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A Black Mathematician Responds to Delgado

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A Black Mathematician Role Model Responds to Delgado

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"Suppose you saw a large sign saying 'ROLE MODEL WANTED, GOOD PAY, INQUIRE WITHIN.' Would you apply? Let me give you five reasons why you should not." -Richard Delgado

Introduction

The article "Affirmative Action as a Majoritarian Device: Or, Do You Really Want to Be a Role Model?" by Richard Delgado changed my life in so many ways; it affected me an African American. It haunted and challenged me as a recently hired tenure track professor at a small college in the south. Most importantly, it appalled me as a mathematician, feminist and social justice advocate.

Role Model from D.C. Anyone?

My educational background as a youth in Washington D.C. was based in attending Dunbar senior high school followed by undergraduate matriculation to Howard University. I was then accepted to Carnegie Mellon University for graduate school where they were extremely supportive. I finished my Doctorate in Mathematical Sciences there

and moved on to Emory and Henry College in southwestern Virginia; the college is a former hospital for the Confederate Army in the Civil War. While the college provided me with a tremendous opportunity to start my career, I naturally was worried about living in an area where progress in diversity and racial issues may be slower than in other places.

It was during my first year there that I ran into "Critical Race Theory" (second edition), edited by Richard Delgado. It was such a rewarding experience to comb through the various articles in the areas of Essentialism, Structural Determinism, as well as others. The book took my beliefs about race, gender, and class to a place where I was both comfortable and open to new possibilities.

I then came across the Delgado's own "Role Model" article. This article weighed upon me as time went on. It was as if it were whispering in my ear at every turn:

“Reason Number One: Being a role model is a tough job, with long hours and much heavy lifting. You are expected to uplift your entire people. Talk about hard sweaty work!”

Was I feeling overworked because I was a role model? Do I even have a choice in being a role model? How will I be looked upon if I don't try and uplift my own people?

“Reason Number Two: The job treats you as a means to an end.”

Am I being asked to do assignments because I was hired just to serve other's needs?
Was I asked to run that science program because they thought I could do a good job or
because no one else wants to do it and they knew I would do it?

*"Reason Number Three: The role model's job description is monumentally unclear...If
you are a role model, you are expected to do the same things your white counterpart
does, in addition to counseling and helping out the community of color whenever
something comes up?"*

Why was I hired? Am I just here to help the black kids? Don't I have more value than
that?

*"Reason Number Four: To be a good role model, you must be an assimilationist, never a
cultural or economics naturalist, separatist, radical reformer, or anything remotely
resembling any of these."*

Was I being myself or trying to fit in? I am I trying not to shake the boat because I am
new or because I don't want them to think I am the "Angry Black Man?"

These four reasons hung over me for a while. It's not as if they were accurate, but my
own insecurities stepped in the way of seeing clearly what was happening in my situation
at my job. It turns out none of these reasons have explicitly reared their head. Yet. I will

always be watching out for those warning signs now that I have read this article. But I'll never be worried about the following one:

Out of How Many?

“Reason Number Five: The job of role model requires that you lie--that you tell not little, but big, whopping lies, and that is bad for your soul...I am expected to tell kids that if they study hard and stay out of trouble, they can be a law professor like me...If I were honest, I would advise them to become major league baseball players, or to practice their hook shots.”

This one (which interestingly enough Delgado labeled as the most important) bothered me the most for several reasons. The first reason is because it inherently dismisses my own experience. I remember vividly when that double Ph. D in physics and electrical engineering came back to his high school to tell me I could do be successful by choosing a science field for a career. But according to Delgado, if he were being honest, he should have told me the *truth*? He should have told me to go dribble a basketball? Is that right?

