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Assessing the Impact of Racism on Black Faculty in White Academe: A Collective Case Study of African American Female Faculty

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Comments

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Assessing the Impact of Racism on Black Faculty in White Academe: A Collective Case Study of African American Female Faculty

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Abstract

Using a case study approach, the authors of this article strive to explore the challenges and adverse impact that faculty of color often experience due to structural inequities, institutional racism, and the lack of cultural awareness on the part of White institutions. Furthermore, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate that even when there is a significant number of faculty members of color, stereotyping and discrimination still occur and often impact the promotion, retention, and experiences of newly recruited faculty of color. Our narratives as African American female faculty are presented as a collective case study in this article. An analysis of the narratives, strategies for retention and recruitment, and validation of the collective experience through un-silencing the voices are discussed

Introduction

In the 1990s, many predominantly White institutions of higher education (PWI) put forth deliberate efforts to increase the number of faculty of color in the academy (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). Such was the case at the large, Midwestern institution that provides the context for this study. A multi-year directive from the university's governing body to increase the number of underrepresented students of color also resulted in affirmative actions to increase the numbers of faculty of color. Within this majority White institution of 26,000

students, 2,000 faculty (including 17 faculty of color) we were a part of the education department faculty from 1995-2000. At this time, we made up the largest number of faculty of color within any one department, and therefore we were viewed as a critical mass.

At the end of the 1998-99 academic year, each of us received a low performance assessment at our annual review. Despite our high achievements and being a critical mass of 12% of the department faculty, we were assessed to be the least productive faculty members in a department of 41. This article covers a case study span of five years (1995-2000) and a debriefing and



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analyses (2014). The nearly 15-year delay to release a collective experience of racial discrimination is due to the silence that many are forced to maintain to avoid professional backlash. Furthermore, this article focuses on the impact that racism can have on a critical mass of black female faculty in academia.

This article and similar literature illustrates that the struggle of faculty of color to move forward on equal footing with their White peers requires more than a diverse critical mass (Dade & Rios, 2015; Sidhu, 2013; Cole Robinson & Clardy, 2010; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, Neuschatz, Uzzi & Alonzo, 1994). It is often expected that employing a significant number of faculty of color will address all diversity issues. One assumption that has been discussed in the literature is that a diverse and critical mass of historically underrepresented people in a given place will naturally lead to their individual success (Stanley, 2006; Turner, Gonzalez, Juan & Wood, 2008). However, we did not find this to be true at this institution. Collectively, we still experienced racism much like our individual counterparts despite representing a critical mass.

Many research studies have examined the recruitment and retention of faculty of color into predominantly white institutions (Stanley, 2006; Turner, Gonzalez, Juan, & Wood, 2008; Ware, 2000). Yet, little is known about the impact of being a part of a critical mass of faculty of color in a single department or the career and personal experiences of African American female faculty. This collective case study examines the impact that being a part of a critical mass of faculty of color had on the occurrence and effect of micro-aggressions, faculty resilience, and sense of belonging. This case study helps to elucidate the multiple layers and dimensionality of racism (Coates, 2011) as it occurred in the academy, and is instrumental in providing deeper understanding about the complexities, and particularity of female faculty of color, in the academy (Stake, 2006).

Recruitment and retention of faculty of color is important for every aspect of the university, including diverse faculty. Yet, this article confronts the assumption that when underrepresented groups increase, things will turn around. Specifically, this article looks at the case of African American females in the education department who were brought closer together by an act of blatant discrimination. It demonstrates how our significant numbers did not make a difference in protecting us against overt discrimination nor did our presence as a critical mass result in the institution critically reviewing its practices.

The Collective Experience: What's in a Number?

Each of us made notable academic and professional contributions throughout the time period highlighted in this article. Collectively, we were well known throughout the university, and were often noted by the university President and Provost for our outstanding work and contributions including frequent references in the President's state of address. Each year, we received various awards such as: teaching excellence, "Unsung Hero Award," Outstanding Humanitarian, and research fellowships. Collectively, more than 50 newspaper articles featured our work in academic research, books, speaking engagements, community service, and national and international partnerships.

Each year prior to 1998-99, we received high evaluations from the department. However, in 1998-99, an interim chairperson was appointed who chose not to follow the established annual review process. The established evaluation process consisted of a one-on-one (chair and faculty member) annual evaluation meeting that included documentation and discussion about the faculty's teaching evaluations, research productivity, departmental and university service, outreach efforts, workload, and exceptional activities for the academic year.

Instead, the interim Chair decided to pass out a 1-5 performance ranking number on a half-slip of paper (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) to each faculty member during a faculty meeting. As the meeting went on, one of us noted that she received a "2". Within a few minutes we exchanged slips with each other, although we were spread out in the room, we managed to pass and compare the slips and numbers. We found that four of us had received a "2" and one had received a "1." These performance rankings were tied to promotion and tenure preparation and to merit salary increases.

