PROFESSION SYMPOSIUM

Navigating the Discipline in this Moment: Considering What it Means to be Women of Color Political Scientists in the Current Political Space

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Professionalism is a term that is frequently used to convey expectations of faculty, staff, and students in academia. Professionalism is also a framework that is used to enforce both the explicit and unspoken norms of academic spaces. This duality makes professionalism an opaque concept. What does it mean to be professional? Does professionalism refer to one's clothing choices, their fit, or how one chooses to style their hair? Does it refer to one's speech pattern, tone of voice, or word selection? Or, does professionalism refer to presenting oneself as happy, humble, and grateful so that others perceive you as a team player, relatable, and therefore someone who is approachable? For some faculty members and instructors, the concept of professionalism may not feel complicated or fraught. Yet, for many women of color in the discipline, especially those who are early career, discourse surrounding professionalism can feel like a sword.

This is the case because the language of professionalism can be used to monitor and enforce male and Eurocentric values and ways of being at the expense of other viewpoints and traditions (Cheryan and Markus 2020; Opie and Freeman 2017). Professionalism rooted in Eurocentric (at best, white supremacist, at worst) thinking scrutinizes the way we, as women of color, occupy space in the discipline. How we present ourselves publicly in our teaching, research, and scholarship. From our outward appearance, especially our hair and bodies, to our diction and accent when speaking, and our general temperament. These metrics are used, oftentimes unconsciously, to assess whether we are a "good fit" in our departments and the discipline (Marshburn et al. 2020; Opie and Freeman 2017; Opie and Phillips 2015; Rudman and Glick 1999, 2001). As women of color political scientists who are junior and therefore have recently applied for and interviewed for jobs and worry about promotion and tenure, most of us have stories of our ways of being in academic spaces being probed with proclamations and provocations couched in the language of "professionalism."

Thus, we argue that the guiding principle of professionalism is both a help and hindrance to women of color in the discipline. It can help women of color by formalizing and making explicit work expectations including metrics that will be used to evaluate one's prospects for tenure and promotion. More frequently, however, this framework operates as a barrier to entry and obstacle for retention as women of color become exhausted in our attempts to successfully navigate these norms and expectations. This tension arises because the rules of engagement, as expressed through norms of professionalism, were not established with the precarious position of women, especially women of color, in mind.

Therefore, we contend that the present moment does not create a challenging position for women of color in the discipline. Rather, it *further complicates* the already onerous position that women of color occupy in academia. In this article, we use professionalism as a framework to explore what it means to hold space in the academy and in our communities within the present context. Specifically, we use our main duties as faculty members—research, teaching, and service—as vantage points to explore the following questions: who has power, who has access, and how are women of color being affected? We use each of these domains to address different issues that may arise for women of color. Importantly, our viewpoints stem from our distinctive positionalities as Black women who are junior faculty members—one employed by a service academy and the other employed by a research-intensive institution. However, in our writing, we consider these issues with women of color, more generally, in mind. We also note that experiences can vary by institutional type, for example woman of color who work at PWIs compared to HBCUs (Blackshear and Hollis 2021).

We share these reflections in the context of widespread initiatives to increase the number of women of color faculty members. To simply increase the number of women of color in otherwise racist and sexist institutions is a failure. Instead, we argue that such efforts must be accompanied by broader

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institutional change which considers the unique experiences of women of color within the academy and within political science. Whether acknowledged openly or not, each of these issues influence the process of recruiting, retaining, and evaluating women of color faculty. Our aim is for existing faculty, university administrators, staff, and students to seriously contemplate the work required to make both university and broader academic institutions not only hospitable to women of color but places where they can thrive.

PROFESSIONALISM AND RESEARCH

What does professionalism require from us as researchers? We are especially aware of the impossibility of addressing issues for all women of color when these issues are so varied and unique. We argue, however, there are common experiences which often play a role in how women of color conduct research and how that work is received. Some of these experiences include unseen work, the emotional effects of our research topics, a sense of obligation to those we write about, and the disciplinary audiences who may not be receptive to our work.

As scholars we use, build on, and expand frameworks and methods. Yet, greater diversity in the discipline means there will be challenges to existing frameworks which fail to make room for work rooted in the lived experiences of the researcher. Research questions stemming from the lived experience of authors can be derided as "me-search"—suggesting scholars who examine issues closely related to their own identities are less rigorous, biased, or irrelevant to broader audiences, while topics primarily researched by white men are believed to be neutral, objective, and broadly relevant (Ray 2016). Devendorf (2019) refers to topics that are personally relevant to the researcher as "self-relevant research." In political science, racial minorities are under-represented in all subfields except: race, ethnicity and politics, women and politics research, and migration and citizenship (Mealy 2018). These data suggest that women of color are more likely to engage in personally relevant research that is visible, while the personally relevant research of whiteness is assumed to be universal and is thus invisible.

