alienated from both the members of the majority and minority cultures and who are structurally excluded from mainstream society. Another conclusion one can draw from the marginal man hypothesis is that it is not possible for ethnic minorities to develop and maintain bicultural identities, behavior, and racial attitudes, or that it is not possible for Blacks to become successful in predominantly white institutions without the psychological effects of negative marginalization.

In strong contrast, African American scholars (Banks, 1984; Collins, 1986, 1990; hooks, 1984, 1989; Ward, 1995; Willie, 1981), who have researched and written about the Black experience in predominantly

White institutions, disagree with Park's and Stonequist's negative conceptualization of marginality. They find marginality to be a positive attribute that enables Black women to successfully navigate their many cultural worlds. Willie (1981), for example, defines marginality as one's ability to live beyond the boundaries of one's own race, social class, and cultural distinctions. According to Willie's definition, the marginal Black woman exhibits the ability to live in, between, and beyond her own and others' social and cultural groups.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) sees Black women's outsider-within position in predominantly white institutions to be "a particular marginality that stimulates a particular Black women's perspective" (p. 11). Collins (1990) notes that Black women, in their marginality, often struggle to live two lives, "one for them and one for ourselves" (p. 94), and that they should embrace this dual structure of their lives and not be restrained or threatened by it. In explaining Black women's outsider-within position in terms of their marginality, Collins states,

As the Others in society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging. (p. 68)

Like Collins, bell hooks (1984, 1989) sees marginality as a powerful force in African Americans' survival in White dominated cultures. As she notes,

Being in the margin is to be a part of the whole but outside the whole. This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us with an oppositional world view—a mode of seeing, unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. (hooks, 1984, p. ii)

Hooks' (1984) position on marginality suggests that those on the margins are fortunate to have carved a special place of resistance where they can retain the essence of their Blackness while successfully navigating to the center and participating in the White cultural world.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to present marginality from the perspectives of five African American female faculty who have found professional success in the white dominated institution of the research academy, without the negative psychological effects that some writers predict.

Methodological Perspective

To examine the concept of marginality as it relates to African American professional women, a qualitative approach was used to explore the subjective experi-

ences of five African American tenured female faculty in a White research university. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) note that researchers who use the qualitative approach are interested in the ways people make sense of their lives. They further suggest that qualitative researchers "seek to grasp the process by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (p. 48). The qualitative research method was particularly useful in this study because of a preference for narrative descriptions in the process, procedures, and the summary of the results (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996).

Since qualitative research encompasses several different paradigms, the interpretive interactionist approach (Denzin, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) was used to understand the process by which these women make meaning of their bicultural experiences. The interpretive approach is defined as a method and theory of interpreting meaningful human action (Nielsen, 1990). Using the interpretive interactionist perspective, the researcher takes a critical look at how individuals connect their lived experience to the cultural representations of these experiences (Schwandt, 1998). It, therefore, allows the researcher to situate participants' experiences within a sociocultural context. "It endeavors to capture the voice, emotions, and actions of those studied" (Denzin, 1989, p. 10). This research perspective uses biography to examine and interpret the various experiences that make up everyday life (Reinharz, 1992). This methodological perspective was important to this study as it allowed for an examination of experiences within a sociocultural context and the meaning that participants assign to those experiences. As Byrne (2001) suggests, "The strength of qualitative research is that the modes of inquiry are holistic and contextual" (p. 3).

Method

This interpretive study took a biographical or life history approach as each participant was guided in the reconstruction of her bicultural life to discover the sociocultural experiences contributing to her successful career in the White academy. Each woman's experiences result from her interactions with her sociocultural life worlds of family, community, institution, and the wider society (Collins, 1990). Denzin (1989) also suggests that experiences occur within the larger historical, institutional, and cultural arenas that surround a subject's life and that lives must be studied within these contexts. In order to understand the totality of the women's experiences, each critical experience was, therefore, examined within its sociocultural contexts.