It is important to note, that all of the women in the department had received lower than average rankings. However, we had received the lowest scores within the department. Our "critical mass" demanded to have this case addressed and the Dean's office held several mediations. These meetings were often condescending in ways of asking us what we needed to feel "supported." Various types of support were given. For example, an administrator who was sensitive to the situation gave additional mentoring for the tenure process.

Nonetheless, institutionally the issue was never directly addressed or rectified, and the interim Chairperson was never reprimanded. In continued mediation,

we shared our personal and professional experiences at the university. It became evident to all of us that we were suffering from humiliation and disappointment. However, no systemic changes were made to address the incident. The healing process was derived from the support and empowerment that we gave to each other in natural response to our common experiences with racism at the institution.

Prior to the discriminatory rankings, we did not realize the degree of racial discrimination and the extensive racial and gender micro-aggressions that we each had faced throughout our employment at the university, nor did we realize the silent pain and suffering that each of us were enduring.

Theoretical Framework

The collective voice expressed in this article reflects the union of critical theory, critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and critical multicultural theory, in that each narrative is grounded in and guided by one or more of these perspectives. Each of these theories promotes the need for analyzing social issues through a critical lens to elucidate the deeper problems at hand. For example, the aim of multicultural critical theory is to move beyond superficial practices into addressing social injustices with a more complex understanding and knowledge base. (Quijada Cerecer, Gutierrez, & Rios, 2010). These critical social theories all examine and address the social construction of race and gender, the intersection of these together as well as with other social constructs such as class, and examinations of power, domination, and oppression. As such, these perspectives and lenses guided the methodology used to bring this work forward.

A qualitative methodological approach was the obvious choice in that it allows for the collection and interpretation of stories, narratives, interviews and other forms of non-quantifiable data. A qualitative approach also does not demand or strive for detached objectivity of the researcher but instead encourages the disclosure of researcher bias and the engagement of the researcher with the research and subjects, often in the role of participant-observer. These aspects of qualitative research are particularly important in this instance because of the multiple roles played by the authors of this article and the sources of the narratives contained in it.

Methodology

The methodology employed is informed by and

grounded in the theoretical frameworks described above. Here we describe the use of phenomenology; the questions guiding the research; and present our narrative data.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology proves to be a particularly helpful qualitative approach in this case. Martusewicz and Reynolds (1994) explain, "While the primary focus of critical theories of education is on the transformation of oppressive social and economic structures through education, other critical scholars focus on the individual experience of those dehumanizing processes" (p. 10). In this article, we bring forth our narratives and 'lived experiences' as Black females in academia. They are each introspective and autobiographical. "Researchers in the phenomenological mode," state Bogdan and Biklan (1992), "attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (p. 34). As authors and researchers, we strive to understand the meanings in our own autobiographical narratives, which is congruent with phenomenology practice as described also by Martusewicz & Reynolds (1994):

Phenomenologists begin their project with questioning how phenomena—"the things themselves"—present themselves.... Autobiography is thus a way of practicing the phenomenological search for "the thing themselves" as they come to affect individual experience. (p. 11)

In all of this, phenomenologists are seeking to understand these 'things' from the perspectives of the subjects (Bogdan & Biklan, 1992). What makes this case particularly unique is the conflation of subject, researcher, and author.

Subjects

As subjects of this investigation, we are also, at the same time, researchers, participant observers and the authors of this article. We provided the narratives that served as data for analysis and also collected and analyzed these data. We four subjects/researchers/authors are representative of the five African American females who served as faculty on the same campus and in the same college and academic department during overlapping time periods. More specific details concerning our

demographic and background information are provided in our narratives.

Design and Data Collection

Four of the five professors met in November 2010 to discuss the design of the investigation reported in this article. Three members were able to meet in person while the fourth participated by conference call. Because of previous commitments, the fifth member was unable to participate in this effort. The group decided that each author would individually write her own narrative and then together would provide a collective interpretation, analysis, and conclusion. In the role of researchers, we subsequently designed the following guiding questions to use when we as subjects created these individual narratives:

Guiding Questions

1. Describe your background. Include education and experiences relevant to your career path.
2. What was it like coming to a predominately White majority university and being an African American academic and/or graduate student? What were your expectations?
3. How did you embrace the fact your department hosted the largest number of African American professors in the university?
4. What were your challenges and successes regarding teaching, research, and service at the university?
5. What focus have you selected to tell your story and why?

Narrative Data

Four professors bring their stories to bear on this phenomenon of ‘critical mass’ as it played out for the five African American females within a relatively large department within a Midwestern, research-intensive university. Our narratives are expressed in a mixture

of creative voice that includes prolific storytelling and poetry genres. Each narrative section features individual backgrounds, and though they are distinctly different they are intrinsically linked through common experiences. This sense of collective experience is carried over into the world of academe, and being African American women within a White institution. Data analysis via triangulation of narrative data, and the review of literature occurred fifteen years after the discrimination “incident” (2014) via phone/video conference debrief sessions between us. The narrative entries are listed by the following pseudonym names; N1 Mahalia; N2 - Khani; N3 - Marie; and N4 - Pearl.

