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# Navigating the Academy: An Autoethnographic Approach to Examining the Lived Experience of African American Women at Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the lived experience of two African American women working at predominately white institutions of higher education. A review of the literature suggests research that examines the experiences of African American women in academe is limited. Using an autoethnographic approach, we explore our experiences and how we navigate our roles. Findings suggest that when the appropriate mentoring is in place African American women have a more positive experience navigating the promotion and tenure process.

### **Keywords**

Higher Education, African American, Autoethnographic

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# **Navigating the Academy: An Autoethnographic Approach to Examining the Lived Experience of African American Women at Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education**

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*This study explores the lived experience of two African American women working at predominately white institutions of higher education. A review of the literature suggests research that examines the experiences of African American women in academe is limited. Using an autoethnographic approach, we explore our experiences and how we navigate our roles. Findings suggest that when the appropriate mentoring is in place African American women have a more positive experience navigating the promotion and tenure process. Keywords: Higher Education, African American, Autoethnographic*

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## **Introduction**

African American women working at predominately white institutions of higher education often have isolated and lonely work life experiences. We are often isolated because we are the only minority and/or woman in our department or college and lonely because the workplace environment does not offer a safe place to vent our frustrations and triumphs. Chronicling these experiences can offer an outlet for minority faculty and an opportunity for Anglo faculty learn how to support faculty of color. Speaking publicly about frustrations in your work life can be frowned upon by individuals who are in a position of power and authority over an individual and that may be one of the reason why there are few publications that focus on individuals of color working in predominately white institutions of higher education (Stanley, 2006).

Autoethnography offers individuals the opportunity to self-reflect on lived-experiences and explore how their personal narratives connect to the broader society (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011; Waymer, 2008). Autoethnography is the perfect tool for us to use to explore our experiences in academe. Our narratives offer insight into our perceptions of being two African American women at different points in our careers and teaching in two different departments at the same University. We began by providing a discussion of the literature that exist regarding African American females in higher education. We then provide a discussion of the authors and narratives. Finally, we conclude by offering recommendations and implications for future studies.

## **Literature Review**

A review of the literature suggests that research that examines the experiences of African American women in academe is sparse (Pittman, 2010; Grant, 2012). There are various explanations that can contribute to why there is a lack of published research in this area. As we asserted previously, speaking publicly about frustrations in your work life can be “suicide.” It is often considered taboo to paint a not so positive picture of your work life and colleagues may view your reflections as a direct threat against them. Another cause of the lack of research in this area can be related to the fact that there are so few African American women with faculty positions in predominately white institutions (Edwards, 2017). The lack of African American women holding faculty positions in higher education can lead to lack of understanding by

editors and publishers of the authenticity of their reflections or place their research in a category of an “isolated experience” which does not contribute to the discipline.

Of the limited research that addresses African American women teaching at predominately white institutions the focus is in two areas; mentoring and teaching evaluations. Mentoring is a staple in the professional growth of faculty in higher education (Tillman, 2001). The value of homogenous mentoring relationships has been constantly found to being a key element for success of African American women achieving tenure in predominately white institutions (Bhopal, 2015; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017; McCormick, 1997; Welch, 1996). Creating homogenous mentoring relationships is a problem for higher education institutions where there are so few African American females to pair with other African American women. African American women are often paired with European-American men and women. According to Noe (1988), these relationships are limiting and often unsuccessful because to the following barriers: lack of access to information; tokenism; stereotypes and attributions; socialization practices; norms regarding cross-gender/race relationships; and reliance on ineffective power bases. Bartman (2015) suggest that institutions predominately white institutions may want to adopt contextual counseling (small group support structures) to support African American women when there is a lack of African American females to serve as mentors. These groups will offer African American women an opportunity to come together in a safe environment that were they can overcome issues of isolation, invisibility, and together develop strategies to overcome obstacles they face.

