

BLACK WOMEN'S ACADEMIC AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Abstract

This paper highlights the results of an autoethnographic qualitative study designed to explore the experiences of four Black women living in the United States who used their own life journeys to explore and analyze factors that shaped their academic development, and gravitation toward higher education and leadership. Autoethnography and elements of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), were used in the design of this study, in addition Black Feminist Thought (COLLINS, 1990) which served as a theoretical framework. Five themes emerged from the data: (1) Family Expectations and Support; (2) Self-Efficacy (3) Importance of Role Models; (4) Resilience in Dealing with Stereotypes; and (5) Multiple Responsibilities (self, family, and community). Recommendations for future research regarding Black women's academic and leadership development are made.

Keywords: black women; education; empowerment; leadership

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O DESENVOLVIMENTO ACADÊMICO E DE LIDERANÇA DAS MULHERES NEGRAS NO ENSINO SUPERIOR: UM ESTUDO AUTOETNOGRÁFICO

Resumo

Este artigo destaca os resultados de um estudo qualitativo autoetnográfico projetado para explorar as experiências de quatro mulheres negras vivendo nos Estados Unidos, que usaram suas próprias trajetórias de vida para explorar e analisar fatores que moldaram seu desenvolvimento acadêmico e a gravitação, em direção ao ensino superior e à liderança. A autoetnografia e os elementos da Pesquisa Qualitativa Consensual (CQR) foram utilizados no delineamento deste estudo, além do Pensamento Feminista Negro (COLLINS, 1990) que serviu de referencial teórico. Cinco temas emergiram dos dados: (1) Expectativas e Apoio à Família; (2) Autoeficácia (3) Importância dos Modelos de Função; (4) Resiliência em lidar com estereótipos; e (5) Múltiplas Responsabilidades (si mesma, família e comunidade). Foram feitas recomendações para futuras pesquisas sobre o desenvolvimento acadêmico e de liderança das mulheres negras.

Palavras-chave: mulheres negras; educação; empoderamento; liderança

Black women have faced numerous social challenges and systems of oppression related to issues of race, class, gender, and colorization (COLLINS, 1990; HARRIS-PERRY, 2011; hooks, 1984; LORDE, 1984; WALKER, 1983). They have survived the horrors of chattel slavery and faced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. They were the legal property of their white owners and had no control over their own bodies, nor any parental rights of the children they would bear. As a central component of the institution of slavery, laws were enacted prohibiting the education of any Black person. If a Black person was caught trying to learn how to read or write, they were severely punished or physically maimed. Their oppressors ensured that they absorbed the emotional cruelty and psychological messaging that they were inferior to their white owners (FRANKLIN, 1947).

However, even under the most oppressive conditions, Black men and women risked their lives to learn how to read and write. In particular, many Black women were domestic servants who lived in close proximity to their white owners. In this capacity they often had access to the educational materials of their owner's school-aged children. When situational opportunities arose through the caring of white children, many of these Black women would secretly memorize letters and words as a form of self-education. They would covertly share what they learned with their own Black children and members of their communities.

After the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that eradicated African enslavement, many Blacks built schools to educate their youth. It was in these spaces that many Black women operationalized their commitment to social justice by becoming teachers. In 1904, educator and activist, Mary McLeod-Bethune opened the first private school for African American girls. It was originally called the Industrial Training School for Negro Girls, but in 1931 it was later renamed Bethune-Cookman College (JBHE, n.b.). This college served as a landmark institution dedicated to the upliftment of Black female life through education. In addition, there were several other Black women who paved the way in higher education. In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson, became the

first African-American woman to earn a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College in the United States.

Similarly, in 1921 Georgiana Rose Simpson became the first African-American woman to receive a PhD from the University of Chicago. These women and many more made unimaginable personal sacrifices to achieve academically despite laws and social conditions that made their accomplishments seem unattainable. They were trailblazers and social change agents who used education as a vehicle and act of resistance and an avenue toward freedom and transformation (hooks, 1994).