Using an interview guide, open-ended participatory interviewing was the primary method of data collection. Each participant was interviewed in her office, with the first interview lasting from two to three hours and the second lasting from one to two hours. The interviews were audiotaped and immediately transcribed verbatim. In addition, several telephone discussions were held with participants to further clarify areas of incongruity and those areas needing greater contextualization.

The sample for this study consisted of five tenured African American female professors from a major white research university. The five participants—Elizabeth, Jean, Kendra, Myra, and Sara—made up the total population of African American tenured female faculty at that university. Their ages ranged from 45 – 51, and they came from Anthropology, Engineering, Journalism, and Social Work.

Analytical Techniques

Issues of qualitative research have been met with much controversy in the research literature. At the heart of the controversy about qualitative findings are doubts about the nature of the analysis and the credibility of the report (Patton, 1999). Patton suggests that the credibility issue for qualitative inquiry depends on rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high quality data that are carefully analyzed, with attention to validity, reliability, and triangulation (1999, p. 2). This research project, therefore, followed a three-phase analytical process to enhance the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

First, each woman's narrative was studied in order to capture the uniqueness of her story and then a biographical sketch was constructed. The narrative was first sent to the participant for member check, the purpose of which was to test the accuracy of the data gathered. A face-to face meeting was then held to discuss any inaccuracies or misrepresentations. Second, each significant experience within each woman's story was isolated and situated within the sociostructural context of self, family, community, institution, or society. Situating the experience within its sociocultural context is what Ferrarotti (1981) frequently refers to as contextualization. It is also in accordance with suggestions made by Collins (1990), Denzin (1989), and Moustakas (1994) for the analysis of lived experience. As Ferrarotti (1981) explains,

Contextualization occurs when the researcher studies the relationships between the subject's life experiences and his or her primary membership group, his or her community, and also the social, cultural, economic, and political structures in which he or she has lived. (Cited in Bujold, 1990, p. 61)

Situating the experiences within these contexts was helpful in capturing how different contexts influence professional development and the perceptions that result from these experiences.

The third stage in the process was a thematic analysis of each of the appended stories and the researcher concluded with a cross-case analysis, which revealed themes common to all participants. After the transcripts were all analyzed, a summary of themes was prepared that outlined the enabling, disabling, and stabilizing experiences within each context. The stabilizing themes that emerged represent the strategies that the women used to manage their bicultural living conditions and to maintain professional careers in White dominated institutions. The discussion that follows addresses the participants' perception of their marginality, which was found to be a major survival strategy among them, in maintaining what they defined as their equal but different status in the academy. It is important to caution that these findings are representative of the perceptions of the five women studied and should not be generalized to all Black professional women in majority organizations or specifically to all Black female faculty in higher education.

Discussion

Reconceptualizing Marginality

"To study marginality, a researcher observes the formation of the outsider status of these groups, and how they come to define themselves and become defined by others (Wilton and Lawrence, p. 1). One of the most illuminating findings of this study is the manner in which the participants empower themselves through positive self-definition to resist oppressive forces and stereotypical images in the dominant culture. Self-definition for the Black woman is an independent self-derived point of view about the meaning of her realities (Collins, 1990). These self-definitions enabled the women to use African-derived conceptions of them to resist negative evaluations and definitions advanced by the dominant group. The women's positive self-definition was manifested through the concepts (1) creative marginality, (2) cultural identity, (3) safe space, and (4) rejection of external definitions, all of which contributed to their definition of their marginality in White dominated institutions.

Creative Marginality

When participants were asked to comment on their marginality in the White institution, an analysis of their responses indicated that their idea of marginality did not fit the popular conceptualization of the theory. The notion that a marginal individual is one who is on the margin of her two cultures did not reflect the views of the participants. This study found that the participants did not see themselves on the margin of their two cultures but active participants of both cultures. Although they are outside their collegial group within the institution, their active involvement in their academic community, as well as their participation in their Black cultural community, made them central players in both life worlds.

