



Put Some Respect on My Name: Navigating the Use of Academic Titles and Personas

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ABSTRACT

This critical douethnographic study investigates the challenges and provides strategies related to the use of academic titles and establishing an academic persona within the academy. Starting with a review of the scholarship related to challenges faced by emerging scholars in the academy, both authors then engage in a reflective examination of their life experiences, culture, and values, which have shaped their identities as scholars and professionals. The study then explores the varied challenges that both authors have experienced in their roles as early/mid-career professors. The results of the study indicated that the academy can present some unique challenges for non-tenured faculty, which include the acknowledgement of positionality and authority; students as customers' mentality; lack of respect for non-dominant norms; ageism experienced by young professors; and issues of peer-ship versus collegueship as opposed to essential personhood. However, they found the following strategies as a successful way to address these challenges: being professional at all times; being consistent; being clear about what you want and expect; not fighting every battle; and building relationships with colleagues and mentors.

Keywords: Scholar, Academic Titles, Scholar-of Color, Recognition

INTRODUCTION

To ask to be called by your formal title, “Dr.” is not complaining, it is educating. Yes, there is power involved by having a Ph.D., but consistently be in question of who has the power? Is it you, a student, a colleague? How is this power systemically exercised and who does it benefit most?... When your first response is not to call me “Dr.” in an academic setting, you erase not only me, but the generations before me (Garcia, 2018a, para. 10).

We (Drs. Freeman & Douglas) have known each other for over eight years. Our relationship began as doctoral students who shared membership in the same graduate student mentorship program that supported underrepresented and minority students who desired to serve as faculty within the field of education. Throughout our relationship, we both have often talked about challenges related to how we viewed our positionality within the academy and the ways in which others within the academy, particularly White people, engaged with us.

While both of us are now associate professors at our respective institutions, we have come to experience and understand that it is not uncommon for non-tenured faculty members to experience challenges with being marginalized and disrespected in the academy by more senior peers, administrators, staff, and students. This reality is exacerbated by various identity markers such as race, gender, age, and sexuality (Alston, 2011; Jackson, 2011). The experience of transitioning from graduate student to “Dr.” is a unique border crossing journey that brings together a number of individual, institutional and cultural contexts. As a colleague of Dr. Douglas once stated, “there are very few times when a person’s name changes, and the completion of a doctoral degree is one of those times” (T. Whitaker, personal communication, 3.12.2018).

METHOD

For this critical douethnographic study (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014), we gathered data from multiple sources; they include information from our personal dialogues, email correspondence, and data drawn from each participant by developing a set of questions and answering them based on our

own recollection and perspectives. Each of these sources of data were selected based on the recommendations of Norris, Sawyer, and Lund (2012).

The following douethnographic methodological process was informed by Sawyer and Norris (2012). First, we discussed our pre-tenure experiences related to the development of our personal personas and expectations of respect within the academy. We gathered this data over a three-month period. Next, we collated email correspondences between ourselves, students, and colleagues that directly addressed issues related to the establishment of our authority within the classroom. And lastly, we provided each other with a set of open-ended prompt questions related to the topic of this paper, which included questions about our personal experiences and strategies to navigate challenges faced within one's career when establishing academic credibility and earning respect. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) recommend, we both wrote down our experiences by responding to these questions. Then we dialogued and reacted to each other's responses, after which we developed additional questions as appropriate. Finally, we analyzed our responses together and then compared them with the literature to develop the themes presented in this manuscript. These dialogues allowed us to create a co-constructive narrative to describe our personal challenges and provide strategies that can help faculty mitigate potential issues related to establishing their professional personas and the use of academic titles. This methodological approach along with border crossing theory enabled us to identify various challenges that we both have experienced in our roles as early/mid-career professors and strategies to address these challenges.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are certainly spacialized and racialized components to how faculty members navigate the academy space. Harris, Sellers, Clerge, & Gooding (2017) share that:

When faculty of color walk into the often-exclusionary spaces of their classrooms, offices, and faculty meetings, they have to assert their power and position more blatantly than their White peers, whose status in a White dominant hegemony is literally written on their bodies. The cultural mismatch in styles of speech, dress, and expression between faculty of color and their White colleagues, administrators, and students means that they have to find innovative ways to display contributions to the university space without stepping on any land mines (p. 130).

To this end, we believe that border theory is an appropriate conceptual framework to consider the transitions of faculty in the geopolitical space of academia. Border theory is fluid, broad, flexible and transient, remaining open to the metaphorical and literal theoretical edges (Hicks, 1991)—on the borders or boundaries—that must be occupied in order for theorists to negotiate and understand the nuances of transitions and changing special identities. Giroux (2005) highlights that border theory accounts for the “epistemological, political, cultural, and social margins that structure the language of history, power, and difference” (Giroux, 2005, p. 20), and as Douglas (2016) has previously written, the “multidimensionality of perspective, experience, and Otherness” (p. 43).

