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## Frenemies in the Academy: Relational Aggression among African American Women Academicians

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## Frenemies in the Academy: Relational Aggression among African American Women Academicians

### Abstract

Black women academicians represent a highly educated group that at times hold positional power within institutions of higher education. In this paper, the authors utilize a critical race feminist frame to explore their experiences with relational aggressive dynamics within higher education work settings. Using auto-narrative qualitative methodology, they collected data through scholarly personal narratives in the form of journals. The entries were analyzed by utilizing an intersectional lens with a focus on coping. Data analysis yielded four themes framed as coping with frenemy dynamics between individuals and contexts. The authors consider the contribution of individual, institutional and structural elements.

### Keywords

Women, Academy, Higher Education, Black, Intersectionality, Autonnarrative Methodology

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## **Frenemies in the Academy: Relational Aggression among Black Women Academicians**

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*Black women academicians represent a highly educated group that at times hold positional power within institutions of higher education. In this paper, the authors utilize a critical race feminist frame to explore their experiences with relational aggressive dynamics within higher education work settings. Using auto-narrative qualitative methodology, they collected data through scholarly personal narratives in the form of journals. The entries were analyzed by utilizing an intersectional lens with a focus on coping. Data analysis yielded four themes framed as coping with frenemy dynamics between individuals and contexts. The authors consider the contribution of individual, institutional and structural elements. Keywords: Women, Academy, Higher Education, Black, Intersectionality, Autonarrative Methodology*

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Dysfunctional relational dynamics among women in the workplace are fraught with stereotyped notions of women's inability to effectively compete or resolve conflict (Tanenbaum, 2003). Often considered taboo and even a betrayal to one's sex, discussion of the dark or "shadow side" of women's relationships with one another have the potential to perpetuate problematic stereotypes about women's work-life experiences (Chesler, 2009; Sheppard & Aquino, 2013). Shame, resentment, regret, and fear hang alongside hopes for friendship, sisterhood, and connection among women in employment contexts. In settings, such as academia, in which women are one of few, new, and/or likely to be compared to one another for professional gain and/or social inclusion, the situation can be ripe for competitive dynamics (Chesler, 2009). When their numbers are further divided by race, there is even more potential for pitting women of color against one another despite the potential for them to relate most to each other's particular point of view (Denton, 1990). The current work centers on our experiences as two Black women, who were tenure-track professors in Counselor Education programs in the northeastern and southern regions of the United States at the time of data collection.

Generally, Black women stand to be ideal supporters of one another. Given their shared racial and gender identities and the common experiences of discrimination and prejudice they may have as a result of social, cultural and institutional responses to their positionality, they are likely able to relate to one another (Denton, 1990; King & Ferguson, 1996a, 1996b). Relatedly, we argue that Black women may also seek the same among their colleagues in academic contexts. As academic workplaces can position these women to compete with one another to secure coveted perceived or actual limited opportunities, we argue this positioning has the potential to place African American women academics in a relational paradox with one another. On the one hand, they may be best positioned to understand the socio-cultural challenges and triumphs of their respective intersectionality in the academy, and on the other hand, they are placed in competition with one another for time, acknowledgment, and financial

resources that are the professional currency in academic work contexts. Brittney Cooper (2018) aptly calls up the experience many Black women know all too well in her recent book, *Eloquent Rage*.

What might feel like a singular and stunning defeat for her [Hilary Clinton] is one that Black Women learn to live with everyday – the sense that you are a woman before your time, that your brilliance and talents are limited by the historical moment and the retrograde politics within that moment in which you find yourself living. Black women, from slavery to freedom, know that struggle so much more than any white person ever will. (Cooper, 2018, p. 60)

Cooper's suggestion that Black women, when brilliant, should expect to be perpetually misunderstood, not seen, and/or deemed inconsequential is an unfortunate reality in their lives and particularly in their work. Further, in academic work contexts, it runs counter to what constitutes or can contribute to a successful career. Knowing this, one coping response might be for Black women academicians to take up the posture of advocating, naming, and amplifying the accomplishments of other Black women and themselves. This productive response is what Cooper (2017) describes as *listing*, and is the purpose of the Cite Black Women Collective (<https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/>) organized by Dr. Christen Smith at the University of Texas - Austin. Both advocate a praxis of honoring and acknowledging the intellectual work of Black women because often their work is rendered invisible.

Academic culture is characteristically competitive and organized so by design. Scholars are warned to “publish or perish” and are rewarded for engaging in egoistic, self-promotion to make sure that they are recognized with little focus or appreciation for the work of their colleagues. These dynamics can lead to what Black women have described as the “chilly” climate of the academy (Patton, 2004), which causes feelings of isolation. For this reason, they may welcome other Black women who have the capacity to share their point-of-view in order to make meaning of their reality in an academic work context, especially when it does not promote collaborative and integrative engagement that would support their healthy professional development (Denton, 1990). In fact, the intersection of race, class, and gender politics in academic settings may actually place Black women scholars at risk. As institutions of higher learning, and especially those that are predominantly White institutions (PWI) and elite are deemed so by the absence of Black women from their classrooms and the stigmatization of Black female difference (Sulé, 2014), when a Black woman is permitted access to these spaces she may believe herself to be exceptional. This sense of exceptionalism can be threatened when other “exceptional” Black women scholars are invited into that context. Hence, in order to protect her sense of psychological and physical place in academia and ultimately her livelihood, she may engage in relationally aggressive behaviors with other Black women academics in response to actual and/or perceived access scarcity.

### **Of Frenemies, Competition, and Relational Aggression: The Psychology of Women and Girls**

Popularized in the media and fictional depictions of our culture, the concept of the “frenemy” is characteristically a woman or girl engaged in relationally aggressive behaviors to advance her social and/or professional position. While notable white feminists have shed some initial light on these frenemy relational dynamics as they emerge in professional contexts, later formulations that we characterize as taking a critical race feminist stance further explicate the intersection of race, gender, and class to create particular contexts that damage professional relationships among Black women professionally.