Park (1950) suggests that marginality leads to psychological conflict, a divided self, and a disjointed personality. Contrary to Park's suggestion, the participants define their marginality as a positive attribute. To them, it is a privilege to be marginal. Myra uses the term "creative marginality" to describe her outsider-within stance in the dominant culture. She explained that her marginality allows her to move freely and competently in her various life worlds. Myra used a discussion she had with another Black woman to explain her creative marginality.

I talked to a woman at the ski summit, and we were talking about being in the box or outside the box. She said, her image of herself is standing on the edge of a cube. It's like the box is at an angle and she is standing on the edge as opposed to being in the box; she is dancing on the edge. . . . That's exactly how I like being marginal. That's exactly how I see my marginality. I think being marginal is indeed a privilege. Standing on the edge makes me privy to both my black and white worlds.

Elizabeth also made reference to the box when she noted, "Some people try to put me in a box, but it does not affect what I try to build on; I refuse to stay in a box. I prefer to be outside the box." Being on the edge of the box provides Black women with a special angle of vision from which to watch and learn the behavior of the dominant group. Standing on the edge of the box, as opposed to being in the box, affords the participants the freedom to navigate their various cultural worlds without the constraints of any particular world. Collins (1990) suggests that Black women's outsiders-within position in the dominant culture places them in a unique position in that they have "a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies" (p. 11). As Sara noted, "We know everything about them, and they know nothing about us. Our marginality places us in a very special position." Because of the privilege of know-

ing, watching, seeing, and learning that a position of marginality affords Black women, Collins (1990) suggests that they embrace it and not be restrained or threatened by it.

Stonequist (1961) also suggests that in order for Blacks to be successful, they have to become more like the White man, and it is by trying to equal themselves to the White man that they are thrown in a marginal position. When Jean, an executive officer, was asked about the claim that women in leadership positions must emulate the behaviors of White men in order to be competitive with that group, she remarked,

I couldn't behave like anything other than who I am. That wouldn't be real, and I have a hard time carrying on unreal stuff. That makes me very uncomfortable; I think I can be who I am, but it does not hurt to know how some people might play the game. I think awareness is important, but I don't think I have to emulate anybody's behavior.

Through her watching, observing, and becoming aware of the way the dominant group plays the game, Jean develops her own strategy, based on her self-defined standpoint, for playing the game. By being aware of how others play the game, the participants develop the competence necessary to successfully perform roles in the dominant culture—a major contributor to their positive conceptualization of their marginality in White-dominated institutions.

When Jean was further asked about her marginality in the institution, she responded,

No, I won't allow myself to feel marginal. . . . You don't want to talk to me, I don't want to talk to you, and I mean it. I can keep my distance, and I can sit in a meeting and not say anything and still feel secure about what my real job is. No, I won't allow them to make me feel marginal if that is what they are trying to do. If I ever feel that it is too much, I know how to brush off my vitae and move on.

Consequently, due to current conceptualizations of marginality—inferior, victim, subordinate, psychologically damaged, void of culture—Jean refuses to take ownership of the term as such definitions do not represent her perceptions of herself. Jean sees marginality as something "one allows to happen," and that individuals have the power to allow it not to happen. Jean demonstrates the power to reject stereotypical images that do not fit her definition of herself.

In summary, to be creatively marginal means that the Black woman must develop the expertise to successfully journey to and fro, within, and between her various cultural worlds, although while doing so, she must contend with oppressive forces that permeate society's negative controlling images of Black women.

Cultural Identity and Marginality

Analysis of the women's interviews suggests that the school, with family and the Black community, con-

tributed greatly to building positive definition of the Black self. The Black schools, during the period of segregation, functioned not only as a transmitter of knowledge but had the expressed functions of building self-esteem, self-efficacy, and of preparing students to enter and become successful in the White world. These were accomplished partly through implicit and explicit messages about Black self-worth. Core themes running through the messages that the participants received were that they were just as good as Whites and that their Black skin did not make them inferior. While their Black cultural world was nurturing and accommodating, the White world was not. Consequently, in order to survive and thrive in the White world, the message was they had to be better prepared than their White counterparts. In other words, they had to develop a positive sense of self and a strong cultural identity that would sustain them during their interactions within the White cultural world.