Villaverde (2008) describes Otherization as “the process of marginalizing difference, most times through negative stigmas and stereotypes” (p. 42). Otherization is the way that those who hold dominant positionalities seek to silence difference and stultify subordinate groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gause, 2008; Johnson, 2006). How minority faculty members are engaged in the academy, particularly by those in positions of dominance (e.g. senior colleagues or privileged students), can illuminate the significance of border positionalities and “polarities” to rupture dominant positionalities and deconstruct vestiges of the colonial/postcolonial, center/periphery binarisms (Hicks, 1991, xvi). Similarly, drawing on Giroux’s (2005) use of the concept of border pedagogy to describe the power relations in educative settings that must be dismantled by students and teachers—as border crossers, we seek to consider in this paper how we (two underrepresented and minority faculty members) push back on dominant norms of informality and Whiteness as manifested in problematic communicative practices. As border crossing brothas in the academic space—Black males who have traversed many geographical, ideological, and institutional barriers in our journeys to the professoriate (Douglas, 2016), we are willing to challenge the “physical . . . [and] cultural borders historically constructed and socially organized within rules and regulations that limit and enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms” (Giroux, 2005, p. 22). As we discuss later, being border crossing brothas in this paper looks like naming and pushing back on five specific challenges we face in our practice as professors. These specific challenges are: Acknowledgement of Positionality and Authority as a Professor; Navigating a Students-as-Customers Mentality; Promoting Respect for Diverse Cultures; Resisting Ageism Experienced by Young Professors; and Navigating Peership, Collegueship, and Essential Personhood. Border Theory is an effective tool in our capacity to critically consider each of these challenges because of its

malleability in naming and navigating identities, positionalities, and power dynamics as Black male professors in higher education spaces.

We understand that writing such an article does not come without risk. We are particularly sensitive to the notion that our ideas may be misconstrued and may be misinterpreted as an attempt to reinforce negative hierarchies: for example, our position could be seen as playing into the notion that oppressed populations reinforce toxic forms of authority once they gain positions of power and leadership. Garcia (2018a) faced and named the same internal struggle as an author addressing this same issue in her essay, Please call me Dr. when she said, “I contemplated on writing this piece out of fear. Fear of what people may think. Fear of who may get offended. Fear of backlash. Fear of vulnerability. Fear of reproducing power and privilege. Fear of not being radical enough” (para. 8). However, we believe our voices and experiences are vital terrain on which other faculty members can draw strength to continue to live out their truths and center their voices in the narrative of how individuals interact with professors, particularly Black and Brown professors. In the next section, we will describe our background as scholars.

OUR BACKGROUND

Dr. Freeman: Shaped by Blackness, on Mission in Idaho

I am an associate professor who specializes in the study of higher education. I come from a devout Christian family. One of the seminal moments that I remember occurred while attending a Christian middle school. The pastor of the church that sponsored the school was asked to briefly serve as a substitute teacher in the class for the day. I do not remember speaking out of turn to the pastor while he was substituting but do not deny the great possibility. However, once school ended, my father was contacted by the principal of the school and was told that I was speaking out of turn and being disrespectful to the pastor. My father reprimanded me and told me to never disrespect an adult, particularly clergy. This perspective came out of the religious scriptures in the Christian Bible that says in Psalms 105: 15, “Touch not my anointed, and do my servants no harm (KJV)” and 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 where it says, “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake (KJV)”. This experience and my overall Black cultural upbringing, I believe, shapes my values regarding respect for positional authority and recognition via professional, academic, social and gendered titles.

I was raised to address adults by either a formal or social title. For instance, if I were speaking to my aunt, I would address her as aunt and then

her first name. If I was speaking to a male adult at my church, I would address him as brother and then his first or last name. Given the importance that the people in my community placed on formal education if a person was a medical doctor or had earned an academic doctorate they would be addressed by their formal title and their last name. It was a form of respect to acknowledge that person by their title. I still abide by that value set, and enjoy acknowledging people by their titles.

I went on to attend Pine Forge Academy in Pennsylvania, which is one of four remaining private Black boarding high schools. In that setting, it was also expected that I address all adults as mister, miss, or misses. I went on to pursue my bachelor's degree from Oakwood College (now university) a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Huntsville, AL. Both Dr. Douglas and I attended the same undergraduate institution, albeit at different times. Similarly, I experienced the same cultural norms I was socialized in from birth to high school. Given that I attended Auburn University, a Large Research Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in Alabama for my graduate education, the cultural norms in many ways were different. However, as it related to acknowledging and recognizing professors and administrators at the university, it was the cultural norm for all students to address them by their academic titles.

I earned my Ph.D at the age of 26. I was the first person in my immediate family to complete a degree. I am the oldest child of three and I actually completed my doctorate before any of my younger siblings earned their undergraduate degree. So, it is a point of pride to be a trailblazer within my family academically. Once I completed my Ph.D. I began my first professional academic position as a director of a teaching and learning center at Tuskegee University. They had a particularly formal culture, as everyone addressed each other by their academic, professional, and gendered title. Even my supervisor and co-workers addressed me in both formal and informal settings by my academic title.

When I accepted my current faculty position at the University of Idaho, I knew this would not be the case. During my interview, I asked about the cultural norms of the department that I would be in and was told that generally everyone was informal unless at a formal executive meeting and even then, some people would address each other by their first name. I later learned that these same cultural dynamics in many cases pertained to students to. I teach at the graduate level with no teaching responsibilities for undergraduates. Many of the students that I teach work in some capacity at the university. Therefore, I perceive that some of the students also see me as a peer that happens to be teaching them.

I embrace the value of presenting a professional persona, particularly with an emphasis on acknowledging my academic title. I find this as important, given my uniqueness in the space at the University of Idaho as one of 10 Black faculty members and a millennial. This coincides with me being the only African-American tenured faculty member located on the main campus. My students are often older than me, with many having children at a similar age. I have found that the use of my academic title provides a level of credibility and is a conscious reminder to my students, peers and colleagues of the role and responsibility I have within the academic environment.

