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Marian E. Truehill
Northcentral University

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Black Women Leaders Professional and Social Experiences in Higher Education: A Review of the Research Literature

About the Author(s)

Marian E. Truehill is a fourth year PhD student at Northcentral University focusing on General Education. Her primary interest lie in the academic fields of Higher Education, History, and African American Studies. She is projected to graduate with her doctorate degree in 2021 or 2022.

Keywords

African American or Black, discrimination, microaggressions, and social conditions

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my mentor, Dr. Tiffany A. Flowers, who is employed at Georgia State Perimeter College.



BLACK WOMEN LEADERS PROFESSIONAL AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

Marian E. Truehill, *Northcentral University*

Abstract

The purpose of this review of the research literature was to offer a critical take on the current body of research focusing on the aspect of how Black women are affected by their experiences in higher education. Some of the themes discussed in this review include discrimination, social conditions, and lack of advancement in academic institutions. Implications for these issues will be discussed and delineated.

Introduction

Since the twentieth century and current decades, Black women have written regarding their personal experiences working in higher education at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs). Most of the discussions are on incidents related to racism, sexism, and gender issues in higher education (Sherman & Williams, 2009; Croom & Patton, 2011; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Allen & Lewis, 2016; Beard & Julion, 2016; Howard, 2017). Black women described their social experiences as stressful, isolating, and at a severe disadvantage for tenure and promotion practices in post-secondary institutions employment positions (Sherman & Williams, 2009; Croom & Patton, 2011; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Allen & Lewis, 2016; Beard & Julion, 2016; Howard, 2017). Many times Black women in academic positions have had to postpone family or marriage options to advance their careers in higher education (Gamble & Turner, 2015). Black women have experienced what Patricia Collins defined as "multiple jeopardy": race, sex, and gender discrimination in the past or currently by working in colleges or universities in the United States. The term "Black, African American, or Afro-American" will be used interchangeably to describe women of color in the United States. This paper will synthesize the literature on Black women's professional and social experiences in higher education.

Methods

After a comprehensive search for data, I located secondary sources to implement in my review of literature on Black women's professional and social experiences in the field of higher education in the United States. I researched several library resources search engines such as ERIC, EBSCOHOST, and I also conducted an internet search using Google Scholar. The search terms I used included Black Women in Higher Education, Black women faculty at Predominately White Institutions, and Black Women at Historically Black Colleges or Universities in the United States.

The search yielded Black women in higher education and employment articles. According to Creswell (2009), this literature review helps determine whether the topic is worth studying. In addition, it provides insight into ways in which the researcher can limit the scope to a needed area of inquiry. For this review, I divided the articles into three succinct categories based on the themes that emerged in the research studies. This includes discrimination, social

conditions, and lack of advancement in academic institutions in the United States. Some of the studies focused on racism, sexism, hostile employment environments, curriculum, tenure, interaction with white students and faculty regarding Black women's professional, plus social experiences in the United States. The first category includes studies that discuss Black women's discrimination experiences in higher education and other employment positions in the United States. The second category includes studies that focus on Black women's social conditions in higher education. The third category includes studies that describe Black women's lack of advancement experiences in academic institutions in higher education.

Discrimination

This first section of the literature review will discuss the discrimination experienced by Black women in higher education. For three and half centuries, Black women have carried special burdens. They responded in dichotomous ways: by protesting racial and sexual discrimination or somehow avoiding it, rationalizing the psychological impact of racism and sexism, or transcending their victimization (Hine, 1986). Black women have discussed how they are treated by fellow administrators, faculty, staff, and students on Predominately White Institutions and Historically Black College or University campuses in the United States. According to Black women who served in both faculty and administration, devaluation of their research, teaching interests, and job guidelines is often challenged by some white colleagues and students at the university level for tenure consideration (Croom & Patton, 2011). In addition, Black women professors stated typically, some of us do not have Black mentors to help us obtain tenure at colleges or universities in the United States. For example, most Black women contend with not having mentoring and networking in post-secondary institutions in the United States (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

Furthermore, Black women faculty described how they experienced microaggressions at their jobs in higher education (Allen & Lewis, 2016). Microaggression is defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary as a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority. Black women experienced both racist and sexist tensions from white males on their jobs. Also, black women have noticed the difference between the white males' treatment of white women and themselves in the workplace. Black women cite hegemony, white male dominance, and degrading remarks toward them by white-collar executives on the job (Allen & Lewis, 2016). However, most Black women viewed themselves as being more relaxed; when dealing with others on the job.