BLACK WOMEN AS PROFESSIONALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Black women have a long history of valuing education as an act of resistance (hooks, 1994), academic attainment (Coker, 2003) and pursuing leadership positions in higher education (e.g., GAMBLE & TURNER, 2015; LODER et al., 2007). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017) although Blacks made up slightly over 13% of the U.S. population, overall 15.1% of Blacks had a Bachelor's degree; 7.0% had master's degrees; 0.7% of had professional degrees (e.g., law, medicine); and only 1.1% of had doctoral degrees. When gender and age were factored in, the percentage of Black females (age 25 and older) with a bachelor's degree or higher was 24%, and the percentage of Black males (age 25 and older) with a bachelor's degree or higher was 20.6%. We can see from the numbers that Black women are indeed making strides toward degree attainment, but the numbers could be better in order to promote a sizeable and visible presence of Black women in higher education.

Data from the 2015 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that Black women constituted only 2% of full-time faculty at institutions of higher education. Some researchers (e.g., GRANT & SIMMONS, 2008) have identified various reasons to explain the disparity between graduation from doctoral programs to tenure and promotion. Grant and Simmons believed their academic and career barriers included a lack of mentorship, minimal or ineffective retention programs to support minority faculty, higher expectations

from Black faculty, difficulty in being promoted, and hostile work environment at predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) marked by racism, sexism, and homophobia (PATITU & HINTON, 2003). Another explanation was the current trend for universities and colleges to hire women and racial minorities into adjunct teaching positions rather than full-time tenure track positions (FLAHERTY, 2016).

For Black women who did obtain teaching positions, research indicated (e.g., GREEN & MABOKELA, 2011) that many had experienced incidents of being discriminated against and marginalized. Like students of color, Black professoriates and Black administrators in higher education experienced discrimination and stereotype threat which negatively impacted their performance and overall well-being. Stereotype threat was a term first coined by Steele (1997) who used it to describe a situational predicament in which individuals (typically of historically oppressed groups) believed themselves to be in danger of conforming to stereotypes regarding their social group. Feelings of stereotype threat had been known to have a negative impact on individuals' performances. Carter-Black (2008) described the threat phenomenon as an issue that often stripped Black students of their self-esteem, leaving them with self-doubts, fears, and misgivings. To this end, individuals who experienced stereotype threat had also reported a need to represent their group in an ultra-positive light in order to avoid or contradict negative stereotypes.

Visibility and acceptance have been a life-long struggle for people of color in academe. Visibility, acknowledgment, and validation are often associated motivations for the production of scholarship and knowledge. Collins (1993), through her social construct of black feminist thought, criticized the traditional approach of evaluating knowledge in academia. She asserted that the way traditional knowledge is being appraised by white males is a tactic that served to perpetuate the marginalization of Black women in academia and in leadership positions in higher education. Collins called for Black women in particular to develop greater self-awareness and self-consciousness (HARRIS, 2007).

Due to the complex intersectionality of the lives of Black women, they must often assess how race and gender in particular play a role in their experiences and interaction with others. Cole (2009) highlighted the crucial role of understanding how these distinct systems of oppression, such as genderism, racism, classism, sexism, and other isms, when combined, are experienced differently by the subordinate than when in isolation. Consistent with the characteristics associated with stereotype threat phenomenon, Black women faculty develop time-consuming self-presentation tactics such as closely monitoring presentations of self by dressing up, modifying any racial markers (e.g., altering kinky hair, or dark complexion), over-preparing for classes, or having to constantly cite their credentials to avoid deliberate dismissiveness from colleagues or students (HARRIS, 2007). Harris also noted that Black women's upward mobility in academe was often compromised as they expend enormous amounts of energy constantly combating negative prejudgments instead of placing their efforts into producing new knowledge.

According to Harley (2008), many Black women at PWIs suffer from *Race Fatigue Syndrome*—a phenomenon in which Black women felt undervalued, used, and unappreciated. They disproportionately assumed roles in service and teaching, and were often seen as the spokesperson for anything related to diversity while being excluded from other university domains (HARLEY, 2008). The barriers that Black women face in academia are very well documented (e.g., TURNER et al., 2008). Several researchers have offered various recommendations to help lessen institutional barriers. Among these strategies was the need for leadership role models, mentoring, greater efforts to recruit and retain Black faculty/professionals, diversity sensitivity trainings for all campus employees, and the creation of a hostile free campus climate in which diversity was valued and respected (GRANT & SIMMONS, 2008; HARLEY, 2008; PATITU & HINTON, 2003). Grant and Simmons (2008) further suggested that same-sex and same-gender mentoring combined with the mentoring of Black students by non-Black mentors may be effective ways to promote the academic success of Black women in higher education.

