

# ***COCONSTRUCTING COUNTERNARRATIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN FACULTY SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONERS***

## ***A Critical and Collaborative Autoethnography***

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Keenly aware of the historical omission, absence, and underrepresentation of African American women's leadership experiences, perspectives, and narratives in the educational leadership discourse, 3 pretenured African American women scholar-practitioners employ the combined qualitative methods of critical autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. Centering their journeys from PK–12 to higher education, this study presents an analysis of their professional, personal, and academic experiences viewed through complex theoretical/conceptual frameworks (i.e., Afrocentric feminist, intersectionality, resiliency). The results of the study indicate that “academic othermothering” and peer mentoring practices are essential for faculty women of color. Reflective, narrative, and collaborative research methods are meaningful ways to convey lived experiences and intersectional identities are needed for the recruitment, development and retention of African American women educational leadership faculty PK–12 scholar-practitioners.

**Keywords:** scholar-practitioner, peer mentoring, academic othermothering, Afrocentric feminist, intersectionality, resiliency

### ***INTRODUCTION***

Keenly aware of the historical omission, absence, and underrepresentation of African

American women's leadership experiences, perspectives, and narratives in the educational leadership discourse, three pretenured African American women scholar-practitioners

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employ the combined qualitative methods of critical autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. African American (Black will be used interchangeably in this study) women in America have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity (Harris-Perry, 2011). Alice Walker (1983) acknowledged that “Black women are simultaneously involved in moral or physical struggles, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom” (p. 5). As African American women have moved from the classroom to school leadership to the academy, the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, age, religion and politics has impacted not only their communities, schools, students and teachers but also the women themselves.

Given the academy’s history of exclusivity, vestiges of sexism and racism, the recruitment and retention of faculty women of color (Khalil & Edwards, 2018) and specifically African American women, has become necessary. Even with the implementation of these efforts, African American female professors are still nearly invisible on university campuses in the United States (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). As of 2016, African American faculty accounted for 6% of full time professors in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The percentage of African American women in the academy is a small portion of that statistic. As such, this nearly invisible percentage brings both professional and personal challenges to the position. Black women in the academy have faced discrimination while striving to succeed and have had to find new ways to survive and thrive (Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014). Women in these roles desire to excel in their careers while representing themselves in authentic ways.

### ***STATEMENT OF PURPOSE***

The purpose of this study was to examine the educational, personal, and/or professional experiences of three scholar practitioners and

explicate how they matriculated from PK–12 leadership contexts to their current spaces as PK–12 educational leadership bridges in the academy. This study documented multiple intersecting identities of three Black female scholar-practitioners through critical autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. The authors’ experiences were chronicled from their educational, personal, and/or professional perspectives. Each scholar-practitioner utilized Afrocentric Feminist theoretical framework to locate her experiences. After reflecting, constructing and sharing individual lived experiences, then coconstructing critical and collaborative autoethnographic accounts, we identified common themes that connect the African American woman tenure-track faculty scholar-practitioner experience.

The growing discourse has included inquiries and perspectives about if and how race, gender, class and the intersectionality of these social constructs influence Black women’s personal and professional challenges and triumphs on the educational leadership pathway. (Alston, 2012; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). The experiences of Black women matriculating from PK–12 school leadership to academe’s subaltern spaces, has been less represented in research. Black women who have served as campus and district leaders in PK–12 systems and later transition to the tenure track, are even less represented in higher education and scholarship. While these women already contend with racist, sexist and double-bind oppressions, their intersectional identities as both scholar and practitioner has compelled them to navigate the academy and negotiate subalternity in new ways in order to survive and thrive. In this paper, three Black female scholar-practitioners employ the dual methods of critical autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography and distinct theoretical framework to explore their experiences. The authors set out to (a) identify common themes that connect the Black woman scholar-practitioner experience; (b) highlight findings that contest monolithic gendered and/or racialized conceptualizations; and (c) center the narra-

tives of Black women scholar-practitioners to reify their experiences navigating and negotiating with/in multiple, intersectional identities.

The findings of this study serve to (a) center the voices and experiences of Black women scholar-practitioners negotiating their multiple identities in the academy, (b) challenge the monolithic gendered and/or racialized conceptualizations by including narratives reifying multiple, intersectional and other(ed) identities, (c) bolster the construction and representation of educational leadership scholarship for, with and by Black women scholar-practitioners and (d) offer recommendations to recruit, develop and retain Black women scholar-practitioners in academe. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

*Research Question 1:* How have your educational, personal, and/or professional experiences influenced your identity development as an African American woman in the PK–12?

*Research Question 2:* How have the barriers and challenges that you experienced (personally and/or professionally) contributed to your commitment to social change?

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

African American/Black women's leadership experiences and "herstories" are absent from the educational leadership perspective (Alston, 2012, p. 127). The experiences and voices of Black women are essential to the study, practice, and scholarship production of educational leadership. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted that despite the salience of race in the United States, the experiences of African American women school leaders are often underexplored as a topic of scholarly inquiry in education. There is a lack in the discourse centered around the trajectory of African American female school and district leaders to tenure-track positions in academia and even

less scholarship explaining their experiences of matriculation from serving as PK–12 leaders to teaching aspiring school and district level leaders in PK–12 educational leadership programs.

