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Mothering the Mind

Women of Colour Creating Supportive Communities to Increase the Academic Success Rates of Minority Students

Mothering is a central concept in the communal work of women of colour, as they attempt to create and maintain strategies that are designed to ensure the survival of their communities and their people (Hill-Collins, 1987; Edwards, 2000; Gilkes, 1983, 1986; Reagon, 1990). Hill-Collins (1990) uses the term othermothering to define mothering behaviours that exist within the experience of Black women, outside their homes. This mothering is based on responsibility rather than biology (Troester, 1984), extending to the care of blood and nonblood relations (James, S. M., 1993); and informs much of the community work conducted by Black women (Edwards, 2000; Gilkes, 1986; James, J., 1993a; Neverdon-Morton, 1982). To this end, the behaviours that result resemble the extension of nurturing and supportive strategies that are motivated by recognizing a need and mobilizing resources to meet that need. Often the resources are personal to the provider and familiar to the recipient, as is the case of academic mothering, or mothering the mind. According to Omolade (1994), this behaviour often occurs as Black women engage the academy and determine ways to survive and to ensure the survival of their students.

Academic mothering takes the form of informal advisement that may be academic or personal in nature. As practiced by Black women who are faculty, staff and sometimes upper level students it takes the form of support groups or other types of groups where the ultimate goal is assistance towards success and a "passing on" of what is known. Additionally, it may include creation of support systems or organizations that provide venues for students to "exhale" and reach out to others who are similarly oppressed, but who might otherwise not feel empowered enough to transform the setting into that which is positive and supporting. To a certain extent, these women recreate the

academic setting in a marginalized way that allows them to operate within and without the power structure in terms of their own race and gender marginalization (Gathright, 1999).

The work conducted by Black women covers the spectrum of academia, community service, even militancy and extends from their history of voluntary associations and internal helping traditions (Dill, 1979; Gilkes, 1983, 1986; Harley, 1982; Hill-Collins, 1987; Shaw, 1991). Black women as mothers are aware of the social and occupational difficulties their children will face and therefore prepare them for it (Joseph, 1981). As multiple-oppressed citizens (Gilkes, 1986; Grant, 1989; Omolade, 1994; Standley, 1990). Black women are said to possess an intuitive knowledge based on personal experience of living in a society that is dominated by the White male experience. As a result, racist and sexist experiences place psychological and social limitations on the lives of Black women who must devise innovative and empowering means of success or knowledge not only for themselves, but their sisters and children as well.

Many of these academic mothers relive their own prior academic experiences in that of their students, peers or community members as they struggle to meet expectations that they could not themselves meet (James, J., 1993b). As a result, these women provide instruction on the temporary transformations that are necessary to survive and thrive until success is obtained. The similarity of experience occurs as marginalization in what James (1993b). terms a "society and culture where the White European represents both the ideal and universal manifestation of civilization." She states the need to deprogram herself from the effects of "institutional bigotry which relegated Blackness and femaleness to savage superstition, invisibility or exotica and whiteness and maleness to a paragon and the sublime" (119). Given that this is not an atypical experience, it is ascertained that similar versions will be replicated in the academic experiences of Black or other nonwhite students that Black female administrators or staff encounter. The attending knowledge of the past engenders the strategies these women engage as they attempt to ensure a successful progression for their "charges."

Underlying the practice is an assumption of community, familiarity, and similarity that almost assures the provision of services once the need is observed. Reagon (1990) ascribes the term culture-keepers to Black women who engage in community work, in that they ensure the survival of the essence of the experience of their communities. By extension, the practitioners of academic mothering have a similar goal of ensuring survival of the students they assist. There is a sense of familiarity for the student. One male student recalled his early experiences of being nurtured in this way and related his expectation of this familiar behaviour from Black women faculty members. The expectation did not extend to Black male faculty. Additionally, there is the expectation of this behaviour exhibited by how readily it is accepted when proffered to the intended recipient.