As we reviewed the historical and current literature on Black women in higher education, we were both inspired and saddened. First, we were inspired by the trailblazing achievements of historical Black women who embodied grit and determination to achieve academically and become leaders. We were disheartened to know that the numbers of Black women in post-secondary schools was not higher. Next, with all the social obstacles Black women have faced systematically in the United States, we wondered about our own stories and the ways in which we came to value and pursue higher education. To this end, the purpose of this study was to use an autoethnographic approach to explore specific familial and societal messages, in addition to experiences that influenced our academic and leadership development as Black women living in the United States. It should be noted that the terms Black and African American are used interchangeably in this paper for logistical simplicity. However, we are very much aware of the differences that exist among Black women with respect to nationality and country of birth. Nevertheless, we maintain that regardless of place of origin, once Black women are exposed to capitalist patriarchy and racism (hooks, 2004), as a result of living in colonized societies, they become vulnerable to variations of the same oppressive forces (e.g., racism, sexism, classism). Therefore, given this reality we posit that Black women are members of the same collective social group. Lastly, in this study, the definition of leadership was defined as an individual who may or may not hold a position of authority or power, but had the ability to serve, advocate for, or inspire others in their social circle or larger community.

METHOD

Qualitative autoethnography methodology was used in this study. Autoethnography is “a form of critical self-study in which the researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researcher as similar to the self (i.e., us) or as others who differ from the self (i.e. them)” (HUGHES, PENNINGTON, & MAKRIS, 2012, p. 209). Autoethnography inquiry allows researchers to use their lived

experiences and self-reflection as a pathway to data collection, broaden social narratives regarding a particular phenomenon, consider the larger societal implications of the analysis, and enrich existing scholarship in a particular discipline (ADAMS, JONES, & ELLIS, 2014). This form of research came out of the field of anthropology (PATTON, 2002) and relies on self-reflection to explore and illustrate a certain experience. Early studies using ethnography as a research method placed importance on the researcher maintaining a certain “detachment” toward academic inquiry and to be an observer of its research participants (VIDICH & LYMAN, 2003). However, Lincoln and Denzin (1994) pointed out that the notion of true disconnection was a fallacy because all researchers have some attachment to their work.

In addition, elements of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; HILL, 2012) was used in the data analysis of this study. CQR is a comprehensive method of collecting and coding qualitative data through the use of interview questions. Core aspects of CQR include (1) a focus on induction versus deduction analysis; (2) use of semi-structured open-ended interview questions; (3) use of narrative and stories; (4) focus on context to understand cases being studied; (5) small qualitative numbers; (6) multiple perspectives of research team members with at least three researchers and two or three conducting the audit check; (7) consensus-building among the research team; (8) an emphasis on culture, ethics, and trustworthiness; and (9) revisiting raw data to verify emerging conclusions. For the purposes of this study, we used five components of CQR: a research team, structured interview questions, consensus-building to analyze data, attention to cultural context; and revisiting data.

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Lastly, we used Black Feminist Thought (COLLINS, 1990) as a theoretical conceptual framework for this study. According to Collins (1990), Black Feminist Thought stipulated that Black women have a unique standpoint, angle of vision, or *outsider-within* status that has enabled us to use our positionality to creatively define, validate, and empower ourselves. Core tenets of Black

Feminist Thought include the acknowledgement that Black women (1) have specialized knowledge about our own realities; (2) must be self-defining by rejecting racialized gender stereotypes imposed on us by others; (3) must engage in collective dialogue as a means of self-validation; and (4) must honor the intersectionality (e.g., race, gender, social class, sexual orientation) of our lives. Lorde (1984) also noted the importance of understanding the intersectionality of Black women's lives by warning against attempts to leave out any part of their multiple identities. Noting that to remove any feature would distort the complex view and understanding of the lives of women of color. Lorde noted:

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restriction of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living (LORDE, 1984, p. 120-21).

