"Learning the Ropes"

A Black Feminist Standpoint Analysis

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Anyone who has assumed a new role in an organization has experienced organizational socialization, the process by which an individual enters and becomes integrated into organizational settings. Often referred to as "learning the ropes," socialization is an inherently communicative process because newcomers rely on formal and informal communication to help them make sense of their job and their work environment (Jablin, 1987). To reduce uncertainty about their role, newcomers acquire information and insight from numerous sources (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, orientation programs, employee manuals, clients, managers, training sessions, and staff) within the organization.

Studies on these information sources and socialization in general date back to the 1950s when researchers studied ways to transform a new employee into a responsible organizational citizen (e.g., Berlew & Hall, 1966; Hughes, 1958; Van Maanen, 1976). Most of these works reflect a strong managerial as well as patriarchal bias because they sought to predict and control employees' behaviors for the sake of the organization. The following quote captures this sentiment: "Put bluntly, new members must be taught to see the organiza-

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resources for criticizing prevailing knowledge claims, which tend to be based on the lives of men in dominant races, classes, and cultures (Harding, 1991, 1997; Rixecker, 1994). These knowledge claims usually depict women and other marginalized persons (e.g., men of color) as "other" or "outsider."

Feminist standpoint theory endorses allowing women, as "others," to speak from and about their everyday experiences in order to discover aspects of the social order that have not been brought to light. Like all feminist efforts, standpoint theory demands that we identify instances of domination and patriarchy. For example, we can scrutinize women's lives for instances of oppression and exploitation. We then can see how hegemony pervades social relations, and we can make recommendations for changing these conditions.

Hegemony refers to taken-for-granted societal assumptions that lead people to believe that hierarchical relationships are normal and natural (Conrad & Poole, 1998). Conrad and Poole explain.

As people internalize the values and assumptions of their societies they also internalize its class, race, gender, and ethnicity-based hierarchical relationships. In contemporary Western societies educated Anglo, middle- and upper-class men traditionally have been (and often still are) assumed to be superior to everyone else. (p. 349)

Members of organizations (including those who are oppressed and exploited) tend to behave (consciously and unconsciously) in ways that perpetuate these patriarchal assumptions and hierarchies.

Feminist standpoint theory does not essentialize the category "woman." Rather, it advocates incorporating viewpoints of a variety of women across the multiple contexts that women occupy or encounter (Harding, 1991). Thus, it responds positively to lingering criticisms that feminist projects focus mainly on white, middle-class women without considering other women's experiences. Moreover, standpoint theory places primacy on the role of context in building theory: "Context matters because it shapes the way we construct reality" (Rixecker, 1994, p. 124). Therefore, as they construct theory, researchers should consider the impact of political and historical contexts because efforts to create knowledge are never apolitical or ahistorical. For instance, as Rixecker (1994) points out, "Race, sex, gender construction, class, and sexuality all play a role in the creation of epistemological [ways of knowing] stances" (p. 128).

Feminist standpoint theory "refers to historically shared, group experiences..." (p. 375; see also Wood, 1992a). As it requires researchers to seek women's accounts of their everyday lives, it compels them to con-
textualize their studies and to seek commonalities among group members' experiences.

Feminist standpoint helps us to accomplish feminist goals of emancipation and social change. For example, we can identify acts of resistance. As we study women's ways of knowing and being, we can provide insights for where, what, and how to change existing practices. Equally important, this type of work validates experiences and feelings of similar "others." When we invite marginalized others to tell their stories, we can help them to free themselves, to raise their consciousness.

I focus on the standpoint of black women. However, I advocate studying any group of persons that society tends to marginalize. I concentrate on black women because I am a member of that group and therefore can offer personal reflections. I believe that we need to detect distinctions among various racial and ethnic groups of women, as opposed to viewing them as monolithic. Because they are simultaneously members of two traditionally disenfranchised groups, black women may enact the role of "outsider" differently than white women (Bell, 1992; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; hooks, 1989, Houston, 1997). They may experience power and domination based on their gender, their race, or both of these socially constructed aspects of their identity. Their unique social position allows them to identify patterns and behaviors that dominant members cannot readily discern (B. Allen, 1996).

As more women and men of color and white women enter the workforce and ascend organizational ranks, we need to study how they learn the ropes in order to understand what succeeds and what fails. Studying black women in academia might provide insight about how to develop practices that welcome persons of color and empower them and value their contributions. We also can provide examples of resistance and emancipation to black women and other marginalized persons.

**ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION**

In this section, I provide a historical overview of literature on organizational socialization. Because this area of study abounds with essays and research projects, I cannot offer a comprehensive review (see Jablin, 1987). Rather, I highlight work that relates explicitly to this chapter.

As I noted earlier, research about organizational socialization originated in the organizational sciences when investigators studied how organizations could transform newcomers into productive employees (e.g., Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). These projects tended to view newcomers as passive, blank slates on whom organizations could write whatever script they desired. They relied on an anthropological model that analyzed organizational newcomers similarly to how one might study infants in societies (Bullis & Bach, 1989b).

They viewed socialization as a linear, one-way transfer of information from the organization to the employee. Moreover, they concentrated on socialization outcomes, such as employee commitment, communication competence, job satisfaction, absenteeism, and turnover. Thus, early investigations tended to be prescriptive and biased toward management.

Jablin (1987) presents an overview of socialization literature that focuses on communication. He portrays socialization as a developmental, ongoing process. Following the tradition of early writers, he divides the process into stages that he labels anticipatory socialization, assimilation, and exit (Bullis, 1993). According to this model, vocational anticipatory socialization occurs throughout childhood as we receive messages about occupations and careers from various sources (e.g., family members, teachers, peers, and the media). The next stage, organizational anticipatory socialization, occurs immediately prior to assuming a new organizational role and includes recruitment and interviewing. Within the assimilation stage, Jablin distinguishes between socialization (i.e., how the organization attempts to influence newcomers and individualization (i.e., ways that newcomers adapt to their roles).

According to the literature, upon entry into a new role, a newcomer experiences an encounter, or "breaking in," period and "metamorphosis" (Jablin, 1987). During the encounter period, incumbent members send the newcomer ambient (implicit, indirect) and discretionary (explicit, direct) messages about job-related role skills as well as organizational and group norms and values (Comer, 1991; Jablin, 1987; Louis, 1980). In addition, the newcomer seeks information or feedback about his or her performance or about unclear or ambiguous information or events. The newcomer may encounter surprise if his or her expectations fail to correspond with reality (Louis, 1980). He or she may also experience role ambiguity (i.e., confusion about job requirements or lack of information regarding his or her role; Katz, 1977).

The literature characterizes metamorphosis as a time when the individual tries to become an accepted, participating member of the organization. The newcomer "acquires organizationally 'appropriate' attitudes and behaviors, resolves intra- and extra-organizational role conflicts, and commences efforts to individualize his or her organizational role" (Jablin, 1987, p. 694). He or she begins to use, accept, and internalize organizational rules and norms. During this time, a newcomer may try to modify others' expectations of him or her. In addition, the newcomer may attempt to change informally accepted values and norms (Jablin, 1987; Miller & Jablin, 1991).

Many scholars have criticized aspects of Jablin's model and the work that he reviews (e.g., B. Allen, 1996; Bullis, 1993; Bullis & Stout, 1996; Clair, 1996; Smith & Turner, 1995). For instance, the literature tends to assume a universal experience of organizational socialization. As Bullis and Stout (1996) observe, this act of universalizing privileges white men's experiences and positions. Jablin's model also implies that all newcomers have access to
similar information sources. On the contrary, women and other marginalized persons often are excluded from formal and informal networks that comprise important, powerful socialization resources.