Familiarity with the presence of women of colour ushers in an expectation

that they will express mothering types of behaviour to all who are available. Numerous example are provided of Black females in administration (Dumas; 1979; Payne, 1990), academia (Omolade,1994; Andrews, 1993) and other professional settings (Garcia, 1989) who are expected to "mother" everyone in addition to fulfilling the responsibilities for which she is being paid. This role described as resulting in emotional drain when the Black woman professor is called to serve as mentor, mother and counselor to students, and the role is "compounded by the existence of similar demands placed upon Black women by colleagues and administrators" (Andrews, 1993: 190). When these behaviours are not forthcoming the woman may be penalized for not meeting familiar expectations based on the assumption that she and her colleagues have similar expectations of her behaviour in these informal relationships (Dumas, 1979; Omolade, 1994). Therefore, though the behaviours may be viewed as necessary and an extant component of Black women's work in academia, it carries a double cost through lack of recognition and the increased demand it places on their workload. The behaviours may be willingly extended to students, with the knowledge of its cost; however, the extension to empowered others, simply by dint of similarity of location, adds another burden to an already burdensome situation.

The mothering behaviour enters the academy in much the same way that it functions in other settings. The knowledge of struggle necessary to succeed is said to empower practitioners to transform academic settings in ways that engender resistance to the status quo (Gathright, 1999). Bernard et al. (2000) provides a detailed example of academic othermothering which includes first hand reports of students who participated in such an experience.

This paper extends those findings by providing additional examples and subsequently suggesting ways in which the practice may be re-located from its marginal functioning to a component of the retention strategies and interventions that institutions engage to retain minority students. Suggestions are also made for the formal recognition of this behaviour as an example of committee work or other indirect sources of academic commitments that are measured and documented as faculty services to the university. This study presents theoretical and practical examples of the practice, and suggests additional methods of inclusion of this mode of behaviour as a possible component of the academic process with regard to the retention and graduation of minority students.

Process and outcomes

The examples presented are based on observation, participation, and the strategies designed to ensure success of minority students in graduate programs. The behaviours are deemed academic mothering because of the way in which they conform to the definitions provided earlier, as well as the strategies that were utilized. Data was not so much collected as experiences documented for later enunciation and usage in suggestions for intervention design. Instru-

mentation occurs in the form of agendas that were followed towards goals that were inherent (success in the academic programs) or circumscribed (successful accomplishment of particular academically oriented tasks).

As a result, data is provided in the form of narrative descriptions of the strategies as they were experienced, and where possible, results of the success of the strategies are presented.

Example 1: Tuesday Morning Group - Participation

This strategy was implemented by a Latina faculty member after the loss of three minority students in one semester. She conducted meetings with minority students in a graduate psychology program every Tuesday morning from 8:00-9:00am. Students met over breakfast as "in" by sharing concerns or issues related to continuing in the program. The process was unstructured in that topics emerged within the conversations that occurred, or were structured as participants practiced formal presentations or shared information on upcoming assignments. The format remained unstructured in that it resembled a drop in method so there was no specific documentation of the events. However, the experience of the assistance and safe space proved beneficial with regard to ensuring the success of the student participants.

This faculty member, in addition to conducting this group, was also available for informal meetings to rehearse ideas and for assistance navigating the department. Despite her efforts and their effect of increasing the retention of minority students in the department, this service occurred outside her expected duties and was therefore not compensated or documented as faculty work.

Example 2: Dissertation Support Group - Creation

This strategy grew as the result of two Black, female, upper-level graduate students realizing that it was impossible to survive the grueling process of comprehensive exams and the accompanying dissertation process without support. They created a support group by contacting and inviting seven other graduate students to participate. The participants represented six disciplines, all with similar experiences of lack of support within their departments, a need to "exhale" and process their experiences and a commitment to succeed. Participation was structured around an agenda, with each member receiving twenty minutes to present work for critique. Time could be donated to others if necessary. The meetings occurred monthly for four hours with check-ins during the month. A master calendar was created indicating upcoming academic events and assignments for which participants were preparing, wanted support around, or needed feedback or "hand-holding" for in order to be successful. All participants were at the comprehensive exams, thesis or dissertation stage of their programs. The meetings usually began with sharing, giving and receiving of supportive energies, and finally the academic portion. The process continued for over three years.