Dr. Douglas: It Takes a Village to Raise a Professor

I am an associate professor of P-12 educational leadership and policy at the University of Missouri. I was born and raised in a close-knit island community in the country of Bermuda where the concept that the village raises the child meant that adults were referred to by their last name or “Aunt/ Uncle,” even if the person was not a blood relative of a young person. Respect for adults and educators was expected and valued, and deference to those in positions of trust was the norm. As a precocious young man, I was known to challenge authority and leaders in school and community-based settings. As a 7-year-old, I informed my teacher (Ms. Furbert) that she was being “facetious” for reprimanding me for talking too much in class and around the same age I also corrected a respected pastor (Reverend Lamb) at the dinner table about his dietary practices noting, “you know the Bible says you shouldn’t eat pork.” Such was the communicative continuum of criticality and expression within relationships with those in positions of trust and authority. And though I have now learned that Ms. Furbert (now Mrs. Bean) is likely no more than 15 years older than me, the thought of calling her Rochelle is not an option for me. My current engagement with Mrs. Bean is grounded in gratitude and respect for the deposits she made in me as Ms. Furbert. This is a value system that permeated my high school experience, my journey to and through Oakwood University, and my graduate and doctoral interactions. Similarly, as a young high school and middle school teacher, I learned the importance of setting up boundaries that confirmed that though my students and I may not have been very different in age, my role was clear as a responsible adult who was not in the school setting to abuse or confuse my positionality: As a 25 year old teaching 18 year olds in my first year of teaching, I was in that educational space to teach and lead young people responsibly. All of these experiences created a context where I did not assume that interacting with my professors on a first named bases during my doctoral program was expected. The culture of my doctoral institution was that most professors went by their academic titles and last names; for me this wasn’t an issue or a reflection of some type of subservient relationship. I saw it as a

form of respect for the educational space and positionality that my professors occupied as trusted leaders and mentors—much like I had previously experienced in my educational journey; I remain sensitive to the continuum of criticality and respect for the roles and relationships that are being navigated across time and space.

DISCUSSION OF OUR PERSONAL CHALLENGES

Challenge 1: Acknowledgement of Positionality and Authority as a Professor

Garcia (2019) writes that after completing a doctoral degree and earning a faculty position, “we seek validation, appreciation and respect based on these accomplishments, this will not always happen” (para. 9). One of the initial challenges that a new faculty member faces when starting the professoriate is to establish their authority as a professor. Holdcroft (2014) notes, “The recent practice of addressing faculty members by first name, for example, perpetuates the idea that the student and the professor are equals” (para 20) in the classroom context. One of the foundational ways to avoid that is to ensure that your academic credentials are recognized, acknowledged, and respected. Having students refer to a professor by their academic title inscribes cognitively that this person is not just another person but is an expert in their chosen field. There can be negative challenges to an underrepresented and minority faculty member’s professorial authority when they do not consciously and actively establish their positionality within the classroom. They cannot take it for granted that they will be perceived or deferred to in the ways that the prototypical White male professor is viewed (Jackson, 2011). Biolock (2014) states that, “for women and people of color working in the academy, decisions around titles are constantly being weighed by several factors including the age of the professor, institutional cultures, students’ backgrounds, and gender dynamics” (para .4)

I (Dr. Freeman) have experienced challenges to my title. For instance, a student once yelled across the hall to me by using my first name. After I turned around to the student, the student said to me, “Oh I mean Dr. Freeman or whatever,” and then proceeded to go on to tell me about the topic the student wanted to talk about. The flippant nature of the student’s acknowledgement of my title let me know that the student knew what they were doing. I consistently tell all students in each class my preference for being addressed as Dr. Freeman. However, there are some students that will still test to see if they are able to get away with it. For instance, another student within one of my classes while passing me in the hallway, said “Hey Sydney”. And sped along to their next appointment. The student later that day emailed

me and apologized for not addressing me by my academic title. I sensed that they apologized largely due to my disapproving facial expression when they addressed me by my first name.

As a young-looking professor, I (Dr. Douglas) have had similar experiences. In addition to being referred to by my first name by some students who make the assumption based on how some of their White professors invite them to communicate with them, I was also asked about my age by a middle-aged White student during my first class as a professor. While this student would eventually come to highly respect my perspectives and teaching, this student was initially very resistant to conversations about race and racism in the course—maintaining a self-described “pollyanna” view about America and its racist history. Navigating this terrain with the armor of “Dr. Douglas” was an important pedagogical strategy and reminder to this student that even though he was older than me, I was the teacher and there was much he needed to learn from me. Yogoda (2003) states that “forms of academic address are not only intensely personal, but also tied up with far-ranging trends and issues of gender, prestige, and cultural change” (para. 13). I (Dr. Freeman) agree with the sentiments of Cathy A. Trower (cited in Patton, 2012) as she states, “I don't want to ascribe evil motives to people...It may be a way for people to assert some form of superiority over others. They might not be conscious of it, but they have a hard time being corrected by women, minorities, or adjuncts they've put into another category, even if they have a Ph.D.” (para. 31).

