

## Catalyzing Research on Geographies of Broadening Participation, AAG / NSF program.

### Briefing Paper, Shangrila Joshi Wynn, March 17, 2012

*A brief note before you read my briefing paper:*

*I wish to apologize for 1. Sharing my briefing paper at a much later than recommended date, and 2. For the fact that the paper is not as refined and does not have as many references as I would like. Due to unforeseen circumstances, I have had to write (most of) the briefing paper at a hospital in India where I do not have access to the world wide web. Hopefully what I say here makes sense, and I look forward to further refining the paper after receiving feedback from you at the retreat.*

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My areas of specialization in Geography (political ecology, global environmental politics, environment and development) do not engage with issues of diversity in higher education including in Geography and related disciplines. Therefore, rather than bringing perspectives from my specific sub-fields in Geography to this project, I draw upon my personal experiences from everyday life as a graduate student in Geography and Environmental Studies. I will make an effort to place these experiences in the context of relevant literatures from interdisciplinary fields, including the broader subfields of critical and cultural geography. Two key concepts I want to focus on are: standpoint epistemology – an approach developed originally by feminist scholars in the discipline of sociology, and racial micro-aggressions – a concept that originated within the field of clinical psychology. I was never exposed to these concepts in the classroom. I was exposed to them in informal conversations with colleagues from various disciplines, particularly in my work with the Alliance of Graduate Students for Diversity. They spoke to me because they resonated with my personal experiences, particularly those of marginalization, as a female graduate student of color who was also a new mother and a student of foreign origin. I think there is tremendous potential to develop a research agenda that applies these two concepts in a place-based framework that seeks to examine the climate of diversity in (institutions of) higher education. This research agenda would in the long term, contribute to an emerging field of study referred to as critical studies of the university. I therefore envision this research agenda as one that explicitly acknowledges and critically examines issues of diversity and equity within the space of the US university in general and the Geography department within it in particular.

#### **Standpoint epistemology**

“We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppressions.”

– Combahee River Collective (in Harding, 1993, 62)

Standpoint epistemology is a form of knowledge creation based on personal experience. This approach to theorizing has been originated and developed particularly as a feminist methodology in Sociology, but I believe its value and applicability extends to critical and cultural geography as well. The crux of standpoint epistemology is twofold: one, that valuable knowledge can be

generated from the experiences of everyday life; and two, that the everyday experiences of marginalized lives provides a crucial entry point to producing such knowledge. It needs to be emphasized that these stories do not necessarily constitute knowledge in and of themselves – standpoint epistemology does not assume the unique ability of the oppressed to produce knowledge – but rather they provide the grounds for such knowledge, or a starting point in the form of generating new and critical questions for research on not only their own lives but the relationships between themselves and others – questions that simply cannot arise from the vantage point of the experience of those of dominant groups (Harding 1993).

In the context of the landscapes of diversity in higher education, starting with the experiences of various ‘diverse’ students – underrepresented and marginalized groups such as students of color, international students, female students, LGBTQ students, students with a disability, or others – provides a unique vantage point to start a research agenda about the campus climate for diversity in various institutions and disciplines, or in higher education in the US in general. This starting point can then lead the way for a critical examination of dominant institutional and cultural beliefs and practices in higher education – including those of progressive and well-intentioned diversity administrators – that systematically (albeit possibly unwittingly) disadvantage and marginalize underrepresented students. This approach is inherently geographical as knowledge is produced on the basis of an individual’s specific geographic location within the landscape of diversity in higher education or a particular institution.

### **My standpoint in brief**

My awareness of my identity as a person of color developed towards the end of my time as a graduate student. An engagement with a graduate student group called the Alliance of Graduate Students for Diversity was crucial to this emerging awareness. The most important contribution of this awareness has been to understand my marginalized experiences as part of a systematic marginalization of students of color / underrepresented students in US institutions of higher learning that are designed for the success of straight white upper / middle class students. It was a relief to learn that I was not alone in my experiences of isolation and feelings of inadequacy as a graduate student that I had harbored for many years.

It is true that graduate school can be a daunting and humbling experience, even for the best among us. But this is even more so for some of us, who may not quite feel at home in this environment, or may not be or feel fully accepted for a number of reasons. As a bike-rider, I like to use the analogy of driving an automobile versus a bicycle on the road to explain my graduate school experience, where the space of the road represents the landscape of an institution of higher education. Those who ride bikes on the road are particularly more vulnerable to the usual risks of traveling, and can simultaneously be more invisible to the more powerful participant on the road. Designated bike paths provide more security to bike-riders, just as institutional support systems specifically designed and created to enhance the success of underrepresented students would to these students. Likewise, the safety of the bike-rider is also in part dependent on everyone – including bikers and car-drivers being informed and educated about the rules of driving and sharing space on the road. This translates to the importance of all students – including dominant as well as marginalized groups – being informed of their rights and obligations associated with sharing the space of the university.

Much of the work of the Alliance of Graduate Students for Diversity included organizing events on campus designed to create a supportive space for the social and professional development of graduate students who self-identify as underrepresented or marginalized. By providing a supportive space, the Alliance sought to help build community and to serve as a source of strength to members of the underrepresented graduate population on campus. But our outreach efforts were only marginally successful, I think in part because most people including underrepresented students, do not feel comfortable confronting issues of diversity and in acknowledging or talking about experiences of marginalization. Some events created opportunities for individual stories to be shared, and I often found myself thinking that more people – including members of dominant and underrepresented groups – need to hear these stories of marginalization.