The impact of teaching evaluations on the careers of African American women is another area which there has been some research. Teaching evaluations play a significant role in an individual’s pre- and post-tenure career. Negative teaching evaluations can impact a person’s ability to receive tenure and can influence an individual’s income. Many universities use teaching evaluations as a tool to determine an instructor’s effectiveness in the classroom and if a person receives bad teaching evaluations they can be deemed as making unsatisfactory progress toward tenure and will be at risk of having their tenure denied. They are also used to determine whether or not they should receive annual merit raises. Research suggest the African American women tend to receive the lower teaching evaluations compared to their Anglo colleagues (Anderson & Smith, 2005; Huston, 2005). Huston (2005) suggest that students may use different criteria in evaluating teaching for faculty of color than the use of Anglo-faculty. Perry, Wallace, Moore, & Perry-Burney, (2014) found that African Americans who teach courses with race related themes tend to have the lowest teaching evaluation across disciplines. The author’s surmised that when students’ self-concepts and world-views are challenged the result can induce feelings of discomfort, anger, and guilt.

Littleford, Ong, Tseng, Milliken, and Humy (2010) found that students form first impressions of their professors and that race does influence their judgments of their instructors’ and directly influences how they evaluate their professors. These findings offer a limited understanding of the obstacles African American women face when working at predominately white institutions. This paper offers a brief reflection of the lived experience of two African American females at the same predominately white institution. By qualitatively chronicling our lived experience we hope to provide complete picture of our journey.

### **Methodology**

The narrative reflections presented in this paper were composed by two African American females. We used the process of autoethnography for this paper. The process of autoethnography combines characteristics of ethnography and autobiography that allows for individuals to explore cultural understanding through self-observation which results in individual narratives (Chang, 2008). This approach allows for the researcher(s) to become

participants in the research (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). The use of autoethnographic approach is appropriate for this study in that the goal is to explore the lived-experiences of two African American women in higher education. The self-narrative autoethnographic approach allows for the researcher to reflect on and question their lived experiences in the context of reality in which they live (Macalister, 2012; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010).

The idea for this paper came out of a series of social conversations between us two. As these discussions continued to progress a relationship of trust and understanding began to develop. Over this time, we began to converse about our frustrations of being the only African American females in our respective departments. As we shared our frustrations regarding our working relationships with colleagues and students we realized that our experiences were similar and at the same time somewhat different. That conversation led to the idea of this paper.

When constructing the concept for this paper we sat down together and discussed some of the themes that had developed from our previous conversations that we could be used to construct this paper. It was around those themes that we constructed subsequent subheadings for this paper. We then went our separate ways to write-up our individual experiences. Once we completed writing our individual experiences we came together to write the rest of our paper. During this period, we did have a very long discussion of the repercussion that could come from us writing our "truth." We also discussed that for one of us this repercussion could be more serve given that she has yet to gain tenure and promotion. During that conversation, we did decide to omit a reflective experience. We decided that the individual involved in the exchange could easily identify him/herself and that given their position of authority it would not be a good choice to include that exchange and we also did not feel that choosing not to include it would take away from the integrity and other experiences expressed in this piece.

We are two African American women at very different points in our careers one of us is at beginning of her tenure track career and the other is a tenured Associate faculty member. We both hold positions at the same Midwestern mid-size university but in different departments. Our teaching experiences are vastly different. One of us has primary responsibilities that are focused on teaching in a graduate program and the other's department does not offer graduate study and as a result is only teaching undergraduate courses. The teaching loads are the same and the research and service expectations for tenure and promotion are comparable.

### **My Story**

The reality of sharing my story is that it is a political process. In my own observations, many institutions of higher education profess a commitment to diversity. However, these commitments to diversity struggle to be manifested in ways where the reality of such is actualized. To discuss inequities is almost seen as taboo as people and institutions want to demonstrate that they have reached of level of commitment where all are welcomed. This is not true. So, as I share my story, I realize that to speak my truth means shining a light in that dark corner that people have walked by, but perhaps, failed to notice. It's risky, but it must be done.

### **Getting the Position**

I was so excited. I was nearing the end of my doctoral training and preparing for the beginning of my career in academia. I had interviewed for a position that fit with my passion around social justice and advocacy in schools. I was ready. I accepted the position as assistant

professor and quickly went back to finishing up my dissertation as I knew this hire was contingent on successful completion of such.

