

# Automatically Discounted: Using Black Feminist Theory to Critically Analyze the Experiences of Black Female Faculty

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*Black female faculty (BFF) automatically face a number of (un)conscience struggles as they enter into the academy as junior faculty. As a result, there is often a sense of burnout and over-compensation to mitigate the oppressive experiences related to race and gender. This article conceptualizes a thorough review of the literature of the struggle that many BFF contend with in institutions of higher education. The authors emphasize the importance of studying the role BFF can play in transforming and diversifying the culture and climate of these institutions, in order to increase awareness and access to other BFF in the academy.*

*Keywords: Higher Education, Black Feminism, Female Faculty, African American*

The exclusion and marginalization of African American women in the academy is well documented from historical and contemporary perspectives. In the fall of 2013, of all post-secondary degree-granting institutions, only 6% of faculty were Black (NCES, 2014). Although the numbers are not disaggregated by gender, the number of full time Black women represented would be far less than 6% of all faculty working in 2013. In addition to paltry numbers, Black women in institutions of higher education are less likely to be hired, continue in tenure track positions, or receive promotions (McCray, 2011). Much of the research regarding faculty in higher education is focused primarily on race and ethnicity. Few studies in comparison have reported information about faculty that is gender specific for races other than white (Dace, 2012; Gutierrez, Niemann, Gonzalez, & Harris, 2012; Croom & Patton, 2011; Turner Kelly & McCann, 2013; 2014).

However, African American women have a unique perspective of educational and social injustices due to their positioning in society. Many African Americans are still confronted with issues, such as racism and discrimination, as they pursue careers in higher education. When the additional minority status of female is attached, the issues are compounded. African American women are struggling to navigate discriminatory practices related to gender and ethnicity in institutions, including higher education.

The political climate of many higher education settings are dominated by cultures that have not been socialized to account for the unique position of Black women. As a result, many in the academy automatically discount the standpoint of the African American woman and the benefit their unique perspectives can bring to the institution (Horsford, 2012). Namely, women tend to be transformational and collaborative (Herrera, 2012). Here, we explore how African American women navigate and transform the social structure of the ivory tower when confronted with the “double bind” reality of being female and of color. Through that exploration, we conceptualize the role and socialization of African American women in academia as discussed in extant literature.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the literature regarding the holistic experiences of Black female faculty (BFF) in academia through the lens of Black Feminist Theory. The authors illuminate the biases that affect Black women regarding cultural and gender identification. In order to encourage and support African American women in the academy, one must understand their unique standpoint at the university level. A thorough analysis of the literature will highlight themes and gaps in the research regarding the effects of race and gender in the academy, specifically within the context of historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs). In addition, it will inform the educational community of future research that will add to the body of literature regarding this subject.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Black feminists engaged in specific feminism rhetoric in the mid-nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1970s the term Black feminism was coined. These feminists made the case that socially and politically Black women have to deal with the concept of the “double bind” which refers to being Black and being a woman. More recently, Black feminists have expanded the notion to include issues of class and sexuality, in addition to race and gender. Each of these social identities place the Black woman in the position to fight not just one status, but the intersectionality of all labels that lead to discrimination (Salzman, 2006).

Black feminist theory is characterized by some very specific ideologies, as it relates to the justice movements for African Americans and for women. For instance, the civil rights movement, led predominately by men, effectively and tirelessly fought for Black rights as a racial minority while largely ignoring the rights and needs of women who were a part of the same movement. Conversely, the popular feminist movement that took hold in the sixties and seventies sought to fight gender discrimination in a manner that ignored the unique needs of minority women in regards to equality. Thus, two of the most important civil rights movements at the intersection of race and gender essentially excluded the needs and ultimately the voice of Black women (Salzman, 2006).