Critics also note that the literature continues to be biased toward organizations (B. Allen, 1996; Bullis & Bach, 1989b; Clair, 1996; McPhee, 1986; Smith & Turner, 1995). Consequently, although projects increasingly turn to newcomers for insight about socialization, a need persists to examine socialization from the individual’s perspective. Organizational socialization literature also is biased toward dominant cultural constructions of reality. The literature does not explicitly acknowledge the inherent hegemony that pervades socialization processes (B. Allen, 1996; McPhee, 1986). Regardless of newcomers’ gender and racial identities, power distinctions obviously influence socialization processes as organizational actors contend with systems of hierarchy, competition, authority, and territoriality. Rarely do researchers seem to recognize that organizational settings usually reflect the dominant culture’s norms, attitudes, and values. Yet, as a black woman professor of organizational behavior observes, “Organizational cultures—large scale, hierarchical, white, and male-dominated—have their own set of norms, traditions, and values and, in the extreme, are prototypes of the Anglo-Saxon tradition and the Protestant Ethic” (Bell, 1990, p. 465). Therefore, the “appropriate” socialization attitudes and behaviors that researchers study usually parallel those of the dominant culture.

Moreover, the literature does not give adequate attention to contextual variables that may affect socialization processes. Research usually does not address historical, political, or local circumstances that might influence newcomers’ realities. For instance, empirical studies usually provide only cursory information about research sites and participants, rarely identifying respondents by gender and/or race (e.g., Bullis & Bach, 1989b; Miller, 1996; Miller & Jabin, 1991; Morrison, 1993; Stohl, 1986). In addition, theoretical essays seem to refer to a monolithic, universal “organization” (e.g., Jabin, 1987; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). A need exists to situate and analyze socialization studies according to historical, societal, and organizational/institutional factors that may influence how organizational members interact with one another. As one example, we need to consider sociohistorical factors such as sexism and racism that reflect historical power relations in Western societies.

To conclude, even though recent socialization studies have sought to understand the newcomer’s perspective and experiences, several needs persist. Research needs to delve more deeply into individuals’ experiences; to study the socialization experiences of marginalized persons; to identify instances of patriarchy and domination; and to assess the influences of sociohistorical and organizational contexts on socialization practices. This chapter addresses these needs. As I discuss next, the everyday experiences of black women faculty in predominantly white universities demonstrate alternative or deeper issues regarding socialization processes.

BLACK FEMINIST STANDPOINT ANALYSIS OF LEARNING THE ROPE

The newcomers to whom I refer are black women in occupational roles historically reserved for white males. Although I focus primarily on black women faculty or graduate students at white universities, the discussion also applies to other situations in which black women and other marginalized persons assume nontraditional positions (e.g., top-level corporate executives or high-ranking administrators). These types of hires depart from traditional practices in which recruiters sought an employee who fit the “ideal” of the vacant position. Employers usually based their ideals on race-, sex-, and class-derived prototypes of who “belonged” in which types of jobs. Thus, employers placed white men in high-level positions of power, while they relegated black women to less subservient roles. As one consequence, black women are among the lowest-paid workers in the United States (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996).

However, contemporary organizations are increasingly hiring black women for nontraditional roles, in part as a result of affirmative action initiatives (or other laws and institutional mandates). Consequently, black women frequently enter workplace roles that they previously have not been welcome and where governing ideologies generally have ignored their existence or have viewed them pejoratively. These and other sociohistorical factors place black women in a distinct social location that may affect their socialization processes in ways that most researchers do not seem to have considered.

To explore how sociohistorical and contextual factors influence socialization processes, I describe and analyze “micropractices”—daily, mundane occurrences in organizational life (Mumby, 1993b). Rather than attempt to cover the range and complexity of socialization processes, I focus on assimilation, or what happens after an individual enters a new role. In addition, I discuss newcomers’ interactions with significant others in their immediate work environment, as opposed to organization-based initiatives (e.g., orientation programs or employee manuals, newsletters, and memos). Interpersonal interactions with others (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, clients, students, and clerical staff) provide the primary means by which newcomers attempt to learn their role and to reduce uncertainty (Jabin, 1987; D. Katz & Kahn, 1978; R. Katz, 1980). Other persons provide cues that give an individual a sense of achievement and competence (or failure and incompetence; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

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I concentrate on two broad aspects of assimilation: newcomer treatment (how others interact with the newcomer) and newcomer sense making (the ways that the newcomer attempts to cope with the challenges that she faces). I refer to role-sending and role-taking concepts that Katz and Kahn (1978) describe in their model of an organization as a system of roles:

Each person in an organization is linked to some set of other members by virtue of the functional requirements of the system that are heavily implemented through the expectations those members have of the person; he or she is the focal person for that set. An organization can be viewed as consisting of a number of such sets, one for each person in the organization. (p. 220)

Within this system, role-set members communicate to the newcomer their expectations regarding the newcomer's role. As the newcomer processes these messages, she engages in role taking.

To portray everyday micropractices, I refer to a variety of sources, including my experiences; data from my research projects on women of color faculty and graduate students of color; essays and research projects by and/or about black women or other women of color; and anecdotal data from some of my friends and acquaintances. To adhere to an important tenet of feminist standpoint theory, I offer examples from numerous individual women to tell a collective story, to describe common experiences for members of this particular group.

First, however, to further contextualize the discussion, I offer a bit of autobiographical data (see also B. Allen, 1995b, 1996, 1998a). I am a black, heterosexual, middle-aged woman who was born and raised by my mother in a single-parent home in a working-class black community in Ohio. Currently, I am an associate professor of communication at a large, predominantly white, Western research university. I have worked at this institution since 1989, when the university hired me as a tenure-track assistant professor. Prior to that, I was an instructor in the Comprehensive Sciences Department of the School of Liberal Arts at a black university in the eastern United States. At that time, my area of study was computer-mediated organizational communication. A couple of years ago, I added race, ethnicity, and feminism to my research interests. I am the first and only person of color faculty member in my department, along with only one graduate student of color, a Chicana. The university recruited me based partially on state and institutional directives to hire minorities, as well as concern about public image and funding. I believe that members of my department also valued my expertise in computer-mediated communication. When I came to the university, I was one of only three black women faculty who were tenured or on the tenure track.

Newcomer Treatment

When a newcomer enters her role, numerous sources within the organization provide information about job-related skills as well as organizational and group norms and values (Comer, 1991; Jablin, 1987; Louis, 1980, 1990). In addition, members of her role set consciously and unconsciously convey their expectations of her (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Miller & Jablin, 1991). During formal and informal communication, other persons transmit discretionary (explicit, direct, intentional) and ambient (implicit, indirect, pervasive) messages to the newcomer (Jablin, 1987). Miller and Jablin (1991) state that, "These messages to newcomers constitute efforts to engender (1) a sense of competence in the task role and (2) a sense of acceptance into the work group/organization" (p. 92). Members of the role set transmit prescriptions and proscriptions that reveal what they expect of the newcomer (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Although the literature tends to presume relatively equal treatment for newcomers, one's identity as a black woman in a nontraditional role can influence her interactions with veteran members of the organization. Members of her role set may not interact with her based strictly on their expectations of her position, or role, as the literature implies (see Katz & Kahn, 1978). Prejudiced individuals who do not welcome a black woman's presence and who want her to fail may give her erroneous or misleading information, if any. Because of institutional sexism and/or racism, white people may apply different standards for evaluating a woman of color. As one consequence, they may provide nonproductive feedback. For instance, they might be more concerned with her personality than with how well she does her job (Cox & Nkomo, 1986). Or, because of fear that the black woman may think that they are patronizing, sexist, and/or racist, white people may refrain from sharing useful information or productive criticism.