Challenge 2: Students-as-Customers Mentality

Higher education finds itself in a place of increased volatility. Students and parents are demanding more from colleges and universities due to various factors, including the rising cost of tuition (Dhir, 2015). This has caused what some have viewed as a negative turn in the relationship between these institutions and the students they serve, which has been described by some as a “student-as-customer mentality” (Groccia, 1997). Now we often find administrators trying to determine how to best address the needs, wants, and desires of current and potential students. Some administrators have advocated for and facilitated this student as customer philosophy, similar to the burger king slogan, “You can have it your way”. Jackson (2011), a Black female professor, describes her faculty experience this way:

One would expect that having a PhD from a most reputable institution would signify qualifications, expertise, and competence. However, respect for a faculty member—her knowledge and competencies, in this regard—was not always forthcoming. The culture of the institution in which I work, often favors students as customers—

promoting making them happy, and not grading too hard. So, the effects are that students expect A's and are disappointed when they do not get them in a class. (pp. 156-157)

I (Dr. Douglas) have experienced this reality teaching graduate and undergraduate students who often seem to think that they know better than me what should be on the syllabus or what should be the focus or outcome of a course. I recently taught a large undergraduate course of over 70 students. In this course, I serve as the lead instructor and mentor to three graduate assistants who lead smaller sections of 24 students during the breakout portion of the class time. I designed the assignments and directed the learning process that the graduate assistants executed. One of the assignments that I have designed for the course is what I call a “community-based pedagogical space” assignment where the students (over 90% of whom are usually white students) are required to spend time at a community organization or space (e.g. a black barbershop, a mosque, ride the public bus for the first time) in order to learn from and with community educators in that environment. After explaining the assignment at the beginning of class one evening, I stumbled upon a small group of white students who were talking with the only white graduate assistant (GA) after class in the hallway. I was walking with another graduate instructor who, like me, was black and he was actually the lead GA for the course. As an attentive instructor, I checked in to see how the students were doing and, in so doing, learned that the students were discussing the community-based pedagogical space assignment with the white graduate assistant. Always eager to provide additional support and resources to students, I listened as a white male student shared how he had already visited a number of community-based spaces on a particular side of town and he was hoping to find other spaces closer to the school where he would be student-teaching on another side of town. I affirmed his desire to diversify his exposure but also cautioned him to be careful to avoid a “I’ve been there once so I have it figured out” mentality. I suggested other spaces for him to visit that I thought would challenge his thinking and enthusiastically encouraged him and the other students that they would benefit from their visits and be well received by the community members. I left the conversation feeling good about the exchange with the group, only to receive an update from my white male graduate assistant that the white male student had been offended by me ‘intruding’ on ‘their’ conversation about the assignment—‘my assignment,’ with the student effectively noting that he would have preferred to have been guided on the assignment by my graduate assistant! Again, this was about an assignment I created and have facilitated for over 10 years! And this was from a student who called me “Dr. Douglas,” but the questioning of my expertise, authority to lead, and my voice in a class and on an assignment I created

suggested I was “Ty” in his mind—a black male whose voice and contribution in that moment should be subservient to his and that of my white male GA. Clearly, he also didn’t appreciate his privilege being checked and his assumption that he “gets it” being pushed back on. Further exemplifying the ‘student as customer mentality,’ the student also questioned if my other (black) graduate assistant should have contributed to the hallway conversation either—going as far as to ask if the black graduate assistant even knew the student’s name. My lead GA did know his name, even though the student wasn’t a member of his small group. The student would later apologize during our follow up meeting with him. As part of the mentoring process, I also challenged my white male GA—who fielded the white student’s discontent and initially empathized with his claims of victimization—to be careful how he can be used by students to undermine the authority and voice of colleagues of color.

I (Dr. Douglas) have had similar experiences to the one above with graduate students who think they know what they should be learning better than I do. One particular group of first year students in their particular program stand out in this regard. I sought to provide them with a publication opportunity, drawing on a leadership theoretical framework that I have developed. The framework, FREEdership, which was to serve as a foundation for a proposed special issue I would guide them on, required that they analyze and unpack their racialized identities and personal journeys, using what I call freesearch, which is a product of MEsearch, WEsearch and REsearch in my model (Douglas, 2016). The students were resistant. They did not understand that as a scholar and leader in my field, I was actually giving them an opportunity that is not often afforded to students: a mechanism to create and turn a class experience into a publication opportunity. I was reminded through their lack of thoughtful engagement, lack of criticality in their writing, and their subsequent course evaluation responses that these students believed that I didn’t know my place. And yet, they still expected a good grade, reflecting the problematic belief that faculty and staff are expected to facilitate and address students’ needs, wants, and desires. Jackson’s (2011) position is clear:

First I do not see education being about happiness. Rather I see it being about growth and development...Second, I believe that an A should be designated for truly outstanding work—not merely work produced because one ‘really tried and worked hard’ on an assignment (or in a course). Third, regarding written work...for an A, ...the writing must be exemplary.... (p. 157)

In addition to challenge the students’ assumptions about their grades, I also challenged them to consider how often they question their white professors in regards to assignments, grades, and syllabi content, noting that

I hope they will also raise their voices if and when syllabi in other courses are devoid of authors who identify as people of color or women.