Delgado goes on to say:

“Recently, the California Postsecondary Commission, concerned about the fate of minorities in the state's colleges and universities, had it statisticians compile a projection

for all young blacks starting public school in California that year. That number was about 35,000. Of these, the statisticians estimated that about one half would graduate from high school, the rest having dropped out. Of those completing high school, approximately one out of nine would attend a four year college. Of that number, about 300 would earn a bachelor's degree. You can form your own estimate of how many of this group, which began at 35,000 will continue on to earn a law degree. Thirty? Fifty? And of these, how many will become law professors? My guess is one, at most. But I may be an optimist."

It must be remarked immediately that advising these students to be major league baseball players already eliminates ALL of the young ladies in this class. That insulted me as a feminist. What should the young ladies in that class do in their future?

The final reason I was bothered was as a mathematician. Delgado uses this example to show that the chance of a Latino kid being a law professor is low. That may be true but not for any evidence he has given.

The most important question in probability theory is "Out of how many?" Delgado makes the assumption that the pool of prospective law professors consists of all of the 35,000 Latino kids in his example. This is clearly not correct. Some of those kids (if not most) do not remotely care about being a law professor. This plays the largest role in the determining what percentage of these kids turn out to be law professors. So it's not out of

35,000 kids, it's out of the number of kids who want to be law professors. This number is considerably less.

Here is a simple example. Suppose in a 5 years span, a city graduated 10 players who went on to the major leagues and 1 who went on to be a law professor. Is it more likely to be a baseball player or a law professor?

It clearly depends on the respective pools of interest. If there were 1000 students who wanted to play baseball versus 50 who wanted law professors, then it's an easy question.

Relevant to our interest, D. Stanley Eitzen in his book, "Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport," makes it very clear:

“In baseball, each year about 120,000 players are eligible for the draft (high school seniors, college seniors, collegians over 21, junior college players, and foreign players). Only about 1,200 (1 percent) are actually drafted, and most of them will never make it to the major leagues. Indeed, only one in ten of those players who sign a professional baseball contract ever play in the major leagues for at least one day.”

So less than 0.1 percent of all eligible players play for more than one day. But what about those students who said they wanted it to be their career and never became

eligible? So the success rate is much less than 0.1 percent to even play for a year. That is less than 1 person for every thousand who want to play.

Analogously, examine the Latino students who want to be law professors when they are in high school. Are there even one thousand of them? Yet, time and again, there are Latino law professors coming into the profession.

Let's explain this another way. When I graduated from Dunbar Senior High School in 1995, Washington D.C. basketball was at an all-time high in skill level. There were a number of prospects who wanted to play professional basketball. Let's say there were 30 legitimate prospects from the graduating classes across the nation's capital. This does not mention the number of kids who are spending as much time playing and practicing because they believe they will make it to the NBA when they have no chance at all. About 40 new players (mostly college) from across the country are added to NBA rosters each year (Eitzen). How many of the graduating students in Washington D.C. wanted to be a mathematics professor? Five? Ten? TWENTY?

Yet I am the only one needed to make the point; In 1995, it was more likely for a student graduating from high school in the nation's capital to be a mathematics professor than a professional basketball player. Moreover, it is even likely that if you look at the percentage of Washington D.C. high school graduates who wanted a doctorate in mathematics from the last 15 years, my single Ph.D in mathematical sciences still stands high over all of the efforts to get into the NBA; when you look at the percentage of graduates over the last 15 years who wanted to get a Ph.D in mathematics versus those

who wanted to get into the NBA, it is still likely that my contribution alone would still allow the former number to be higher than the latter.

So maybe there is some value to going in and inspiring young people and you don't even have to lie about it!

Conclusion

To all of the role models out there, yes, it can be difficult being one of the few minorities at your job. Indeed, if you are not seeing any of the possible difficulties, I truly believe Delgado gives a very good number. Just ignore the last one. I implore you recognize that when you tell others like you that they can achieve what you have, that you are NOT lying to them. My role model was not lying to me. Tell those students they CAN achieve their goals. They can achieve them only if they **want** to achieve them.