Phylis Chesler (2009), Jean Baker Miller (1987), and Carol Gilligan's (1982; 2011) work exploring women and girls' psychology set an early and fertile stage for the psychology of white women and girls. Baker Miller's (1987) relational-cultural theory sets relationships as the site and indicator of mental health and wellness. The primacy of relationship takes further shape in Carol Gilligan's work on the moral development of girls and boys. While her initial formulations about girls' processing of moral expectations and ethics leads to thinking about the ways girls may differ from boys and women from men when enacting ideas of justice, she later articulates her own surprise that her early work served to perpetuate patriarchal practice of division and comparison in social science research (Gilligan, 2011). Upon reflection, Gilligan (2011) articulates that embedded in her findings are the lessons girls learn during adolescence to ignore and silence themselves in order to avoid being socially excluded from the group. And upon further reflection, she realizes that the silencing effect of patriarchy also exerts itself on boys during middle childhood such that they do not express their vulnerability and emotionality, either. We have now come to frame the impact of patriarchy on men and boys as toxic or hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Gilligan (2011) concluded that society exerts a dissociative influence on its members so that they go quiet to avoid punishment for saying things that might dismantle the status quo.

Phylis Chesler's (2009) work centers on the uses and misuses of power between women. She articulates that competition for power between women and girls is indirect because direct expressions of aggression, a form of competition for power and position, are not deemed socially acceptable. Indirect forms of competition consist of psychological bullying in which gossiping (e.g., defamation, humiliation, or betrayal of trust), withholding information, and ostracism are used to socially control women and girls in social and professional settings. Dellasega (2009) highlights these same behaviors in descriptions of relational aggression. Chesler (2009) suggests that women and girls make attempts to get ahead of one another in indirect ways that hide their natural competitive motives because the outward competition is not deemed socially acceptable. Chesler (2009) argues that there are more ways to be indirectly aggressive compared to physically aggressive and women and girls have more options when their aggression is indirect.

In *Mean Girls Grown Up*, Cheryl Dellasega (2005) frames the manifestation of these ideas in women's professional work experiences. In this book and related research among women in the nursing profession, Dellasega (2005; 2009) explores women's professional/friendship relationship dynamics and places them in the following categories: "queen bee, middle bee, and afraid-to-be" behaviors. Essentially, there is the role of the individual with perceived social-cultural power, the queen bee, who is relationally aggressive. She may engage in psychological bullying behaviors described above (e.g., gossiping, defamation, ostracism, or betrayal of trust, etc.) to maintain her power/authority. The middle bee is an intermediary between the queen bee and the "afraid to be." She amplifies and minimizes negative exchanges between the two, thus facilitating these dynamics and being subject to gain or lose power and/or position. The "afraid-to-be" is the woman who has lost her power and retreats away from the relationally aggressive behavior. Dellasega (2005) indicates relationally aggressive behavior can occur between peers or by someone higher or lower in the workplace and relational hierarchy and, in fact, when engaged is a means to move between places in the hierarchy. In other words, enacting these dynamics are an access point to power within these relationships.

Absent these analyses on frenemy and relational aggression dynamics at work is attention to the role of intersecting race, gender, and class factors to mediate power and access. We apply a critical race feminist frame to the consideration of frenemy dynamics to deepen and complicate the effect of race, gender, and class to mediate access to voice, visibility, and power (Wing, 2003). What happens when the socio-cultural power is undergirded by

whiteness? How do women compete for the queen bee role or engage in the middle of relational aggression when their status is mediated by their proximity to whiteness and access to the benefits of patriarchy? Though cross-racial and gendered explorations are not the focus of this article, Black women's competition and relational aggression with one another is. The degree to which they approximate and seek proximity to whiteness within institutions empowered by what bell hooks terms *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* (hooks, 2013) significantly influences their perceptions of themselves and others, and their resulting relationships. In her effort to move "beyond race," hooks names the overarching structure of the hegemony guiding our thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes. Thus, within institutions of higher education, Black women who are academicians and scholars seek access and therefore proximity to the properties of whiteness and smartness that are typically afforded to white heterosexual able-bodied men (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). The degree to which Black women are able to outperform one another in those spaces has the potential to secure an invitation to belong in the ivory corridors Sulé (2013) asserts their absence makes valuable. And the degree to which they are successful may also secure ousting of their sister-colleague.

Black women scholars have shared their stories about relationships, generally, and within the context of their work lives. King and Ferguson (1996a) speak directly to the intersection of race and gender to shape self-in-relation and communal ideals or what they call "communal self-hood"; the balance between one's development of self in the context of their relationships and ethnocultural identity. Their work describes heightened dependency Black women may have on their friendships and the nature of their relationships with one another in professional contexts.

Professional Black women, in particular, reside in multicultural communities or majority White communities, some living long distances from their family of origin and primary communities of relatives and friends. (King & Ferguson, 1996b, p. 166)

She writes about the potential for isolation and loneliness Black women may encounter when they are far from home and familiar community. In these academic settings where competition and hierarchy are especially prevalent (Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Patton, 2004), Black women academics may understandably rely on their relationships with one another to survive psychically threatening and lonely environments.