I (Dr. Freeman) have had times where students have displayed characteristics of the students-as-customers' mentality. For instance, in one case, one of my students in a class was upset with a grade that they had received and in an email to me asserted that I "justify the 10% (they) were docked". I was taken aback by the word choice that was used in communication with a professor. However, I chose to address the email by replying with this message:

"Dear (student's name),

Thank you for reaching out to me. I am open to clarifying and sharing my decision on why you received your grade. However, I would be remised if I did not say that the choice of the term "justify" can be perceived as problematic. Asking your professor to share, clarify, or help you to understand is an appropriate communicative practice. I share this with you as a form of mentorship to assist you as you grow as student within our program and as a professional. I hope my comments are received in the spirit that they are given.

Now to your grade..."

The student quickly replied via email:

"I sincerely apologize for the tone of my email, that was not my intention. I appreciate the feedback and it did clarify a lot for me. I will apply the feedback in my future paper."

Challenge 3: Respect for Diverse Cultures

It is important that the backgrounds of underrepresented and minority faculty be considered by academic administrators, faculty, and staff when joining a new academic community. I (Dr. Freeman) as both a former teaching and learning center director and faculty member have found that many PWIs do not have an inclusive onboarding process that prepares both the new faculty member and their new colleagues for their arrival and integration into the new academic community (Freeman, 2015; Freeman, 2017). Most institutions subtly assume that underrepresented and minority faculty will automatically focus on acculturating into the new environment without thinking about the ways in which that environment can become more inclusive (Thompson & Louque, 2005; Christian 2012). This is highlighted by what (Freeman, 2017) shared,

It has been my experience working in various predominantly White environments that many leaders and colleagues have been woefully unprepared for the integration of people with different backgrounds

in their workspaces. Very few have taken the time to learn about the unique needs and perspectives of minoritized populations - particularly, why they may do things differently or may have varying perspectives. If someone approaches an issue in a way that is outside of the social norm, there can be a visceral negative reaction - a glare, undesirable verbal response or non-acknowledgment of the perspective of the person (para 5).

However, similar to what I expressed previously, formality may be a part of an underrepresented and minority faculty member's culture and a healthy respect for the incoming person's culture is warranted. I have expressed to my colleagues that I am not trying to totally change the institutional culture at the University of Idaho to mirror the cultural environment I experienced at Auburn or Tuskegee Universities. I appreciate the strengths of the University of Idaho's institutional context. However, I also have adopted the approach that I learned from a White Canadian missionary that served in South Africa who said, "I did not go to South Africa to become African. I came there to share my skills and abilities to improve their way of life."

Challenge 4: Ageism Experienced by Young Professors

Another challenge that both of us have faced is ageism based on being young professors. Given that we are both under the age of 42, we have both consistently been asked or assumed to be students. Also given that we are Black males, when some people find out that we work for a university it is assumed that we are either athletic coaches or teach in disciplines such as music. I (Dr. Freeman) have felt at moments that I have been treated as Ph.D.-lite. By that I mean that others may not interact with me or give deference to me in the same way that I may see some White male faculty receive. Garcia (2018b) expresses similar challenges when she discusses an experience when she interacts with what one might assume is a campus security officer who stops her as she heads to her office. And asked her to identify herself and once she does he replies, "Oh! You don't look like a professor" (p. 3). She goes on to say,

My day successfully starts off with a gendered-raced microaggression and the process of undoing the pain that follows such interaction. I still must enter my office to work on a project that combats the very topic I just experienced (para. 4).

One example of ageism that I have experienced is with older students. When I (Dr. Freeman) first arrived at my current institution, I taught a doctoral course with five students. All but one of the five students were significantly older than me. In my initial class meeting, one of the students said that I looked to be around the age of one of their children. The student also asserted

that they were teaching in the department. Later I discovered that the student was serving as a graduate assistant. To coopt any assertion that some students could use my first name and other students couldn't, I shared with the student and the entire class that I preferred to be addressed by my academic title by all students and did not deviate from that.

I (Dr. Douglas) have experienced similar realities. The academic conference space is a unique context where these dynamics are exacerbated. The assumptions that I am a student—even now over eight years into my career as a professor—speaks to the underlying deficit-based narratives about Black males and other underrepresented and minorities in general: that is, many people still envision a professor to be old(er) and light(er) in skin tone than me.

Challenge 5: Peership, Collegueship, and Essential Personhood

I (Dr. Freeman) like to clearly define the notions and differences between what it means to be a peer and a colleague in the academy. I define a peer as someone who holds the same or similar rank within the field of academia. For instance, as an assistant professor, another assistant professor would be their peer. Furthermore, an assistant professor and a full professor may serve in the same role, given the differences in rank and additional responsibilities expected of the higher rank, assistant professors would not be described as a full professor's peer. However, they would be colleagues. I define colleagues within the academy as anyone who works within the academic enterprise whether it be faculty, staff, or students. All those who affiliate with and contribute to the field of higher education, whether it is an administrator, faculty, staff, or student can be colleagues with one another no matter the rank or position. However, these definitions should not be confused with recognizing the essential personhood of all persons that are members of the academic community. People, despite their race, creed, color, or background, should be treated with dignity and respect.

The definitions and distinctions mentioned above are important as students, faculty, and staff navigate the complex hidden terrain of the academy daily. Many times, people confuse the distinctions between being a peer and a colleague and find themselves in subtle untoward situations. When people are not exposed to the hidden rules of the academy, they may offend some members of the academy belonging to higher ranks who would seek retribution without addressing it with the concerned persons. This can particularly get students in a conundrum for instance, when they assume that because most professors and administrators may be amenable to being addressed by their first name, by default they address all university personnel on a first name basis. However, some professors may not prefer this and

would not address this directly with the students. We would like to point out though, that every person should receive basic human respect, free of intimidation, coercion, etc.