Mahalia (N1)

My childhood education in the 40s and 50s in San Francisco was as wild a ride as our family’s living situations: eight schools and double that many residences before I reached high school. In spite of the fact I was told in a myriad of ways that I would never make it out of the Projects, the Fillmore or the Haight by the school administrators, I thrived anyway because of my family’s and my own personal desire to learn. I received a BA in elementary education, a Masters in Humanistic Education, a Certificate of Graduate Study, and a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. I taught in elementary schools for 23 years in California and Massachusetts and then taught in a midwestern university for 20 years in the area of Multicultural Education. Today I am a social justice and political activist, mother, grandmother, womanist educator and scholar.

I had few expectations when I started my academic career at the university. In 1986, I started part-time, and then was offered a full-time tenure track instructor position and only later was informed that I needed a doctorate to keep my position. It was an unexpected challenge, in my 50s, but I took it on and after earning the doctorate was promoted to assistant professor. Research and writing strengthened my skills and talents as an educator and I still focused on my goals of social justice and equity in our nation’s schools.

No matter how many successes we experience as Black women, it is hard to escape ‘imposter syndrome.’ As Johnnetta Cole points out in *The Imposter* “in our country... all black folks are doomed to be intellectually inferior to all white folks. Thus, the last image that many Americans would have of an African American woman is that of an intellectual, an academic, a college president, a person of academy” (Cole, 1997).

In my first week at the college a senior faculty member told me I was an affirmative action candidate. He was at pains to assure me that he had nothing against me, but he said he just thought I “should know.” Why this man felt the need to tell me I was an affirmative action hire had more to do with his resentment of my presence and his racist attitude than any need I had for helpful information. He said what others probably thought, but didn’t say to my face. I didn’t have the role models of professors in my family. I was the first to graduate from high school in my generation and the first to graduate from college in my family. After I was hired, it took another eight years before we reached our administration’s perceived “critical mass” of five African American women in the same department. This did help to empower us in personal ways but our numbers made little difference in the way the department and university regarded our value or rewarded it. I believe it even threatened other faculty and staff at times to have us there. For instance, frequently when other people saw us in the hall talking with each other, we heard, “Uh, oh, what are you up to?” “Looks like trouble.” It was a joke, but unfortunately a revealing one. It did, however, make a difference to have other African American women who knew what it meant to be there. I felt safer knowing that they understood and would watch my back. We did support each other, collaborate on projects, write together, and joined each other’s “Amen” corner. Even so, it took a critical event to show us how second-class our treatment had been: when we found ourselves rated at the bottom of the whole department’s evaluation ranking scale for the first time.

Whenever issues of race or class found their way into committee meetings or faculty meetings, people became defensive. Men more than women were regularly disrespectful to the women. Most White women didn’t directly challenge men in authority; we African American women would. We paid for it in subtle and not so subtle ways. I was once read-out by a top administrator for questioning something he said. He came back at me with, “Young lady,” (I was 55), as he pointed his finger at me and continued to try and humiliate me. There were periods of time under the leadership of particular administrators that I did feel supported and when finances were good and monies were available funds were diverted to underfunded diversity related initiatives, curriculum, staff, faculty and students.

The burden of being a double-minority person when both race and gender intersect cannot be ignored. Race always trumps my gender in a country

whose number one problem is racism, but sexism does impact me and when the two are present at the same time it is doubly devastating. One of the most surprising experiences I had as a Black professor and a woman was one where I returned from a Faculty Improvement leave to a major confrontation among administrators, faculty, and students. The administrators had decided to name a building after a prominent alumni suffragette whose work to move the feminist movement forward was at the expense of African American women. The university was asked, mainly by Black graduate students, to reconsider their choice. Friends and relatives had already placed a brick in my honor in the Plaza of Heroism at the building, and I was asked to have it removed in solidarity with those who were hurt and humiliated by the naming. After examining the records, I agreed. This principled stand came at a cost. I felt frozen out for a period of time on campus; mostly by White feminist colleagues. They thought I was putting the interests of African Americans ahead of women. In the words of Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a woman?” For them I had lost my standing as a Feminist. The day I removed my brick I started calling myself Womanist.

Service, research and outreach were important to me and I grew as a person as a result of those opportunities but my greatest success was in teaching: interacting with students who shared their lives and experience with me. Yet my time was often called on for committee work, as often happened with minority faculty, and included both University and community requests. In addition, we are sought out for council, advice, mentoring and serving on graduate program of study committees disproportionately by students who feel marginalized by the institution. We feel an obligation to serve and we want to honor the legacy of what has been passed down to us for generations. Unfortunately most of us don’t realize until too late that service does not count for much in terms of promotion, tenure or financial recognition in this highly competitive culture.

I learned that if you wanted to impact the structure you had to change the policies and procedures and bring a diversity agenda to the more respected committees (search and curriculum, for example). On the whole, diversity committees that I served on had little power to do anything but make people think those on the committee sanctioned the policy in place and they could point a finger at the people of minority status who seemingly approved. We were tokens and in some sense used. On the other hand, we could and did take advantage of opportunities in the system to gain support for projects and initiatives we felt better furthered our agendas.