Example 3: **Canadian Example (Mothering Conference)-Observation**

This example is based on observation of an occurrence of academic mothering at the 1999 Association for Research on Mothering conference held at York University (Mothering in the African Diaspora). A group of African Canadian and African Caribbean graduate students and professors presented a dialogue on their experiences in academic settings as they attempted to pursue their interests in African-centered studies. Their presentation was intriguing because of the similarity in their experiences even though they functioned in different institutions and at different levels. What was evident was the commitment of the professors—particularly Dr. Bernard. This example of academic mothering occurred in the way Dr. Bernard ensured that each student had enough time to present their experiences, and seemed to have personal involvement in their academic lives. She concluded the presentation with the statement "we are able to be effective mentors and othermothers because others have already done it for us ... taking time to develop the brilliant minds of the future is not only a privilege but a responsibility" (Bernard, et al., 2000: 83). The group discussed plans to publish the dialogue in an upcoming ARM volume. Dr. Bernard continued the process by providing support through informal and phone conversations as well as by emails in order to ensure the success of the plans to publish.

Results

Major themes that emerge from these examples are: need, support, and urgency. These examples also engendered products in the form of degrees, articles being published and clearly the retention of minority graduate students who ultimately produced them. Need is the most prevalent theme in all the examples and the preeminent example of women of colour practicing academic mothering. In all cases a need was recognized—for retention, presentation and publication of work and completion of the degree—and resources were developed to meet it. The resources were personal and familiar to all parties. The need for retaining students was addressed in the Tuesday morning group based on recognition by the faculty member. Resources included space to engage in practices that supported students and met the recognized need. Similarly, a need was recognized in the examples seen in the Canadian group to encourage the students' professional growth through conference presentation and subsequent publication of work. This process was necessary but occurred as an example of the faculty member mothering the students from the beginning of the process until its conclusion. The dissertation support group was created based on the need for the student members to successfully navigate the final segment of graduate work.

Support occurred in all cases in a reciprocal manner between students and between students and the faculty/mothers. Actions and gestures including telephone calls, time being given and positive feedback and critiques provide

the examples for this theme. The committed presence of the faculty members in the examples is another aspect of the mothering behaviours described earlier. Support as a theme emerged in observing and participating in these engagements as resources were made available such as time, attention and feedback. Additionally, there was the expectation of support/mothering on the part of the students, which ensured the acceptance of the mothering behaviours and successful result of said behaviours once they were presented.

A sense of urgency permeated these experiences of academic mothering in that the practice occurred in light of requirements for retention, graduation and publication. In academic settings time is often of essence to ensure successful completion of assignments and responsibilities. An added burden to the experience of academic mothering is the implanting of the additional time constraints once the practice of mothering begins. This engenders the sense of urgency to have students prepared for timely submissions of work, publications or timely recovery from any experiences that may slow the process of successful completion of programs. For example, retention of students is successful if they transition through their programs in a timely manner, regardless of any experiences that may prove debilitating thus requiring more time to recover. The sense of urgency is also present in that the academic mothering occurs within the scope of the experience of the academic mother but without the benefit of time formally allocated for the process.

Resulting products from the examples include the retention of all the students who participated in the Tuesday morning group and their successful completion of the graduate degree at the academic institution. The Canadian group continued its discussions after the period in which the observation took place. The process included the provision of support from Dr. Bernard through emails, phone calls and providing feedback. As a result of this academic mothering, at least four students received their first academic publication. The dissertation support group was also successful, and at this writing, all students successfully completed their programs (M.A., M.S.W. and Ph.Ds) with one currently writing her dissertation (she suffered a major car accident and needed to recuperate).