Another challenge that also confronts faculty can be colleagues who may believe the practice of formality unnecessarily reinforces institutional hierarchies. Some scholars have abandoned all formality. Biolock (2014) states:

This has meant aligning oneself with leftist politics, engaging in extensive community outreach, or even simply dressing casually and encouraging students to call you by your first name with no signifier. However, all of this positioning occurs while folks remain fully entrenched in the privileges bestowed upon them by the doctorate, seniority, and ethnic and/or socioeconomic backgrounds (para. 3).

However, scholars such as Preston (2016) who initially advocated for informality in the classroom over time realized that engaging students informally was not about her being more accessible. She shares:

I realized that my informal, first-name performance with my students was not so much a committed feminist pedagogy as a gendered fear of claiming authority and being disliked (note the common claim that Hillary Clinton "shouts" and has a "likeability" problem.)" (para. 19).

Preston (2016) continues as:

[My experiences] challenged my assumption that an egalitarian classroom was an ideal to be achieved by diminishing my expertise and authority and cultivating an informal relationship with students, including using first names. Why did I think a casual atmosphere was honest and authentic? Power relations shape every pedagogical situation, and it might be more honest, even comforting, to acknowledge them (para 11).

Tangentially, it should be noted that informality in the academy is reflective of regional, White normative social and familial cultures where White children are invited by their parents to engage with adults by their first name, and as such, as peers. Larger cultural critiques and questions remain, however, when we consider the deference that is given within the context of athletics on university campuses; namely, the football or basketball "Coach" is rarely referred to by his or her first name by students, parents, fellow coaches, faculty, administrators, or staff, even as these same individuals take liberties to introduce faculty by their first names in professional contexts. Certainly, these assumptions need to be challenged using strategies that account for differential power dynamics and politics of higher education. We share some of these strategies in the next section.

DISCUSSION OF STRATEGIES TO NAVIGATE THOSE CHALLENGES

Strategy 1: Be Professional at All Times

It is always important to be professional in an academic setting. This is particularly true for underrepresented and minority faculty. By this we mean that one of a non-tenured faculty member's goals as it relates to interacting with people in the workplace should be to be viewed as competent and someone who does their job well—understanding that your faculty co-workers and peers will not necessarily be your friends (Henderson, 2011; Walker, 2017). This does not mean, however, that a person must engage in extreme respectability politics; by this we mean that an underrepresented and/or minority professor does not always have to speak, act, and dress like the majority to be taken seriously. However, it is important that faculty members present themselves as a credible and competent teacher and researcher first. That will provide a faculty member with standing among their colleagues and peers.

Strategy 2: Be Consistent

Another strategy we suggest when wanting to establish a professional persona in the academy is to be consistent. We spoke to various scholars within the academy who expressed their disappointment that students choose to be informal when given the option of addressing them either by their formal title or by their first name. For instance, a female colleague shared that she asked her students to address her either by using her first name or by using her academic title. Most students chose to call her by her first name. And in some cases referred to her in writing using the title Miss or Mrs. while addressing her male colleagues by their academic titles. After a while she decided to ask all of her students to address her by her academic title, which made it easier for her. Biolock (2014) expressed similar interactions with students when they said, "I have never needed to encourage students to be less formal with me" (para.5).

Several of our colleagues have expressed that they believe students chose to be informal because informality lends students to feel that they have a personal relationship with their instructor. It is thought that students may feel that using a formal title may not facilitate the type of relationship that students desire to build. There is a theory that students may feel that a professor that they share an informal acquaintance with will be more apt to give them grace if they underperform in their grades based on the more accessible nature of the academic relationship. Also, there is a false sense of

equality when first names are exchanged between a student and an instructor, which goes back to the student as customer philosophy. Students might feel as if earning their grades within a classroom is a transactional experience or that they are on equal ground with the instructor since they are paying for the course and may feel they are in the position to also dictate the terms of the relationship, including the way in which they address their instructor. This is a particularly problematic position for underrepresented and minority faculty, who are often pre-tenure and apart of the growing population of contingent faculty. Individuals in such precarious teaching positions may not desire to be addressed by their first names as it does not acknowledge or reinforce their positionality and standing in the class. However, given their precarious employment status, they may feel that to address and enforce that desire would cause more issues than it is worth.

I (Dr. Freeman) have provided non-tenured faculty with strategies to deal with telling students in a strong but nice way how to formally address them as faculty. Here are some of the strategies I use. The first strategy that I use is during the first day of class when I introduce myself. I say, “My name is Dr. Sydney Freeman, Jr., I ask all my students to address me as Dr. Freeman both in written and verbal communication.” I say this with a serious face. However, before and after that statement I try to comport myself both cheerfully and in an accessible manner. The contrast allows the students to know that I am very serious about what I said. I generally have no challenges after saying that.

We also have both experienced the challenge of students emailing us using our first names. Below are stock replies that each of us use to respond to students’ questions in their emails and clearly communicate our expectations related to the use of our academic titles. I (Dr. Freeman) would also note that I am consistent in not being addressed by my students by anything but Dr. Freeman. Here is an email response I send to students who address me by my first name.

Dear (student’s name),

Thank you so much for reaching out to me. The answer to your question is the following...Also, I prefer to be referred to as Dr. Freeman in communication related to this course (as mentioned during the first day of class). I am not a stuffy professor as you will find, but I ask that all my students respect that request. I look forward to working with you as progress through your program.