We need to update a statement attributed to Mohandas Gandhi: "First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, then you win." To this I say: "First they ignore you, then they invite you to the table and ignore you, and then, if you can, you use your seat to teach them how to build a better table."

Khani (N2)

I am a part of you. I'm on the inside. I'm one of you.

The youngest of five children, I grew up in a lower-middle class, all White neighborhoods. I discovered racism like most children discover the stove is hot; I put my hand on it and quickly pulled back when I was burned.

Confrontations of prejudice and discrimination were plentiful, and my siblings and I, from early on were taught by our parents and life ways to address the internal and external conflicts that were apart of our daily lives. Self-confidence and pride, a commitment to truth and fairness, a responsibility to help others in the community, and a strong sense of right and wrong were the basic values our parents instilled in us. Despite the prejudice they experienced at work and in the community, our parents insisted that we treat the people we encountered as individuals – not as part of a collective that represented prejudice or racist views and actions. We were to be respectful and fair with each person, and expect each person to be fair and respectful with us.

Daily life for our family in a small predominately White Midwestern city in the 1970s included all the typical childhood events flavored by a variety of racial macro-and micro aggressions. My three older brothers excelled in high school and college athletics, my father held public office, coupled with the fact we were an African American family who defied many White people's stereotypes, all this gave my family a sort of 'local celebrity' status. We were Midwesterners. We were a part of the community. We were on the inside.

The values our parents instilled in me, along with an idealist sense of fair play and the belief that I could make a difference, led me to higher education. Although I earned higher grades in college than I did in high school (graduating cum laude), I never thought I was smart enough to go to graduate school. I entered the academy because my father knew the vice president of the graduate college at one of the state universities. I received guidance and support during my Master's degree (despite being discouraged from completing

a thesis); the professors encouraged me to enroll in a doctorate program.

The last place I ever thought I would go to school was the very institution where I eventually earned a doctorate at age 27 and was offered a tenure track faculty position. It is also the same institution from which I later received one of the lowest faculty evaluation ratings without any explanation after one of my most productive years.

I was dumbfounded that the university in my state, where I believed I was on the inside, had rendered such a low assessment of my skills, abilities, and my scholarship as an academic and provided no feedback at all, just a number. How was I rated? What were the criteria? What was not strong enough? Compared to whom? In many ways the absence of any formal feedback ate away at my resolve, self-confidence and academic self-efficacy; like a cancer that lies dormant until it is too late.

Each month during the next academic year my four African American colleagues and I met with the new department chair to discuss the nature of our collective and individual experiences at the university. Although I knew my colleagues fairly well, it was in these monthly sessions where I learned the raw truths about their personal struggles to thrive on campus. There were random incidents and assaults that we did not have the time, energy, or emotion to share on a day-to-day basis even with one another. Though seemingly minor incident by incident, as we talked it was clear that we were each bleeding to death from one thousand paper cuts.

After each session I was sickened and disheartened by the reality and nature of racism and prejudice in the university. I was comforted by the resilience of my colleagues but troubled by the lack of ownership and accountability on the part of the university administration.

The final inequitable blow came after meeting with the dean of the college at the conclusion of the academic year. We had each received an equity raise (a modest increase in salary) to make up for what we had not received the year before. What we did not receive was a fair assessment of our performance for the year. I didn't need a financial pat on the head or token increase to make up for the unfair, unjust rating I received the year before. What we did need (and what we as faculty members were entitled to) was a fair and accurate assessment of our individual performance and most importantly the feedback of what needed improvement.

At the end of the year of group processing, I received four things:

1. A modest salary increase to make up for the previous year when I received no formal annual review upon which to base my extremely low salary increase.
2. A second year for which I did not receive a timely annual review (submitted in February, I received the written review in late May).
3. An “informal” review of my curriculum vitae by the dean and provost.
4. Information from the Dean that I needed to produce as many publications as I could in the two months before my tenure dossier was due.

As a result of this entire event, I experienced:

- A significant level of disillusionment about the academy and higher education.
- A realization that the academy is often slow in acknowledging and obtuse in addressing issues of equity involving women of color.
- The realization that I was not on the inside of the academy, and probably never will be.

A key factor impacting the ability of all professors to excel as an academic is the annual review. The careful, thorough, and timely critique of a faculty member’s work provides direction and impetus for future productivity, so much so that many universities require that annual review documentation be included in the tenure application materials, so that review committees can judge a faculty member’s performance based in part on the quality and nature of the feedback provided in the annual review. The inequity my colleagues and I endured could not be resolved via salary increases. We were denied our annual reviews; a cornerstone of faculty development.

The next year, I submitted my dossier and was granted tenure and promotion to associate professor. I remain an associate professor today. My interest in and resolve to navigate the professorial ranks of the academy is no more. It was clear, and continues to be, that the decisions regarding promotion and tenure have little to do with one’s academic productivity and much to do with the agendas of those who maintain the academy’s hold on institutionalized racial or gender bias.

