Structural Discrimination and Multiethnic/multiracial Professionals: (Un)healthy Communication Practices in Context

Rujira Rojjanaprapayon, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Communication
Graduate School of Language and Communication
National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA)

E-mail: rujira2@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this research report, the researcher examines (un)healthy communication practices found among multiethnic/multiracial professionals, particularly in regard to structural discrimination at the work place. Previous studies on structural discrimination, then, are reviewed; while "autoethnography" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) is employed as research methodology, which focuses on the researcher's personal experiences and the interpretation. Based on the implications of the barriers to minority workers/professors as found by Essein (2003), the researcher's experiences on structural discrimination are revealed, analyzed, and discussed through five major areas as unhealthy communication practices, including: (1) "teaching load and the nature of courses taught," (2) "committee work that is trivialized in tenure decisions," (3) "being left out of the information loop," (4) "failure to credit publications in specialty focus journals as viable scholarship," and (5) "denial of research funding." Finally, recommendations on future studies and public awareness are given.

Remark: This is a revision of the research report that was accepted and presented at the 2005 National Communication Association (NCA) Convention in Boston, U.S.A.

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Introduction

There are more than hundreds of thousands of non-American legal workers and professionals in the U.S. nowadays. Many of them are struggling to deal with latent discrimination against them at their workplace and elsewhere. The present research was conducted by the researcher who was a teaching faculty member at a public university in the U.S. from 2001-2006; he was facing the so-called "structural discrimination" during that time. Therefore, this research was designed to explore and describe this kind of discrimination, by attempting to answer the research question: "What are the characteristics of structural discrimination happening to a non-white and non-American professional in the U.S.?"

In order to answer the research question, the researcher employed "autoethnography" as a research method. In this report, the researcher will start with a review of previous studies, and then a brief overview of the research method. Finally, "Personal Narrative as Data Analysis" will be presented.

Review of Previous Studies

Initially, the concept of tokenism as the first aspect of structural discrimination will be explicated. Then, the concept of structural discrimination will be discussed. Then, a model of barriers as discrimination will be reviewed.

Tokenism and Discrimination at the Workplace

Kanter and Stein (1980) assert that the issue of tokenism and discrimination in the U.S. workplaces is typical and common in saying, "This is a familiar drama performed every day in every place where there are many more of some kinds of people than of others—where some people have an easy time fitting in because they're just like everyone else, while other people have problems because…they are different." (p. 2)

Based on gendered-imbalanced group (male vs. female), Kanter (1977) defines tokenism as the processes involving a clearly definable and seen subgroup consisting of less than 15 percent of the entire larger group. There are other scholars who have followed this maneuver investigating problems of the tokens, especially female employees as well as people of colors, in organizations (see also Brown, M. & Ratcliff, J., 1998; Clarke, L., Pedersen, E, and Wall, C., 1999; Niemann,1999; Scott, 2005; Yoder, J. & Sinnett, J., 1985).

Structural Discrimination

In Pincus' article entitled "Discrimination Comes in Many Forms: Individual, Institution, and Structural" (1996), three types of discrimination are defined,

> Individual discrimination refers to the behavior of individual members of one race/ethnic/gender group that is intended to have a differential and/or harmful effect on the members of another race/ethnic/gender group. Institutional discrimination, on the other hand, is quite different because it refers to the policies of the dominant race/ethnic/gender institutions and the behavior of individuals who control these institutions and implement policies that are intended to have different and/or harmful effect to minority race/ethnic/gender groups. Finally, structural discrimination refers to the policies of dominant race/ethnic/gender institutions and the behavior of the individuals who implement these policies and control these institutions, which are race/ethnic/gender neutral in intent but which have a differential and/or harmful effect on minority race/ethnic/gender groups (italics added). (p. 186)

According to Pincus (1966), "dominant" refers to "groups that have most of the power in the society" (p. 187) and "minority" refers to "groups that lack power; it does not refer to groups that are small" (p. 187). Pincus (1996) explains further the essence and consequence of structural discrimination, saying, "Structural discrimination is a more controversial but also more fascinating concept to discuss because it involves behavior that is race and gender neutral in intent"(p. 191). For example, if a budget problem occurs, the social welfare for poor people of color might be cut. This could be considered structural

discrimination because there are other things to be cut, such as the number of new fighter jets.