Sydney Freeman, Jr., Ph.D.

I (Dr. Douglas) have responded in the following manner to students who have made the assumption that addressing me by my first name is

appropriate—note that my response models an appropriate greeting, answers the student’s question, and then provides clarification:

Example A

“Hello (student name),

I hope you're well.

Under the "assignments" tab on Blackboard, there is a linked file called "needs assessment, revised, 5.8.2013" under 'Needs Assessment.' That's the document/template you should use.

Let me know if you still have trouble finding it.

A friendly, but important, point of clarification: I actually go by Dr. Douglas in this professional context.”

Example B: Depending on my relationship with the student and the university/community spaces that they are engaged in, I may provide additional context as a form of mentorship—particularly with underrepresented and minority students who may not have considered how they will have to navigate the academic space as future Black PhDs—even though some of their professors (usually White professors) may make them feel comfortable to lead with first names based on the White professor’s cultural norms of informality. During my first year as a professor, I shared this response with a doctoral student who became a mentee of mine.

Response Email Sample

“You're welcome.

A friendly but important point of professional clarification: I actually go by Dr. Douglas/ Dr. D. in professional contexts and/or Dr. Ty in my capacity as a minister/community leader.

I know some professors go by their first names. I actually do not. Many faculty members of color have a similar position to me on this and I would be happy to share more context about why in the future—in part because it has professional development and leadership-identity implications for you as you make the transition to Dr. (first name)/ Dr. (last name) or whatever language you choose to use in the future.

Going forward as you continue to navigate academic/ professional/ leadership spaces, I would encourage you to inquire from faculty members/ leaders about how they would prefer to be addressed and/or lead with a more formal approach and let the person tell you otherwise.

Thanks again for your willingness to participate in the community event! Looking forward to seeing you and your family there.

Best,
T. D.”

Strategy 3: Be Clear About What You Want and Expect

We suggest a faculty member be clear about what they want and expect from the beginning regarding their academic title. If a person wants to be addressed by their academic title, it is important that they state that. Given the culture of most PWIs, addressing a person by their first name and not their formal title may be the norm. And it may not be an issue for others to call a faculty member by their academic title; they just have to state their preference. We have found that when we ask students to address us by our academic title, most have been apologetic and have acknowledged us by our designation thereafter.

Here’s a response from a student after I (Dr. Douglas) provided clarification:

Thank you for that clarification and my apologies. I will be sure to address you as such in the future. I have so many professors who are on a first name bases I forget who is not. Honestly at one point I thought You said Ty was fine so again my apologies Dr. Douglas.

Strategy 4: Don’t Fight Every Battle

We have learned that all battles related to respecting our title are not worth it. It has been clear in certain settings that if we were to correct the slight of not being recognized by our title, the attention would be placed on us making the request, not on the substance of the request. Although, I (Dr. Freeman) expect all students within my program and in my classes to address me by my formal title, I recognize that students outside of my program may not initially address me by my title given the cultural norms within the institution. Although I would hope that my colleagues would reinforce the importance of having students address me by my title as some have, I understand the reality that many of them don’t see a problem with being informal; therefore, they may see it as burdensome and a non-issue.

Similarly, Rockquemore (2015) shares that this is not an issue to take lightly, “If the prevailing norm on your campus is that students call faculty members by their first names, then you will need to calculate the cost of being the only faculty member who deviates from that norm by asking students to call you Dr. ____.” (para. 4) She goes on to advise that a faculty member needs to have a clear understanding of what your title means to them and provides a checklist that a professor can think through.

- A way to put distance between you and your students?
- A way to publicly display your educational credentials and expert status?
- A way to acknowledge all of the sacrifice you've been through to get the degree?
- A way to connote respect, either to you personally or to the role of professor?
- A privilege earned from years of education that should be unquestioned?
- Something else entirely? (para. 7).

Notably, when many of our colleagues introduce us to potential students, they may introduce us by our first name. To correct them in that moment may not be the best time to make the point about how we would like to be addressed. Also, this can happen when a peer or colleague introduces a faculty member to their children. As mentioned before, we both were brought up with the notion that non-adults did not call adults by their first name. However, we have both experienced our colleagues introduce us to their teen and pre-teen children by our first names. And the children have therefore felt the liberty to address us by our first names because their parents have given them license to do so. Another complicated situation can be when a student has dual roles at the institution both as a student and serve in a faculty, administrative or staff appointment. I (Dr. Freeman) have experienced this issue as many of my students pursuing doctoral degrees are already full-time faculty or senior administrators at the University of Idaho or another local institution.

I have also come to the conclusion that everyone does not view and recognize a person's success in the same way. Coming from a heritage of people who have been denied access to education, ownership, and standing within the broader American society, Black people have historically praised, embraced, and supported the notion of education and the rights and privileges associated with it. Not only was the title revered but a certain allotment of deference was given to those within the community that had earned high educational achievements. However, with that came an expectation that that person would work to improve the Black community. So, there was a sense of pride from the Black community that one of "their own" made it and was representing them. I experience this when I go home to New Jersey and spend time amongst my family and friends.