After completing a semester-long faculty develop-

ment leave, I changed the focus of my scholarship to examine issues of higher education access and social capital for students of color in technical fields; my work examines the lived experiences of students with personal and familial histories of socio-economic and educational marginalization seeking to gain and secure access to the most exclusive and elitist fields in the academy (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). To this end, I also serve as the director of a youth development program to prepare and empower minoritized students to earn bachelor degrees and pursue careers in technical fields.

Marie (N3)

Realistically, I could have been a statistic. Either dead or perhaps imprisoned. Yet, I suppose I did fulfill another expectation of inner city youth, which was becoming a teenage mom. However, in direct contradiction to these demographics, I started college at age seventeen. Furthermore, I completed a doctorate at the age of forty while raising five young children. My career path was not a surprise to me. Becoming a professor of multicultural education made perfect sense considering my life experiences.

My undergraduate major was Fine Arts Education. My teacher preparation and external training helped me to hone a repertoire of various art forms such as, theatre, dance, painting, photography, film, jewelry design, pottery, and silk screening. I taught one or more of these aspects of the arts in prison programs, P-12 schools, and after school community programs.

I learned to bridge my artistic talents and social activism; in fact, I viewed them as one in the same. For instance, if I were given an art project from college I would connect that assignment to my community. This is how I started the Children’s’ Theatrical Group. There were twenty or more youth from “my” projects, including my younger siblings, who performed in social justice plays that I wrote and produced. After performing at my own college, we became sought after by colleges throughout the Massachusetts area. I later expanded the concept of that group to start a business known as “Unity Through Creativity Productions Co., Inc.” UTCP employed artistic youth and adults in areas of social justice/cultural arts cable television productions, school residencies, and contracted theatre and dance performances.

Upon completion of my Masters, I began teaching at the college level. I became a senior faculty member

for Cambridge College Graduate School, and an adjunct dance instructor at Springfield College. Soon after, I applied for the Cultural Diversity and Curriculum Reform doctoral program at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. My dissertation was titled, "Racism in United States Schools: Assessing the Impact of an Antiracist/Multicultural Arts Curriculum on High School Students in a Peer Education Program." I came to enjoy research tremendously. Collecting and analyzing data allowed me to give empirical evidence of the ill effects of racism on youth. Furthermore, I learned that such evidence helped to address biased policies and curricula. Even before graduation I was publishing and presenting my research at major research conferences. Once I graduated, I accepted my first tenure-track position.

Coming to a majority White university I saw the potential for great exchange. I was recruited by one of the African American faculty featured in this article. I asked many culturally related questions during the job interview. For many African Americans, cultural resources are a determining factor as to where we take positions. Yet, often in academe we do not have the luxury to expect a critical mass of African American professors at any one university with the exception of HBCU's (Historically Black Colleges and Universities).

I was impressed that this Midwestern state, although 94 % White, was one of seven states in the United States to have multicultural nonsexist education (MCNSE) legislation that mandated K-16 schools to provide MCNSE integration k-12 and college level courses for teacher preparation. The institution was also ranked a "research one" institution and I looked forward to getting support on my antiracist education research agenda.

When I arrived, there were 2,000 faculty members and only 17 were African American. Those numbers fluctuated throughout my tenure because retention was a challenge. The small number of faculty of color generally paid a heavy price through over-extended hours and diversity service efforts.

Our education department was also mandated by state legislation and our accrediting board (NCATE) to improve its diversity goals and outcomes. I thought this would be a great opportunity to witness all of the faculty members becoming a unit of cultural competent educators. However, more attention was paid to the diversity knowledge that the African American faculty would bring. By my second year, the department boasted of having hired the largest concentration of Black faculty of any college and/or department.

We were five female African American faculty

members. I believe that each of us maintained an expectation of being treated as equals in the profession. Each year we earned excellence awards in research, teaching, and service despite the challenges of racial ignorance and discrimination. For instance, as a new tenure-track Assistant Professor, I didn't expect to be asked to serve on numerous diversity committees that included department, college, university, community, and state obligations. I did not expect to be a token that was invited and expected to attend many events to demonstrate our diversity. I did not expect to end up serving on more than 25 graduate student committees, because students of color felt most White faculty did not have the cultural understanding they needed for their chosen research projects. I did not expect to have to separate tenured White male professors because of their heckling comments to me during a diversity workshop that I was giving for my department. I did not expect to be given a Black colleague's office without her knowledge. I did not expect to be asked to soften the term "anti-racist education" to "racial ethnic explorations." I did not expect to be ranked in one of the lowest categories for a performance evaluation and department raise (especially after receiving awards of performance recognition throughout the year), along with my four African American female colleagues because we were Black and thought to be inferior by our interim department chair. Furthermore, I did not expect for this blatant discriminatory act to not have consequences for the perpetrators which included a racist administrator and staff person. These were but a few of my racist encounters in my beginning years of academe. It became too difficult for me to keep up appearances that everything was fine. My expectation was to be treated fairly on the basis of my expertise, work ethics, and character. My challenge was how to remain at an institution that did not value me as an equal. I decided to leave the institution. The "burden of appearances" (my selected narrative focus) had taken its toll. I could no longer continue to pretend that it was tolerable for me to have to cope with daily racist micro-aggressions for the sake of gaining tenure & promotion.