Alternatively, the direness of their employment contexts may lead to unchecked psychological need and an unrealistic expectation for friendship help to manage their experiences. King and Ferguson (1993, 1996a, 1996b) address the limits of friendship between Black women to buttress the impacts of systemic and structural inequity in their work lives. They write that "At times a particular woman's deprivation of worth produces a false or pseudo use of communal principles in competitive and hierarchical ways" (King & Ferguson, 1996a), suggesting that the relationship may be misused and possibly abused to respond to the demands of toxic environments. When relational aggression arises between Black women the impact compounds given the intersecting gendered, racialized, and classed tenor of Black women's judgment of themselves and one another. Informed by the Black women's club movement and attempts by Black people to justify their citizenship post-enslavement (Davis, 1999; Higginbotham, 1993), class-based respectability politics articulate social rules and expectations which dictate an individual's social acceptance and credibility (Williams, 2014). These rules exert social control over the actions and movement of women within social and professional hierarchies and emerge out of a desire to preserve Black lives (Chesler, 2009; Davis, 1999; Higginbotham, 1993). In light of Black women's friendship and relationship

ideals (King & Ferguson, 1996a), relational aggression among them has the potential to be experienced as particularly problematic and especially hurtful *because* it is committed by another Black woman.

King and Ferguson (1993) speak to the expectation of an “untenable and unyielding sisterhood” (as cited in King & Ferguson, 1996a) among Black women. They suggest Black women’s friendships/relationships are predicated on an “ideal” of infinite help-giving, that may result in unchecked psychological need in the form of undifferentiated self, low self-esteem, and/or chronic dependency. They warn these dynamics can lead to abuse of these relationships (King & Ferguson, 1996a, 1996b). As described, such relationships are sites for particularly high stakes and ultimately leave some Black women to feel depleted and vulnerable to be seen as a friend-failure as there is no possible way for them to live up to this standard. With little room for their inevitable fallibility, these friendship dynamics can cause them to set one another up for a parallel unrealistic strong and together Black woman stereotype expectation that has proven to be detrimental to Black women’s health and wellness (Beubeouf-Lafontant, 2009). In fact, when these transgressions occur between Black women, they are especially damaging because they are so very aware of the difficulty of one another’s lives (Johnson-Bailey, 2015).

In the same vein of the current study, research on African American women’s work lives in academia use qualitative methods that elevate their narratives. Scholars Juanita Johnson-Bailey’s (2015) and Tracey Owens Patton’s (2004) works are examples. Johnson-Bailey tells her story of several instances that have occurred in her over 20 years’ academic career to demonstrate what she terms “academic incivility” and Patton (2004) shares her narrative as a means to articulate a professional development model for African American academics. Interestingly, Patton’s model aligns with Johnson-Bailey’s (2015) description of her experiences of relational aggression in an academic workplace and in the following, we outline the phases of Patton’s model (enchantment, disenchantment, and re-articulation) through Johnson-Bailey’s (2015) narrative.

The first phase of Patton’s model is *enchantment*. She describes the Black woman academic as being excited about her work and ability to be intellectually engaged. In her writing, Johnson-Bailey (2015) exalts having the “best job in the world” (p. 46) in which travel, free books, and nurturing her intellect are enjoyed. Patton goes on to describe the *disenchantment* phase in which the Black woman academic realizes the effect of interlocking systems of racial and gender oppression and their effect to restrict her privileges as an academic. She recognizes that she will not be permitted to have the same experiences as her White or men of color colleagues. Illustrative of this stage, Johnson-Bailey states, “I discovered this revered place (academia) was not sacrosanct, but an American workplace that did not exist apart from and superior to the outside world” (2015, p. 42). Johnson-Bailey describes a number of examples that led her to feel disenchanting about her work. She described the “worthlessness of positional power in certain conflicts” (Johnson-Bailey, 2015, p. 44) and shared examples wherein female students (White and Black) were able to bully her because her race and gender intersected in the institution to reify her lack of actual power and authority no matter status and position within the university. For example, she described the “phenomenon of existing as a gendered being in the workplace” (Johnson-Bailey, 2015, p. 45) when she was called “Miss, Ms. or Mrs.” rather than “Dr.,” and when she was interrupted during meetings. The final stage of Patton’s model involves the African American woman academic *re-articulating* the academy, such that she develops new definitions of the work that are informed by both the disenfranchised and privileged perspectives she holds. Thus, African American women academics must learn to thrive in a “*both-and*” scenario relative to the instability of the power and privilege they experience in their work environments. At the end of her writing, Johnson-Bailey (2015) describes a difficult moment when her leadership and authority was challenged and the words of wisdom shared by a senior woman colleague imploring that she “better get

used to such actions, because this would not be the last time” (p. 46). This sentiment articulates the fact that while there are privileges (e.g., leadership opportunities, travel, etc.), when she is a woman of color, and especially a Black woman, her positional power is tenuous and vulnerable to challenge at all times.

In this writing, we join our narratives to focus on our experiences and what they may tell us about the ways Black women academics relate with one another. We acknowledge the responsibility of telling our truth in ways that are respectful of the vulnerability of our colleagues whose stories we also write when we write our own. Thus, we articulate these as experiences “with” relational aggression because we are active agents in the relational dynamics described. For this reason, when appropriate, we use the pronouns “we” and “our” to remain consistent and mindful that we acknowledge our voice and complicity in the dynamics and refer to ourselves as “participant-inquirers,” locating ourselves within the inquiry.

### **Materials and Methods**

Qualitative methods aim to gain a deep understanding of an experience or event (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Unlike quantitative research that provides a surface description of a sample of a population, qualitative research provides a richness of depth and detail in understanding the answers to research questions through firsthand experience (Nash, 2004). A qualitative approach was used for this study because it allows for in-depth data collection through open-ended questions permitting “one to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories” (Kuebel, Koops, & Bond, 2018).

Autonarrative inquiry was chosen to define our methodology because it best clearly indicates that we are investigating our own story (“auto-”) rather than someone else’s (Kuebel et al., 2018). Although this approach shares similarities to autoethnography and is often considered interwoven with autoethnography (Nichols, 2016), this work is characterized as a narrative inquiry based on the data collection, analysis, and written account of our stories. The purpose of autonarrative work is to disrupt, challenge and illuminate rather than settle or prove. Autonarrative inquiry has been used as a term and as a method over the past decade in varied disciplines, including teacher education (Alanis, Machado-Casas, & Ruiz, 2014), women’s studies (Pasque & Errington Nicholson, 2011) and cultural studies (Syed, 2012).

