

Chapter 7

Teaching Up: Female Sociologists Teaching About Privilege

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ABSTRACT

In the current political climate, racial, gender, and sexual differences are controversial topics, particularly on college campuses. This illuminates the need for increased focus on these issues in college classes. Although the literature on teaching about privilege is small, it is dominated by the voices of White faculty and almost completely focuses on racial issues. Marginalized faculty are rarely heard in this literature for our intersectional understanding of teaching about oppression and inequality. This chapter explores how female faculty (who also identify as working-class, queer, or as racial minorities) experience teaching about privilege. It builds an understanding of issues surrounding teaching about inequity from an intersectional perspective and moves the focus beyond tenure-track faculty. It expands an understanding of the experiences of faculty within the classroom and provides ways to support marginalized faculty in their teaching. Although the faculty interviewed here are sociologists, there are broad implications for teaching across disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

The lack of diversity within the professoriate is an acknowledged problem (Moody, 2004; Ndandala, 2016). As the student body becomes increasingly more diverse, these changes are not reflected in the faculty. Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) shows that 77% of full-time faculty are White, with only 8% identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander, 5% identifying as Black, 4% identifying as Latinx/Hispanic, 4% as nonresidential, 2% as unknown and less than 1% (.5%) as Native American. The picture is similarly bleak when exploring full-time faculty with tenure. A full 83% are White, 7% are Asian or Pacific Islander, 5% Black, 3% Latinx/Hispanic, 1% nonresidential, less than 1% unknown, and less than half a percent Native American.

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Furthermore, according to IPEDS, in fall of 2007 women were 42% of full-time faculty and only 34% of full-time faculty with tenure. Women who identify as racial minorities are underrepresented in academia across all institutions (Kelly & McCann, 2014). In order to create institutions that attract a diverse student population and more importantly, to facilitate a learning environment that is inclusive, welcoming, and engaging for those students, the author argues that a diverse faculty is needed.

Empirical evidence illustrates that, particularly on predominantly White campuses, minority students experience a sense of isolation (Harpalani, 2017). While diversifying faculty is not the single solution to increasing diversity and inclusion, it is a vital step. Moreover, Ferber, Herrera, and Samuels (2007) posit “If racism, sexism, and homophobia are the result of a process of socialization, then mounting a public argument for equality and social justice from a forum such as the classroom can theoretically challenge students’ racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes, and potentially evoke individual transformation and effect social and political change” (p. 521). The respondents from the study presented in this chapter utilize their classrooms to evoke social change and advocate for social justice and their successes create more space for diversity and inclusion in the campuses where they work.

The literature on challenges faced by women faculty discusses sexist environments, gender inequity, having higher teaching and service loads than male counterparts due to the perception of women being more nurturing, and lack of mentoring (Kelly & McCann, 2014). The literature on faculty of color primarily focuses on issues of isolation, tokenism, and tenure (Pittman, 2010; Stanley, 2006; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008). As teaching is central to faculty experiences in higher education, similar attention should be focused upon faculty experiences within the classroom.

It is clear that women and faculty of color are more harshly criticized by their students in relation to their male White counterparts (Bavashi, Hebl, & Madera, 2010), but how does that play out in the learning environment? To explore this question, this chapter focuses on how women sociologists teach about privilege in their classes. Messner (1996) introduces the idea of “studying up” which “in sociology . . . refers to studying ‘up’ in the power structure” (p. 222). This concept led the author to the reframing of marginalized faculty, including women, teaching about privilege as “teaching up.” Although Tomlinson (2012) outlines how to “Teach Up for Excellence,” that concept focuses on how to help underserved students. In contrast, the focus here is on the experiences of teaching as a minority to the dominant group in line with Messner’s idea. The scholarly knowledge regarding teaching about privilege is incomplete. Most has been published by those in the dominant group. Much less has been written by those from marginalized statuses and most of the research focuses exclusively on issues surrounding race. There is a dearth of research on teaching about privilege beyond race, and there exists an intersectional understanding of teaching about oppression and inequality.

This chapter explores how women sociology faculty’s position in social groups relates to their students’ perceptions of them and how this may affect their teaching strategies. Sociology faculty were chosen because of the pervasive focus on privilege and inequality in sociology classes. Data was drawn from a subset of semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty-five faculty from a variety of social groups and diverse institutions who occupy a range of professional statuses from adjunct to tenured. The data in this chapter focuses only on those who identified as women (n= 15) to address the research questions:

1. What is the experience of women sociologists as they teach about privilege?
2. How does the meaning-making of their experience vary across different intersecting social identities?
3. How are these experiences and meanings reflected in their teaching practice?
4. What implications do these findings have for retention and support of marginalized faculty?

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