Positionality and Power: The Individual's Role in Directing Community College Men of Color Initiatives

Dr. Kaleb L. Briscoe, Mississippi State University
Dr. Veronica A. Jones, University of North Texas
Dr. Deryl K. Hatch-Tocaimaza, University of Nebraska Lincoln
Dr. Eligio Martinez Jr., California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

In light of the barriers that Men of Color (MOC) face in higher education, many educators increasingly pursue Men of Color initiatives (MCIs) as a means to enhance their success (Harper et al., 2015; Keflezighi et al., 2016). Community college MCIs (CCMCIs) are especially of interest, as this sector of higher education continues to enroll disproportionate numbers of MOC (Wood et al., 2016). What goes unexamined is the nature of CCMCIs as products of individuals—CCMCI directors—who design, develop, and implement these programs within particular contexts. Therefore, we assert that by gaining knowledge on program conception through the experiences of CCMCI directors, the higher education community can learn more about the individual level of meaning making that shapes programs, resources, and institutional commitments.

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of CCMCI directors in conceptualizing and implementing CCMCIs within their institutional context. The following research questions guided our inquiry:

1. How do directors' professional and personal identities relate to their experience in leading CCMCIs?

2. How does the context of societal and community college inequities affecting Men of Color influence how directors design and implement CCMCIs?

3. How do CCMCI directors navigate issues of power in designing and implementing CCMCIs?

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Understanding structural inequities facing MOC is a precursor to understanding initiatives designed to assist them through college. Being that MOC face narratives from an early age that they are intellectually inferior and societal threats (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016), professionals must be mindful of the stigmas MOC bring with them to postsecondary education. Broader societal stereotypes follow MOC into institutional settings and, combined with inequitable practices, result in issues such as racial battle fatigue, isolation, and gendered racism (Smith et al., 2011). Not only do MOC deal with gender role conflicts based on social constructions of masculinity (Harris et al., 2015), but also as MOC, individuals and ideologies relayed in policy present them from a deficit perspective (Harper, 2010).

Despite this relatively robust literature base that establishes educational disparities for MOC and provides implications to guide practitioners, there is limited literature that focuses on the growing number of CCMCIs established as a consequence. To more fully understand how CCMCIs take shape and their potential influence on MOC, we contend that we need to better understand the perspectives of directors as individuals on the front lines and contending with their institutional setting.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We elicit positionality theory as a framework to conceptualize how CCMCI directors make meaning of their professional and personal identities, the context of social and community college inequities, and issues of power that affect programming. Thus, in the case of CCMCI directors and the stakeholders that influence their initiatives (e.g., faculty, administrators, and funders), we understand these roles as in line with intersectionality, in that the agents' roles are nuanced, variously mitigated and compounded by privileged and marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1991).

We extend our framework to include critical race theory (CRT) to affirm racism as a norm of institutional functioning and utilize its foundational purpose of challenging dominant White narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Solórzano, 1998). CRT compliments positionality theory in allowing for a critical lens through which to interrogate the marginalization of MOC as well as the materialization of Whiteness through individuals' identities, institutional contexts, and power dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

For our study, we used a critical phenomeno-logical approach. True to phenomenology, our purpose was to derive the lived experience of the social process (Moustakas, 1994) of how CCMCI directors conceptualize and implement CCMCIs. Our approach was critical in the sense that we favored an exploration of a subject's experience in connection with the surrounding world, what is referred to as intersubjectivity, rather than a subjective reality construed by an atomized, individual subject in a world of their own making (Salamon, 2018).

Participant recruitment focused on faculty or college staff responsible for overseeing CCMCIs. Fourteen participants engaged in two in-depth 60–90 minute interviews via phone using a semi-structured interview protocol. In order to identify the phenomenon in question, we used bridling, in which researchers question pre-understandings and assumptions rather than the arguably unfeasible task of brack-eting them (Dahlberg, 2008; Vagle, 2009). To address trustworthiness and credibility (Jones et al., 2014), the research team engaged participants in member checking to allow them an opportunity to review the information and incorporated all feedback into our findings.