The following autonarrative study allows for a rich connection between our personal selves to the broader cultural phenomenon of frenemies and the experience of relational aggression in the academy. In this study, we examined our own experiences as representative of African American, pre-tenure, women professors. There are several methods within autonarrative inquiry that researchers can use to reveal stories of meaning. For the purpose of this study, we used journaling in the form of scholarly personal narratives. Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) share that this type of “methodology is particularly well suited for documenting African American women’s stories because the methodology itself models education as a practice of freedom” (p. 224). This methodology is particularly suited to document the stories of those who “have been traditionally underrepresented, marginalized, and disenfranchised in higher education” (Nash, 2004, p. 3).

Over the course of six months, we each documented our separate experiences with relational aggression in reflective journals in the form of scholarly personal narratives. Each researcher wrote seven journal entries for a total of fourteen. This study was deemed exempt from the Institutional Review Board. To protect confidentiality, each journal entry was coded. However, by voluntarily serving in the roles of researchers as participants engaged in an autonarrative inquiry, we fully acknowledge that the safeguards for confidentiality and privacy



that is typically given to participants outside of autonarrative and autoethnographic studies were not applicable. We understand that data may then be associated directly with us. It is our aim that the data and findings will be used to offer insight and solutions regarding relational aggression among African American women academicians in higher education.

The constant comparative method is utilized to analyze the data and focused concurrently on our individual and combined experiences to identify equivalent themes. The constant comparative method is an inductive process for developing a master list of concepts or categories from the data collected in a study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The continuous process of examining individual units to developing classifications eventually reflects patterns in the data, which are organized into themes in this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). In the process of our data analysis, analysis of data from journal entries recorded early in the process were compared with those entries collected later and between participants. Thus, journal entries two were compared with one, three with two and one, and so on, as well as between the participant-inquirers, throughout the data analysis process to facilitate comprehensive interpretation and presentation of related themes.

Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington, (2008) noted that self-studies such as autonarratives should be marked by rigor and outward focus. Using this as a guiding premise, attention to rigor and focus was central to our process. Furthermore, it has been noted in the literature that successful, collaborative autonarrative research requires an atmosphere of trust and honesty that allows members to be vulnerable about their individual experiences (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). Because we had a collegial professional relationship which included serving as peer mentors for one another prior to this project, trust was established prior to data collection and was maintained throughout the research process. Our data collection process included monthly one-hour meetings over five months using Skype video conferencing. During these meetings, we engaged in peer mentoring which consisted of establishing a safe space framed with a culture of challenge and support. Under this guiding framework, we initiated each video conference with a “check-in” to each process our professional and personal well-being. Critical to these check-ins, we were discussing our vulnerability as both participant and inquirer, the benefits and barriers we encountered as pre-tenured African American women faculty members, and effective methods of coping while remaining productive in academia. Topics for the next meeting’s call were negotiated at the end of each call or via email. We examined our data individually and collectively, exploring why we had chosen to tell the stories we did during those calls. As suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008), we kept field notes in the form of written memos that described our coding and data analysis process. These notes also documented discussed areas of intersection and divergence between our narratives.

Serving as both researcher and participant put us in a position of “vulnerable observer” which can influence how the data is interpreted (Råheim et al., 2016). To control for our own biases that would potentially influence the results of the research study, peer-debriefing was utilized to validate the data and establish trustworthiness. Trustworthiness indicates that both the themes and interpretation of the themes are credible to the individuals who experienced the original and multiple realities. Peer-debriefing is the “process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Peer-debriefing was conducted with an investigative team that was comprised of the two researchers (the co-authors, previously described) and four colleagues in the counseling and education fields. Specifically, an African American woman counseling psychologist in clinical practice at a university counseling center; an African American woman counseling psychologist and associate professor of Counselor Education who is also an expert on African American women and multicultural career counseling; one

African American male counseling psychologist assistant professor who is an expert on internalized racial oppression among African Americans; and one White male counselor educator with expertise in sexuality and addiction. All team members were employed at predominantly White institutions (PWI) of higher education.

Three-part instructions were provided by the researchers. First, each member was asked to read the 14 journals and identify salient themes and codes. Members were then asked to read the journals again using an “intersectionality lens” to identify instances, if any, when the writer’s thoughts highlight an intersection between the systems of race, gender, and the culture of the academy. Third, the team members were asked to explore when and how, if at all, the writer indicates instances of liberation psychological practices that may transform her experience. Liberation psychological practices consist of instances in which an individual utilizes intrapersonal, interpersonal and/or organizational social justice practices to counter oppressive processes and interactions (Moane, 2003). All the data were coded and reorganized into fewer, robust themes based on these three directives until the data was saturated. It was determined that data saturation was reached when further coding was no longer feasible (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) A total of seven themes were found. The four richest and robust themes that emerged from the personal scholarly narratives are presented.

## Results

Data analysis yielded four themes framed as coping with frenemy dynamics between individuals and contexts.

**Theme 1: Coping with being perceived as a threat and a target of relational aggression by senior and junior colleagues.** Being identified as competent or capable can make a Black woman a target for competition. When colleagues determine that one is competition, they can either respect and celebrate them or seek to compete with them. Given the characteristics of academic environments described above, it is likely competition will arise and when women are involved, relational aggressive behaviors may arise too. Being targeted is difficult and consequently, Black women academicians who find themselves in these situations may try to be less visible or they may take up the spotlight and risk being ostracized. In the following quote, the participant-inquirer describes the power and promise of the collegial relationship she formed with two Black women colleagues.

Carol, Sandy (pseudonyms) and I became sought-after speakers, guest lecturers, and committee members across the campus and in our prospective fields nationwide...It was clear to me that through our collaborative efforts and support of our individual endeavors, as a group, we were well on our way to becoming well-recognized and productive tenured professors... I began to be seen as competition. As a woman, this is the kiss of death because we are socialized to be cooperative and collaborative but never competitive. To be seen as competition is to be viewed as having too much power.