In general, the white people with whom she interacts (e.g., coworkers, administrators, supervisors, managers, clients, students, staff, and community members) will have had fewer experiences with blacks than she has had with whites. They will be unaccustomed to dealing with black women in positions of authority. Because many whites do not have a "socially cognitive framework based on authentic contacts with black women, they can easily base their perceptions of them on negative stereotypes and assumptions" (Dumas, 1979, p. 124). These perceptions can influence communication processes.

Prevailing stereotypes and assumptions frequently emanate from various sociohistorical images of black women, some of which I describe and discuss below. White people (and persons of color) may rely on centuries-old pejorative images of black women as blueprints for interacting with us (Dumas, 1979; Hoke, 1997; Orbe, 1998; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Although I refer to
these stereotypes under separate headings, they can occur simultaneously. Furthermore, some of the examples can apply to more than one stereotype.

Stereotypes

Beneficiary of Affirmative Action. Organizational members often perceive a black woman to be an affirmative action hire, someone recruited strictly to meet policy requirements (Hine, 1997). Sometimes they view minority women as “token” because they can be counted for their gender and for their race or ethnicity (Benjamin, 1991). This perception frequently accompanies a belief that the newcomer is not competent. When they enter the academic world, black women confront the long-standing presumption of white male intellectual superiority and its accompanying belief that blacks are intellectually inferior. Assuming that black women are affirmative action hires fuels this conviction. A. Allen (1994) explains, “Black women, like black men, are often presumed to be at the bottom of the intellectual heap. Employing us is perceived as stepping over the deserving in favor of the least able” (p. 192). Research reveals that while faculty and students often assume that faculty of color are under- or over-qualified and/or were hired to meet quotas (James, 1994; Kossek & Zonia, 1994). These false perceptions may restrict whites from accurately perceiving black women as competent colleagues or teachers. They also might induce hostility and distrust, as well as opposition (Essed, 1991).

Through subtle and blatant communication, other persons display these attitudes toward black women. For instance, when I was first hired, a faculty member in my department was overheard telling a group of students that I was not qualified, that I had been hired only to meet a quota. In addition, a black male faculty member from another department told me (during a reception for new faculty of color) that someone in my department said I was not a good writer (see B. Allen, 1995b). A black woman law professor recounts her experience as a graduate student preparing to enter the job market: “A white male professor told me that as a black woman I would have to “pee on the floor” at job interviews not to get hired” (A. Allen, 1994, p. 186). Black women researchers report comparable experiences. One participant stated, “My appointment was seen as an affirmative action hire. People did not expect me to be successful. But I was. Some were actually rude enough to tell me so—thinking it was a compliment” (as cited in Moses, 1989, p. 14). A second woman said,

I was treated most graciously when I came to campus—many people in my department breathed a sigh of relief that they had “gotten one.” So the pressure was off. But on the other hand, I have been insulted, treated with arrogance and a sense of superiority, especially by white males. (as cited in Moses, 1989, p. 14)

Thus, wherever a black woman turns on campus, she may receive messages from (or endure interactions with) colleagues, students, and staff that implicitly or explicitly question her right to be in her new role. As one writer observes, “Black women have their credentials tested over and over again” (Moses, 1989, p. 11).

Some persons may challenge her based on her chosen area of study. Peoplo often assume that a black woman’s scholarship focuses on race or gender. This stereotype probably stems from the notion that people of color are responsible for studying these topics and that we are not qualified to study other disciplines. If she does focus on such issues, a black woman may endure disparaging and discouraging interactions because others may view her work as inconsequential and marginal (B. Allen, 1995a; Benjamin, 1991; Burgess, 1997; Cox & Nkomo, 1990). If she has chosen a more “mainstream” discipline, people question and negate her capabilities to succeed. Black women in the life and physical sciences are particularly vulnerable to these types of attacks (Essien, 1997; Henry, 1994).

Black women faculty report that their white students (especially males) frequently challenge and disrespect them, thereby ignoring the hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship in favor of white/male dominance over black/female (Benjamin, 1991; Burgess, 1997; Moses, 1989; Pope & Joseph, 1997). One of my friends who teaches at a predominantly white university explains,

I experience students ignoring their own cultural hierarchy (for authority) when it comes to me as an African American woman with a Ph.D. They feel they can follow the dictates of white superiority when it comes to me. They are always the supreme authority and are always worthy of being in control.

For example, when one black faculty member first began teaching college in 1976, a young white male student asked her, “What gives you the right to teach this class?” (A. Allen, 1994, p. 183). Unfortunately, contemporary students also engage in such disrespectful behaviors. A research participant reported that a student told her, “You are here because of affirmative action” (Pope & Joseph, 1997, p. 256). Another respondent indicated that a student told her that he did not want a “colored” teacher (Pope & Joseph, 1997).

Black women graduate students have described situations in which professors seem to acknowledge them and value their input only during discussion of diversity issues; otherwise, they feel silenced and invisible during classroom discussions (B. Allen, 1998b; Sandler, 1986; Zapper & Stansbury, 1987). For instance, teachers exhibit negative nonverbal cues such as rolling their eyes or sighing when students of color speak about their concerns (e.g., course materials and topics that do not reflect their cultural ideologies or their existence). Graduate students experience other forms of ethnocentrism and
patriarchy: A black woman in her early 40s told me that one of her white male graduate professors told her that she was inarticulate, that he could not understand her speech. Yet this woman is an independent consultant who is much in demand for motivational speaking. Proud of her hard work on a challenging project in an engineering graduate program, a young black woman I know was crushed when her instructor chided, “You should do your own work.”

Staff members sometimes display prejudicial attitudes and behaviors toward black women (Benjamin, 1991). A new assistant professor of history told me that several white men in her department would not speak to her when she encountered them in the hallway or on campus. In addition, they showed favoritism to her white male office mate, who also was a new assistant professor. He could give the office staff work (e.g., tests to be typed) at the last minute, and they immediately would complete it. The staff members told her, however, that she had to turn in her work at least 3 days in advance. It seems that the office staff took their cues about discriminatory treatment from faculty and administrators.

Token. Organizational actors enact stereotypes when they seem to regard a black woman as a token, someone who represents her social category. They identify her as a symbol rather than as an individual. Tokenism can lead to performance pressures because organizational members evaluate the person more closely than they do nontokens and then generalize to other persons in the same category (Kanter, 1977). For example, one research participant—a black professional woman—recounts an interaction with her white supervisor:

“I hope you make it.” Emphasis on you. And I told my new supervisor right then and there, I stopped her in her tracks and I said, “What do you mean? I detect some sort of implication here regarding the pronoun you. I don’t feel that you’re addressing it singularly, but plural. And there’s nobody here but me and you.” (St. John & Feagin, 1997, p. 193)

The supervisor replied that a black person had never “made it” in the role.

Tokenism also can elicit role encapsulation, in which dominants distort the token’s characteristics to fit stereotypes, thereby limiting the number and types of roles that the token may assume (Kanter, 1977). Viewing a woman of color as an expert on race and/or gender relations represents a common example of this mindset. This may produce limited opportunities for career development (S. Collins, 1989, 1997; Igen & Youzts, 1986). For instance, in corporate settings, executives often restrict blacks to human resources jobs or delegate them to cultural attaché roles (e.g., community liaison or urban affairs) as opposed to more powerful positions (S. Collins, 1989, 1997; Tucker, 1994).

In academe, other people routinely and frequently consult black women faculty members on racial or gender issues (Hoke, 1997; McKay, 1997; Moses, 1989, 1997). When I was first hired, some of my colleagues consulted me for advice about how to handle black students in the classroom, and they requested me to give guest lectures about race and gender (even though my area of study at that time was computer-mediated organizational communication). Although service is a defined component of my academic role, I received many more requests to serve on university committees than my two white female peers did. I believe that I was invited to serve on these committees to be the spokesperson for blacks, people of color, women of color, and/or white women. Often, chairpersons from other departments invite me to lunches or dinners with minority faculty job applicants. Once, the university president invited me to accompany her to a meeting with minority community leaders in the nearby big city (see B. Allen, 1993b, for additional examples).