With these worries in mind, women of color who write about personally relevant topics often spend precious time trying to preempt attacks on the rigor of their work. Women of color, no matter their area of research, can also take additional time to challenge beliefs about incompetence. Finally, racist and sexist norms require women of color to spend time considering whether their clothing, hair, accent, and way of speaking meet standards of professionalism. This time is above and beyond the copious amounts of time it already takes to produce research.

The fraught process of sharing research in carefully cultivated slides, presentations, and elevator pitches are experiences all junior academics share. Unfortunately, these shared experiences can be made more difficult for women of color who may contend with the additional worries about standards of professionalism in behavior and research. For example, dealing with emotions stemming from the research topic or from the world in general. How can we maintain particular expectations of "neutrality" and productivity when rage and sadness bubble up as we write about our world? There may also be a struggle with added responsibility to capture the complexity and to reflect the people (often in our communities) who have shared their stories with us—reflecting them as subjects and not objects of study.

These tensions don't arise overnight for women of color faculty members, rather they tinge our entire graduate school experience. Academia operates on a mentor model where standards for professionalism are assumed to be transmitted from one's graduate program and academic adviser. Yet, women of color often receive deficient training in terms of critical skills such as networking, publishing, and professional development (Alexander-Floyd 2008). Senior scholars play a crucial role in translating our professional value to the research community-at-large. Advisors, in particular, play a key role in the professional lives of early career scholars and their choices can make or break a career in both formal and informal ways. In the formal realm, they send signals about students' viability as researchers by choosing to co-author with them and/or provide support for their research. Advisors' informal choices are also highly consequential. For instance, the decision to send enthusiastic notes in support of job candidates to search committee members they know. Advisors may also send implicit messages about job market candidates through their decision to use their social media presence to boost some candidates while ignoring others. More, when they *do* signal boost job market candidates, advisors' choices may reinforce existing inequities by closely engaging with the research of some candidates while only providing generic or lukewarm endorsements of others. This tendency is all the more troubling when enthusiastic endorsements are primarily given to those who employ highly technical quantitative methods that senior scholars or advisors presume to be more rigorous.

PROFESSIONALISM AND TEACHING

Another thread that links women of color faculty together is our students. Navigating the university is largely influenced by interactions with students—their needs and expectations. Interactions with students are not only a matter of emotional labor spent helping and guiding them, but also the emotional labor of being held suspect because of your race and gender. As women of color step into the classroom, a variety of issues emerge such as student care, defensive teaching, and institutional vulnerability.

Navigating the academy in political science is especially challenging during this time. Whereas some disciplines may be able ignore their responsibilities under the guise of depoliticizing the classroom, our field purports to deal directly with the political. The current moment involves national attention toward violence against Black and Brown people, immigrants and asylum seekers, a global pandemic, and a U.S. election that put white supremacist rhetoric center stage. No political science field is untouched by one or more of these issues. This means that women of color are entering classrooms where

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they and their students are depleted, anxious, searching for political answers while also experiencing racism and sexism in and outside of the classroom. Women of color may be tempted to invest too much time preparing courses to guard against student criticism or have a ready answer to any student question. Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2008) refer to this practice as "defensive teaching" and argue it does not produce better teaching, only a more exhausted and anxious professor.

The pandemic has pushed most teaching online. With everyone else, junior women of color face the challenge of shifting their courses to new modalities and the challenges associated with online teaching. However, as more course material is posted online, professors who teach "controversial" subjects are increasingly vulnerable to doxxing and other types of harassment., which is uniquely stressful for women of color who are early career and may be seeking employment and/or concerned about promotion and tenure.

We also must now navigate concerns about "Zoom bombing," or instances of internet trolls logging into our classes via the videoconferencing tool, Zoom, and hijacking the meeting with racist, sexist, and other vulgar content (Redden 2020). Statements about race and white supremacy are often flashpoints for this type of targeting (Kamenetz 2018). As discussed earlier, women of color are often engaged in research about issues which could make them vulnerable to online harassment and intimidation. Kamenetz (2018) noted that "in the past year and a half, at least 250 university professors…have been targeted via right-wing online campaigns because of their research, their teaching or their social media posts." Institutional responses to harassment from students and others have been incredibly varied—from issuing canned statements from college administrators condemning these acts to hosting virtual town halls and promising future action.

