

TRYING, CHOICE, SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND PRIDE?

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Our Marks, Our History, Our Choice?

More than twenty years ago I was struck by the essay, *Marked Women, Unmarked Men* (Tannen, 1993) because for the first time in a long time I felt as though someone turned on the light in the dark room of what it felt like to be female, to fall outside the definition of the majority. I had a cognitive and sociological understanding of the messages that were clear, and simultaneously muddy enough to inspire insanity. While in my early twenties I was exasperated by comments, looks, unfair criticism and more without the lens to metabolize these incongruous messages. I kept asking why I should minimize my identity to get what I need?

What reading Tannen's essay did for me was in many ways what we need to do for minoritized students: to give them the lens to metabolize the messages that have barraged them since the late 1800s. Minoritized students have dealt with time and time again with different forms of "isms" that shape and reshape who they are. Students of color are consistently pushed out of schools and into others in efforts to "desegregate" and access opportunities (e.g. school choice). Though the Brown decision was more than 60 years ago, our communities remain largely segregated prompting the latest in questionable desegregation attempts. Our students are not failing within a strong and well-funded system; our inequitably funded system is failing our strong students.

When I began my work as a Ph.D. student, I insisted upon working in high poverty urban schools because I saw—in my work as a School Psychologist—that students from these systems were underserved and misunderstood. In my first day at a high-poverty urban high school, I realized through a discussion about pizza that the proposed work was misaligned with the needs of the community. You might wonder how pizza has any impact on curricular planning, but pizza is powerful in high schools. My students pointed out that they wanted me to buy them pizza as a reward for a project they were trying to complete. I happily responded that I thought I might be able to do that for the students, maybe 5 or 6 pizzas. One student chimed in, "Well, you're white, you can afford at least one pizza for each of us". In those moments, the conversation shifted to what it meant to be who we are; the assumptions that people make based on physical characteristics, clothing, hair, and more and naturally, what to do about it. In the years that followed, we built a program that addressed who we are as people in general, as racial people, as people navigating a system that feels loaded with assumption, stereotype and discrimination.

Years later, nothing made me feel more satisfied and connected as empowering my students to acknowledge their strengths. We worked tirelessly together to build a culture of appreciation, of celebration of even the "smallest" success. One success story that has shaped my professional trajectory involves the simplest thing, or as my student put it, "getting some fun up in that hair, Miss." One student worked extremely hard to get to school, and then to do well. As part of the plan, she could choose what she wanted to earn for her end of the marking period milestone. As she got closer, I would routinely remind her about this and she would smile and tell me she'd think of something. The day came for us to celebrate her success and she decided that what she wanted was for me to "get some fun up in that hair." When I asked her what she meant exactly, she replied with, "Well, you know, I want to see some pink up in there or some blue." That weekend I got some fun up in there and I had never been more proud.

Social Conformity and My Little Pony

As my time with my students drew to a close and the possibility of faculty interviews drew near, I had some thinking to do because I still had bright turquoise streaks in my blonde hair. I sat in the salon thinking about the process of getting some fun up in my hair and felt a sense of melancholy as I was preparing to be a bit lackluster, my fun concealed. Surely, now in this era of mermaid hair, this is not a big deal, but nearly two years ago, turquoise hair was reserved for punk rock singers or My Little Pony. My pride in my turquoise hair and what it meant was now overshadowed by the need to fit into a mold.

I sat and waited for my turn at the salon, listening to the radio, sipping my “lemon infused” water (aka tap water). As I was humming with the top 40 radio station I froze, horrified by what I was about to do. I caught myself in the mirror and realized that we do try as Colbie Caillat’s “Try” swooned in the background, and this is what minoritized groups have been *trying* historically. That was the whole reason I sat waiting at the hair salon; to *try*. Despite her assertion, “You don’t have to change a single thing”, we do (Caillat, 2014). We have to change so many things in order to survive, in order to navigate the culture in which we live. However, this song tells us over and over again that we don’t need to try and that we don’t need to change a single thing. My question then is how do we navigate and succeed if we don’t try? And for what are we trying? For many of us, what we are trying to change or conceal about ourselves in order to navigate our worlds isn’t nor should it be a choice. I was in the position of being able to conform back to the expected phenotype for an academic with some kind of scholarly aptitude and white middle class background.. But what about People of Color, how do they prepare to fit into the perceived phenotype of scholarly aptitude? Anger welled up in me as I realized what I was doing.

I began to think. How could I advocate for my students not to change a single thing about themselves, to stand strong in the face of stereotypes when there I sat, prepped and ready to get rid of my one identifier of deviance from the white middle class norm? Was I choosing to give up the turquoise streaks in my hair so that I could fit back into the mold of white privilege, of not having to defend my appearance, or prove my worthiness because my looks interfered with people’s interpretation of my scholarly aptitude?

I shifted uncomfortably in the chair as I was ready to run. Then, I thought of providing health insurance for my child and my weight slid back into the chair. A few minutes later, I was ready to run again, but I thought of putting a roof over his head and food in his mouth. Again my weight dropped into the chair like a brick into the ocean. I lifted again, ready to run this time. When I thought of paying for his clothes, books, trips to museums, music lessons, my body sank back into the chair consumed with the realization that if I didn’t try, if I didn’t try to conform at least in terms of my physical presentation, I could be taking a step toward denying my son access to a life every parent wants for their child. As I sat, anger welled in me because my need to try to conform and the ease of my ability to conform made me realize that many of my marks are like temporary tattoos that I have chosen.

I was able to make a choice to make myself more competitive, or less aberrant from expectations for a scholarly appearance and again I was sobered by the injustice. I wrestled with the question of was it an injustice to want to take care of my son and try my best to give him the life he deserves, even if that meant conforming or dulling my personality, my pride. I realized that this “benefit” I had to change my hair color wasn’t a benefit at all, but a means to perpetuating a cycle I was trying so hard to end. In the end, my son’s needs won; my mark was gone. The marks my students carry are not choices that can be dulled like my river of turquoise. The marks my students carried and continue to carry are marks put on them by the majority culture that are directly tied to demography, race, ethnicity, age, residence and more. The consequences of carrying these marks are far greater than anything I will ever experience whose injustices cut much deeper than a river of turquoise.

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