Members of an organization may believe that a black woman’s only role is to be an expert on issues of race. Once, a white male student dropped my introduction to organizational communication class after the first session because, he said, he had already fulfilled the college’s ethnic studies requirement. I had made no references to ethnicity during my opening remarks (see B. Allen, 1998a). Similarly, as I noted earlier, graduate students report that their professors and classmates expect them to provide the minority perspective on course materials, even as they question the students’ intellectual capacities (see Bata, 1997).

Mammy. In addition to regarding black women as tokens, members of organizations often expect them to assume nurturing, caretaking roles that are reminiscent of the black woman’s role as mammy in early U.S. history (Dumas, 1979; Hoke, 1997; Mulhudd, 1994; Omoiade, 1994).

Whether she likes it or not, the black woman has come to represent the kind of person, a style of life, a set of attitudes and behaviors through which individuals and groups seek to fulfill their own socio-emotional needs in organizations (Dumas, 1979, p. 123).

Consequently, members of the organization may expect her to be a mother confessor, to provide comfort, and to advocate for the oppressed. Moses (1989) reports that black women often seem to spend more time than their white counterparts discussing personal issues with students (see also Benjamin, 1991; Burgess, 1997; Hoke, 1997; McKay, 1997; Moses, 1997). As McKay (1997) points out, “Students (even white ones) in need of counseling on academic issues as well as psychological ones continually appear on the doorstep of the black mother, the great bosom of the world” (p. 21).
My experiences strongly support the preceding points. Students in my department, as well as students of color and women students from other departments, frequently seek my advice and comfort regarding their concerns about discrimination or other personal problems. Some of my white colleagues have asked me how to deal with problematic black students. When I first arrived at the university, a member of the Black Student Alliance asked me to be their adviser.

*Matriarch.* Black women also may face the stereotype of matriarch, an aggressive, overbearing individual. Sociological studies by Prasler (1939) and Moynihan (1965) spawned this caricature by offering the derivative label of matriarch to a society that devalues powerful women or blacks (Mullings, 1994; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Research shows that some persons may believe this stereotype. For example, white college students rated black women as more confrontational than white women (Weitz & Gordon, 1993). Similarly, white professional women viewed black women's conflict-management styles as more confrontational than white women's (Shuter & Turner, 1997). A tall, soft-spoken black woman graduate teaching assistant whom I know received negative evaluations from a couple of white males in her class; they described her as intimidating and loud.

**Power Plays**

Although power dynamics thread through the examples that I have already described, I include this separate section to depict blatant exemplars of the ways that incumbents wield power over black women newcomers. These interactions reflect historical relations of group power and dominance.

When I was hired, the chair of my department at that time (three men have chaired the department during my 9 years here) warned me that I would be asked to “sit on every damned committee.” He knew that many members of the university actively were trying to address “diversity” issues and that they would view me as an “expert.” He gave me an “out” by telling them that he did not allow me to sit on external committees. I appreciate that he was looking out for my welfare, but I believe that he was demonstrating a patriarchal attitude. In a protective father role, he did not seem to consider that I was an adult who had her own ideas about service. One of the reasons that I accepted the position was because I saw the dire need for more women and people of color at the university, and I wanted to be an active agent for social change (see B. Allen, 1998a). I wish that he had invited me to discuss how I felt about service and then advised me about how to negotiate service roles so that I could accomplish my personal goals as well as meet the department’s expectations regarding research and teaching. Given the university’s mission to increase and value diversity, such a discussion might have been productive for both of us.

Power dynamics also arise when a couple of department chairs, the dean of my school, the chancellor, and the president of the university “invited” me to be a member of a variety of university committees. These committees ranged from those that specifically dealt with diversity issues to others for which I believe I was expected to fulfill the role of token. From their positions of power, these persons probably did not stop to consider that I might be overwhelmed with requests to serve or even that I might not have been qualified to provide the perspective that they desired. This tendency among persons in power positions to expect oppressed people to shoulder the burden of addressing diversity symbolizes their privilege and status:

> Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to reach the oppressors their mistakes. . . . The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their actions. (Lorde, 1984, p. 114)

As my tenure case worked its way up the university hierarchy, the chair of my department at that time asked to meet with me. Speaking on behalf of the dean, he offered me 2 more years to “prove myself,” because, he said, the dean doubted that my case would succeed. It seems that he did not think that evaluators would view my research record favorably. He thought that I had spent too much time on service, perhaps to the detriment of my research endeavors. Thus, they would grant me 2 additional years to redeem myself. I refused the offer.

Like this chairperson, the white people that a black woman encounters probably do not even think twice about how they interact with her: “The power imbalance is reinforced, as blacks tread lightly, carefully, and whites comfortably go about their business. The powerful can choose what they wish to ignore” (Thomas, 1989, p. 284). The powerful also can choose how they behave toward the powerless, as the following example from a black woman faculty member illustrates: “An eminent white scholar with whom I was dining suddenly took my chin into his hand to inspect my face. He told me, approvingly, that I resembled his family’s former maid” (A. Allen, 1994, p. 187). The fact that he was comfortable touching her face without her permission reveals his patriarchal position as starkly as his patronizing comment does. White persons often feel comfortable touching a black woman’s hair (particularly when it is in braids or some other nonmainstream style). In addition, white men routinely invade black women’s office spaces or interrupt their conversations (see McKay, 1997, p. 14).

Students also engage in power plays, as the following anecdote illustrates:
A white male student informed me that at the beginning of the course he had often been angry at many of the things I had said, and that he had considered confronting me and "punching" me in the nose several times. When he told me the story he was congratulating himself on not having taken such drastic action. (A. Allen, 1994, p. 146)

This woman’s story is not an isolated incident. A research project on black women and student harassment reveals that the typical harasser was a white male (Pope & Joseph, 1997). Students’ behaviors ranged from verbal comments (e.g., “Bitch, go back to Africa”) to physical attacks. One woman shared the following:

After reading his grade, the student lunged out of his seat, threw the chair on its side, and shouted very loudly, “I don’t want that grade. You can’t teach. You black women are not qualified; you are here because of affirmative action. I’m going to see that you don’t get tenure.” He then stormed out of the room. (as cited in Pope & Joseph, 1997, p. 252)

Another professor reported that a white female student tried to persuade her peers to write negative evaluations of her teaching. A friend told me about a black woman faculty member who was asked by a white male student, during class, “How would you feel if someone called you a ‘black bitch’?”

A final way that dominants engage in power plays is through sexual harassment. One woman reports that her adviser kissed her on the mouth (A. Allen, 1994). When a professor friend of mine wore a T-shirt decorated with figures of African women, a white male professor commented, in front of staff members, “If you shake your breasts, it would look like those women were dancing.” Other black women report that white male students made sexual advances toward them (McKay, 1997; Moses, 1989; Pope & Joseph, 1997).

In sensitive or patronizing comments or requests

This final category encompasses types of comments that others make to black women. On top of the interactions that I have described, these add insult to injury. The following incidents typify others’ assumptions about black women and their lives. A graduate student I know described her interaction with a white male professor during an orientation session:

[The professor said] “Wow! To be black and a woman getting your Ph.D.” Then I believe he commented that my family must be proud. . . . Not only did he lack political correctness and social grace, but he also (1) had no concept of the fact that I had just come from a university where seeing a black woman with a Ph.D. goes completely unnoticed because that is just the way it is (and is supposed to be) and (2) had no way of knowing whether every person, both male and female, in my family held a Ph.D.