Jean's band director was very influential in the development of her Black cultural identity and self-worth. As she recalled,

My band director was an influence on all of us in the band because he would talk to us about getting better than what we were, but it was always in reference to White people. He always talked about advancing and improving ourselves because we are Black, and you know, we had to be better.

Sara, too, received a similar message from her teachers. As she noted,

Our teachers used to say that we must be better than anybody out there. We just knew that we had to be the best, so we were constantly reminded of that. . . . I grew up in an all-Black community with Black teachers who really talked about how we were just as good as Whites, meaning we were just as smart and just as important as they were.

Parents and community members transmitted similar messages about being Black in a segregated world. Kendra's parents, for example, told her, "You will experience racism and you will be in situations where people will not want to sit next to you. Just remember that you are just as good as they are. The only difference is in the color of your skin."

Although they were confronted with White domination and oppression, African Americans adopted what Collins (1990) and hooks (1989) call a "culture of resistance" in order to create a social reality of Black equality and positive cultural identity. The participants, through implicit and explicit messages from family, community, and school, developed a cultural identity, which formed a lens through which they view themselves in relation to Whites.

Myra, for example, grew up in an integrated community in the Northeast, but she never doubted her

worth as an African American. She attributes this constructed sense of self to her positive interactions within her Black family and community life worlds. She explained,

I was always aware of Black people and White people. I don't think I ever had any identity crisis about who I wanted to be, and I think it's because when I first started growing up in my old neighborhood, all Black folks talked to each other. White people were not people to look up to; they just lived there. They were the other people of society, and as far as I know, had the goodies of society. I always had a sense of difference. I never thought I was the same as them, ever.

Articulating a similar sentiment, Sara said, "I think I absolutely grew up with that very knowledge that I was Black, but I never felt that the Whites were better than us."

These women grew up in nurturing Black environments where Black cultural pride was part of their ancestral and community legacies. They knew that as Black people, they were different from White people. They did not see themselves as inferior to White people, but as different from them, and that the difference did not make them subordinate.

This perception of "different but equal" was found to be critical to the participants' resistance of the negative conceptualization of institutional marginality. Because of their constructed knowledge of themselves and their perception of their worth as Black women, they do not see themselves as being negatively marginal. The marginality that they perceive is one that places them in a unique position and one that affords them the power to maintain their constructed knowledge of themselves. hooks (1984) sees this form of marginality as a subjective space, a site of transformation where Black subjectivity can fully emerge. She emphasizes that there is a definite distinction between the marginality that is imposed by oppressive structures and marginality one creates for oneself.

Park's and Stonequist's notion of marginality exemplifies that form of marginality imposed by the oppressive forces that hooks (1984) speaks of. The findings from this study refute this notion that marginality is problematic and causes psychological conflict. They also refute the popular belief that Black women, because of their underrepresented status in the White academy, are a marginal group. Marginality is a state of mind and can become problematic if one lacks a strong sense of cultural identity. If one is rooted in her culture and has a definite sense of herself and her place in that culture, then she will perceive her marginality as a positive attribute rather than as a handicap (Alfred, 1995; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984).

Use of Safe Space

The use of a safe space was found to be a method by which the women preserve their conception of their marginality when the environment becomes disconcerting. According to Ward (1995),

The safe space serves as a prime location for the Black woman to resist objectification as the Other. In safe spaces, as domination is seldom the prevailing operative, Black women may, theoretically, freely function and do or be that which she pleases. (p. 153)

Ward (1995) also notes that the predominantly White institution does not provide any inside safe spaces wherein Black women are truly free to develop and express their self-constructed knowledge of their Black womanhood. The findings from this study do, however, indicate that Black women were able to identify and access places or people in environments where their objectification as the Other was minimized. bell hooks (1989) refers to these safe spaces as "homeplace." She describes homeplace as

a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and, by so doing, heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. . . . We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole. (p. 42)

Elizabeth, for example, resists institutional marginalization by retreating to the safe place she has created in her home. As she explained,

I won't allow myself to feel marginal. I guess if this meant more to me, if it were my whole life, then perhaps I may have a different view of it; but it's only part of my life. . . . I love my work, but this is not my main life. . . .I am very happy with my family. I have my husband and my daughter and we are very happy; we have lots of fun together. We have a beautiful home to come to. This is not my only reality. When this becomes too much, I can go home and forget it, at least for a while.