Throughout the end of my dissertation process, I received a slew of emails from my new institution, welcoming me, sharing departmental news, and asking me questions about office set up. There was one email that I received which scared me beyond measure. The email was about my business card, particularly what I wanted on it. The suggestion was that I have my name and director of the school counseling program. Now mind you, this wasn't the position I interviewed for. It was never a discussion that I may need to step in this role. Nothing. Instead, it was declared for me, without my input that this would be.

## **Service**

As I began this journey, the most surprising aspect of my position revolves around service. As I mentioned previously, I serve as the director of the program. At the time, I had no idea what the entailed. There is no list of duties that was provided, but rather a random assortment of duties that fall unto your lap. True baptism by fire. I walked in and had to quickly learn about the program and the department. I essentially became the face of the program as I was the only full-time tenure track faculty member in the program – we had on adjunct who taught two courses and another faculty member who was split between teaching and administrative duties in the practicum clinic.

Navigating this role has been tiresome. The entire burden of the program essentially falls to me. When I started I was immediately thrown into the reaccreditation process for the master's level programs, which included the program I direct. I had to prepare and submit materials for a program that I had little familiarity with as I just began my time at the university. There was little guidance or help with such. I have asked for help from colleagues in some areas and there is limited support they could offer, for whatever reason. Some couldn't speak to what was needed. Others simply won't do it – but verbally offer their support. I needed to figure it out by myself. In many ways, this is the nature of this director role – I feel like an army of one that shoulders the responsibility of all aspects of the program with limited support from others.

I've been fortunate in some ways to have opportunities to build greater networks outside of my program, across campus, and in the community. Across campus I have secured allies, who may not understand all the ins and outs of my program or department, but they offer their support and help if they can. I've become more involved in the local community, particularly around actualizing this vision of diversity and inclusion of all people in the community. These networks are energizing and help me to better tackle the tasks I have in my own department.

## **Teaching**

It is interesting to negotiate my role as a social justice educator in a room full of students who are more often than not white with limited multicultural experiences. I go back and forth with figuring out ways to challenge students in developmentally appropriate ways without seeming like I'm on a soap box. That's something I have to negotiate because I know my own intersecting identities and presentation comes with it stereotypes and assumptions. I know my credibility will be questioned because of my age, my race, my gender identity. I know that my tone will be questioned or assumed to be aggressive because of my race and my gender identity.

It's interesting to be in a place where I teach my students about the inequities and oppression in schools, the same inequities and oppression I face as a faculty member. Although rewarding, it is exhausting at times. I appreciate the challenge of teaching but realize that to do it well, particularly around the areas of social justice in k-12 schools, it is mentally taxing.

It's hard when they don't get it. It's hard when they are rightfully resistant to the realities of diverse students in school. I can't divorce my own identities and present as neutral. I can't not be disappointed and offended by the things they say. I do have to ask myself how I can respond in ways that are teachable rather than react in ways that shut students down. Yes, my classroom interactions and teaching inevitably come back to me in teaching evaluations which count for my tenure and promotion. That is important as a pre-tenure faculty. However, in order to really teach well, I'm more focused on their process of learning because eventually, my students will be in schools and interacting with children and adolescents from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. This means that as a class, we have to get comfortably uncomfortable to get real about biases and systemic oppression that impact vulnerable communities. The stakes are too high for k-12 students not to do this. Yet I also know that this means that teaching evaluations, which again count towards tenure, aren't necessarily reflective of the good work we're doing together. I refuse to save multicultural learning for the multicultural course that they are required to take. I'm taking the risk and infusing it in every course I teach, knowing that it's just the right thing to do.

## Research

I've learned a lot about the research requirements over my years at my current institution. The biggest learning curve was understanding that the requirements of the university can and are different than what is required by my department. In fact, the research requirements for promotion and tenure are similar to what is required at institutions classified as *Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity* although we are classified as *Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity*. While there are some supports for research, there is nowhere near the necessary supports to be comparable to larger universities like Indiana University or The Ohio State University.