An attorney friend of mine cannot count the number of times that a white person has said, “Why did you decide to become a lawyer?” Similarly, people often tell a young black woman graduate student I mentor, “You don’t look like an engineer.” A white male asked a black woman branch bank manager (the only person of color among 12 managers) to wear a blond wig (i.e., play the part of the buffoon) in a skit. A white woman faculty member told a black woman that she might be happier if she “returned” to a historically black college: “My Ivy League graduate training, my colleagues told me, would make me a ‘queen’ at a historically black college” (McKay, 1997, p. 14). Another black graduate student describes her first meeting with her temporary adviser:

After telling him that my interest was in African American women, ethnic identity, and organizational communication, the discussion moved to issues of career planning and life in academia in general. He proceeded to tell me that because that I was (1) black, (2) female, (3) had interest in feminism, and (4) tall in stature, that I might have a hard time in the field because people (translation: white folks) would be intimidated by me.

Houston (1997) discusses three types of insensitive statements that white people sometimes make to black women: “I never even notice that you’re black”; “You’re different . . .”; and “I understand your experience as a black woman because . . . sexism is as bad as racism, I watch ‘The Cosby Show.’” (or) “I’m also a member of a minority group” (p. 192). As Houston explains, these types of statements erase or diminish a black woman’s ethnic cultural experience.

To summarize, a black woman newcomer endures a complex variety of treatment from incumbent members, many of whom may interact with her based on stereotypes, from positions of power, or both. As a result, a black woman may find herself responding to a series of stereotypical projections rather than being able to establish herself as a vital member in the organization. On the one hand, members of the organization seem to value her for nurturing behaviors and for representing the “minority” voice, but only when they ask for her perspectives and advice. On the other hand, they may question whether she is competent to be an intellectual, a scholar. Consequently, black women may experience a type of role ambiguity (confusion about requirements or lack of information regarding the role) that the literature does not describe (e.g., D. Katz & Kahn, 1978; R. Katz, 1977).

As she endures all sorts of subtle and blatant forms of prejudice, sexism, and racism, and provides a variety of services that her job description does not include, a black woman tries to make sense of the multiple and sometimes
conflicting messages that bombard her. In their discussion of role taking, Katz and Kahn (1978) propose the concept of received role, the newcomer's "perceptions and cognitions" of what members of her role set have communicated to her. This received role strongly influences how the member performs her role and how she perceives her competence and value to the organization. Next, I discuss potential sources of stress regarding their received role that confront black women as they engage in making sense of their socialization experiences.

Newcomer Sense Making

Socialization researchers have acknowledged that newcomers experience conflict and stress as they attempt to assume their new role (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Miller & Jabin, 1991). As Van Maanen and Schein (1979) observe, "Individuals undergoing any organizational transition are in an anxiety-producing situation" (p. 214). Newcomers usually try to reduce this anxiety by learning the functional and social requirements of their new role as quickly as possible. They work actively to make sense of the situation and information that they receive or elicit (Weick, 1995).

The naturally stressful position of newcomer probably is more pronounced for black women. Many of them undergo constant inner struggles as they endure the types of interactions I described earlier, as they try to learn their role, as they conduct job-related tasks, and as they fulfill external obligations. Next, I describe some of the major sources of stress and conflict that black women may experience as they receive role information and engage in the role-taking process. Again, although I divide these into topical headings, the issues may overlap.

Potential Stressors

Seeking Information. A primary way that newcomers strive to reduce uncertainty about job-related skills and group norms and values is by seeking information rather than waiting for others to provide it (Conrad & Poole, 1998; Katz, 1985; Miller & Jabin, 1991). Therefore, socialization researchers often study newcomer information-seeking behaviors (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1985; Comer, 1991; Louis, 1990; Miller & Jabin, 1991; Morrison, 1995; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). These researchers report that newcomers employ a variety of strategies to obtain information from such sources as the organization itself (e.g., employee manuals or training sessions), coworkers, managers and supervisors, social networks, or mentors.

Miller and Jabin (1991) offer a theoretical model of factors that affect newcomers' information-seeking tactics. They describe some of these tactics (e.g., direct questions, indirect questions, disguising intent, surveillance, observation, and disclosure), and they provide propositions about how newcomers enact them. They contend that newcomers often are aware of costs or social exchanges that embed information-seeking behaviors. For instance, newcomers express concern about "bugging" coworkers or eliciting social disapproval. Miller and Jabin further posit that newcomers are more likely to ask direct questions when they feel comfortable approaching a source or when they feel that little chance exists for "losing face" or being embarrassed. They hypothesize that the higher the level of uncertainty, the more a newcomer engages in information-seeking behavior. In addition, they argue that individual differences (e.g., self-esteem and tolerance for ambiguity) may influence newcomer behaviors. Finally, they note that contextual factors, such as the type of socialization program, can also affect newcomers' information-seeking behaviors (see also Miller, 1996).

Social conditions also might influence black women's information-seeking behaviors.

Acquiring role information is particularly challenging for many black women because, in general, they have limited career opportunities, experiences, and interactions in high-status positions through which to learn role requirements sufficiently well. They are particularly vulnerable at work when entering newly acquired positions where they feel pressured to perform, in order to compensate for both their race and gender, before learning sufficiently the formal and informal roles. (Bell, 1990, p. 475)

Aware that others might use stereotypes to perceive and evaluate her behaviors, a black woman may hesitate to seek information directly, not only because of how others might judge her but also because she feels responsible for representing others like herself. A senior vice president of a large finance firm explains, "When they put you in a job, you feel as if you are carrying the future of any black person or any woman in this role forever" (as cited in Tucker, 1994, p. 62). A black woman may fear that others might offer her misinformation because they want her to fail. Her white coworkers may feel competitive and threatened by her presence because they believe that she will reap benefits that they will not because of her perceived "twofer" status (Benjamin, 1991). Thus, a black woman may be especially conscientious and cautious about whom to ask, what to ask, and when to ask for information.

When I became a tenure-track professor, I did not anticipate the complexities of the role. Accustomed to reading a situation and quickly assimilating, I felt frustrated and confused as the intricacies of my role emerged. I was ambitious and likely to ask questions directly. However, in this new context, I
proceeded cautiously. Acutely aware of my “first and only” status, I rarely asked direct questions or sought help. Instead, I paid close attention to my colleagues and how they enacted their roles. Although I was friendly with my colleagues, I rarely consulted them about how to do my job (even though some of them routinely approached me for advice about race or gender issues or computers).

Mentors and sponsors are particularly important sources for learning the ropes in complex roles such as faculty or executive positions. Some research shows that black women are not as involved in mentoring relationships (Benjamin, 1991; Justus, Freitag, & Parker, 1987; Moses, 1989). However, Thomas (1989) found that black women frequently participate in developmental relationships with other women, but rarely with white men. In most contemporary university settings, as well as in the corporate world, white men usually are the main persons positioned to mentor black women newcomers. Because of homophily (a tendency to develop relationships with others like oneself), white men and black women might not easily develop mentoring or apprentice relationships with one another (Burgess, 1997; Ibarra, 1993). The mentor–protégé relationship seems to work best when the two parties highly identify with one another (Thomas, 1990).

Research shows that white mentors find it difficult to build sharing relationships with black women. Thomas (1999) contends that the U.S. history of race relations and racial taboos influence cross-sex/cross-race mentoring relationships (see also Conrad & Poole, 1998). Black women in career-enhancing relationships with white men may encounter pressures and negative attributions. For instance, their coworkers may accuse them of having sex with their mentor. In addition, white men’s coworkers might accuse them of betraying other white people, of being disloyal (Moses, 1989). Intergroup dynamics may occur when a black woman feels pressure to avoid contact with other blacks to seem loyal to the dominant group (Benjamin, 1991; Ibarra, 1993). Similarly, she may experience intragroup sanctions from black people for interacting with white men (Ibarra, 1993).