Hill Collins (2000) effectively added to the dialogue of Black feminism by fostering a fundamental shift in the paradigm of oppression. She has conceptualized the notion that the many systems of oppression are interlocked as opposed to additive. For African American women pursuing a career, they must contend with possible racism that their White counterparts do not experience and sexism that their male counterparts will not contend with. This situation makes a very different journey from others in the position that are affected by race or gender solely. Therefore, minority women view the world from an intersected positionality of both race and gender (Collins, 1998), but are often faced with the choice of dedicating themselves to one cause or the other, rather than both (Crenshaw, 1993; Roane & Newcomb, 2013). As a result, the Black feminist standpoint, can be seen as divisive leading to “tensions Black feminists experience with both Black men and white society at large...” (Taylor, 2014, p .33). Salzman (2006) explained,

Furthermore, Black feminists have resisted for generations the separatism of their white feminist counterparts who have not traditionally included racism and classism as part of the women’s rights agenda while simultaneously questioning the patriarchal beliefs of their African-American male leaders who often choose to ignore sexism in the fight for racial justice. (p. 758)

Therefore, the journey to eliminate sexism, racism, and classism should not be the fight for Black women, but should be entangled in the fight for social justice for all people. (Salzman, 2006). The standpoint of the Black feminist is one that must encompass and embrace the intersectionality of women whose social construct is filtered through a dual lens that is minoritized from race and gender standpoints. This complex duality frames the way in which extant literature on Black female faculty members is critically analyzed and discussed.

## **Literature Review**

Experiences of Black female faculty members (BFF) in academia comprise a growing body of scholarship from an interdisciplinary perspective (Bonner, 2001; Croom & Patton, 2011; Davis & Reynolds, 2011; Edwards, 2015; Guy-Sheftall, 2006; Hinton, 2010; Patton & Catching, 2009; Sule, 2014; Turner Kelly & McCann, 2013, 2014). As efforts to diversify the professoriate continually increase, it is important to document difficulties and successes faced by faculty of color as they navigate the complex terrain of academe. Equally important in documentation of these experiences is that certain voices do not become invisible under umbrella terms like “faculty of color” and “women” (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wong, 2011, as cited in Turner Kelly & McCann, 2013). Illuminating nuanced experiences of those occupying multiple minoritized identities is crucial to the deconstruction of hegemonic practices and policies in the academy that are pervasive (Croom & Patton, 2012). The review of literature will discuss the marginalized

experiences Black female faculty endure through the tenure and promotion process. The authors then examine socialization processes as it relates to the campus climate for Black female faculty before discussing empirical studies that focus on these issues in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Finally, the authors will conclude with a critical discussion of implications for this population and how future research should focus on these experiences in specific institution types.

### **Marginalization of Black Female Faculty Members**

Extant literature paints a tough picture of academic experiences for Black female faculty members. Primarily defined by marginalization, BFF persist through a multitude of difficult circumstances compounded by the intertwining elements of race and gender. When both social identities are considered, the alarmingly low numbers of Black female faculty exacerbate the difficulties due to lack of community. Croom and Patton (2012) discuss how the dearth of Black women at the level of full professor exposes them to dangerous “racially toxic environments that act as the catalyst for their numerical underrepresentation, as well as their invisibility” (p. 16). Hinton (2009) delineates aspects of tokenism, completing extra work, and invisibility as significant to the BFF experience. The result of managing such difficulties can manifest in what Padilla (1994) calls cultural taxation, or fatigue from having to take on extra tasks such as serving on committees to represent “diversity.” The inherent contradiction in taking on extra tasks to be the tokenized representative of all things diverse is that it often results in invisibility because the task is completed for appearances only. In other words, while intending to make a meaningful contribution when serving in this capacity, their suggestions often go unacknowledged, reminding them that it is not their engagement in the work that matters, so much as their simple representation to keep up the appearance of diversity and inclusion.

Hirshfield and Joseph (2012) build on Padilla’s concept of cultural taxation by focusing on the specific difficulties faced by BFF as it relates to the intersections of race and gender. Identity taxation “encompasses how other marginalized identities may result in additional non-academic service commitments for other faculty” (p. 213). In addition to being overburdened by service demands, BFF are often thought of as “mothering figures” wherein they are placed in a nurturing role that goes well beyond the expectations of a typical advising relationship (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). The implications for tenure and promotion are significant since these nurturing responsibilities (and the identity fatigue that accompanies) come in addition to, rather than instead of, the other responsibilities associated with advising.