According to Pincus (1996), this kind of argument must be considered thoroughly because "the issue for structural discrimination is whether the goals of the race/gender-neutral policies are worth the negative effects." (p. 192) He also adds,

> Although all three types of discrimination are still serious problems, it is harder to deal with structural discrimination than with the other two. After all, structural discrimination is not intentional and it is not even illegal; it is carrying on business as usual. Confronting structural discrimination requires the reexamination of basic cultural values and fundamental principles of social organization. Isn't that what education is supposed to be all about? (p. 192)

Structural Discrimination: Visible and Invisible Barriers within

In Essein's (2003) article entitled "Visible and Invisible Barriers to The Incorporation of Faculty of Color in Predominantly White Law Schools," the author posits that barriers exist, saying, "In 21st-century America, most minority law professors are likely to experience any or all of these visible and invisible barriers to incorporation" (p. 69). Two types of barriers, then, are discussed: visible barriers and invisible barriers. Visible barriers include: (1) being told directly by a senior colleague to withdraw one's candidacy for tenure, (2) periodically receiving hate mail without administration intervention, (3) being physically shoved aside to prevent one from claiming the chair of a committee, (4) being told by the administrator that they do not want to let the minority professor have career development.

According to Essein (2003), invisible barriers are defined as "subtle and indirect actions and omissions that undermine personal and professional development of minority law professors," including: (1) "dubious teaching assignments whereby minority professors are asked to teach low-status courses like legal writing," (2) "being burdened with committee work that is trivialized in tenure decisions," (3) "being left out of the information loop," (4) "failure to credit publications in specialty focus journals as viable scholarship," (5) "being denied consideration for hire or promotion simply because of one's minority status," (6) "failure to mentor minority law professors," (7) "the delay or denial of research funding, and encouraging visiting faculty to teach courses in competition with courses offered by the minority law professor" (pp. 68-69). This description will be used as a framework for my personal narrative.

Essein (2003) also provides the implications of such barriers. They include:

(1) too little qualitative change occurring in the life of the minority law professor;

(2) individuals in the dominant group refusing to relinquish their position of power, preference, and advantage voluntarily;

(3) difficulty for the minority law professor to speak up when faced with a barrier to incorporation, when this tyranny of silence is real and one who attempts to rock the boat is promptly and firmly sanctioned;

(4) the irony of, silence does not benefiting the minority law professors; to the contrary, when minority law professors suffer indignities in silence, they are perceived as vulnerable and susceptible to attack; and

(5) the creation of parallel institutions (in the form of conferences and organizations) has helped to combat the feeling of isolation and offer a forum to promote scholarship and pluralism in the legal academy. (p. 70)

All in all, the author concluded that racism became the center of all barriers to incorporation.

Methodology

In this section, information about autoethnography will be presented, including: (1) the nature of autoethnography, (2) autoethnography as a method, and (3) the implications of autoethnography.

The Nature of Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography in two ways: (1) as a report on one's personal life in the form of a story (p. 737) and (2) as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). Autoethnography is known by many other names, such as personal narrative, narrative of the self, personal experience narrative, personal ethnography, and lived experience (see also Personal Narrative Group, 1989, Richardson, 1994b, Denzin, 1989, Crawford, 1996, and Van Maanen, 1990); currently, autoethnography has been used as the "term of choice" when researchers refer to their works that are

involved with their personal lives and cultural issues (Ellis & Bochner, pp. 739-740).

Autoethnography as a Method

Scholars have developed a variety of methodological strategies for doing work in autoethnography and include them in the area of qualitative research; they name such strategies as systematic sociological introspection, reflexive ethnography, and narrative inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; see also Ellis, 1991b, and Bochner, 1994). For example, in reflexive ethnography, the researchers create works which reflect their own personal experience in order to pinpoint how their experience "illuminates the culture under study" (Ellis & Bochner, p. 740).

The Implications of Autoethnography

Autoethnography has been known in other fields as a form of narrative, which is a mode of inquiry. In the Communication field, as well, narrative is considered a mode of inquiry because "social science texts [have] needed to construct a different relationship between researchers and subjects and between authors and readers"; therefore, narrative inquiry is seen as "stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into questions" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 743-744).

Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that such narrative may be called "evocative narrative." They explain the characteristics of this narrative genre as follows:

> [T]he word evocative contrasts the expressive and dialogic goals of this work with the more traditional orientations of mainstream, representational social science. Usually the author of an evocative narrative writes in the first person, making herself the object of research and thus breaching the conventional separation of researcher and subjects (Jackson, 1989)…; the mode of storytelling is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature; the accessibility and readability of the text repositions the reader as a coparticipant in a dialogue and thus rejects the orthodox view of a reader as a passive receiver of knowledge…." (p. 744)

Therefore, they conclude that evocative narratives "activate subjectivity and compel emotional response…" and are "to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions…." (p. 744) Hence, the data used in this type of research are drawn from the researcher's personal experience.