Discussion

These three examples of mothering behaviours occurring in academia and contributing to success for the recipients of the behaviours are more of the norm than the exception. However, these behaviours, due to the marginalization of the practitioners and recipients, receive little or no informal recognition and no formal recognition. Meanwhile, the departments and resident institutions benefit in that they are able to document impressive numbers of minority students who are retained and who successfully exit their programs. The time, effort and resources that are expended not only support the notion that these departments are successful with their minority students but ensure the continued success of students who are lucky enough to find them.

These intentional communities provide strategies that work and ensure the academic survival of minority students who are likely to fail without their presence. This is failure due not to inability to produce work at the level that ensures success, but rather due to the accompanying pressures found in institutions that "practice simultaneous integration and segregation" (James, J. 1993b). Creation and maintenance of these defined spaces involves deconstructing familiarity and similarity in academic settings through determined inclusion, intentional communication and intentional presence.

Determined inclusion of this behaviour may occur as individuals, and particularly students benefit from these 'informal' extensions of care and lobby for ways to make them components of graduate and academic programs where minority students are in attendance. Inclusion may occur as intentional communication and intentional presence. Information concerning these strategies may be communicated through listserves or websites created to contact and communicate with others concerning the presence of this type of 'service' or the need for it. Intentional presence may follow as documented benefits are communicated to those in positions to make the practice of these behaviours less of a burden to its practitioners.

James (1993b) suggests the discovery and exercise of "theory rooted in practice" so that adoption of parameters is more inclusive or attentive to the experience outside of academia. She notes that many paradigms used are those of Eurocentrism, which though supporting a belief structure of White cultural hegemony, is simultaneously embraced by people/academicians who are non-White. The development of theory and movement of this type of Black women's experience "from margin to center," (hooks 1984), and exercising the role of "outsider within" (Lorde, 1984; Hill-Collins 1991), seems to signify a formal means of addressing this need.

Certainly, the examples presented have occurred and continue to do so to the benefit of the students involved and the departments in which they successfully matriculate. The strategies need not be formally defined, but may follow a format that works best for those involved. Formality is needed however in the documentation of the service and the ways in which all parties benefit from its presence. Women of colour engaging in mothering behaviours in academe is not new, which in part, contributes to the assumption of familiarity that makes this type of work seem to be part of the academic landscape of what these women do, how their charges benefit, and how the academic departments ultimately save face with regard to retaining and graduating minority students. Intentional changes are needed since this is yet another component of women's work that is taken for granted because of its familiar presence. Bernard et al.'s (2000) assertion of the position of "privilege and responsibility," coupled with that of Gilkes' (1983) on Black women "meeting community needs as an occupation," supports the recognition of Black women mothering in academia as a necessary component for minority student success, and the need to formally recognize and reward its presence.

Summary

Women of colour create and maintain intentional, supportive academic communities for minority students with a particular purpose in mind, based on a familiar process, and as a means of 'making a way out of no way'. The goal of this creation is the retention and graduation of these students through outreach that is based on a recognized need when no other support is available. In this way they practice mothering the mind (Omolade, 1994), which is the extension of nurturing behaviours into academic settings with students as children who themselves may expect this behaviour from these women. Envisioning this behaviour as mothering the mind, and the concepts of process, rationale and outcomes, involves an attempt to move a familial type of knowledge and practice away from the margin of academic experience. This movement is necessary for women of colour to relocate their methods of primary and secondary interventions from settings on the 'outside', to spaces where their bodies are invited, and where they must therefore make space for the presence of their energies and our worldviews. It is further suggested that given that these behaviours ensure and increase the retention and graduation levels of minority students in predominantly majority academic programs that they should be relocated from marginal existence to being recognized as a retention tool that is necessary for minority students in academic programs especially at the graduate level.

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