This participant-inquirer attempts to reconcile the cooperation and collaboration values she enjoys and is expected to engage given her socialization as a Black woman with being seen as competition. She attempts to respond to the projections of others, whether they see her as bright and talented as she is or not, with the expectation that she not rise to the occasion within her professional setting. Professional success in academic contexts relies on the promotion of one’s good ideas, intellect, and intellectual products (e.g., books, papers, presentations, etc.), thus the implication that this woman would not indulge the recognition of her work would be odd. The

academic context and leadership would not understand and in some instances, this would reflect negatively upon her. Her colleagues and the leadership might wonder if she has what it takes to succeed in the field, whether she is “leadership” material and other wonderings that could have a direct bearing on her professional advancement.

For this participant-inquirer, there is a complicated relationship with power. Her writing implies a sense of surprise as if she has just discovered that she has power. In fact, there is a felt sense that had her colleagues not responded as they did, she may not be aware of the power she holds. This ambivalence toward power may be explained in any number of ways and using a critical race feminist approach, one is to consider the intersection of race, class, and gender to shape Black women’s access to and articulation of their power. How does one of the most disenfranchised individuals fully embrace and walk in her strength without it being problematized or the fact of her doing so be evidence that the natural order of things is upended? Black women are conscious of the fact that others are uncomfortable with their embrace of their power and reflexively, because their survival has been contingent on others’ comfort, they may be ambivalent about being seen to fully take it up. Even and perhaps especially with other Black women. Among Black women, and arguably groups that have been dominated by others, there may be a concern that the power in the hands of one who knows them well, could be used against them. In this case, the Black woman with power could become an outsider. Thus, when applying a critical race feminist frame, what looks like fear or suspicion of power, may actually be a concern of being deemed untrustworthy and possibly ostracized from the in-group of other Black women; a group that may be suspicious of whether she will exert her power to help or hurt them.

Being targeted comes in many forms, and in the following quote, the participant-inquirer recounts the experience of being the focus of her colleague’s attention when she decides to exercise the privilege of indulging academic life from the comfort of home through the summer months. This is common and a bit of what Johnson-Bailey (2015) describes as the job of an academic being the best in the world.

As a rule, I try to do much of my “thinking” work from home. Quite honestly I find the writing, reading, and reflection necessary for research are not easily come by while in my office. I have spent my tenure track “off” time at home and have been productive and proud. A publication acceptance letter reached my inbox just this past Thursday and tomorrow, actually, I will be submitting another manuscript for publication. I mention this not in an effort to laud my accomplishments, though I am proud, but because it was the only thing that I knew to be true that helped to buffer some of the challenges I felt to the suggestion that I was a non-existent entity in the department through the summer. Literally, my colleagues, an African American woman and White man, indicated jokingly to me now one of the least senior persons in our department that I have not been around during the summer. I wonder how the implicit expectations of Black women’s labor are managed by both colleagues in the 21st-century workplace in a country that enslaved African slaves (men and women) and built its wealth on their backs. I am sure they are not conscious and thus not conscientious of how this history influences their inappropriate comments about my presence in the office.

I have been conscious of an underlying resentment that the two may feel related to their need to be more active during the summer, as well as give more of their time to administrating our department and program. They were recently promoted to these positions and the coals under these transitions have not yet

had a full year to cool. Consequently, they have made reference to my not being there in a comparative older sibling, we-have-more-responsibility-than-she-does way. I ignored their behavior and comments because I have nothing to be apologetic about. I am not contracted to be in the office outside of the nine months stated in my contract. Their administrative responsibility necessitates their working during their “off” time and is the reason they are allotted a stipend to compensate. My opinion is that the stipend comes nowhere near a compensatory level for the amount of work involved, and for that reason resentment builds.

So back to power. These two are in my eyes essentially reduced to sibling-like squabble, without the “power” to influence their environment in the ways they would like, i.e., perhaps seeing more participation on my part during the summer months, and perhaps other changes they are not empowered to enact. Without an outlet, it seems it turns inward and for us, it happens to our system. Instead of creating a sense of connection or honestly communicating a need for help or assistance they antagonize and this does not engender a feeling of collegiality, at least for me. Sure, I could offer time and energy I don’t have as I make my own march toward tenure and compromise my own economic solvency and professional status to assuage any potential rift. I mean come on, isn’t that what I’m expected to do as a mammy, I mean Black woman professional, in the workplace?

This participant-inquirer identifies what may be aptly identified as the queen bee, middle bee, and afraid-to-bee triad conceptualized by Dellasega (2005). The Black woman and White man hold positions of power and authority in their administrative roles that require that they work through the summer. She experiences their comments about the fact that “she’s not been around” and their efforts to engage a politics of containment of her black female body and the academic labor they are ultimately pulling from it. They are administrators but the worthiness of their positions seems to materialize when they have her to administrate upon. They need an object. When she is not in the office, their power over others is seemingly diminished. And, in fact, as she describes, she is productive at home and enjoying one of the key perks of an academic; to have time and space to be with one’s thoughts and to write. She begins the writing with a declaration that she has been productive. Notice that her paper has been accepted and her readiness to submit another are her evidence and, interestingly, she feels compelled to exhibit it. And at the same time, she articulates the fact that she has a right to be out of the office because she is not contracted to be there. In as much as she is evidencing her right to be home to her colleagues in this entry, it seems she is also doing so for herself. It seems being targeted has awakened questions within her about whether she actually can have “the best job in the world.”