A number of empirical studies focus on broader minoritized populations, such as Black faculty members of two genders (Patton & Catching, 2009), or female faculty specifically, but of multiple races and ethnicities (excluding White) (Turner Kelly & McCann, 2013, 2014). Patton and Catching examine experiences of 13 Black faculty members teaching in graduate programs in higher education and student affairs. Through application of the powerful metaphor of “driving while Black”, they describe factors influencing experiences of Black faculty in these programs including lack of respect, having to defend credentials, having teaching skills questioned, and challenges with diversity courses (p. 718). In a longitudinal study of three women of color faculty who departed their tenure-track positions, Turner Kelly and McCann (2014) found that racialized tokenization and isolation, a need for more in-depth mentoring, and poor institutional fit significantly impacted their experience (p. 681). Clarity of role, self-

efficacy, and social acceptance are also documented challenges emerging from the same longitudinal study conducted by Turner Kelly and McCann (2013).

Managing social acceptance amidst feelings of tokenization and isolation contributes to the practice of “shifting” or changing voices, attitudes, and postures to meet the cultural codes of workday America (Hinton, 2009, p. 397). Navigating social perceptions for BFF is important due to a pervasive stereotype of being an *angry Black woman* when voice is used to express any level of dissent on an issue. While the same dissent expressed by a person with dominant identities may be seen as standing up for their beliefs and desires, it is often seen as complaining, defensive, or intimidating for Black female faculty members. These specific aspects of marginalization highlight the complexity of being a Black woman in academia, and how the heavy burdens of cultural and identity taxation are both fully present and likely hazardous to the mental, physical, and professional wellbeing of this population.

Marginalization and difficulty are not the only defining factors of the Black female faculty experience. Despite many obstacles, current research documents the ways in which this population persists to find professional success (Dowdy, 2008; Gaetane, 2006; Hinton, 2014; Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Sule, 2014). Creating community on the margins with other Black female faculty members (Hinton, 2009), and using agency to strategically transform institutional norms (Sule, 2014) are two ways in which BFF find success in academia. Turner Kelly and McCann (2014) discuss the helpful aspect of intrusive mentoring, and how it plays a significant role in the success of BFF in promotion and tenure. Interventions such as research boot camps and “sister networks” address many of the aforementioned challenges facing Black women in tenure-track positions (Davis & Bertrand Jones, 2011). Edwards, Beverly, and Alexander-Snow (2011) found that Black female faculty define success as a journey, marked with publishing and giving back to the community. It is thus important to acknowledge the resilient nature of BFF that allows them to overcome the many obstacles present in academia. However, equally important is the warning against embracing the mythical image of the “*strongBlackwoman*,” as it further marginalizes and creates consequences for Black women (Hinton, 2009, p. 396). A fine line must be tread in acknowledging barriers and success for Black Female Faculty.

## **The HBCU Context**

To date, most of the research addressing Black women in academia is contextualized in the environment of predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Less present is attention to socialization processes for Black women at HBCUs. Edwards (2014) investigates Christian privilege for Black female faculty at HBCUs and problematizes the ability for these institutions to provide “an uncommon space of authenticity, while simultaneously supporting a privileged system that could silence different religiously-identified students” (p. 263). Jean-Marie (2006) captured the historical experiences of three Black female administrators at HBCUs and also highlighted the powerfulness of agency in the pursuit of success. However, studies examining faculty experiences for Black women in this institution type are fewer and far between. Bonner (2001) discusses the difficulty in addressing issues of gender inequity and discrimination at HBCUs because these schools have long been considered laudable institutions through which the consequences of racism and discrimination were subverted to provide social, economic, and political advances for the Black community.

However, acknowledging these important contributions made by HBCUs, should not also negate the important issue of highlighting the “significant pressures related to gender for Black women in these particular U.S. academic settings” (Bonner, 2001, p. 181). In a study on the experiences of Black women (faculty and administrators) at a large HBCU, Bonner found significant fear among participants in responding to the survey, which suggested a “lack of comfort this group of HBCU women had about answering some of the questions posed” (Bonner, 2001, p. 179). Also significant was the 45% of respondents reporting the experience of gender discrimination. The study revealed a bifurcation in race and gender that presents itself in the context of the HBCU because Black women must often set aside the struggle for gender equality to fight the larger issue of racial discrimination (Bonner, 2001, p. 189).