White men may not believe that they understand black women’s needs (Hall & Sandler, 1983; Moses, 1989). Research reveals that cross-sex or cross-race/ethnicity mentoring relationships seem to focus more on task-related issues than same-sex and same-race/ethnicity relationships do (Conrad & Poole, 1998). 

When I first became an assistant professor, I took advantage of a program at the university that matched minority faculty with professors outside of their own departments. My mentor was a white man from a sister discipline of communication. We met once for coffee, and I enjoyed our conversation. A few months later, I called him when I was feeling stressed. I disclosed that I was feeling bewildered and confused. He seemed to want to help, but the relationship fizzled. He did not contact me again. I ran into him on campus some months later, and he seemed uncomfortable. I never figured out what happened.

Newcomers can also obtain important information and insight from social networks. However, black women may experience restricted access to informal networks because or exclusion or self-imposed isolation (Benjamin, 1991; Denton, 1990: Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Their white colleagues may also invite them to participate because of outright discrimination or boundary-heightening effects (e.g., misgivings about interacting with an “other” outside of the job context). In addition, black women may decline to involve themselves in social events. Some may isolate themselves because they “interpret invitations to participate in informal relationships as bids to behave according to stereotypes” (Dumas, 1979, p. 125). Once, a white woman at a faculty gathering asked me to sing a Negro spiritual (B. Allen, 1995a).

Many black women have other obligations (e.g., family responsibilities or community work) that preclude their spending time on extracurricular activities that often characterize social interaction (e.g., happy hour, golf, or other sports). Some black women may choose not to interact much with whites beyond performing the assigned tasks of their jobs (Denton, 1990). Some may want to avoid yet another situation in which we have to suppress our own cultural preferences in favor of the dominant culture.

Bicultural Identity. Many black women may face the challenge of negotiating a bicultural life structure (i.e., attempts to balance professional and personal lives) and experience the emotional strains of walking a line between two worlds (Denton, 1990, 1992; Denton, 1990). They also have to respond to demands from their job and from the black community (Locke, 1997). A research participant explains,

You have double demands placed on you; you have a choice to ignore one and go with the other or try to satisfy both. I try to satisfy both. I don’t believe I would be here without the support of the community... I feel I have an obligation and debt to pay to my community. (as cited in Benjamin, 1991, p. 130)

In addition, a black woman may be “torn between the expectations and demands born of her mystical image and those that are inherent in her official status and task in the formal organizations” (Dumas, 1979, p. 123; see also B. Allen, 1995b; Omolade, 1994). I often struggle with the dilemma of trying to refute others’ stereotypical expectations of me (e.g., to be a “mammy”) while feeling an ingrained sense of obligation (based on how I have been socialized as black and as a woman) to be a caretaker, to look out for others (see Collins, 1991).
Black women must negotiate the paradox of being expected to check their race and gender at the door at the same time that organizational members solicit their insight for dealing with race and gender issues (Bowman, 1991). Baraka (1997) explains, "The Eurocentric academy most readily embraces those African Americans who divest themselves of their culture and heritage to become more acceptably European and limit their interests to 'black' or 'gender' issues" (p. 242).

In addition, black women sometimes must negotiate conflicts related to the two stigmatized aspects of their identity (B. Allen, 1995b; Collins, 1991; Dill, 1979). In an article titled "Black Woman Professor—White University," McKay (1983) asserts,

One constantly feels the pressure of a double-edged sword: simultaneously, a perverse visibility and a convenient invisibility. We are treated as blacks, on one hand, as women, on the other. We are left constantly taking stock of the landscape as different issues arise and we have to determine which side, women, or non-white we wish to be identified with. (p. 144)

Thus, black women may "experience pressure to choose between their racial identity and their womanhood" (Moses, 1989, p. 1). When one of my former students (a black man) faced rape charges, some members of the black community wanted me to support the student, while women’s groups wanted me to support their position. I responded by avoiding everyone (see B. Allen, 1998a). Trying to negotiate these aspects of bicultural identity can contribute to role ambiguity, role overload, or role conflict (i.e., "the inability to conform to the expectations of a particular role," Denton, 1990, p. 456; see also Benjamin, 1991; Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Isolation and Alienation. Sometimes black women feel frustrated because "people around them are likely to be insensitive to their needs for socio-psychological support, reassurance, or some relief from the heavy demands on their time and energy" (Dumas, 1979, pp. 124-125; see also Benjamin, 1991). Believing the stereotype of matriarch, other people may assume that a black woman is emotionally strong and capable of taking care of herself (Moses, 1989). Her white colleagues may seem to be oblivious to her plight as an "outsider within" (see B. Allen, 1998a, p. 578; Collins, 1991). One woman explains,

No one ever stopped to think that this might be an uncomfortable or difficult situation [being the only and/or first black woman in her role]. It’s not an issue for them [white people]. You just have to learn how to deal with it. But I don’t think you ever stop being uncomfortable. (as cited in Tucker, 1994, p. 61)

A Black Feminist Standpoint Analysis

In meetings or classrooms, I sometimes get the strangest feeling when I realize that, once again, I am the only person of color (and sometimes also the only woman) present.

Black women who study race and/or gender may feel isolated or alienated because their white colleagues marginalize their area of study (Benjamin, 1991; Henry, 1994; Hoke, 1997; James & Farmer, 1993; McKay, 1997). Black women who study a mainstream topic may feel isolated because other scholars question their credibility (as I discussed earlier). These women also may feel physically isolated and alienated when the community surrounding the university is predominantly white (Locke, 1997). Besides alienation from colleagues and community, some black women’s spouses, family, and friends also may not understand their situations. For instance, I do not have many friends or family members who understand the life of an academic. Many of them believe that I have it made because I teach only two classes a semester and, as they put it, I “don’t work” in the summer.

To summarize, as they attempt to learn the ropes, black women newcomers encounter numerous potential stressors that may arise from socially constructed aspects of their identity (i.e., their race and/or gender). As I discuss next, black women respond in a variety of ways to these and other sources of stress.

Responding to Sources of Stress

Before I describe responses and strategies, I must note that many black women expend a lot of energy trying to make sense of our experiences. Often, I find myself second-guessing: Was that remark racist, sexist, both, or neither? I also wonder if I am being paranoid or too sensitive. These thoughts may scurry across my mind, or they may consume minutes or hours of my time. In addition, double-bind situations often arise in which I feel "darned if I do, damned if I don't."

Consider, for instance, the numerous times that I had to decide whether to accept invitations to serve. If I provided the service, I might perpetuate the notion that majority persons should shoulder the burden. If I did not, other minority persons might feel that I betrayed them or that I did not care about the issues.

In response to double binds and other issues, many black women faculty members decide to exit their jobs. Some of them transfer to other institutions of higher education. Others join corporate America. Sometimes they become entrepreneurs. Sadly, whether we leave or we stay in nontraditional roles, many black women endure physiological and psychological consequences of our first and/or only status. We may suffer chronic physical ailments or burnout. We may have nervous breakdowns and even commit suicide.
McKay (1997) recounts an interaction with a colleague who asked her, if things are so bad, why do black women stay in the academy? She replied, “We choose to remain in these contested spaces because as black women (and men) we know that we have a right to occupy them and will not be driven out by those who would gladly see us go” (p. 15). When they choose to remain in their roles, black women employ a variety of strategies to negotiate the impacts of racism and sexism and other sources of stress. They may avoid discriminatory work environments or alter or lower their career goals (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). They may assimilate (Locke, 1997), or they may employ proactive strategies such as networking/mentoring or compartmentalizing (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). To fill the gap formed by limited access to mentors or social networks, some newcomers form relationships and networks with individuals (women and men from varying racial or ethnic backgrounds) from other departments or universities who specialize in similar areas of research. We communicate through phone calls or electronic mail, and we interact at social gatherings or conferences.

