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Member Spotlight: Deborah J. Johnson, Ph.D.

Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, MSU Foundation Professor, and Director of the MSU Diversity Research Network, Office for Institutional Diversity and Inclusion at Michigan State University; SRCD Black Caucus Conference Committee, Black Caucus Past President; Inaugural Town Hall.

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What interested you in becoming a developmental scientist?

The civil rights and Black power movements were the backdrop of my childhood on Chicago's south side. I witnessed struggle and change. Inspired by the movement and the protest culture of my family, one of my core concerns at that time was how to achieve widespread social change for my generation and the

generations to come. And among the many areas of focus I considered was education. The pebble in the pool reverberating throughout American society would be to center on equalizing the educational experience for African American children. When I arrived at the University of Chicago I was clear, I would be an educator, and the Human Behavior and Institutions major (later Human Development) seemed the right fit at the right time. Plunging into the major, I learned that not only was the problem more complex and systemic, but the answers were also multilevel and systemic. Human Development was the logical approach with the most potential to continue my queries and develop strategies. In my third year of undergraduate education, it was again clear, in order to impact widespread social change, the work that I did had to be the foundation of what others did who served children. I needed to produce research and contribute to theory to increase impact and perhaps change how professionals delivered critical information, cared for and trained our young children. Now, I imagined many pools in which to drop my pebble. These lofty goals transformed over time to my deepest motivations.

Do you have a mentor or mentors who have been instrumental to your career and, if so, whom and how?

There are many amazing mentors in my path, at Cornell University in Human Development and Family Studies, Dr, Leachim Semaj, a Piagetian scholar from Rutgers, and Dr. Bill Cross, a social psychologist from Princeton both influenced my scholarship in ethnic-racial identity development, each having very different perspectives on the process theoretically. Margaret Spencer has provided mentoring at many junctures along the way, I have appreciated her presence, advocacy and guidance since graduate school as well. I appreciate each and all of these great scholars and numerous others, touching my life and career.

At the center of my career-long mentored universe, however, stands one amazing scholar. At a conference as a MA student, I requested a meeting with Diana Slaughter (Kotzin), she energetically took me by the hand and introduced me to every significant scholar of color at that conference and made the observation that “she was old enough to be my mother” with the inference that she would parent my career professionally. I likened her to German terms for academic mentors, “doctor-mothers” and “doctor-fathers”. Her statement assured me that my best interests were in her care. Neither of us knew at the time but it was truer than anything I’ve known before or since. She meant that she was committed to teaching me what she knew and to supporting my career through the duration of her own and beyond. I flourished under her candor and tutelage; I learned the craft and applied it creatively under her encouragement sometimes even, delight. Most importantly, I learned how to carry the future of others with you pushing open the necessary doors.

What words of wisdom might you pass on to someone on their very first day after deciding to get a Ph.D. in developmental science or related?

Center yourself in the knowledge that you deserve to be where you are every day. Do not let anyone, entity or institution knock you off that "dime" of centeredness. Do not seek or look for affirmation from the institution, it is not likely to come, or it may come so inconsistently as to make you unsteady. Instead build the networks and mentoring relationships that support, value and affirm you and your work…these will serve you well. Your network should also hold you accountable and be honest, for the important purpose of growth and development of your scholarly prowess. Stay in regular and close contact, don't disappear from those who are truly supporting you. Remember that we need you in the field.

What is something you learned in the last month?

I learned that you can get off the world for a moment and when you return it will be OK. I am still learning balance in work and self-care, and I am still learning to say "no". It's tough. I have learned that forcing work when you are tired or your mind is otherwise occupied is an exercise in fertility. Get your rest, as my colleague Rob Sellers is fond of saying, "work hard play hard!" It's a good philosophy for figuring out self-care, especially radical self-care. We are all worth it, and better for it! Another learning, I periodically write a blog on elders, my experiences with my parents and dementia (losingtime34.com) I have learned that when I am overextended, actually working in the blog can be calming meditation and provide respite.

What does the Black Caucus mean to you?

I was introduced to my first Black Caucus meeting as a graduate student, nearly 4 decades ago. The Caucus has been among the significant fulcrums in my career. I was introduced to the most critical group of Black developmentalists in the nation as Black Caucus members and they have been career-long role models. The caucus provided a home within SRCD before it was as inclusive as it is today. Though the work of crafting our place within the organization continues, I am proud of my experience and journey as among those who sought and achieved the goals of permeating the walls of leadership within the organization. Certainly, I followed the first, but we have our firsts too. I organized my first Caucus conference and became the Caucus chair before I was tenured. I was involved in writing the history of the organization published as a monograph in 2006 because that is how senior leaders within the organization brought us all along. I am grateful for Diana Slaughter Kotzin, and for the others Margaret Spencer, Harriet McAdoo, Vonnie McLoyd, Suzanne Randolph who found ways to life me up in critical ways within SRCD organization and in the academic institutions where I built my career. They held open doors. When I was up for tenure, the Caucus

was there. It was there to provide innumerable opportunities for elevating the work and my visibility as a scholar and leader, and to shape the kind of leader I have become. I still show up to meetings… it's a very different organization and each new Caucus chair leaves something vital within the organization. Certainly, the Caucus has provided for my career but also acceptance and the bonds of friendship. You walk into that meeting and you are greeted with life transforming care and support. And most recently, with the gift of music and joy (Versus)! These are the elements of the Caucus I love and value, and I will always be its servant.