Participants

The four authors of this paper who identify as Black women participated in this study. The lead author (Participant [P1]) identified as African American, a PhD holder, and an associate professor with over 18 years teaching in higher education. The second author (Participant [P2]) identified as Haitian American, holder of two master's degrees, a doctoral student, and a Student Affairs professional working in higher education. She had lived in the U.S. for over 20 years. The third author (Participant [P3]) identified as African American, a doctoral student and community-based counseling professional. The fourth author (Participant [P4]) identified as American American and a master's degree student. All four participants identified as first-generation college students, or the first individuals in their families to receive a college degree. We ranged in ages 32 to 52, either worked or taught at the same university, and had academic interests in either the fields of counseling or social work.

Our research team developed out of a shared past history of facilitating a weekly support group at a Mid-Western university in the United States. The support group was designed to help women of color explore their academic and career goals and had been an important feature of student life for many women on campus. We had been inspired by the many stories shared by group participants who successfully navigated their way through college. We began to reflect on our own personal experiences navigating high school and college, and wondered how we were able to academically succeed despite many societal, cultural, and personal challenges. In the beginning we informally met to share our reflections until a decision was made to conduct an autoethnographic study using our own life histories as living data.

Data Collection

After five research meetings and conducting an extensive literature review, we developed five structured self-reflective questions to guide our self-study:

1. Reflecting back on your childhood, what messages did you receive about education and scholarship?
2. Reflecting back on your childhood, what messages did you receive about leadership?
3. What significant events/experiences as an adult have shaped your understanding of scholarship and leadership?
4. In what ways if any, has your identity as a Black woman shaped your experiences?
5. What are the lessons learned as you continue to pursue your professional aspirations in counselor education?

All participants responded individually to the self-reflective questions within the span of three weeks. We each kept structured written notes as a way of documenting our individual responses. We individually coded our responses and shared them with each other. Our research team met on four separate occasions to engage in dialogue, code and identify emerging themes.

Through continuous dialogue we engaged in consensus-building to collectively analyze the data (CQR; Hill, 2012). Each research meeting lasted on the average of three to four hours.

RESULTS

Five themes emerged: (1) Family Expectations and Support; (2) Self-Efficacy; (3) Importance of Role Models; (4) Resiliency in Dealing with Stereotypes; and (5) Multiple Responsibilities, with the subcategories of Self, Family, and Community.

Theme 1#: Family Expectations and Support

Family expectations, encouragement, and support emerged as a major theme. There were strong family messages transmitted regarding the importance of being self-reliant. It was always expected that we would finish high school, but there were also expectations and support from parents and extended family members that we needed to go beyond high school. We recalled consistent family messages being directed toward us as Black adolescent girls. The message: it was critical to achieve academically so we could get a decent job, and not rely on men to take care of us. Our family members also believed it was also important for us to not hide our intelligence as young Black females. Overwhelmingly we noted the most encouragement came from our mothers. As one participant remarked: “My mother had minimal education...though she did not graduate from high school, she placed extreme importance on education and was determined to ensure that all five of her children received a decent education”. Another participant shared: “My grandmother had limited mobility and rarely left the house”. [However], she said: “nothing would keep her from attending my high school graduation. This message...reiterated for me the importance of an education”.

Finally, in addition to consistent active messaging and verbal encouragement, we noted that several of our family members and parents made enormous

financial sacrifices to ensure that we got a good education. One participant reflected:

I remember them [parents] making the decision to send me to private school for high school. It was explained to me that sending my brother and I to a private school, would be a sacrifice for them, however it was one that was important to them because they wanted us to get a good education.

Theme 2: Self-Efficacy

This category was defined as having a strong sense of self and the ability to anticipate and meet any academic or personal challenge. We all noted a strong awareness and belief in our personal skills and talents. It should be noted that even in the midst of our individual self-efficacy, we did acknowledge that there were many times we were afraid, but confident that things would work out. It was this self-efficacy that enabled us to identify our leadership potential. In this context leadership was defined as the ability to motivate, inspire, and serve as a role model for others. As one participant noted:

Being smart and capable of success was always part of my self-concept. My childhood was one in which I was inadvertently placed into leadership roles since I was five.... Being raised by a single mother who was overwhelmed with an alcohol addiction left me vulnerable. Having to make decisions of survival prematurely catapulted my leadership skill set as I often made decisions across safety, financial, and social issues.