Black women also develop social support systems with other black women or women of color who may or may not be academics. For instance, one of my friends has developed a group of black women scholars on her campus called the Brown Sugar Brigade. On my campus, women of color faculty have formed a Sister Scholars group that meets once a month at one of their homes. In addition to offering task-related information, these sources provide a type of psychosocial support that our white peers cannot. As Denton (1990) observes, “Black women’s bonds provide direct confirmation and validation for experiences that others might not readily understand” (p. 448). She elaborates:

For black women, who must consider whether an incident was motivated by their race, their sex, or both (Smith & Stewart, 1983), support from significant black female friends can clarify the source of discrimination and help them select pertinent coping behaviors. (p. 448)

These social networks help to make black women feel less isolated and alienated. For example, I am a member of a couple of electronic mail groups that provide support and information.

I also have developed productive mentoring relationships with two white men in my department. One of them was instrumental in my being hired, and he always has respected and supported me. He has played a critical role in my advancement as an organizational communication scholar by assisting and advising me regarding publications, by introducing me to other academicians in the field, and by helping me to present a strong case for my tenure and promotion review. The second person recently joined our faculty. I scheduled a meeting with him and asked him to be one of my mentors. He agreed, and he already has provided useful information and guidance. I meet with him regularly, and I am comfortable seeking information from him. My research and writing on the socialization of people of color have helped me to become more protective of my own career advancement.

Some black women compartmentalize their roles by drawing sharp boundaries among them (Bell, 1990; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). This can prove advantageous, as Parker and Ogilvie (1996) observe: “Having multiple, compartmentalized roles gives them perspectives on a setback or problem in one role because it is only one part of their identity” (p. 204). My colleagues seemed skeptical about my attitude when I told them that I would not be devastated if I did not earn tenure. However, I meant what I said; just like I got that job, I knew I could get another one. I know better than to limit my identity to my job as a university professor.

In a study about black women executives, Bell (1990) concludes, “They are extremely vigilant in their work environments, and they take pain in not revealing parts of their true selves” (p. 474). Thus, one way that many black women respond to the threat of stereotyping is by monitoring themselves. For instance, some black women may pay special attention to their appearance. Participants in a research project reported that they intentionally manage their dress to appear professional (B. Allen, 1998b). One woman said,

I feel like people look at Black bodies more... I try to represent Black women in a very positive way no matter where I go because often I am the only one... and I want my colleagues to have a good impression. I think there is a stereotype of black women being “sex pots.” (p. 9)

Another research participant told me, “There have been times when I wanted to dress in a more ethnically appealing manner (e.g., mud cloth, head wrap), but I shy away from doing this because... I do not want to appear too militant” (p. 12).

An awareness of stereotypes also might influence the ways that black women display their feelings (B. Allen, 1996; Tucker, 1994). I rarely display emotions such as anger, frustration, or disappointment because I do not want to perpetuate stereotypes of being overbearing, militant, or hypersensitive. Because of consciousness raising (i.e., studying, thinking, writing, and talking about feminism and black women’s lives), I realize that black women sometimes are complicit in hegemonic practices. For instance, I sometimes reinforce stereotypes or remain silent in the face of oppression (mine and others’). In addition, I used to say “yes” to all requests for service because I felt obligated. I rarely questioned the process or the system. Furthermore, I continue to struggle with identity issues related to scholarship. I used to be offended and defensive when someone asked me if I studied race and/or gender. I would reply proudly that I study computers, thus attempting to establish
that I am intelligent (because I am expert in a white-male-dominated area of study). I liked the positive (and usually surprised) way that people would respond to me. Now that I conduct research on race and gender, I sometimes hesitate to admit it. I believe that my reticence stems largely from internalized racism and sexism. I also struggle with the irony that I am fulfilling the stereotype that a black woman scholar should study race and/or gender. I will continue to raise my consciousness and free myself from those hegemonic shackles.

Although the literature implies that persons who remain in the organization have been metamorphosed (i.e., transformed into the ideal employee), that is not always the case. In fact, "newcomers may stay but not become identified with the organization" (Bullis & Bach, 1989b, p. 287). In addition, newcomers may try to change the groups to accommodate their needs (Zablin, 1987). Indeed, black women may work for their personal needs, but many of us also work to effect social change for others. We may speak out against stereotyping and discriminatory behaviors. We take advantage of situations in which others ask for our opinions about diversity issues by being straightforward and by helping to develop and implement policy.

Related to this work to influence change, many black women in university settings engage in acts of resistance. As I reported earlier, I did not allow administrators to postpone my tenure case for 2 years. I told the chair of my department that either the university valued me and would give me what I earned or I could move on. Although I know that I can offer beneficial insight and perspective to my department, I have learned to refuse to shoulder the entire responsibility. I encourage my colleagues to refer to other sources and resources and to share responsibility. To negotiate constant demands from others, I have learned how and when to say "no." I carefully consider the pros and cons of accepting an invitation to serve, and I feel less guilty than I used to when I decline. When I say "no" to community activities, I explain that I need to concentrate on research and writing so that I can retain my position in the university (and therefore continue to be available to assist the community). The inviting party usually seems to understand and support my position. At the university, I try to serve only on committees that engage in making decisions, solving problems, or developing policy.

I also enact hooks's (1989) definition of resistance by actively shaping a new identity of myself, rather than allowing other forces to shape me (see also Ettler-Lewis, 1993). Therefore, adding black feminism to my area of research represents a significant act of resistance. Following Collins's (1991) counsel, I am using my "outsider within" status to help create black feminist thought, the self-knowledge that can help black women break glass ceilings (Locke, 1997). To cope with stressors related to bicultural identity, I have learned to value how I have been socialized as a black woman academic. I am proud of the fact that I can move fluidly from one "cultural" context to another. I refuse to be stigmatized, even as I am aware of oppression. I try not to operate from a "victim mentality" (B. Allen, 1995b, 1996, 1998a; Bozeman, 1994).

I am proud of my heritage, and I infuse elements of my black woman cultural experience into my work. In the classroom, I sometimes use a "call and response" teaching style reminiscent of some black preachers who interact with their congregation by actively eliciting responses (e.g., "Can I get an "amen"?"). I intersperse anecdotes about my life into lecture and discussion material to give my white students positive perspectives on "the black experience." In addition, I view my concern for others as an "ethic of caring" that adds value to how I interact with colleagues, staff, administrators, and students (see Collins, 1991).

To address my sense of physical isolation and alienation, I moved to a suburb 40 miles away from campus that is more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, class, and age. I have developed a diverse group of friends and acquaintances, and I engage in a variety of activities that allow me to honor and nurture many facets of my multicultural identity.

Summary

Viewing socialization practices from a black feminist standpoint illuminates issues that previous research has not broached. Therefore, the analysis contributes to our understanding and analyses of "learning the ropes" processes. This discussion supports feminist standpoint theory's argument for assessing contextual influences on social practices. The examples demonstrate that the unique social location of black women in contemporary U.S. society affects their socialization experiences. Moreover, the specific context of black women in nontraditional occupational roles exposes numerous ways that members of organizations enact hegemony.

Black women's experiences demonstrate that socialization processes may not be based solely on the expectations inherent in one's occupational role, as the literature implies. Rather, organizational members may project onto the newcomer expectations that arise from sociohistorical stereotypes. The job description of assistant professor did not align with the expectations that members of my role set conveyed to me. Furthermore, it did not correspond with the expectations that my role-set members seemed to have for my two white female peers (hired at the same time that I was). Socialization does not encompass a universal experience for newcomers. The particular social location of a black woman affects interpersonal interactions when she assumes occupational roles that women like her previously have not occupied. I must introduce a caveat: Because I write from a black feminist standpoint, this discussion refers only to black women's impressions and perceptions. Conse-
quently, the examples provide insight about newcomers’ received roles rather than sent roles (see Katz & Kahn, 1978). Future research might assess incumbents’ experiences and accounts.