As I learned the expectations, I was hopeful to have the opportunity to collaborate with my new colleagues. After all, the welcome messages and initial interactions focused on how open and collaborative the faculty members are around research. As I settled in, I realized that their statements may have been true at one time, but wouldn't be true for me. I downloaded each of their CVs and quickly reviewed each one to get an idea of the work being done in the department. Indeed, I saw publications that had what seemed to be half of the department on them but no publications relating to children and adolescents. This was fairly common across all of the CVs. As someone who works with children and adolescents, there was no sense of importance here, no community of scholars in the department who were actively pursuing work that includes children and adolescents, or even domestic diversity – several explore international diversity with adults. Furthermore, although no one would directly say it, there is this overall sense that anyone who works with children and adolescents is seen as less than.

Initially I reached out to a white woman who was another new hire to set up a meeting. I assumed that in her position she would have similar interest and that we might be able to collaborate on some projects together. When she showed up to my office, she took the opportunity to mother me. Rather than engage me in a discussion about research and our own commonalities, she felt she had the authority tell me how and what I should do research on. Mind you, this was unsolicited and she hadn't even completed her doctoral degree yet.

Having essentially no one to work with on k-12 social justice issues in school counseling I turned outside of the university for support. I am fortunate to have friends on the tenure track who were just as committed to social justice in school counseling as I am. I turned to these friends and we collectively decided that we would be our own research team and take on the tenure track together. Not only did we serve as a research team, but they have also become a place of social and emotional support for navigating the tenure track as well as

programmatic, departmental, and institutional challenges. I could talk about being a young black woman in academia and knew that they could hear me because of their own intersecting identities and experiences in academia. I could count on sound advice on how to deal with negative interactions with faculty, administrators, and students.

### **Interactions with Faculty, Students, and Staff**

As I previously stated, although my colleagues often verbalize their support, there are limited interactions with them. We work in ways that are essentially isolated, though I assume my isolation from them is due to my work with children and adolescents. My isolation from faculty is not an indicator of the department being isolating, they continue to work on collaborative projects with each other, just not me. Our limited interactions are brief and mostly restricted to faculty meetings. Like any other department, we can expect a fair amount of disagreement, good and bad ideas shared. Most of the discussions don't revolve around me or my program, so I have limited contributions to discussions. I do speak up for my program and in other discussions where I think there are important implications for any student in our department. As a faculty member, we should be able to engage in these discussions as we see fit. It should be normal. However, another faculty member, white male, sees my behavior as needing commentary from him. He consistently finds me after faculty meetings to tell me that he thinks it's great that I'm engaged in the faculty meeting. I understand that he is shaped by his past experiences in the department, which may contribute to his observation of me. Yet, the frequency of his comment is odd to me, as if he would expect me to do otherwise.

Other interactions with students, faculty, and staff center around my own legitimacy as a faculty member. Faculty and staff find their way into conversations with me and impart advice that I never asked for – most of which is not anything I need. The tone is often one of mothering and fathering with little acknowledgement or desire to see what I actually need. They comment on my youth, say I'm "just a baby." I'm readily seen and identified as a student or an administrative assistant. One of our senior level administrators, who I have seen and talked with at least 4 or 5 times every year continues to ask me "how are your classes going?" and "how is graduate school treating you?" When I correct this administrator, the response typically points to my youth. Further, despite the formal culture at the university, my colleagues and even students often refer to me by my first name and their other colleagues as Dr. so and so. Even when corrected, I'm still called by my first name. There are a slew of comments about my appearance – typically relating to how I should wear my natural hair and which styles are their favorites. I'm not here to entertain you. I'm not here for your enjoyment.

### **My Story**

As I reflect on my story, I feel as though I'm in a safe place and can speak my "truth" freely. As a tenured Associate professor, I feel that I'm in a position to speak without ramifications. Speaking your "truth" can often be a very scary experience. I don't know that I would have felt like I was in a safe place to share my "truth" prior to receiving my tenure and promotion. Even with promotion and tenure I struggle with how much to share and how much of my lived experience I should omit in order to maintain the peace in my working environment and not have to worry about any negative consequences. I have come to the conclusion that my "truth" is that "my truth" and that it is my responsibility to write an honest representation of my experience. I trust that my colleagues will read this and want to learn how to support me and other colleagues of color who may struggle to navigate the tenure track conundrum.