Another participant noted: “Through every challenge, trial and tribulation, my confidence magnified as the realization set in that I possessed personal power and the ability to impact, respond, and navigate setbacks to propel forward to victory”.

Theme #3: The Importance of Role Models

Having significant role models was another theme that emerged. We recalled during our childhood not having professional contact with professors,

or individuals who had achieved degrees above the bachelorette. We noted having teachers who we looked up to, but we did not recall having significant career-related discussions with these individuals. We agreed that many of our role models came in the form of “informal” individuals whom we came into contact with at school, church, or in the community. Some of these role models were people who we never talked to directly, but just observed going to work. They were custodians, community leaders, single mothers, or business owners. One participant noted:

During my undergraduate years, I became aware of a woman named Ms. “C” who worked on campus. She carried a briefcase - she was the first African American woman I ever saw working in higher education. I remember thinking that if she could work in a college setting, then perhaps so could I! I was so impressed by the way she carried herself. She looked so important and focused... I never forgot that. Her image had a big impact on me.

Another participant shared:

There was a custodian who did not have a degree, but he would see me on campus everyday and ask how school was coming along. There were many days where I thought I would drop out of school, but Mr B.’s concern for me helped to give me the extra push I needed. You can never underestimate the power of showing an interest in another person. I wish I knew where Mr. B. was today. I would like to thank him.

Theme #4: Resiliency in Dealing with Stereotypes

Resilience in this context not only meant the ability to cope with life’s challenges, it also meant being able to deal with racial, gender, or social class stereotypes. These experiences included, but were not limited to racial microaggressions, verbal attacks, or academic scrutiny from others. Issues of racial and gendered stereotypes showed up across the lifespan: during childhood, the teen years, and as adults. One participant shared a painful memory:

I was in the first grade and it was the first day of school. My teacher who was White invited students to share stories about their summertime activities. A white male student raised his hand and told the teacher that he had learned how to spell the word: CONSTITUTION. The teacher invited the boy to the front of the room where he demonstrated his spelling talents. I observed how delighted the teacher was, and I wanted to impress her too, so I went home that evening and learned how to spell the word CONSTITUTION. When I returned to school the next day I informed the teacher that I had memorized the spelling of the word, but she did not appear impressed at all...in fact she had a frown on her face and she told me return to my desk and sit down. I was crushed. It was at that moment that I realized that my life as a Black girl was going to be different from my white male classmate [...]

Participants of this study also talked about issues of stereotype threat and the ways in which it affected their interaction with peers and faculty. Throughout our primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational experiences we were highly vigilant and self-monitoring about not reproducing any stereotypes that might be negatively perceived as “ghetto.” Ghetto is a term used to describe individuals who grow up in poor neighborhoods and behave in unsophisticated ways. Examples of this within a racialized gender context include behaviors such as being verbally loud, having a combative attitude, or seeming unintelligent. One participant shared:

I knew some of my professors were not expecting me to know the answers to questions posed in class. One time I had a professor question the legitimacy of a term paper I wrote. He suggested I was not the original author of the paper. I was so livid, but instead of getting angry, I had to cool down my reaction so he would not perceive me as a loud angry Black woman. It took a lot of energy on my part not to show my true emotions.

Another participant weighed in:

I have to deal with oppression (racism, sexism)...For example, dealing with microaggressions; [my] research being questioned due to its focus on Black women as the sole subject, being looked upon to offer a comment on the Black experience, or my hairstyle choices being characterized as less professional.

In addition to remembering the ways in which we responded to stereotypes, there was an acknowledgement that one needed to engage in self-care as a means of promoting resilience. This is because consistent experiences with racism and sexism can negatively weigh on the psyche. As one participant acknowledged: “Experiences with oppression can get you down and require additional energy to continually engage in self-monitoring and self-care. I have to make sure I am not too stressed or my blood pressure will go up!”