This participant-inquirer is keenly aware of the politics of race, gender, and containment of Black women’s bodies and the labor extracted from them. Even from within the comfort of the academic workplace, she feels the pressures of that antiquated and classed relationship between her body and her work. Most notably, she is experiencing this within a triangulated relationship between her and her colleagues, a Black woman and a White man. She characterizes the relationship as sibling-like suggesting she does not buy-in to the superiority her colleagues may feel about their roles, and the underlying possibility that they may ultimately resent these roles in the face of the freedom they observe her enjoying as she is home and writing.

**Theme 2: Coping with the contradictions and pitfalls associated with holding a Black feminist worldview in a White, male-dominated academic culture.** Holding communal and relational values may lead to a cultural clash for Black women academicians. Throughout the following quotation, this participant-inquirer poses several questions.

Does the gendered and racialized expectation that Black women (and other women of color) be sisterly, demonstrate sisterhood, set up an unrealistic expectation in the workplace that binds them to a professional trajectory that ultimately does not permit them to compete on par with their White and Black male counterparts? Are we cutting a Black woman off at the knees with the expectation that, for example, she takes a Black female colleague's weak publication history into account when determining the order of authorship, despite less work on the part of the colleague? This is a thought and an expectation that one colleague shared with me was her experience with a less prolific colleague. On the flip side, is it more troubling when a senior colleague that is a woman of color, even perhaps a mentor takes first authorship or authorship credit for work that is not entirely hers, but gave a start to her mentee, also a woman of color? While commonplace in the academy, is this a violation between two Black women, but standard protocol and expected by White and male mentors of mentees? Are we as women setting up collectivistic and relational expectations for our colleagues that ultimately will compromise our women of color colleagues' ability to be competitive with White and male colleagues? Do our expectations and/or hopes at finding a comfortable space within it (the academy) for ourselves perpetuate our problems in the academy? I wonder.

This participant-inquirer wonders if the "problem" lies in her (and others') expectation that her professional environment should yield a "comfortable space." The idea that one may need to grow comfortable with discomfort reflects what Johnson-Bailey's (2015) colleague advised her to do. Being a Black woman in academia is to be out of place with your presence being the mark that threatens the institution's legitimacy (Sulé, 2014). Hence, embedded in this question, less so is whether she should be comfortable, but rather whether she should be there at all? The incompatibility of the values that guide Black woman's socialization with the rules and mores of the academic environment, highlight the structural inequalities which cause her to question her presence there through questioning her expectation to be comfortable there. It is in this questioning that she and other Black women may begin to affirm themselves and demand that they are affirmed in the academic workplaces that utilize their intellectual and relational labor to articulate the contours of the context not visible to their white and male colleagues. Occupying the outsider-within location in academia gives Black women academicians a perspective that benefits the institutions wise enough to hear and apply their insights (Collins, 1998).

Additionally, embedded in this question of space and expectation is the question of harm. While we have considered the harm to the relationship between Black women academics, little focus has been applied to the effect of reconciling the differences between their personal values and the values of their workplaces on their careers. Black women spend a considerable amount of time cultivating and defining their professional goals and accomplishments. In their search for meaningful relationships and connections in academia, one must ask whether their expectations for sisterhood and connection should come at the expense of career advancement.

Reckoning with the hope and expectation for sisterhood in the academy and the realities can be quite startling. In the following, this participant-inquirer comes to grips with herself,

adopting a stance that does not ask apology for her beingness. What she finds is that there is a price, namely disappointment in her Black women colleagues.

All that being said, I never thought that the same type of behaviors would present themselves among Black women. I mean, when we met we all said we had the same “You must do better” philosophy. So, what was the problem? What does it say that I made them feel uncomfortable also? (While I need to self-reflect and examine my own flaws and shortcomings, I must balance this against always wanting to blame myself). How do I “come off” to people? I have been told by some that I have “presence” and that is how I like to describe it now, too. Presence. I am hard to ignore in a room. I am big. I am Black. I am beautiful on the inside and on most days it radiates through my eyes and my smile. I am learning to not be ashamed of any of these qualities. Besides being big, I can’t change the rest anyway. Shucks, when I was smaller, the hate was even hotter! But what did they see in me that threatened them? I know for one older and well-established colleague, she saw me as too powerful and wanting to be in charge. She had a problem with me having an opinion when the others just got in line behind her like she was their mother. Another colleague had to tell her, “Look. She has leadership qualities and that is what you are witnessing.” Instead of those leadership skills being honed and encouraged by this Black full professor, the skills and I were squashed like grapes! Sour grapes! I heard her mention later in a workshop that one of her weakness was that she has control issues? Ya think!

The quote from the same-titled essay by Audre Lorde may be overused, but we believe that is because it is so true. “*For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*” (Lorde, 2007, p. 112). Lorde speaks to the salaciousness of engaging the same domineering, undercutting practices for access and power by those in oppressed and marginalized groups and that they enact on one another in an effort to gain power over each other. In this quotation, the participant-inquirer is also posing questions, however, the one she does not ask is, “Can I go ahead and be brilliant?”

Viewing the attempts to hold her back and restrain her voice and natural leadership qualities and presence are particularly sinister when they are happening by another Black woman, especially when she is senior. What is it about this participant-inquirer actually “doing better” that upsets her colleagues? The Black girl’s mantra of self-protection, self-respect, and survival is one we imbibe in our communities as we commit to being “faster, stronger, and smarter.” This is the intersectional gendered racial socialization on which the strong black woman stereotype is built. And so, when she is strong and fast and smart, we must ask as this participant-inquirer does, “*So, what’s the problem?*” Why does it cause such upheaval? Why is her good performance the cause for broken relationships? Why the sour grapes?