Nevertheless, Black women often play it safe when issues arise on the job (Gamble & Turner, 2015). On the other hand, Sherman and Williams's study (2009) focused on how race and gender discrimination affects the leadership of Black women in businesses, government positions, and higher education. Race and gender discrimination directly impact how Black women serve in the capacity of administration positions. Consequently, many Black women experience a multiple jeopardy syndrome at their jobs in the United States.

Social Conditions

Section two of this literature review described the social conditions of Black women in higher education. Social conditions differed for Black women employed at PWIs and HBCUs in the United States. For example, Sule' (2014) explored professional socialization among tenured Black women faculty at Predominately White Institutions. Black women scholars often experienced unwelcomed contact with co-workers and isolating employment environments in

higher education. Black women faculty are left to mentor students alone, serve on university committees, and find themselves mentors for their research and teaching interests outside of their jobs. Next, Burkhard et al. (2016) described how Black women scholars developed a meeting place and space to discuss their classroom issues with education and curriculum studies. Black women scholars often must do without contact from other Black citizens in the communities outside of their jobs. Curtis, Moore, and Wallace's study (2014) explained how Black women scholars' social agents in their communities and employment positions in academia were. Black communities are few in some white regions of the United States, for which Black women scholars often contend within academia. Sule' (2014) explained that agency is a factor for Black women faculty personal spaces in higher education. Churches, social clubs, and ethnic options for food, hairstylists, or music are non-existent in regions outside of their work. Also, Black women scholars must schedule hair appointments on weekends when they go home for short visits to meet their beauty needs for work. Sule'(2014) also states Black women faculty display a culture of dissemblance when working in academia. Black women have to contend with their supervisors telling them that their hairstyles are inappropriate for the professional job environment.

Nevertheless, professional socialization and agency are essential for Black women faculty to maintain tenure in academia (Sule, 2014). Furthermore, Black women scholars often risk not finding mates for marriage options in predominately white regions where potential mates are few. All of these factors lead to some Black women scholars leaving PWIs. Thus, Black women's social conditions are valid in higher education.

Lack of Advancement in Academic Institutions

The third section of the literature review provides scholarship on the lack of advancement experienced by Black women faculty in higher education. Dade, Tartakov, Hargrave, & Leigh's (2015) study, described how at a predominately white institution (PWI), they experienced low evaluations, lack of understanding of both their research projects and teaching interests by students and other faculty members. Next, Black women scholars' told stories about their professional lives in their research (Farrier and Grey, 2017). Many Black women scholars face competition with their Black male counterparts, white males, and white females in academia. Dillard (2016) tells how she prefers a particular type of interaction among colleagues while working in academia. Tenure and promotion options for Black women scholars have been hard to accomplish at PWIs. Griffin's (2016) study focuses on the complexities of working in academia at a PWI. At Predominately White Institutions, there hasn't been a change in developing diversity on their campuses. Many white students challenge the authority of Black women scholars in their classrooms at PWIs. These Black women faculty stated that before their fifth year at the PWI, their evaluations, awards, teaching, and research interest had been given excellent praise and marks for their exemplary work with students (Dade et al., 2015). They also explained that a new chair was appointed, who did not think that their research and teaching interests were of value for exemplary scholarship in the department (Dade et al., 2015). These issues are not uncommon among Black women faculty experiences in college departments at PWIs. Therefore, three professors received tenure and promotion, while one professor left to pursue options at another university (Dade et al., 2015). Moreover, Black women faculty members must make hard decisions regarding their professional careers in higher education.

In a different study, Farrier & Grey (2017) implemented critical race theory and an Afrocentric feminist epistemology to develop their discussion of working in higher education.

Black women are often met with prejudicial treatment by both white females and males at their employment in higher education. Both authors identify struggles with teaching some white students in their courses at their jobs (Farrier & Grey, 2017). Furthermore, the researchers painted a vivid picture of Black women scholars building relationships as sisters for networking support in academia. Networking for support among Black women scholars ensures that their mental and physical abilities will remain intact to survive a cold and isolated work environment at PWIs in higher education.

However, Dillard (2016) explains in her study that since the arrival of Black women by the transatlantic slave trade, Black women have been treated differently by white males in the United States. Black women have constantly been perpetuated as unattractive or strong compared to white females in the United States. She also describes how she wants to establish a relationship with her fellow faculty in academia (Dillard, 2016). The author wants acknowledgment for her hard work with teaching students, research interests, and volunteering for committees on campus. This journal article represents the essence of all Black women in academia.