## **Getting the Position**

Everyone has a dream job and a place where they would like to work. For me, that place is where I completed my undergraduate degree. The dream of working at that institution was not necessarily do to the amazing mentoring I received or that there was someone in the department that looked like me that I could admire to emulate. I wanted to work there because it is a school that multiple family members have attended. Although, I didn't feel a deep connection to the department in which I had received my degree I did feel a connection to the school. When a tenure-track position became available and it logistically made since to move I took the opportunity. After three years and successfully navigating the tenure-track maze at a four-year institution in another state I took the leap and accepted my "dream job." Upon accepting the position, I did so without negotiating any time toward tenure.

## **Service**

In my experience navigating service can come with a conundrum of issues depending on the culture, size, and the political climate of the department. At the start of my tenure track position, I was told not to worry about service responsibilities beyond those in the department. I was also warned to be aware of being used as a "token." People would invite me to join committees because of my race and gender. Playing it "safe" I limited my service activities to the department until I received tenure and promotion. Since receiving tenure and promotion I have found that service on the college and university level can be very fulfilling. Service can also be an opportunity to connect with people outside of your department. As the only women and only person of color in my department feeling isolated and alone was just part of my daily work life. As my career has progressed and I began to realize that I can define and control my service activities I realized that I wanted to focus on working with minority students. As a result, I'm currently working with various on campus mentoring programs. I have also established friendships with other women that I have met through serving on committees on the college and university level. These friendships offer me support and encouragement. I have learned that through service I'm able to express a voice that is not often not valued in a department of mostly European American men.

## **Teaching**

Unlike my pervious institution where I was able to teach an array of courses, I have been limited to teaching the same three courses with the exception of the summer were teaching courses is based on seniority which allows faculty "pick and choose." The three courses that I have taught are corrections, race, gender, and crime, and victimology. When I applied for my current position the job advertisement was for a "generalist" because of my research is in the area of race I was told that I would be teaching the race, gender, and crime course. I never thought that I would limited to the courses for 9 years. I have found that being a person of color can often put you in a box. It has been my experience that people assume that your research and teaching interest are limited to issues that focus on race.

I have found it challenging teaching a class on racial inequality in a department were I'm the only representation of diversity. In my department, the minority population of students is less than 20%. It is very common for me to teach a course and have no or only one student of color in the class. Also, for many Anglo students I'm the first person of color in a position of authority that they have encountered. As a result, students often feel threatened and are unprepared to discuss topics of race and inequality. I often find that are threatened by my presence in the classroom. This is reflected in my student course evaluations. Like many other

women of color my student evaluations are often lower than those of my colleagues. The challenge then became for me to educate my colleagues that bias exists in student evaluations and create a dialogue as to how they should be used in my evaluation.

## **Research**

My Ph.D. is in Sociology with an emphasis in Criminology. My research focuses on the intersection of race and social problems in African American communities. I have had to face the challenge of validating my research and how it fits into the criminological lens. Often my publications are in non-discipline specific journals (i.e., criminology and criminal justice journals) and I often have to justify why I chose those publication outlets. Having to validate my choice of research publication outlets is very challenging and an added layer of work that my colleagues don't endure.

## **Getting Along with Colleagues**

As the only African American and female in the department, I often find my position very challenging not just because of my race and gender but because I'm also the only tenured associate professor in the department. We have four Anglo male full professors and one Asian male full professor and within the last three years our department has hired six tenure-track faculty members all Anglo males. I often find myself feeling isolated from the other senior colleagues and the junior fraction in our department. As the only "one" in the department I often feel as though my colleagues place me in a bubble and make certain assumptions about me and my abilities. For example, when discussing the possibility of hiring a tenure track faculty member, I was told, "we assumed you would want a woman." The assumption that I would encourage the hire of a woman because I'm a woman discounted the fact that I'm an African American woman not just a "woman." It also discounted that I would want to hire the person who would be the best person qualified for the position.