### **Theme 3: Coping with the negative impact of traditional gender-role socialization.**

This theme revealed that we were both socialized as African American women to not to be competitive, to value the success of love/partner relationships over friendships with other women or professional advancement, and to silence oneself to maintain relationships. Characteristic of the socialization of women and girls is the traditional gender roles which inform whether they are being appropriate. Breaking out and away from the group or being seen as better or different is deemed unacceptable, typically by other women, and thus relationally aggressive tactics are often used to “put a woman in her place.” This theme is very similar to Theme 2, though reflective of gender-role expectations, and is reminiscent of what

has commonly been described as the “crabs in a barrel syndrome” (mentioned in the quotation below) a metaphor used to describe the mentality and behaviors of individuals belonging to or identifying with a particular community or culture, who “hold each other back” from various opportunities for advancement and achievement despite incentives and expectations for collaboration (Miller, 1987). This metaphor also serves as a characterization of how some respond to structural inequalities and/or internalized oppression. There can be a lack of faith or support from those in the same group because their success is deemed as a perceived or actual scarcity. The experiences of this participant-inquirer describe the consequences of being perceived as a leader and the responses it inspired.

What was not clear to me was that my collectivist vision was not as equally shared by the other women in the group. My primary goal was to experience what I now see as a romanticized notion of sisterhood. I wanted to bring these women together to work collaboratively in an egalitarian style, like a quilting circle where each woman shares her art and creativity to complete her part of the quilt or project. My egalitarian vision was not shared. Instead of being seen as the facilitator of the “quilting circle,” I was seen as the leader and one with too much power. I began to be seen as competition. To be seen as competition is to be viewed as having too much power. I found myself in a “crabs in a barrel” situation. Instead of being in a healthy “lifting as we climb” professional scenario, like crabs in a barrel I was being grabbed back down for the (mis)perception of climbing ahead of Valerie and Kim (pseudonyms).

...It was difficult to experience how Valerie and Kim wanted me to walk in lock step with them. If I fell behind, that would be fine. However, if I was perceived as getting ahead, that was a problem. There was to be no cheering on of another whose strides were perceived as too great. In my eyes, by bringing a group of African American women to work together, we could increase productivity, provide peer mentoring and support all while securing our success in the academy. The act of trying to facilitate the group and bring us all together for a collective work effort led me to be seen as having too much power. While I saw myself as a busy worker bee. They saw me as a queen bee, and it was problematic. Their solution consisted of kicking me out of my own hive, building their own, and not letting me in.

...After I refused to do and say and fall in line as Victoria (pseudonyms) covertly demanded, I began to experience an “us and them” mentality. I saw this with these women before but now I was part of the “them” and ousted from the “us.” I was no longer invited to lunches or other events. I was left in the dark about...everything. I was CUT OFF!

Again, and similar to the quote presented for Theme 1, this participant-inquirer’s experiences of being seen as having power or being a leader and causes her to be a target of relational aggression. Though some agency is revealed in her articulation, it is the coping with another’s reaction to her being identified as a leader with which she contends. Able to accept the recognition for herself, she states, “This should have been a positive,” in some ways questioning why it is not viewed that way, why it cannot be perceived as such by her African American women colleagues. Identification as a leader may be the ultimate signifier of one having been recognized by senior administrators and/or leaders within an organization, and may, therefore, designate the woman a target for relational aggression among her peers

(Packer-Williams, 2011). Often in the position of leading within patriarchal and/or hierarchal context, women are subject to the parameters of these environments and as a result may be unable or unwilling to employ alternative styles of leadership (management) (Suyemoto & Ballou, 2007). Finally, the racialized conception of this participant-inquirers gendered leadership should be noted. She articulates the notion of “lifting as we climb,” which was the motto for the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) (i.e., Black women’s club movement) and was inspired by the leadership of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. Ruffin articulated Black women’s leadership role as leading through projecting a positive image of Black people to the world (Wormser, 2015); and likely contributes to the infusion of the politics of respectability to shape African American women’s relational aggressive tactics among one another. Thus, embedded in this participant-inquirer’s experience is the intersection of racialized and gendered socialization in her leadership.

**Theme 4: Coping with perceptions of inferiority.** The final theme is coping with being perceived as being lower than and subservient to colleagues with less power and the problems that arise when attempts are made to assert oneself. This theme addresses the effects of challenging the projections of inferiority that are embedded in frenemy or relational aggression dynamics. Clear conflict is observed, as one questions the power and authority of another, while at the same time being envious of it. The questioning of another’s power implies a lack of power in the questioner or at least an unequal status or standing. Thus, when one woman of color poses the following question, “who does she think she is?” about another woman of color, this may say more about who the questioner believes she is not. Further, at the same time, the questioner’s ability to preserve the inequality through the act of questioning the authority of her peer suggests the dynamic may have been based on a false premise; that there was ever inequality between them. Rather, we assert that no matter the hierarchical positioning, these women remain equal in their marginalization. The following quotation highlights the conflict to ensue when the unequal dynamics which support frenemy tactics are confronted.

Each “friend” was met during an initial period or a stage of my professional life (the beginning of my doctoral program, my internship program, and the start of my first 4 year academic position). Now mind you, I have had friends who I simply fall out of contact with over time. I am not including these friends in this discussion. I would put such friends in the “some friends are for a season while others are for a lifetime” category. The three specific people I am writing about are people that I had falling outs with.

It is important to note the timing of the start of these friendships because they were times when I was most vulnerable as I was starting a new chapter of my professional life particularly as a single woman without support in the local area. It was important to me to have a colleague I could confide in. It is important to note that in each new situation I made other friends that I am still friends with today. However, it was these women who I made “close” friends.

Another similarity is that each of these friendships BLEW UP when I finally began to assert myself... Well, before I go there let me backup a little bit.

In each of these friendships, I began to silently recognize that perhaps my “friend” did not see me as a true equal. In some situations, I began to feel used. I began to feel resentful over that fact. However, I would always give my friend



the benefit of the doubt and would willfully ignore and silence myself about the issue. However, I would always reach a breaking point when I would feel the need to finally assert myself. THIS is when shit often “hit the fan.” It would be as if I exposed the truth. Like Toto in the Wizard of Oz, I would pull back the curtain and see the true weak person for what she really was/is. Each woman fought like hell to pull that curtain back...fought like hell!