This analysis underscores the primacy of communication and interpersonal interactions in socialization micropractices. Moreover, it reveals the complexity and some of the nuances of “learning the ropes” practices. For instance, a black feminist standpoint demonstrates that organizational socialization is not entirely rational. Rather, emotions permeate “learning the ropes” processes. In addition, the examples indicate that this naturally stressful situation holds particular sources of stress for black women. Finally, black women’s experiences show how domination and patriarchy permeate socialization practices. They also illuminate the multiplicity of ways black women respond to micropractices, including acts of compliance and resistance.

This analysis is nowhere near exhaustive. I could have written much more about this complicated topic. I hope that the discussion provides insight and direction for future research on women of color and organizational socialization. As scholars theorize about learning the ropes, they might consider revelations that this chapter provides. Moreover relevant to my goals for this essay, this depiction yields numerous implications for everyday practices, as I discuss next.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION PRACTICES**

In this section, I offer recommendations for social practices that arise from the discussion. I provide suggestions for persons who interact with black women or other historically disadfranchised persons, then offer guidelines for newcomers. Although I focus on black women, these suggestions also apply to other newcomers. As a black woman historian observes, “In many ways the experiences of black women professors serve as a window into the issues, problems, and frustrations most marginalized groups and women in general during encounter in the academy” (Hine, 1997, p. 337). The recommendations might benefit newcomers in organizational contexts other than academia.

**Members of the Newcomer’s Role Set**

Although macrolevel societal and institutional/organizational forces influence how people interact with one another, as an individual, you can facilitate a newcomer’s socialization experiences. First, realize that you can help to effect positive change. Try to be sensitive to the plight of black women (and other traditionally disadfranchised persons) in white institutions. Do not dis

miss, discount, or dilute our experiences by engaging in “me-tooism.” Sometimes when I describe my experiences, a white person will observe that he or she has had similar experiences. This type of claim may support the argument that using a black feminist standpoint helps us to render more accurate depictions of everyday socialization processes; it may demonstrate how persons (not just black women) can experience oppression based on various aspects of identity. Moreover, this type of response may indicate a genuine attempt to empathize and to engage in dialogue. I wholeheartedly welcome such discussions. However, sometimes such reactions may reflect denial, a refusal among some white persons to see or try to understand the experiences of oppressed and disenfranchised people. Occasionally, I get the feeling that white people think that I am paranoid or hypersensitive. This impression occasionally may be true, but black women often endure pressures that others do not based on the physically salient cues of race and gender. Please try to understand that not only do the micropractices I describe count, they also accumulate and take their toll.

Second, recognize that, contrary to what many persons seem to believe, racism, sexism, prejudice, and discrimination are not limited to blatant, overt behaviors, as I hope this chapter demonstrates. Although you may believe that you are not guilty of any of the behaviors and attitudes that I describe, I encourage you to monitor yourself. Try not to reinforce negative stereotypes and expectations as you interact with black women. Understand that black women are individuals, but we are also members of a collective that other people often treat in predictable, discriminatory ways. We may or may not be affirmative action hires; regardless, we probably are qualified to perform our roles. Most of us have paid (and continue to pay) prices that you might not imagine to reach our current positions. If you consider inviting a black woman to perform a service, ask yourself if your request is reasonable. You probably are not the only person making demands on her. Respect and honor her time as well as her specific skills and interests.

Third, be an advocate for valuing difference. Do not place the burden of addressing social issues such as sexism, racism, and diversity on the newcomer’s shoulders. Rather, make everyone responsible. For instance, identify and use resources on campus and elsewhere. Challenge or question colleagues or students who make racist and/or sexist remarks. If the newcomer conducts traditionally marginalized research, develop strategies to publicize and value her work and accomplishments.

Fourth, so that no one feels slighted or favored, develop inclusive policies and programs for all newcomers. For example, create and maintain a formal mentoring program based on tested models and/or with specific evaluation strategies in place. In other words, do not take a slapdash, superficial approach to mentoring: mentoring is a critical aspect of any newcomer’s socialization.
If you wish to encourage same-sex and same-gender mentoring, do not require or coerce potential mentors to participate. However, if they agree, compensate them appropriately (e.g., through release time).

Fifth, take an active role in providing task-related information to newcomers. Volunteer to create a relationship with a newcomer. Routinely offer information and insight to all newcomers. This will help to create a collegial climate in which everyone works to help all newcomers (regardless of their race or ethnicity and gender) succeed. In addition, include black women in informal networks and activities.

Finally, try to establish a climate of trust, openness, and inclusiveness. Listen attentively when a newcomer talks during meetings. Solicit and consider her input on a variety of topics (not just race and/or gender). Try to develop a setting in which you and the newcomer feel comfortable discussing sensitive or taboo topics. For instance, my department recently instituted a "mentioning" policy that encourages us to talk privately with someone who says something that seems offensive or insensitive. On the basis of what I have disclosed, you may feel more apprehensive about how to behave because you do not want to be perceived as patriarchal, racist, and/or sexist. If you feel awkward, tell the person. If you seem genuine, I believe that most of us will meet you halfway.

Newcomers

McKay (1997) observes that "black women must always weigh the cost of their choices against the balance of energy, will, and the determination to survive with human dignity. Each woman must learn to identify her own limits" (p. 15). I agree. Try to weigh the costs and rewards for anything you might consider doing in your role as a newcomer (e.g., asking for information, feedback, or advice; providing service that your job description does not require; or confronting a colleague regarding a questionable comment). In addition, be extremely proactive in your own socialization.

Alfred (1996) offers several recommendations for black women academics, including "know who you are" (p. 8). Do not allow someone else to define you. Create a positive self-image, and do not buy into the stereotypes (see also hooks, 1989). Recognize the value that you add to your organization. Remind yourself often of what you have accomplished and what you intend to achieve.

Alfred (1996) also tells black women, "Know what you want and how to get it" (p. 8). Develop and follow a game plan. If you aspire to ascend the ranks of an organization, find out exactly what that entails. Try to get expectations and requirements in writing. Do not hesitate to ask colleagues whom you trust questions about your role, and invite them to be mentors. Select individu-
CONCLUSION

Learning the ropes is a complex and stressful communicative process that presents distinctive conflicts and challenges for marginalized persons who assume jobs traditionally reserved for dominant males. I hope that this black feminist standpoint analysis of learning the ropes provides insight and information that will help newcomers and incumbents enact socialization processes that allow marginalized persons not only to survive but also to flourish.

NOTES

1. See B. Allen (1996) for a discussion of the ways that patriarchy and hegemony pervade anticipatory socialization processes. For instance, as a "smart" black female growing up in a lower-class neighborhood in the 1950s, I received messages that my only occupational choices were to become a nurse or a teacher.

2. The tenure and promotion process entails a complex set of requirements and expectations. At the university where I work, personnel committees at several levels of the institution evaluate a faculty member according to research, teaching, and service. The evaluations are weighted 40%, 40%, and 20%, respectively, usually after the first 6 years in the tenure track. To achieve tenure and promotion, a faculty member needs to demonstrate excellence in either teaching or research (including publications in mainstream journals or by prestigious publishing houses) and meritorious performance in both teaching and research. Although service counts for 20%, committees do not seem to penalize a faculty member for not providing an adequate amount of service. During a personnel evaluation meeting, a couple of my colleagues admitted that they were uncertain about criteria we should use to judge faculty service.

3. I say "invited" because I believe that these requests were actually directives. I think that few persons in subordinate positions will say "no" to persons in high positions of power.