Although Bonner called for more research to address the intersections of being Black and female at HBCUs 10 years ago, we have not seen a proliferation of this topic in extant literature. Here, we reiterate the importance of further nuancing research on female faculty of color to focus on these issues in HBCUs specifically. As a follow up to this conceptual article, we are currently designing a qualitative research study to capture socialization experiences of BFF at HBCUs. Doing so may provide more asset-based literature for these institutions, while also allowing a very scarcely covered topic to be better understood and visible. We now move to a discussion of our synthesis of extant literature regarding BFF experiences in academia.

## Discussion

After reading numerous studies on experiences of Black female faculty members, an apparent concept emerged through the multiple aspects of marginalization often experienced by this population. It seems that Black female faculty are automatically discounted on a number of levels in academia. An automatic discount is assumed on credibility, collegiality (the “angry Black woman” stereotype), sufficient credentials, ability to teach effectively, and make valuable contributions in committee work. The discount can also come in the form of fiscal allocations, as BFF are often asked to take on more tasks and responsibilities for less pay. Therefore, the automatic discount is two-fold, in that institutions receive a discounted price for a faculty member to have a fuller plate than others, and BFF experience a chilly campus and academic department climate due to this automatic discounting that is both pervasive organizationally and (un)consciously enacted by colleagues, students, and other stakeholders in higher education.

The resilience with which Black women persist through being automatically discounted is courageous and problematic at the same time. In addition to identity and cultural taxation (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Padilla, 1994), Black women must work to not only prove their capabilities, *but to also disprove automatic discounts* that assume an inability to perform well as a scholar, teacher, and colleague. The struggle is thus complex and not singular in nature due to the double bind (Hill Collins, 2000) of being both female and Black. While it is important to highlight the unrelenting strength inherent within persistence in the academy, it is dangerous not to also acknowledge that this persistence against several discounts generates significant damage to the minds, bodies, and spirits of Black female faculty members. At some point, the process of working to disprove becomes so automatic that the negative assumptions may become internalized in that BFF are unable to separate that which they work against from what they believe about their own abilities. Said differently, by fighting against the automated behavior imposed on them from the start, BFF may automatically begin to discount themselves, getting lost in the pervasive messages and actions that significantly influence their everyday

experiences. If Black female faculty can resist this internalized oppression than their plight in academia is three-fold: fighting to prove their worth, fighting to disprove automatic discounts, and fighting to resist the internalization of automatic discounts. And while there are many BFF who both persevere through this tripartite interlocking struggle, there are many who may not. Those that do, do so with significant implications from mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing standpoints (Hinton, 2009; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). Although this has been well documented for Black female faculty in PWIs, a gap of research remains regarding BFF experiences in HBCUs and how the double bind of being Black and female manifests in these institutions.

## Conclusion

The review of the literature shows a noticeable absence regarding research looking at Black female faculty in HBCU's. This is a topic that needs to be more thoroughly addressed because HBCUs are an important employer of Black women faculty. An analysis of the role the Black female faculty play in historically Black colleges and universities will foster a nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical climate at these institutions. In addition, the research will also lay a foundation for Black women to understand how their role affects matriculation through the tenure process and promotion to leadership positions in various institutional types.

More research is needed to investigate the current realities that face Black female faculty at historically Black colleges and universities, where many women face the *double bind* status in regards to promotion and tenure. HBCUs are in the unique position where the cultural ties of ethnicity are the status quo as opposed to being the minority. After reviewing extant literature on experiences of Black female faculty members, the questions remain:

Does gender play a more significant role than race when looking at the socialization of BFF in HBCUs? Or, in situations where Black females are not the ethnic minority, do Black women stereotypes still prevent women from advancement?

The authors hope to address such questions in the aforementioned proposed research study of Black female faculty in HBCUs.

A thorough review of the literature still shows that Black women are contending with many issues that are preventing the same success enjoyed by other faculty members of a different gender and/or race. These issues are characterized by fighting to prove their worth, disprove stereotypes, and maintain the self-efficacy necessary to persist through the automatic discounts that are pervasive. However, despite these issues that inevitably create a heavy burden for Black female faculty, many still thrive in academia, particularly in different institution types. It is thus important that more research is conducted to address the needs of Black female faculty, specifically in HBCUs. As a result, Black women may empower each other and create a space for Black feminism that continues to address these unique issues faced by Black females in the academy.

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