### **Racial Microaggressions**

The term microaggressions was a very empowering one for me to be exposed to. It helped put into context a lot of my experiences with student and faculty members in my departments that often left me feeling unworthy and rejected in interpersonal interactions. The term microaggression originated within the discipline of social psychology to identify incidences of subtle and ambiguous forms of discrimination, insult or invalidation experienced by people of color in everyday life. It is understood that acts of microaggression are often perpetrated unintentionally by people who would describe themselves as non-racist and supportive of multiculturalism (Sue et al, 2007). Examples include being told that because I was from South Asia, I was more inclined to expect rote learning rather than critical thinking in grading papers as a TA; or being told that certain research topics were off-limits to me because I would have difficulty getting access to research subjects; being told my English was really good for an international student; being given no clear reasons (or given contradictory reasons) for why my proposals to teach courses as a graduate student instructor were rejected in favor of others, etc.

As a leading member of the University of Oregon's Alliance of Graduate Students for Diversity in 2010-11, I conceptualized and organized a one-day symposium on the topic of microaggressions that I had become exposed to within the previous year. Because I had no academic background in these areas, I enlisted the help of faculty members and groups on campus to conduct the symposium titled 'Naming and Disrupting Microaggressions'. The symposium included presentations, a faculty panel discussion, an interactive skit and opportunities for audience members to share their stories.

This event created a space for graduate students from underrepresented groups – particularly students of color – on campus to share their experiences of facing racial and other forms of microaggressions during the pursuit of their graduate education. The event was open to all, so it was eye-opening for many audience members to learn about the negative experiences students and faculty members of color faced on an everyday basis (based on feedback). The goal was to educate and empower members of underrepresented populations to be able to name these experiences and to have them validated through acknowledgement of and dialogue about the reality and existence of such behaviors, even in an institution that explicitly values diversity. I wanted to organize this event in my role of Alliance Leader and Diversity Fellow during my last year as a graduate student, because learning about this concept was a validating and empowering

experience for myself after many years of life as a graduate student in a predominantly white environment.

## **Research Questions**

I am hoping that through this initiative (GBP), I could participate in a collaborative research project that explores the nature of experiences of students and faculty members of color within the discipline of Geography or in a broader context of higher education. In my view, the idea of recruiting diverse members to the profession and beyond is a desirable goal, but often institutional efforts to attract diverse candidates are not matched by comparable efforts to create the conditions within which these diverse people may flourish.

Research has also shown that the assessment of the performance of students of color by their professors and research supervisors are influenced in part by their own assumptions about the students in question due to cultural and racial differences. If these research findings are true, then at least two things need to be addressed to ensure that the diverse candidates – that institutions are now so desperately seeking to attract and retain – have successful academic experiences in these institutions: 1. research needs to be done to identify the nature of challenges that different categories of underrepresented students face in pursuit of academic success and excellence, and steps that can be taken to alleviate these challenges; 2. Members of the dominant (White, male, etc.) population in institutions of higher education need to be aware of (1) and they need to receive training in how best to engage with diverse populations. In other words, the rules of the road they are sharing with other members. At least, members of underrepresented student populations should receive protection from discriminatory behaviors from members who hold power over them – professors, research supervisors, writers of letters of recommendation, etc. so that the former's success during and after the pursuit of their education is not unfairly hindered by racial biases on part of the latter.

Research – including within Geography – has shown that underrepresented populations including students of color in the discipline have a distinct set of experiences, and they face a distinct set of challenges that impede the pursuit of academic success. I am aware of some research that has been done on the experiences of women of color in Geography, for example in Volume 13, Issue 1 of the Journal *Gender, Place and Culture*, published in 2006, authors Laura Liu, Audrey Kobayashi, Minelle Mahtani and Rickie Sanders address these issues. In addition to identifying strategies for success of women of color in Geography such as seeking interdisciplinary collaborations, these authors seek to emphasize how institutionalized racism and sexism contributes to undermining the efforts institutions make in diversifying their student and faculty bodies. For the discipline of Geography to be introspective about its potential complicity in advancing inequality is therefore important. In particular, concern about scholarly complicity with perpetuating in everyday life the very injustices critical scholars seek to examine in their scholarship is one that will be crucial to address in order to confront institutionalized forms of marginalization within higher education.

My previous research and academic study has not looked into these areas, but I have an emerging interest in pursuing work in this regard. I would be most interested in doing so in collaborative projects. In particular, I would be interested in qualitative research projects that

seek to understand the experiences of marginalized members of the Geography academic community, and to seek ways in which marginalizing experiences can be minimized. Creating the conditions within academia where minority and other underrepresented groups can flourish to the best of their abilities, I believe, is one of the most effective ways to broaden participation from these groups.

Some tentative questions I would be interested in examining are as follows:

1. How do cultural constraints impede student success in various underrepresented categories, including international students, students of color, etc.?
2. What forms of support are available to underrepresented groups and which of them have been found to be especially effective in helping students thrive?
3. What is the role of groups such as the Alliance of Graduate Students for Diversity in contributing to the wellbeing of marginalized students? How do these groups originate? Why do some groups thrive and not others?
4. Why do diversity efforts tend to focus on recruitment and not as much on retention?
5. Why do institutions seek to diversify? Who is expected to benefit from such diversification and why?
6. Is it possible for critical geographers and other similar scholars focused on theorizing and advocating social justice in the outside world to be oblivious to their own complicity and engagement with forms of microaggressions in their interpersonal interactions within the ivory tower? Why, how and how to address it?
7. What forms of support might the AAG provide to underrepresented members in various institutions of higher learning, particularly in those with low critical mass? (a pool of diversity mentors, for instance)

### **Works cited**

Harding, Sandra. 1993. Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is “Strong Objectivity”? In *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff, Elizabeth Potter, eds. Routledge.

Sue, Derald Wing, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin. 2007. Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4): 271-286. Accessed from: <http://pages.uoregon.edu/omas/articles/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life.pdf>