On Being a Minority Student in Clinical Psychology

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"Congratulations! You are now officially a member of our program." That's how my acceptance letter read, and with those words I embarked on yet another situation where I was one of a few minority members allowed entrance into a white majority-ruled institution. Once again I had the fantasy that I was being allowed to assume the identity of Super Rican, Super Spic. I had always been told that I was better, more concerned and in touch than others of my ethnic background. Once in the program, I was treated as if I indeed were special, different, less like the masses of the people and more like the faculty.* Given this plot, how was I to know that being a minority student in a clinical program at times amounted to being an actor in the Theater of the Absurd?

I looked forward to my affiliation with this program, as I was going to do research with a psychologist who had strong interests in minority issues. The professor was even a Black! What a rare occurrence! I felt that I was fortunate enough to have gained entrance into a clinical program that had more to offer than lip service to issues of importance to Blacks and Hispanics. Because of this feeling, I wrote my first two papers on ethnic issues in psychology. I was praised by one faculty member for having written a competent, well researched paper, while a second faculty member criticized my work because he felt I was using a minority argument in lieu of a paper. These two reactions were the essence of what my future dealings within the program would be about. These future interactions would bring about the feeling that the program had an ambivalent commitment to the training of minority students.

*As one of my fellow panelists stated, there is a danger in the minority person accepting the white liberal attitude, for in this acceptance he accepts his own psychic self-destruction. I agree with this, and I state that the same is true of the minority student who accepts the deceptive praise of his white professors.
This commitment seemed clearest at the most interesting times, for instance, when NIMH came around for its periodic site visit in order to determine if the institution was worthy of continued funding. It became murky when we were asked to find financial support from special sources, i.e., special scholarships for Blacks and Hispanics; and even murkier when the administrators, finding themselves confronted by minority students who demanded program funding like the majority students were receiving, publicly stated that the program had been riding off the backs of the minority students in terms of money. As painful as it was to be told that minority students as a whole were being taken advantage of, it was also a positive statement, for in its expression we minority students saw the faculty as being honest enough to acknowledge its wrongdoing. Our hopes were that this honesty might be tied in with the wish to change matters for the better. Given these aspirations, we minority students decided to take a hard look at the program in order to make it more relevant to our needs.

We had to do this because, as it stood, the program had a bad recipe for clinical training of minority and non-minority students in terms of work with minority clients. It was bad because it lacked some very important ingredients, one of them being that none of the courses addressed themselves to the problems of minority groups in the mental health area. But before the recipe could be improved we had to get better cooks, so we began in earnest to seek out qualified applicants to the program; when a faculty line became available we sought out a minority clinician to fill it; and we improved the cooking skills of those students already in the program by having them enrolled in a special group experience that was funded by program monies.

Under the tutelage of the master chef, Dr. William K. Lyles, we began to train ourselves, mainly because the faculty lacked the initiative to train us. We found that we could be strong when we were united as a group, and we proceeded to make our presence felt by joining committees, taking stands, and working our asses off. At the same time we found ourselves getting increasingly angry and impatient, the main reason being that all of us knew that whatever small gains had been made in terms of minority psychology within the program had been achieved by us. This inequity in task distribution bothered some of us greatly and made our patience wear thin. More troublesome was the feeling that our training needs were not being met and that we were not being respected, that we were not being accepted as equals, that people were insensitive to the cultural shock that many of us were dealing with. The fact that we were cautioned about being too political, once we let our concerns be known to the faculty, didn’t help matters any. Some of us were pulled aside by faculty members and spoken to in terms of our alienation and estrangement in the program. All the minority students felt that a crisis was in their midst, a crisis engendered by a faculty that considered itself knowledgeable about psychology, but which—in actuality—was quite ignorant about the behavioral science as it affected the non-white population. A crisis that was felt all the more because the faculty and students of the program overall like to project a concept of the program as liberal, unbiased, and non-discriminating. A crisis that in part had to do with the disparity which existed between what the minority student was taught and what he knew from his life in the field. A crisis that was caused in part by being told that color doesn’t matter.