I work in the department that is governed by committee. When colleagues spend time together socially they have opportunities to discuss policy and their positions on policy. I often overhear hallway discussions of event planning for lunches and weekend hangouts etc. This gives them the opportunity to align their positions and support each other in a way that I often don't have. These social interactions also allow for faculty to discuss collaborations on projects. Many of my colleagues will collaborate on projects together and these projects have been lucrative in publications. Being excluded from social outings is not only isolating socially it also excludes me from taking part in the informal decision-making processes that occur outside of formal meetings and possible research collaborations. I don't believe that I'm consciously excluded from activities I believe that my colleagues just don't think to invite me. There have been a few occasions when I've been in my office and they are heading out to lunch and one of them will backtrack and I ask if I would like to join them. It's almost like an afterthought. Since becoming tenured and making the conscience decision to widen my net with individuals outside of my department I'm not as isolated and lonely. I often have lunch and coffee dates with friends/colleagues that I have met through my college and university service. I'm also recognizing the value of collaborating with individuals outside of my department. Often my research is interdisciplinary which makes these collaborations fit very easily in my research agenda.

## **Thematization**

Reflecting on our lived experiences as African American women working in predominantly white institutions has offered us the opportunity to develop a level of understanding of each other that we have never experienced with other colleagues. The constant need to remind others of our “legitimacy” is a constant frustration. Having to fight for acknowledgements from others that we have a voice and that voice should be heard is a source of struggle on a regular basis. Being excluded from social activities where informal conversations about department policy and other significant department issues are discussed is an acknowledgement that there is no value in our voice. Having to constantly remind others the need to refer to us with our appropriate titles when they are used for others in our environment is another way in which we are devalued.

The struggle of finding “our place” within working environments that are not always inclusive can lead to added stress in the workplace. Finding ways to find “our place” has required us to think outside of the traditional methods to overcome the isolation and frustration that we often feel. Finding “our place” outside our perspective departments has offered us both sanctuary. We have both found support and encouragement by working with people outside of our departments. We both have had to alter expectations we had of our colleagues. We walk in the clarity of knowing what is important to us is not always important to others. Knowing that we have a voice and that our voice offers insight that should be valued just as much as others is something that we recognize. We also recognize that being in positions of “being the only one” places a spotlight on us that others don’t share. We are constantly struggling with determining how we will use our spotlight and that when interacting with administrators, faculty, and students is a constant opportunity for someone to judge and make assumptions about us.

## **Conclusions**

Autoethnography provides the authors the opportunity to explore their lived experiences and to contextualize that experience from their view point. For people whose voices are often marginalized and devalued this form of research can offer a valuable opportunity to have their voices heard. The purpose of this paper is to offer the authors an outlet to reflect on their experiences of African American women working at predominately white institutions of higher education. It also provides an opportunity for individuals to learn from our experiences. It is hoped that individuals will read this piece and attempt to develop an understanding of the struggle that women of color who work in predominately white institutions. As noted, research has found that positive mentoring experiences can offer women of color the proper support needed to successfully navigate the tenure and promotion process at predominately white institutions (Tillman, 2001). This is something that we have not had the opportunity to experience. However, we recognize that our experiences may have been vastly different if we had the appropriate mentoring. When establishing suitable mentoring relationships is not possible creating support networks should be supported by university administration. Creating opportunities for faculty to come together in safe environments can offer faculty the ability to receive support and affirmation for their professional goals.

Issues of tenure and promotion plague African American women. Student evaluations can be an Achilles heel for African American women. Senior faculty and administrators must recognize that African American women are often perceived and evaluated differently than their counterparts. Student evaluations should be one of multiple tools used to evaluate teaching. African American women often develop research agendas that are considered non-traditional within their disciplines which results in research presentations and publications in

“alternative” outlets. As long as the research is rigorous and offers new understanding to the discipline it should be encouraged. It is the responsibility of senior faculty and administrators to support *all individuals in their teaching and research endeavors*.

Future research should continue to explore the role of African American women in higher education. Broader explorations of the role of African American women in the academy, across disciplines, and at various types of universities is warranted. Exploring the role of African American in higher education should be encouraged as we begin to see more African American women in higher education.

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