In hindsight, the burden of appearances forced me to become clear about what I wanted from academia. For instance, I sought out the opportunity to have a Black female dean who became an outstanding mentor for me. Overall, my academic experiences through the years have been varied. The ways that I chose to receive promotion and tenure, and eventually become an associate dean were not typical. My decisions up until the present were definitely influenced by my

experiences at the Midwestern White institution. For instance, I sought a more administrative path to have greater influence on policy and procedures. Today, I am pleased that I decided to move on from an institution that kept a blind eye to racism and how it impacted the well being of its faculty.

Pearl (N4)

Before coming to the Academy, I had spent about 48 years as an African American female living in the U. S. A. Although many of those early years were spent being socialized in an all Black and segregated community, it took almost all of those 48 years for me to make meaning of it all. Along the way, I had many educational experiences and several careers. Just prior to coming to a large Midwestern, research-intensive university, I had a successful career, spanning over 11 years, as a computer programmer and senior systems analyst. During this time I became increasingly aware of how race and the intersection of race and gender influenced the opportunities made available and therefore how they colored my successes. I learned to work within those constraints while overcoming challenges. Of course, I found myself among very few, and often the only Black individual or even Black female in my divisions or working teams. Therefore, my closest colleagues throughout this career were generally White females.

One of my closest friends and confidants during those years eventually married and entered into what would prove to be an abusive relationship. I worried about this friend more and more intensely as the physical and verbal abuse escalated. They had a baby boy early in the marriage and as the baby grew into a young boy, he witnessed much of this abuse and was taught by his mother how to dial 911 in case she was seriously hurt. I expressed my concern and fear for her life and, all the while, I could not understand why she would remain in the marriage. She explained that her husband had her convinced that no judge would award her custody because she was on medication for depression. There was no convincing her otherwise... that is until the last time he beat and bruised her in places hidden from public view and then asked if he should kill her then or wait until later. In time, she did summon the courage to divorce him and won primary yet shared custody. This experience with my friend inspired me, years later, to write the first stanza of the poem, *Domestic and Academic Violence*, for I later saw myself caught in a similar pattern of abuse within the academy.

He whispered softly in her ear
Should I kill you now or wait 'til next year
An inner voice said I must advise you my dear
To leave at the first sign of abuse

When I did come to the academy, I quickly learned what many already knew: Many colleges and universities reflect the general society and in my case this was true.

My first professional experience in academia as a project manager was a very positive experience and I formed lasting relationships with my White male and female co-workers, while completing a doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instructional Technology (with an emphasis in social equity). After completing my degree and joining the tenure-line faculty, new challenges surfaced and an evaluation and salary equity issue arose that strengthened our bonds but, nevertheless, proved that a critical mass does not ensure equity. I had felt very positive working with four other Black females, who had very different backgrounds and experiences yet shared the common standpoint referred to by Black feminists (see Collins, 2008). Again, this was an experience I seldom enjoyed during my professional life. Then I was one of five accomplished professors rated the lowest in the department and, therefore, given the lowest salary adjustments, as described above. There was no evidence given to warrant my or my colleagues' low rankings and we were simply stunned. I realized then that I was still isolated in the midst of professors who looked a lot like me. Individually, we had no power so we could not help each other outside of providing mental, psychological, and emotional support. We still had to rely on White outsiders to advocate for us and wield some political influence on our behalf.

This is when I began to think about the road to tenure and my prospect for obtaining it. And with all this in mind, it was during this time that I realized that this was the first serious act of academic violence or abuse against me and, perhaps, one of many against my senior colleagues. I began to reflect on my friend who found herself in a cycle of abuse and it was then that I wrote the first stanza of the poem, *Domestic and Academic Violence*, that I shared earlier. I began to question the probability of achieving tenure in my current environment and that doubt and questioning inspired the writing of the second and final stanza of the same poem. Though the abuser promises it would never happen again, as most abusers do, I wondered should I stay or should I go. The poem inside me warned me and my colleagues with these words:

When the smoke cleared from all the commotion
She was ultimately denied tenure and promotion

An outer voice screeched with deepest emotion

I should have left at the first sign of abuse. I ultimately did not heed the warning of my inner or outer voices and remained for a hard-fought battle for tenure; a battle I eventually won. I continued, to this day, within the department, which eventually became the School of Education, still ignoring those inner and outer voices. Just recently, I fought that same battle to simply be evaluated fairly and equitably. Therefore, victory in obtaining a promotion to Professor in 2014, after much struggle and disappointment, is bitter sweet.