As institutions attempt to respond to student demands for a more diverse faculty, decision makers must provide a place for these women to thrive. The trend of hiring and not adequately supporting women of color faculty threatens the objective of these hires. In addition, diversity initiatives often exclude non-tenure track faculty where a disproportionate number of women and people of color work in precarious positions (Flaherty 2016). For members of this cohort of "diverse" faculty, decision makers must examine the expectations and provide support for women of color who are adjunct, contingent, contractual, or affiliate.

PROFESSIONALISM AND SERVICE

A final thread linking women of color faculty together are service demands. Women of color face incessant requests for their labor in "normal" times (Alexander-Floyd 2015; Guarino and Borden 2017). The paucity of women of color in the discipline and the ubiquity of committees formed to address diversity issues mean that women, especially women of color who are junior, are disproportionately saddled with service requests. These requests to serve on the front line of these issues are not only internal requests from our departments and institutions but also external from the discipline and wider public. In this context, we are keenly aware that our decision to say no almost certainly means that another woman of color will likely be asked to perform this service in our place. Thus, the discipline's service gap is both gendered, racialized, and therefore structural in nature (Pyke 2011).

In the present context under COVID-19, requests are even more frequent and come from every direction. These appeals typically come in one of the following forms. First, we are frequently called to invisible forms of labor including one-on-one meetings and email exchanges with students seeking faculty of color because of our personal background and lived experience. The labor involved in these exchanges has become even more taxing in the present context as students share their pain and traumatic experiences, which require unprecedented amounts of emotional labor. Second, our colleagues request to "pick our brain" regarding best practices for addressing race in their classrooms and solving racism more generally. These requests are especially burdensome for those of us who are the only faculty member of color in our department. Third, demands for our time are compounded by university administrators' requests for us to serve on committees and other diversity and inclusion-related initiatives. Finally, for those of us whose research addresses issues of racism, inequality, and related topics: we are being bombarded with media requests asking for our time and expertise to help inform public discourse.

In the face of these demands, we are routinely given the advice to "say no" or to have a "no committee" that can say no for us. The advice stems from the "double-bind" that these requests place us in as faculty members: having our "no" be read as unprofessional by our senior colleagues or yielding precious research time now and being penalized for lack of productivity later (Pyke 2011). While this advice is constructive, it ignores the sense of duty and obligation we may feel as women of color in the discipline. For instance, the coronavirus pandemic thrust us all into the online learning environment, which has slowed the peer review process. Within this context, junior scholars, especially those who are primary caretakers in their families, are wisely concerned about how this moment will affect our tenure prospects. Even with one-year extensions, the backlog that many journals are experiencing as a result of unavailable and slow reviewers means that some of the most vulnerable in the discipline will be in a precarious position for years to come. Given this reality, senior women of color in the discipline who have elevated themselves to gatekeeper status may feel a sense of obligation to oblige review requests and write tenure letters. What are the ethics of saying no in this context? The answer often differs based on your positionality. So too does the sense of responsibility and guilt.

This advice also ignores the sense of responsibility many of us feel to leverage our expertise to try and help solve the problems facing our communities. Media requests provide a platform for us to help shape public discourse about issues affecting us, our families, and communities. Nevertheless, engaging in public scholarship—especially as junior scholars —is often frowned upon. For those of us who do it, we risk being perceived as distracted or uncommitted. In a cruel irony, we have labored for years to become experts in topics that allow us to authoritatively speak about systems of oppression and inequality; yet, using our knowledge to potentially improve the livelihoods of those who look like us marks us

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as nonserious scholars. Again, professionalism norms rear their ugly head and prompt the question: what kind of scholars does the discipline have in mind when creating and enforcing notions of what it means to be a "good" political scientist and who benefits from these constructions?

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued that professionalism norms act as both a help and hindrance to women of color in political science. This tension is long-standing but has been further amplified in the present political moment, and particularly under the pandemic. While the opaque nature of professionalism makes it difficult for scholars of any background to avoid vocational landmines, these dynamics are especially challenging for women of color to traverse, especially those who are first generation scholars. Thus, transforming the discipline requires that we reimagine the rules of engagement entirely. This is the only path to a truly inclusive political science. Together, we must decide: what work do we consider valuable? How do we distribute both the visible *as well as* invisible labor required to maintain an equitable and fully inclusive discipline? Who deserves a seat at the decision-making table? On a more fundamental level: should a table be where decisions that profoundly impact the everyday lives of scholars are made in the first place? As the next generation of scholars who are women of color, these are the questions we are contemplating among ourselves—and, hopefully soon, the broader discipline. ■

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