May 27, 2014

**A Black Female Professor Struggles With 'Going Mean'**



*Image: Jon Krause for The Chronicle*

By Deidre L. Redmond

On two occasions recently, I have heard an African-­American female professor described as "mean" or "difficult" or someone who takes herself too seriously.

The first case involved a colleague who had been invited to join a trip overseas that was to be led by an African-­American professor. While my colleague got along well with the trip leader, other faculty members had told her the woman was "difficult."

Not long afterward, I spoke with a student who told me she was having a similar problem with a different African-American female professor. This professor came across as overly authoritative, frequently reminding the class of her status, the student told me: "She wants us to know that she is the professor and we are the students." Apparently the professor was clear about the distinction between students and professors, and gave students specific instructions to address her as Dr. So-and-so.

By the time I heard the second complaint, I had nearly completed my first semester as a faculty member, and better understood the dynamics facing African-American female professors. I am willing to guess that the trip leader who was described as "difficult" had reached a point where she was fed up with her students’ and colleagues’ constantly questioning her and, in response, developed a tough skin and a cold disposition.

I took a moment on the last day of class to be candid with the student who had complained. I referred back to a lesson about health disparities and health behavior that I had used in my medical-­sociology class. "Remember what we learned earlier this semester about health behaviors?" I asked.

I had taught my students that one erroneous argument about the cause of health disparities among socioeconomic groups is that poor people do not care about their health, and therefore do not exercise or eat healthy foods, etc. That theory is sometimes used to explain why those in lower socioeconomic positions have shorter life expectancies and are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses. I explained that we see the problem as what is immediately visible to us—the health behavior of poor people. However, if we use our sociological imaginations, we can consider how socioeconomic differences create differences in opportunity (for a healthy diet and exercise) that then produce differences in health behaviors.

The student nodded in agreement. Similarly, I continued, we may take issue with what is immediately visible to us about this professor—her cold disposition.

"You are looking at a manifestation of a larger problem of race in institutions of higher education," I told the student. The behavior of the overly authoritative professor was a symptom of being devalued and disrespected by students and colleagues, I said. While unfortunate, I assured the student that such dynamics were part and parcel of the minority and female academic experience. My student then used her sociological imagination to describe how this woman’s place in history had probably played a significant role as well. She said, "Yeah, this woman started in the 1970s. It must have been really tough being a black professor then." I was satisfied with her use of the sociological imagination and ended the conversation by confirming the astuteness of her insight.

I was truthful with the student about how being a black academic is an uphill battle (something I first saw while teaching in graduate school). Indeed, I almost made the decision during that first semester to "go mean" on my own students. I told her that I had felt I was at a crossroads—frustrated about being devalued by my colleagues and disrespected by my students. I had an internal conversation about whether I would continue to be my jovial self or purposefully be cold and differentiate myself from my students and colleagues. However, such behavior would be only a symptom of a larger problem that I was having as a minority female professor. And if I had decided to act coldly, I would merely be seen as "difficult" or as having an "attitude."

Some minority professors  
are so overwhelmed that they turn cold and, dare I say it, angry.

On one hand, we forget that white privilege gives certain groups (in particular, white males) immediate merit and authority. No one questions their authority or whether they deserve their status in the university—or anywhere else for that matter. On the other hand, we forget that minorities and women, especially minority women, are not granted authority even after earning a doctorate and being hired in a very competitive academic market. It is an uphill battle for authority; they must prove their merit. For women and minorities, it is a frustrating process, and feeling as if they don’t have the same status creates distance between them and their colleagues and their students. I believe that helps explain why some minority professors become so overwhelmed that they "go mean." They become cold and, dare I say it, angry.

After having been a professor for just a few months, I understand how this could happen. It’s a symptom of years of devaluation and disrespect.

At times I have feared that  
the "mean professor" was a reflection of my future self.

Although at first I did not identify with the "mean" African-American female professor, at times I have feared that I was staring at a reflection of my future self.

Now, when I become overwhelmed by this pattern, I set clear boundaries that indicate I am the authority figure. Of course, I do not say to my students, "I have a doctorate, and I am running the show." I use more subtle messages to indicate that I am a warm person—I will help you if you need it, and my office door is open—but also that I am in charge of this class. Whether they think I deserve to be in this position is another matter. I deal with this issue by doing the best job I can, and working hard to be prepared for every class so students do not have any grounds to question my professionalism.

Yet I see the benefit of going mean. It creates a distance that inhibits questioning a professor’s authority or devaluing that person. But I prefer to use other strategies to create a comfortable learning environment and an appropriate distance between myself and my students.

I have decided against going mean.

Deidre L. Redmond is an assistant professor of sociology at Murray State University.

<http://chronicle.com/article/A-Black-Female-Professor/146739/>