Conclusion

The authors brought to this research various theoretical perspectives including critical theory, critical race theory, Black feminist thought (BFT), and critical multicultural theory, all under the broader umbrella known as critical social theory.

A critical social theory is one that examines power relationships and addresses issues of oppression and domination. Typically, such a theory addresses issues of racism, classism, sexism, and/or other forms of discriminatory practices, behaviors, and policies aimed at specific social identity groups that have been historically underserved. Social identity grouping involves how individuals align themselves or are assigned by others according to race/ethnicity, religion, gender, language, and other aspects of culture. (Leigh, 2011, p. 150)

Critical theory has roots in Marxist theory and concerns about marginalization of workers by managers and owners of production within the economic system. Modern day critical theorists prioritize class (individual or group economic status and all that comes with it) as points of inquiry in terms of research on domination and oppression (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009). Critical Race Theory, on the other hand, finds race as the most salient factor when examining these same issues, particularly in U.S. society. Critical race theorists use the long history of the cruel treatment of African Americans through the institution of slavery and the subsequent discriminatory and government-sanctioned racist policies as a backdrop and support for the notion that racism is still prevalent and remains an integral part of the fabric of U. S. society (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995). Black Feminist Thought prioritizes the notion of intersectionality and the 'matrix of domination' when

exploring how Blackness and gender mutually influence the Black female experience within communities of color but, moreover, within a society that oppresses both social identity groups (Collins, 2008). Finally, critical multiculturalism examines all areas of difference including race, ethnicity, class, gender, culture, ableism, sexual orientation, etc. and how these social identity groups experience and resist social oppression (see Banks & Banks, 2009).

Coming from these perspectives, it is not surprising that we, the subjects and researchers, offered narratives that addressed issues of power and domination, racism, and gender discrimination. While all these perspectives offer tools for analyzing various aspects of the narratives, Black Feminist Thought rose as the one most helpful in making meaning of our divergent, yet, at the same time, common experiences and the themes that arose from this work. Collins (2008) outlines distinguishing features of BFT, which are used here in the analysis of these experiences.

Two major themes emerged from this research: critical mass did not make a difference with respect to institutional treatment toward African American female faculty; and having a critical mass affirmed "this is not me; it is the institution."

Fighting oppression: Connecting thought and Practice

As with other critical social theories that inform this case study, the chief goal of Black feminist thought is to combat injustice and oppression. In addition, proponents of BFT believe that race and racism, although social constructs, are still very important in U.S. society. Critical race theorists such as Derrick Bell (1987; 1992) and Richard Delgado (1995) would concur and maintain that racism is so prevalent that it has the appearance of normalcy and they go on to claim that only the most blatant and egregious acts and behaviors are recognized and identified as racist. BFT also details the notion of intersections of oppression through what Collins (2008) terms as the matrix of domination. In describing our backgrounds, even before coming to the academy, all subjects spoke of struggles posed by overt and covert racism. One common thread that ran through the narratives was the affects that racial segregation had upon their socialization. Racial residential segregation, based upon racist attitudes and policies, often resulted in confining African Americans into poverty areas. As a result, this intersection of race and class challenged families in

providing quality education for their children. Another narrative reports of the challenges of combating stereotyping and racism as the sole African American family in an otherwise segregated White neighborhood. Two of the subjects also reported entering doctorate programs and, subsequently, academe much later in life than the typical graduate student and/or junior faculty member. They too reported the impact of race on limiting their opportunities in other economic/job sectors.

One aspect of BFT that is emphasized perhaps more so than other theoretical perspectives is the notion of an activist response to fighting oppression. Not only are oppressive acts, behaviors, and policies identified and acknowledged but Black feminists engage themselves in various ways in combating oppression. This activist response to fighting oppression (versus a purely theoretical response) is clearly related to another feature of BFT; the connection between thought and practice. As such, one's lived experiences influence one's view of and resistance to oppression. Further, action and thought inform each other as demonstrated by the backgrounds of two of the subjects who were community activists prior to their entrance into higher education and since. In addition, one subject poignantly describes how she moved from believing herself to be an insider to what Collins (2008) would term as an 'outsider within' location. This 'outsider within' status in this predominantly White academic department and institution affected her view of her oppression and her emotional and intellectual response to it.

From a BFT perspective, another important aspect of fighting oppression and connecting thought and practice is the idea that Black feminists are empowered by engagement in resistance and, at the same time, empower each other in combating oppression. The struggles reflected in the stories contained in this article demonstrate how we as subjects individually resisted and sometimes triumphed, in our own ways, in our personal and professional lives. Additionally, we described how we came together and became mutually empowered by struggling against injustice within our academic department. In fact, this current research process and resulting article is a product of this collaboration and reflects the empowerment that comes from giving voice to the past unjust treatment.

