

Research — and Life — Revolves Around Context

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Context matters, and Margaret Beale Spencer's life is living proof. In her conversation with APS President Douglas L. Medin at the "Inside the Psychologist's Studio" session, she spoke about her academic progress and how it impacted her research.

Her family supported her, she said, by placing great emphasis on education and achievement, and she went to very progressive schools. But the environment that eventually surrounded her was very different.

"After my first three years in elementary school until my graduate experience at the University of Chicago, I had never had a teacher of color," she said.

"Never seeing yourself reflected in the courses or in the content — it was like your whole family and your whole history were invisible. Unless you looked in the index for pathology/deviance problems...and then you'd see something about the experiences of minorities. That was a challenge."

She was also one of very few women in her undergraduate program in pharmacological science, she said.

Her family experiences had a protective effect on her life, as has her marriage. She also found people who supported her, from her kindergarten and second-grade teachers, Ms. Taylor and Ms. Gregg, to Frances Degen Horowitz, to Edgar Epps, an African-American sociologist who held the position of

Marshall Field IV Professor of Urban Education — a prestigious title Spencer now holds.

She also learned how context impacts human experience from professors she called "the original ecological psychologists," such as Herbert Wright, Roger Barker, and Paul Gump.

She said she did not pay attention to her own context, and that was how she happened to become the first person of color to be in a tenure-track position at her university.

Medin encouraged Spencer to share the lessons she learned from her own career development.

She maintains a list of next steps — questions that inform her future research. That list led to her first grant proposal, in which she asked how self-processes concerning color and race are affected when elementary school children are no longer protected by their egocentricity.

She found that the research at the time was devoid of real experiences with the minority population. Researchers never acknowledged the role of one's own processing of the stigma of the American experience by Black people, she said. "I never bought it...I knew the textbooks must be wrong."

That insight kicked off a career in examining the phenomenological variants of ecological systems theory — what she calls the “process of inferring about others’ inferences.”

“I would say to the students in the audience: Take the time to understand where you’re interested in teaching and working professionally...I loved and love what I do.”

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