FINDINGS

Intersectional Identities as Influencing the Director Role

As directors, participants detailed how their personal and professional identities allowed them to connect to the MOC they design programs for in various ways. Participants' sense of connectedness to MOC crossed the bounds of race and gender, through statuses such as being first-generation, parents of MOC, and former community college students.

As intersectionality aids in understanding how multidimensional identities shape a cognizance of social disparities, several directors shared experiences with educational injustices in the K–12 setting as the precursor to a commitment to MOC. Therefore, their professional identities were equally as important as their personal identities.

Project MALES
Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success

Understanding Context: Societal and Community College Inequities for MOC

Throughout their narratives, participants described how a comprehensive understanding of societal and community college inequities that MOC face served as the foundation of their work. This included how MOC are often viewed in the larger society from a deficit perspective, problematizing MOC experiences without justly understanding the context in which these inequities occur. Our participants stressed that before true change can occur in working toward equitable practices, that campus constituents must first build a knowledge of national issues that affect MOC and CCMCIs directors (e.g., police brutality, racism, and White supremacy).

Navigating Issues of Power

CCMCI directors described several ways in which they navigated issues of power, including how institutional politics and buy-in influenced their ability to assist MOC. For example, Ice Cold described how "there's always politics" such as change in leadership, lack of commitment financially and organizationally, and playing the middleman to support students when doing the work of MCIs.

Another form of power that CCMCI directors had to navigate was the level of buy-in that they received from executive level administrators. Participants noted that who held power was an essential factor to establishing buy-in from executive level administrators when supervisors were not supportive of MCIs.

DISCUSSION

Using positionality theory and CRT as theoretical lenses, we illuminated directors' experiences navigating issues of inequity while deconstructing how community colleges, similarly to other institutions, embed issues of race and racism in their organizational structures (Cabrera, 2018;

Kezar & Lester, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Our findings reveal the value that CCMCI directors derive from centering their identities, including the challenges that they experience in developing and implementing programs based on their identities. Our participants' narratives also show how for these CCMCI directors, their ability to do the job they envision depended on their colleagues' understanding of the context of societal and community college inequities that affect MOC (Figueroa et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2011; Sáenz et al., 2013). Finally, our findings speak to how CCMCI directors dealt with issues of power including the ways they attended to institutional politics and the criticality of buy-in from executive-level administrators to ensure program success.

Ultimately, the strategies that they implemented to navigate changing power dynamics spoke to the centrality of one's position (Kezar & Lester, 2010) to implementing effective programming. Participants recognized, nonetheless, that the efficacy of their roles is influenced by how broadly leadership understands the lived experiences of MOC.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications for this study necessitate the need for further exploration of CCMCI directors' experiences with identity, context, and power through research and practice. First, our findings point to the need for practitioners to put identities at the forefront of their practices to recognize that student affairs is not identity neutral. Second, our findings call for student affairs professionals to increase efforts to understand and address the context of inequities that MOC face through greater cross-campus collaborations. Without knowledge of such contexts, deficit perspectives as described by Smiley and Fakunle (2016) can be perpetuated and leave MOC to face inequity without adequate support systems.

We assert that cross-campus collaborations with academic and student affairs partners are necessary to assist directors of CCMCIs in addressing inequity and creating more of a shared sense of commitment to MOC. These partnerships can provide additional resources and, over time, equip other professionals with coping strategies for MOC during national and institutional racial incidents. Lastly, we urge that individuals in making decisions about organizational structures consider aligning CCMCIs with institutional diversity and equity priorities. This is particularly important with the significance of power dynamics within our study that illuminated the political nature of CCMCIs.

AUTHOR BIOS

Kaleb L. Briscoe, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of Educational Leadership at Mississippi State University. Her research problematizes oppressed and marginalized populations within higher education through critical theoretical frameworks and qualitative methodological approaches.