Like Jean and Sara, Elizabeth sees Park's and Stonequist's marginality as something you allow to happen. This refusal to be marginal—as negatively conceptualized—suggests a power within to control the definition of oneself. Elizabeth's home and family provide her with a safe space where she can escape others' definition of her marginality. By periodically detaching her professional self from her private self, she protects her definition of who she is as a Black woman, while she successfully navigates her Black family life world and her White academic world.

Kendra, on the other hand, has found her safe space within her church. She is taking care of an ailing mother who lives with her and her two children. She is healing from a traumatic divorce, and these pressures, together with the demands of the academy, make life very challenging for her. She commented,

With all the demands, I am so overwhelmed that I do not have time to think about how people perceive me at the university. Through all of this, my church family is there. My church group consists of women about my age, and everyone is facing some of the same things, either aging parents, divorce, raising our children, meeting the demands of the job, all of those things. The church group has been very good; it has really been good. This is an open group, and we can talk about anything and everything. It has provided me with tremendous support.

While Elizabeth finds her home to be her safe place, Kendra's church has been the avenue through which she can feel safe to explore the challenges that she faces, both in her academic and personal life worlds. Sara's safe space, on the other hand, consists of her childhood home where she grew up within an all Black university community in the South. Going back to her community gives her a sense of wholeness and it reminds her of the support, the love, and the safety she received from the family and community. This is particularly important to Sara as she works in an environment where she sometimes feels like an outsider. As she explained,

I think the times I feel like an outsider are really when I go to meetings in which I don't know anybody else, like some of the committees that I serve on. Sometimes I go, and I get the feeling when I walk in that there is a surprise that I am there. I hear some of the interactions that suggest that some of the other faculty attending these meetings know one another. Those are the times that I feel like an outsider because I don't know anything about them, and they don't know anything about me. . . . When we go home, there is such a feeling of well-being. It feels good to be there. We still know the people, and they know me because of my father. The neighborhood is still predominantly Black. I try to go back to get back in touch with who I am and from where I came.

Sara's early home and community provide a safe environment where she can recreate and solidify her definition of herself which is sometimes challenged by her interactional experiences in the White academic life world.

Retreating to a safe space is a method of resistance Black women embrace to escape forces of oppression prevalent in the dominant society. The immediate and extended family, churches, African American community organizations, and even the individual psyche have been found to be important locations where African Americans retreat to safety. This safe place becomes a house of refuge where Black women can resist objectification as the Other. In this safe place, she can reconstruct any image of herself that has been threatened as a result of her interactions within White dominated institutions.

Rejection of External Definition

The women in this study, through their refusal to accept others' definition of their blackness and femaleness, are breaking down the negative images that

thwart their successful existence in the dominant culture. They define themselves as survivors and their survival depends on their definition of their own identity and on their rejection of stereotypical images of themselves as Black women. Myra, for example, noted,

There is oppression, but my attitude is not victim of oppression but somebody who is privileged to be part of the most dynamic cultures on this planet. My work takes me all over the world, and I think it is a privilege to be competent in all the cultures in which I find myself. Being an African American and having to live this dual life have prepared me for my career as an anthropologist.

The label of "tokenism" has also been ascribed to African American women in the academy because of the small number that they represent (Atwater, 1995b; Finkelstein, 1984; Holder, 1995; James & Farmer, 1993). This perception of tokenism, however, creates problems for the African American woman. Holder (1995), for instance, reports that Whites might expect African American faculty members to be poor performers because of the few African American faculty that exist in the academy. Holland (1989) also notes that the limited visibility of African American women professors may lead White students and White faculty to believe that few African American women are fit to be university professors.