The authors have similar themes of both racism and sexism in their work for Black women in higher education (Sherman & Williams, 2009; Croom & Patton, 2011; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Allen & Lewis, 2016; Beard & Julion, 2016; Howard, 2017). The studies draw complex but exciting stories regarding the ascension of Black women working at post-secondary institutions and organizations. The authors focus on the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and the history of Black women in the United States. According to the statistical data collected on Black women's mobility in higher education (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

On the other hand, the researchers share similar social experiences due to their work in higher education and curriculum studies (Mawhinney, 2012; Curtis et al., 2014; Sule', 2014; Burkhard et al., 2016; Han & Leonard, 2017). Han and Leonard's (2017) study primarily told the stories of two minority professors working in a hostile environment. The theoretical frameworks for these studies were Critical Race Feminism and Afrocentric epistemology. These studies based their theoretical frameworks on critical race theory and critical race feminism through an Afrocentric epistemology base to enhance their views in higher education. The history of West African griots (storytellers) was a crucial feature in these studies. The studies differ because each woman shared how they were impacted by racism, sexism, and gender on the job. Collins (2000) "multiple jeopardy" was used to enrich their stories of how racism, sexism, and gender often inhibit Black women's lives at educational institutions and in the communities in the United States.

The studies in this literature review of Black women's social experiences in faculty positions have remained true to their meaning regarding critical race theory, critical race feminism, and Black feminist thought. The studies are different in some aspects due to the gaps in the literature. Black women have written about their personal experiences in business, healthcare, government, and academic fields in the United States. The literature focuses on the historical narratives, medical history, and storytelling based on West African history. Both white males and females continue to disregard Black women's contributions as necessary to help build American society. Racism, sexism, gender, and homophobic tendencies continue to be a factor in Black women's lives in the United States. Black women have chosen to leave Black male counterparts out of their studies due to racial, gender, and homophobic slurs they too experience in the workforce in the United States. The United States has a long history of inflicting

hegemonic actions on Black people. Since the transatlantic slave trade, Black people have endured racist treatment in the Americas. The field of critical race theory, critical race feminism, and Black feminist thought all fall under the guidelines of addressing issues in race, sex, gender, religion, and LGBTQ communities. These studies have opened my eyes to the discrimination inherent in the United States by people of all races, gender, sex, religion, ethnicities, and LGBTQ living and working in the United States. The twenty-first century has come in the United States, and the same inequalities exist. As a Black woman doctoral student, I ask myself, when will the mistreatment of people of color end in America? Did Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Fannie Lou Hamer die in vain? Who will lead the Black citizens out of the wilderness?

Educational Implications

I conclude by stating that comparative data existed on how hegemony existed in higher education, business, healthcare, and government jobs in some studies on Black women's social experiences in leadership in the United States. A comparison of white women and Black women existed to show how White students questioned Black women faculty credentials to teach at PWIs. The HBCUs included in the studies showed how Black women faculty and leaders were required to fulfill a different mission for their students than PWIs. The campus experiences of Black women faculty seem to be different at HBCUs than at PWIs. Students treat Black women faculty/leaders differently at HBCUs than at PWIs. HBCUs campuses are warm, friendly, and community-oriented; whereas, PWIs are isolated, cold, and hostile toward Black female faculty/leaders. My personal experience as a Black woman graduate student in the late 1990s lends credence to the campus climate of Black women faculty experiences at a PWI in the Midwestern region of the United States.

I remember one Black female faculty member who did not get tenure due to her strict teaching/research interests because of the white students at this PWI. Black women faculty still have obstacles to face on predominately white campuses as scholars in the twenty-first century. These professors have moved their families, rejected marriage offers, and experienced unwanted stress because of their work environment at PWIs. Once tenure is denied, these professors usually transfer to other liberal universities with better diverse faculty departments. During their appointment at the new universities, these Black women professors often gain tenure and promotion. While the status quo may not have changed for Black women in academia and society, other liberal educational institutions welcome diversity in their academic departments on campuses. My recommendation is that more studies require critical writing regarding the treatment of Black women faculty/leaders at PWIs and HBCUs. The inclusion of Black male treatment at PWIs should manifest for future research studies. Sexism, gender, religion, ethnicities, and LGBTQ studies are needed to view how they continue to be mistreated if they are Black women or men at PWIs. Equality exists for all citizens regardless of color or sexual orientation. The critical race theory field has opened the doors to all individuals living in the United States. More scholarship needs to occur in all categories regarding the personal experiences of Black men and women in academia, business, healthcare, and government. Freedom exists for all United States citizens.

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