Diverse responses to standpoint

Collins (2008) explains that Black feminists have a distinctive consciousness as a result of their lived

experiences and activist response to oppression, which allows for their ability to work together and uplift each other. Though coming from different backgrounds, Black females' experiences in U. S. society are similar enough to promote this distinctive consciousness and a common standpoint. It is this legacy of struggle that Collins (2008) attributes to the development of a Black feminist standpoint. It should be pointed out that the experiences of African American females change as conditions in U.S. society change and so does the Black female standpoint. Consequently, BFT would predict that we four authors would have shared a Black feminist standpoint, regardless of its nature at the time, in the years preceding our coming together from very different geographical locations and work and home environments.

Sharing a common Black feminist standpoint does not mean that all Black females or even Black feminists will respond similarly to oppressive situations or resist oppression in the same ways. One instance of varying responses to the same situation was demonstrated in this research by our different decisions whether to persevere in the department where a common act of discrimination was experienced. One of us remained until retirement from full time employment and the subsequent end of part-time employment; one left immediately and was tenured at another institution; and the remaining two of us stayed for tenure and post-tenure review in the same department.

This research and resulting article contains narratives detailing very different yet common experiences impacted by discrimination and are told from a distinctive consciousness and common standpoint. Just as we as subjects reacted differently, in some ways, to this standpoint so can a Black feminist standpoint lead to divergent strategies for overcoming similar situations in the future.

Strategies for recruitment and retention

Research indicates that African American faculty at majority White institutions often encounter isolation, token roles, biased promotion and tenure processes, and other discrimination. (Frazier, 2011). Furthermore, stereotypes (e.g. inferior intelligence, ability to speak for the whole race, affirmative action hire, diversity expertise) frequently manifest in acts of prejudice and discrimination within the academic setting. Requiring all faculty to receive professional development in cultural responsive awareness and teaching can help to

heighten the overall consciousness of the institution. For example, the president of the Midwest institution did mandate this training. However, the institution only funded it for one year, and this minimized the importance of the mandate. Furthermore, it is important that all administrators be on board in requiring faculty to receive such training. Additionally, if faculty of color know what may be encountered before taking an academic post it may help to express concerns in the outset, and ask questions of the institution regarding cultural responsiveness. Choosing a senior faculty mentor that is culturally competent, and being able to say “no” to token and/or numerous service tasks may help to avoid “the burden of appearances.” Selecting and maintaining experienced mentors outside of one’s institution is equally important. As with all new professors, staying focused on the necessities to acquire promotion and tenure is best. In the process, academe may gain greater insights to the needs of faculty of color. However, in order for White academia to improve faculty race relations, a commitment to educate all employees is a must. We are confident that unless such strategies are intentionally implemented by higher education institutions and even carefully considered by prospective faculty, progress will remain slow in retaining faculty of color regardless of the level of success in recruiting a critical mass of the same. These narratives are a testament to this notion even for the two faculty members who managed to persevere and succeed by the standards of this institution, but not without emotional and psychological cost.

Epilogue

It is often said racism has “made us stronger”. The authors of this article reject that notion. What made us stronger was the exercise of survival skills including resistance to status quo oppression and the willingness to take a stand against it. For us, this experience impacted our resolve. For instance, we strengthened our “got your back” approach with intentional advocacy and support. We strategically chose only to serve on committees with power to enable us to make a difference. We allowed ourselves to pull together rather than apart. We have sustained a strong sisterhood relationship to this day. We do not consider ourselves victims, or strengthened by adversity, but pioneers clearing the way for those who will be coming after us. Our challenge is to share some of the insights we have gained from our experiences.

Our feeling of success in the face of racism is the refusal of each of us to let it deter or detour our prog-

ress. The traditional measure used in academe is in numbers: How many articles and grants written, how many graduate students advised, and so on. We see our success to a large degree in terms of our ability to control the content of our work and to direct it toward the interests of our community, not just the comfort and convenience of popularity or numbers. We feel we have been successful not only despite societal and institutional racism, but also by the individual goals we set for ourselves. We have assembled this narrative in the interest of service, not complaint. We have not viewed the racism we have experienced as an aberration as much as what is still, unfortunately, expected in the traditional academy; not that expected is acceptable, but that there are some hurdles we must be prepared to face and overcome. Important to this is that the solidarity we gained was not a benefit of the racism we faced; it was a result of our shared interest empowering each other and in friendship and collaboration. We are linked even now because of our common interest in equity and social justice and in education. The hallmark of success in the Academy is tenure and promotion; our success metrics go beyond the Academy’s agenda; we measure our success through the nature, strength and impact of our activism.

Since the events considered in this study, all of the authors have remained active in their various academic pursuits. Each of us has been successful in our teaching careers and in our research. We are well traveled and continue to speak nationally and internationally. We still research and write, lecture and consult. We count among us a department head, an associate dean, a state African American Hall of Fame recipient, a commencement address speaker, a radio host, and we have authored books, chapters in books, and articles. We have all received numerous awards for teaching, research, grants, outreach and service. One was given the keys to her city.

We know that we did not transform our department as we would have liked to, but we know that a number of those involved will never act in the way they did again, and that is the best of reasons. We did not make the revolution, but we believe we have turned the wheel a bit.

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