Theme #5: Multiple Responsibilities (Subcategories: Self, Family, Community)

We noted the importance of achieving academically and giving back to everyone who had believed in and encouraged us along the way... Leadership, academic and career accomplishments were understood as a platform for helping and serving others. Our study found that helping and supporting the development of others was an essential responsibility of our role as Black women, and emerging scholars. We noted that individuals felt a sense of responsibility to self, immediate and extended family, and community.

Responsibility to Self. Personal accountability played a significant role in our academic development and navigation through school. Even though we all had a high degree of self-efficacy, there were many times in which we felt emotionally overwhelmed or temporarily discouraged. In the midst of those challenging times, we all knew we could not let ourselves down by not completing a course assignment or any other academic requirement. As one participant recounted:

I have to be honest, there were several times when I felt totally overwhelmed. I thought about all the work I had to do. I was so tired and burnt out from not getting enough sleep, or coming home late from the two jobs I had. I would weigh the pros and cons of not completing my degree. In the end, I knew that if I did not finish I would have really disappointed the most important person: me.

Responsibility to Family. It was not only expected that we finished school, but it was important *how* one finished. We all recalled our parents wanting to be able to brag to their friends about our academic accomplishments. There was an expectation that our school performance (and therefore we) should be a source of pride and inspiration for our families. One participant recounted an event:

I recall an incident when I brought home a failing grade in one of my courses. My mother was deeply disappointed in me. She made it clear that doing well in school WAS my job, and I had better see to it.

Another participant added:

I remember when my uncle asked, “how does it feel to be in school for your PhD and have the whole family looking toward you to finishing?” Until that moment I had not fully realized just how much my family was looking forward to me successfully completing my degree. It was inspiring to know that I was carrying their hopes and dreams.

Responsibility to Community. In the midst of feeling a strong responsibility to self and family, there was the larger Black community that we felt a great deal of responsibility to. We wanted our lives to serve as evidence of positive examples that could come out of Black communities. We were very aware of the often negative stereotypes people had regarding Black girls who lived in working poor Black communities. One participant declared:

I grew up in a government subsidized housing project. It was all Black and barely anyone there had a college degree. Even though there was a lot of crime, drugs, and violence, there were a lot of good families living in my community who wanted a better life for their children. They felt that if their children could do better, then the community as a whole will be better. I was determined to be one of those kids who did better and exceeded expectations.

Another participant extended her definition of community to encompass her workspace that included a large minority population:

I manage a program [in higher education]. Our mission...is to help students matriculate and achieve their goals successfully while helping them overcome barriers....This position means a great deal to me because it has given me the opportunity to have an impact on individual students.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of a group Black women living in the United States who used their personal narratives to uncover and analyze factors that shaped their academic development. Several relevant themes were identified indicating that in this present study, Black women were highly influenced by personal, familial, and community factors. First, family expectations and support were a driving force in the messaging and transmission of values toward academic engagement and success. Family support served as an anchor and place of origin to nurture growth and development. Family expectations were also intertwined with a sense of responsibility to do well academically. This finding is consistent with Wilson (1978) who found that Black children were heavily influenced by family messaging, particularly when it involved issues of personal and cultural identity.

Second, our research found that family support also had a strong influence on our sense of positive self-efficacy. We all had a high positive self-concept that served as an anchor and launch pad for our academic and emotional growth. This finding was not surprising given that we all had strong personalities and attributed many of our strong will tendencies to our mothers who also served as important role models. This is consistent with research that suggested that youth who had positive role models tended to be goal-oriented (Shade, 1983), in addition to develop positive career aspirations (BUUNK, PEIRO, & GRIFFIOEN, 2007). Further, Collins (1990) noted the importance of Black women's dialoguing as a means of "truth-telling," self-validation, and production of knowledge.