As this participant-inquirer reflects on her work/school friendships in this quotation, we are able to see the desires for connection among similar-minded and positioned Black women discussed by Denton (1990). While it is acceptable and widely understood women will engage in relational aggression dynamics, it is not permissible to name them. There is power in naming and so in giving voice, the participant-inquirer stakes a claim to her personal power, which the group may believe is shared or communal, when it is not. Depending on the dynamics of the group, this may cause an eruption of conflict as it has the potential to offset the power dynamics (i.e., Dellasega’s queen bee, middle bees, and afraid-to-bees will need to reorganize), permitting shifts and new power dynamics to emerge.

### Discussion

While Black women in the academy have achieved the highest levels of education possible, they are not exempt from the social and cultural forces that impact the lives of women and girls, overall (Chesler, 2009; Gilligan, 2011; King & Ferguson, 1996a, 1996b; Miller, 1987; Wing, 2003). In fact, they may be even more susceptible to relational dynamics that oppress and suppress women and people of color as they attempt to negotiate identity, power, and authority within academia; a cultural context which may run counter to their communal and relational socialization (Patton, 2004).

Analysis of the findings revealed many insights about the work. As indicated in the results, we recognized the findings were best conceptualized as Black women coping with the intersection of race, gender, and class to undermine their power and authority in academic work contexts. At the time of data collection, the participant-inquirers were non-tenured, Black women academics, and given their position in those settings, were coping with how their colleagues were treating them. The stance of coping also positioned the participant-inquirers as perpetrators of relational aggression or frenemy dynamics. Consistent with Chesler’s (2009) observation, women are able to identify when they’ve experienced relational aggression and/or bullying by other women but are less likely to recognize when they perpetrate these same behaviors. Social desirability is gendered and racialized and is an aspect of coping for Black women managing projections of being viewed as angry and/or non-feminine. Moreover, Black women being relationally aggressive with one another contradicts the lore of Black women’s friendship ideals (King & Ferguson, 1996a). As scholars continue to pursue this line of inquiry, they should be mindful that the complexity of Black women’s relationships may make it difficult for them to tell their relationship stories and consider methodologies that make these narratives accessible. We recognize the strength of inquiry when researchers turn their lenses in on themselves to explore phenomena that are close to their experience. We also recognize the inherent vulnerability in engaging the work in this way.

In this study, findings suggest projection and mirroring among the participant-inquirers and their colleagues with whom they have experienced relational aggression. Participant-inquirers imply that their colleagues begin to identify them as a leader or competitor and for this reason, they become a target. From the point-of-view of the participant-inquirer, their self-identification as a leader or competitor is not the focus, but rather they center on how others see them and relate to them as a function of that projection. Similarly, the constant comparison

or mirroring between self and other for information about one's identity and social placement remains a core influencer for how the participant-inquirers experience themselves, come to know themselves professionally, and resist or accept these projections and reflections.

These observations are particularly relevant as the work is considered within a larger frame of the psychology of women and deepening an understanding of the psychology of Black women. Perhaps an observation taken from our data analysis team meeting is illustrative. Our data analysis team included two men, a heterosexual African American man and a gay White man. While processing the journal entries with the group they wondered about the participant-inquirer's expectation to develop friendships at work. These members of the data analysis team articulated an understanding of the material they analyzed, however, found little parallel within their own lives. This realization led the researchers to appreciate the unique positionality of women, and Black women particularly, to expect and engage friendships with their work colleagues. We are not suggesting an essentialized notion that Black women are predisposed to relational aggression. Rather, we acknowledge the interplay of racism, sexism, and classism to uniquely position Black women to require close, supportive relationships as a strategy to buttress the institutional and structural inequities and resultant stress they endure when at work.

Finally, an analysis of this work is not possible without an appreciation for the social and structural inequities that shape Black women's lives in academia. Taken out of this context, Black women academicians' relationship orientation may appear dysfunctional, and perhaps representative of inherent cultural and gendered deficits. This conclusion would be an oversimplification. Our intention in articulating these dynamics are by no means intended to contribute to problematic notions that Black women have an unusual proclivity toward relational aggression or contribute to the narrative that we are less or more woman or human because of the hue of our skin. Rather, as scholars venturing to articulate the experiences of women leaders of color declare, the context in which women of color work and lead is more complex and subject to the intersectional influences of racial, gender, and class oppression (Chin, Lott, Rice, & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Thus, in this writing, we aim to articulate the reasons why (the psychology behind) or the manifestations of relational behaviors that harm Black women academics. In our work, that entails naming the institutional and structural factors that cultivate these conditions.

The current study followed in the paths of other Black women participant-inquirers to articulate their experiences as Black women academics by authoring their own narratives (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Patton, 2004). Seemingly, a narrative approach continues to be important not only because of its cathartic effects but also for the desire to "get it right," as we seek to share truths that may be shaming for our colleagues and community. Making visible the concerns within a community of Black women, in any part of the population (academics in this instance), stands to be received with trepidation and perhaps a desire to reestablish the "ideal" regarding our "sisterhood" (friendship relationships), without fully absorbing the psychological and professional consequences for Black women facing these dynamics. We aim here, not to shame, but to shine a light on our collective and relational shadow. In our socialization toward considering one another and the group and recognizing ourselves through the humanity and reflection of our peers, we stand in an ideal position to correct the wrongs we do to one another, either in service or response to a system that tells us we do not matter. To this end, in this work, we aim to follow the advice of Phyllis Chesler (2009, p. 463) to "stand up to and disconnect from a woman who lies, gossips, and bullies others into looking the other way or into joining her." We'd add that not only should we challenge the woman, but also the system that makes her relational aggressive behaviors a viable pathway to power, or survival. We consider this work as an opening to discourse within our community of Black women academics with the hope to inspire further discussion, evolution, and change.

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### Author Note

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