Veronica A. Jones, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Higher Education Program at the University of North Texas. Her research problematizes rhetoric, policies, and practices through the use of critical discourse analysis and critical race theory.

Deryl K. Hatch-Tocaimaza, Ph.D. is a settler scholar and associate professor at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. His research and teaching focuses on higher education administration for justice and sustainability.

Eligio Martinez Jr., Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. His research focus examines the experiences of men of color throughout the education pipeline.

REFERENCES

Cabrera, N. L. (2018). Where is the racial theory in critical race theory? A constructive criticism of the crits. The Review of Higher Education, 42(1), 209–233. doi:10.1353/rhe.2018.0038

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299. doi:10.2307/1229039

Dahlberg, K., Dahlberg, H., & Nyström, M. (2008). Reflective lifeworld research (2nd ed.). Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur.

Figueroa, J. L., Pérez, P. P., & Vega, I. I. (2016). (Re)constructing masculinity: Understanding gender expectations among Latino male college-going students. In V. B. Sáenz, L. Ponjuán, & J. L. Figueroa (Eds.), Ensuring the success of Latino males in higher education: A national imperative (pp. 60–74). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Harper, S. R. (2010). An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM. New Directions for Institutional Research, 148, 63–74. doi:10.1002/ir.362

Harper, S. R., Berhanu, J., Davis, C. H. F., III, & McGuire, K. (2015). Engaging college men of color. In S. R. Harper & S. J. Quaye (Eds.), Student engagement in higher education (2nd ed., pp. 55–74). New York, NY: Routledge.

Harris, F., III, Palmer, R. T., & Struve, L. E. (2011). Cool posing" on campus: A qualitative study of masculinities and gender expression among Black men at a private research institution. The Journal of Negro Education, 80(1), 47–62.

Harris, F., III, Wood, J. L., & Newman, C. (2015). An exploratory

investigation of the effect of racial and masculine identity on focus: An examination of White, Black, Mexicano, Latino, and Asian men in community colleges. Culture, Society, & Masculinities, 7(1), 61–72.

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Keflezighi, F., Sebahari, L., & Wood, J. L. (2016). An analysis of programs serving men of color in the community college. Research & Practice in Assessment, 11, 55–60.

Kezar, A., & Lester, J. (2010). Breaking the barriers of essentialism in leadership research: Positionality as a promising approach. Feminist Formations, 22(1), 163–185. doi:10.1353/nwsa.0.0121

Ladson-Billings, G. (2016). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), Foundations of critical race theory in education (2nd ed., pp. 15–30). New York, NY: Routledge.

Moustakas, C. (1994). Phenomenological research methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sáenz, V. B., Bukoski, B. E., Lu, C., & Rodriguez, S. L. (2013). Latino males in Texas community colleges: A phenomenological study of masculinity constructs and their effect on college experiences. Journal of African American Males in Education, 4(2), 82–102.

Salamon, G. (2018). What's critical about critical phenomenology? Journal of Critical Phenomenology, 1, 8–17. doi:10.31608/PJCP. v1i1.2

Smiley, C., & Fakunle, D. (2016). From "brute" to "thug:" The demonization and criminalization of unarmed Black male victims in America. Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 26, 350–366. doi:10.1080/10911359.2015.1129256

Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. The Journal of Negro Education, 80(1), 63–82.

Solórzano, D. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11(1), 121–136. doi:10.1080/095183998236926

Vagle, M. D. (2009). Validity as intended: 'Bursting forth toward' bridling in phenomenological research. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 22(5), 585–605. doi:10.1080/09518390903048784

Wood, J. L., Bush, E., Hicks, T., & Kambui, H. (2016). Black male collegians in community colleges: Factors affecting their persistence and academic success. In S. Harper & J. Wood (Eds.), Advancing Black male student success from preschool through Ph.D (pp. 78–79). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, LLC.