Next, with respect to developing resilience in dealing with stereotypes, participants of this study had the ability to recognize and cope with stereotypes. Even as youth we may not have been able to name the issue, but

we certainly understood the unsettling feelings. These findings are consistent with Williams (2007) who found that Black children received messages about racial scripting and stereotypes early in the developmental lifespan. Similarly, this present study showed that Black women were indeed aware of stereotype threat and worked hard to combat its negative psychological impact as they often found themselves as the “only” in predominantly white spaces. These sentiments are compatible with Johnson-Ahorlu (2013) who found that many African American women experienced stereotype threat. We were able to reframe our challenges as Black women to see them as strengths (e.g., experiences of being the “outsider within”) (COLLINS, 1990). Being the “other” in higher education allowed us to learn how to deal with environmental ambiguity and stress (e.g., we must be twice as good as our white counterparts). Consistent with Collins (1990), Harris-Perry (2011) also noted the stereotypes and distortions in which many Black women must navigate in work and educational spaces. Similarly, Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso (2000), highlighted the ways in which Black women experienced microaggressions in educational spaces.

A sense of responsibility to self, family, and community permeated the consciousness of each of us to develop academic goals. This is consistent with research from Coker (2003) who found that personal, familial and community honor intertwined and held equal salience, and driving forces for Black women who sought higher education.

Lastly, we also noted that with respect to our individual research activities and interests, we tended to embrace an interdisciplinary intellectual framework. This enabled us to ask new questions, and thus expand our academic fields. We realized that our own unique standpoint as Black women positioned us to think outside of the box, and enhance our potential as leaders. Although we all were engaged in various professional or community organizations, our definition of leadership largely encompassed attitudes and beliefs that served as positive habits that would facilitate personal academic growth and modeling for others.

As we reviewed on our collective narratives several revelations came to mind. First, despite the low numbers of Black women in higher education, our very physical presence served as a place of resistance to the status quo in higher education. Although not confirmed, we believe our “otherness” changed the vibrations of our educational environments with respect to the nature and direction of discussions in classrooms, work committees, or on research teams. Our cultural experiences and family of origins provided emotional and generational support for us to succeed. We understood that seeking support and finding allies foster academic and professional growth (LODER et al., 2007), and were central to our development and survival. Sometimes we used strategies of emotional disconnection in order to cope. This disconnection may have served as a protective factor in reducing gender or racial oppression similar to Horsford’s (2014) study that examined risks and protective factors among Black women in pursuing doctoral degrees in clinical training programs.

Limitations of study - We recognize that one of the major criticisms of using autoethnography as a methodology is that some regard it as the ultimate form of self-absorption and data encapsulation (FARRELL, 2017), or that it lacks reliability, validity, and generalizability. We disagree with this position. We did not just capture key moments in our lives regarding our academic development, we worked with each other to validate the data based on extensive review of the literature and collective self exploration. Results of this present study are not meant to be representative of all Black women, but simply illustrative of a set of experiences that might be shared by other Black women. This is similar to Vaz (1997) who highlighted the usefulness of evoking narrative forms of qualitative research when working with Black female participants. To this end, not only did we view autoethnography as intellectually stimulating, we found it to be healing and empowering. This is consistent with research found by Poulos (2008) who noted the value of writing as therapeutic and freeing.

Future researchers interested in extending discourse in the area of Black women’s academic development may want to expand this current study to

include more participants, use focus groups (COKER, HUANG, & KASHUBECK-WEST, 2009), or other forms of qualitative data collection. Regardless of the method, it is critical that the approach be culturally responsive and informed (HUANG & COKER, 2010). Future researchers may also want to explore various demographic factors (e.g., sexual orientation, physical abilities, spirituality) that may impact the experiences of Black women regarding academic development.

In order to enhance the academic development and leadership in higher education, we offer the following recommendations to Black women: (1) Always maintain close relationships with family and friends - they may serve to be your greatest support; (2) engage in leadership opportunities in community and professional organizations; (3) conduct research with, for, and about other women of color to foster self-validation and alliances; (4) remember your own personal wellness and seek emotional balance between your academic and professional life; (5) don't seek all of your validation from higher education - find other avenues of affirmation; (6) have a place to vent because you will inevitably have strong reactions to challenges around you - this is normative; (7) always engage in continued growth and development; (8) seek international experiences - this will broaden your perspective of the world; and (9) become a mentor/sponsor/role model to others interested in advancing their academic attainment.

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