I (Dr. Douglas) have had similar experiences when I return home to Bermuda. If and when my family members and friends use my academic title, it is said in an endearing way with a sense of pride. However, we recognize that not everyone is invested in and feels the same way about our academic

and professional success. Therefore, an acknowledgement of our title even in an endearing way may not even cross their minds. Notably, as a former middle and high school teacher, I have observed a shift toward informality amongst former students I taught in the K-12 setting. There is an unfortunate assumption by these students that calling their former teacher is a reflection of their maturation and transition into adulthood, when, unfortunately, it often comes across as naïveté and immaturity.

In conversations that I (Dr. Freeman) have had with colleagues, I have also learned that some White faculty see it as a form of egalitarianism to allow students and non-faculty to call them by their first names. Some of my colleagues even actively try to find ways in their teaching, advising, and scholarship to advance that approach. I appreciate and respect this method and understand the underlining usefulness for those who have traditionally been in power to approach their work in that way. However, I take issue when these same individuals try to impose their philosophy on to those who may not approach it that way. I have experienced some scholars ask a student in my presence why they address me by my last name and then suggest that the student shouldn't have to refer to me by my last name, which I feel is inappropriate.

I also challenge the idea that colleges and universities are/or should operate using flat organizational structures. By this I mean that higher education institutions should act as if organizational hierarchies do not exist or should not exist. This belies the fact that individuals who are usually White have set and continue to set institutional norms within the academy. There is real power and influence accrued and associated with positions of trust and authority such as being an administrator and/or faculty member. To not acknowledge this fact, I believe is disingenuous and dangerous, particularly for those who are marginalized.

When a White faculty member or administrator advocates for the need to have a flat organizational structure and promotes informality within a higher education setting, I equate it to the similar liberal notions of being a good person versus being anti-racist (Sullivan, 2014). It doesn't cost the White faculty member or administrator much to choose not to be called by their title, as their privilege is inscribed on their person, given the deference and advantages afforded them by them being White (Aggarwal, 2016). Brown (2015) has coined this type of action as a form of "Polite White Supremacy", where White people are nice and can advocate for seemingly equitable treatment for all, but all the while maintaining comfort through not having to make hard professional or personal changes, maintaining control over organizational decision-making, and through confidentiality-not acknowledging problematic power dynamics that disproportionately

negatively impacts people of color. So, not utilizing a person's title doesn't cost White people very much, since they are not being expected to do the introspective work of challenging their own unearned positionality, influence and privilege.

Strategy 5: Build Relationships with Colleagues and Mentors

The academy is often a stressful place for underrepresented and minority faculty. Sometimes the non-acknowledgement of a faculty member's academic title can be a form of microaggression. We suggest that faculty try to build relationships with colleagues and mentors that will listen to them without judgement and won't be dismissive of their feelings. It is important to receive third party feedback, so a person doesn't rush to the conclusion that their students, colleagues, or peers were maliciously trying to disrespect them. Still, the reality is that intent is not as important as the impact of our actions, in classrooms, in communities and in our interactions with colleagues. In fact, across and within various social, educational and political spheres and borders, great damage can and has been done by those who would claim to not have ill intent.

DISCUSSION

Border theory provides an important reminder for us that voices and identities live and are silenced within, across, and on geopolitical, socio-cultural and institutional boundaries and borders (Anzaldúa, 2007; Giroux, 2005; Hicks, 1991). Moreover, border theory is used to challenge center/periphery binarisms; our positionality and the very presence as Black male professors in predominantly White spaces not only challenges these dominant binarisms and narratives of White supremacy, but we are also challenging Whiteness as the norm in our communicative practices, choosing instead to honor our cultures of deference and respect for leaders and leadership in educational spaces like the classroom. We do not seek to assert that all people of color or marginalized groups will agree with our position; in this regard, we do not seek generalizability for our position, nor do we claim to be able to mitigate our biases in the study—we did share our findings with colleagues as we analyzed the data and reflected on our emerging findings in an effort to attend the trustworthiness of our conclusions; this was certainly helpful, as was the formal and informal feedback of colleagues toward the execution of responsible research practices. Still, what is clear for us is the need to acknowledge the messiness of identity construction and the sharing of space with other people who are negotiated their identities in the oft fragile space of higher education. We also acknowledge that a limitation

of our paper is the reality that the position we share is grounded in the experiences of two particular Black male scholars of a particular generation, background, and ilk. Future research on how other scholars—particularly those who identify differently from us in other markers of identity—would add important voices to this conversation. Notably, border theory not only accounts for the differences concomitant with intercultural tensions and dynamics of culture, but also the intracultural tensions that exist within people groups (Anzaldúa, 2007). These tensions reflect the dynamism of relationships, power and communication; tensions that are best alleviated by reciprocity of respect for the ways people would like to frame their identities in any space, particularly educational spaces like higher education where we have attained the requisite credentials of a PhD to legitimize our expectations of being referred to by our titles if we so choose.

CONCLUSION

We would like to recommend to professionals and students in the academy to not assume informality when addressing someone in the academy, particularly if you have not been formally introduced and the person has indicated that they are okay with the use of their first name. This should particularly be the approach when communicating with an underrepresented and minority faculty member. We understand that how professors choose to navigate names and interactions with students is an individual decision that is based on a number of cultural and institutional norms. We respect the different ways that scholars engage the academic environment. Our hope is that greater consideration will be given to how we engage with colleagues and students, and (re)consideration will take place regarding the problematic assumptions that everyone engages the border crossing experiences of graduate student to non-tenured or tenured faculty in the same manner.

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