Personal Narratives as Data Analysis

In this study, based on Ellis and Bochner's (2000) perspective on autoethnography, the researcher offers his personal narrative as data analysis to reveal the barriers or the unhealthy condition as "structural discrimination" he encountered in U.S. academia during the years 2001-2006, including: (1) "teaching load and the nature of courses taught," (2) "committee work that is trivialized in tenure decisions," (3) "being left out of the information loop," (4) "failure to credit publications in specialty focus journals as viable scholarship," and (5) "denial of research funding." Consequently, the personal pronoun "I" is used throughout the analysis.

Teaching Load and the Nature of Courses Taught

I was told to teach all service courses by a senior colleague because that colleague said that it would be good for my profile. This means I was supposed to teach three service courses: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication, Introduction to Group Communication, and Public Speaking while other colleagues were not asked to. In my first two years, I taught more than seven different courses, but I was never given a chance to teach any public speaking classes because this course was reserved for senior colleagues who would get more money during summer time. Therefore, whenever the discipline asked who would like to teach Public Speaking, as the only major class offered in Summer, I passed all the time to avoid conflicts that may have arisen.

Also, I learned from another colleague that my workload at that time was for two faculty members, not for only one: Human Communication Theory, Intercultural Communication Theory and Research, Organizational Communication Theory and Research,

Interpersonal Communication Theory and Research (or Introduction to Interpersonal or Introduction to Small Group Communication), and two other team-taught classes—Introduction to Speech Communication and Senior Seminar. Evidently, there were two faculty members in rhetorical studies and one in media studies who taught fewer courses than I did.

Committee Work That Is Trivialized in Tenure Decisions

I was assigned to be a member of several committees in my second and third years. I was lucky enough that my immediate supervisor told me to be on only one in my fourth year. Later, I learned that the tenure committee did not care about committee work and they did not even consider them as "service" a part of my tenure file.

Being Left out of the Information Loop

This was very true in my case. At my workplace, there was a social gathering for the faculty and staff (mostly for the faculty, I would say). This event was supposed to be at a residence of a faculty or staff member, voluntarily, on every Friday when school was in session.

At the gathering, the faculty and staff mingled together and shared informal information; therefore, if one was a regular participant, he/she would not miss much information and would be considered a member of the group.

Most regular participants were white Americans and they enjoyed drinking. Whenever I participated in the event, I always found that I was left out because I did not drink, I did not share the same interests with them (e.g., American jokes—and I did not think I needed to be like them) and evidently I was not American enough for them. Even though they would enjoy the Thai dishes I brought there because I was a good cook, I never felt I was becoming an in-group member.

Because I was left out, I found that I missed some certain information that would be known first in the group, such as rumors about administrators and any grants that would be available for the faculty. They did not know (or did not want to know) that being different is difficult, and they never cared except to pay lip service. I was just there as a token for their efforts towards diversity.

Failure to Credit Publications in Non-American (or Non-European) Journals/Sources as Viable Scholarship

This was a distressing phenomenon to me because I had more than four publications in English in such sources, and I learned that two senior colleagues refused to credit those publications because those works were published outside the U.S., particularly in Asia, arguing that they did not know the local editorial procedure. However, I learned that another faculty member (she is a European) in another discipline had her publications in a European country in a European language, and was successfully promoted for a full professorship. To me, this was a double standard, because they played down the significance of non-American/non-European publications.

Denial of Research Funding

In 2003, I submitted three proposals on Thai Communication related topics to three different sources in the whole university system, which contained at least four campuses. All of them were denied. At least one comment from a committee asserted that my proposal on Thai communication did not deserve the money because the topic was deemed not important enough and Thai people were not considered relevant in the U.S. Midwest. I was stunned.

Conclusion

In this autoethnography report, my experience as a non-white, non-American teaching faculty member at a public university in the U.S. Midwest has been addressed. The solutions of the problems are not given because the problems have not been taken seriously by the other party and they were not illegal in nature. However, this struggle may last as long as racism still exists in the U.S., obviously and latently.

The implications of this study in Thai context may be related to legal non-Thai workers, particularly those who are from developing countries and are not Western expats. These workers are in the lower levels of the social structure and have no voice in their organizations. Future research on this area is strongly encouraged by using various methods such as critical ethnography and network analysis.

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