When Jean was questioned about her token status as the only African American dean in the history of her major White institution, she replied,

This notion of being a token, I don't buy that; that doesn't mean people don't see me that way, probably my colleagues, especially here at this university. . . . I have felt they are very lucky to have me, and that's because no one has given me anything. I have paid my dues, and I feel pretty secure about what I do.

Although Jean is the only Black dean in the history of her White research university, she refuses to define herself as a token because of the negative connotation of tokenism. Jean's refusal to allow others' perception of her place within her collegial group to influence her self-definition is a classic example of the women's refusal to be objectified as subordinate Others. Sara, on the issues of tokenism and marginality, also noted,

Oh, I just refuse to be what people want me to be. No, I won't do that. I know a lot of times I don't feel necessarily that I fit in. I am usually the only African American in the various meetings and gatherings that I find myself, here at the university. You almost have to force yourself to stop being self-conscious about that and view it really as their problem. I do not allow myself to be marginalized by this other group because it's their problem, not mine.

By refusing to take ownership of the dominant group's definition of them as subordinates and marginalized others, the women are dismantling the negative images that surround them and are creating

and maintaining their own positive definitions of themselves—definitions that portray the uniqueness of their combined categories, female and Black. bell hooks (1989) asserts,

As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. . . . As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject (p. 42).

This perspective from which the participants view their marginality was found to be a central element in Black women's definition of themselves as survivors with the ability to float in and out of different class and ethnic cultures and still emerge with a strong sense of who they are as Black women. Instead of accepting their marginality as disabling, they either denied being marginal or reconstructed their own definition to reflect positive rather than negative images of their marginal status in White-dominated cultures.

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide empirical evidence to refute the negative conceptualization of marginality. This is of particular importance as such negative views (subordinate, victim, psychologically damaged) are still widely used in today's social science literature and, therefore, influence the way that professional Blacks are sometimes perceived in majority White institutions. The data that inform the marginal man theory tend to neglect the social realities of the members of minority groups. As Wilton and Lawrence (1999) note,

Sources produced by the majority about marginal groups seem problematic in developing an image of the self-identity of minorities. These sources rarely contained direct quotes from the marginal people themselves. Many of these sources seem tainted with particular objectives of emphasizing the difference and inferiority of marginal groups. (p. 6)

It is important, therefore, that existing social science theory must be constantly tested with data from the real world and revised to make it more consistent with current social realities.

The five women who participated in this study refuse to be identified as being marginal according to the current definition of the theory originated by Park (1928, 1950) and later advanced by Stonequist (1961). Park's and Stonequist's theory of marginality conceptualizes Black women as subordinate Others and views marginality as a negative attribute, one that is psychologically damaging to the marginalized individual. In contrast, African American writers have written and theorized about the concept of marginality—one that demonstrates a positive attribute, a privileged position to occupy, and an asset to the management of bicultural lives. However, these positive conceptualizations of marginality are not readily advanced in the social science literature. As Gordon (1992) notes, "Although there exists discourse and literature by African American scholars, they have not significantly impacted the prevailing paradigms and ideology within the scholarly community" (p. 21).

This view of marginality presented here draws from the works of African American writers (Banks, 1984; Collins 1986, 1990; hooks, 1989; Ward, 1995; Willie, 1981) and from the voices of the five African American study participants. Marginality to these African Americans is a positive attribute and one that should be strived for, as it enhances the ability to live beyond the boundaries of race, social class, and culture. Marginality, therefore, promotes bicultural competence. This bicultural competence has been found to be vital to one's successful management of her bicultural existence (LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993; Seelye, 1984). Bicultural competency suggests that the marginal individual has the ability to float in and out of both her Black and White cultural worlds, interact competently with participants of both worlds and still maintains her cultural identity as a Black woman. The power of Black female professionals to develop a bicultural life structure allows them to move freely between the Black and White structures of their lives and to capitalize on the experiences resulting from such interactions. This bicultural competence was found, in the study presented here, to be a key element in maintaining successful careers anchored in White dominated institutions.

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