Bureaucracy, politics, and professional challenges often hinder the advancement of these women into key leadership positions at the secondary level. Many educational leadership graduate programs continue to transmit traditional male models of leadership that do not serve women well (Beekley, 1999; Eagly et al., 2003; Grogan, 1996). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) found that many studies of leadership omit the perspectives of "raced people"—individuals who have faced discrimination because of race and/or class and have been oppressed psychologically, physically, educationally, or economically (as cited in Gooden, 2012, p. 135). In addition, research methodologies have not recognized that African American female educational leaders have unique needs distinctly different from their White male, White female, and other male counterparts. Most often, Black women have been silenced, disregarded, oppressed, and discounted in the fields of educational leadership (Gray, 2015). This phenomenon poses a unique crisis for African American females who decide and choose to advance in their careers; subsequently, we (Black women) are one of the very few who actually "make it." Breaking "glass ceilings" and reaching the top of "hierarchical ladders" limits the potential to achieve both personal and professional goals. Therefore, during the journey of trying to achieve both personal and professional goals, we are frequently fatigued, disillusioned, physically/mentally depleted, and lonely when we reach our goals.

Black women who aspire to be educational leaders lack mentors or role models who can support or guide them as they navigate the environments of schools and universities. Additionally, women and ethnic minority women do not have access to the informal networks that White men use most frequently to transmit the understanding of administrative

culture necessary for the successful socialization and induction of aspiring leaders (Sperandio & LaPier, 2009). Black women also face other issues such as stereotyping and negative understandings of their identities as leaders. Riehl and Firestone (2005) noted that the reality of leadership is “at least partly socially constructed—a product of experience and perceptions and a combination of material and subjective conditions” (p. 159). Thus, Black women lack the bridging of secondary school leadership experiences to inform higher education practices as faculty and scholar-practitioners.

Alston (2012) asserts, “as African American women embody the history, politics, and educational aspirations of an otherwise oppressed people, an analysis of their lived experiences and leadership roles creates a distinctive theoretical and methodological application to leadership” (p. 128). Research is needed to document the experiences of African American women faculty scholar-practitioners and from the perspectives of African American women. By hearing their stories and illuminating their leadership styles, other educational leadership faculty and scholar-practitioners may develop strategies and approaches that are beneficial for matriculating to academia.

In the book, *Black Womanist Leadership: Tracing the Motherline*, King and Ferguson (2011), the authors state:

Black women challenge the dominant authorities and their accompanying projections by asserting the power to speak and name themselves. Moreover, this reclamation of identity on our own terms delimits the authority system’s efforts to quash visibility. As Black women’s lives require complex negotiations and the mediation of contradictions, the capacity for leadership has been shown in our ability to create strategies for survival and advancement that include self-authentication, through unending self-invention and reinvention. (pp. 451–452)

King and Ferguson summarize the concepts gleaned from the essays as four stages of lead-

ership development: basic habilitation, communal affiliation and helping skills development, work ethic cultivation/vocational maturity formation and, organizational citizenship (2011). They also identify two additional parallel components that are integrated throughout the four stages: social justice consciousness and capacities for resistance.

### ***THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK***

A variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks have been employed independently by researchers studying scholar-practitioners, in general, female scholars, who are practitioners and minoritized scholar-practitioners in educational leadership. As practitioner-scholars, we seek to contribute to scholarship that is more inclusive of the diverse perspectives and frameworks experienced by African American scholar-practitioners. For this study, the following framework was employed to guide this critical and collaborative autoethnography: Afrocentric feminist. The use of this theory to ground qualitative studies has supported the production of discourse that examines and explores the experiences of Black/African American educational leaders.

#### ***Afrocentric Feminist Framework***

Our educational, professional and personal experiences can be understood and explained through the Afrocentric Feminist Framework theoretical lens. This framework includes features from both Afrocentric and feminist traditions. An Afrocentric feminist epistemology is rooted in the everyday experiences of African American women. Collins (2000) believes that African American women have a “unique angle of vision” (p. 811) that they use to make sense of their lives. This “angle of vision” can be explained through the four dimensions of the Afrocentric feminist epistemology. The dimensions are: (1) concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning; (2) the use of dialogue in

assessing knowledge claims; (3) the ethic of caring; (4) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2000).

Several scholars (Dillard, 1995; Lomotey, 1995; Robinson, 1996; Southern, 1996) agree that African American feminism and African American women's writing in general have been a way to survive and escape the barriers, pain and challenges in African American women's lives. Collins (2000) believes that African American women have a "unique angle of vision" (p. 811) that they use to make sense of their lives. This "angle of vision" can be explained through the four dimensions of the Afrocentric feminist epistemology. The dimensions are: (a) concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning; (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims; (c) the ethic of caring; and (d) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2000).

The first dimension, concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, focuses on two types of knowing. Collins (2000) posits that the concepts of "knowledge" and "wisdom" are understood differently in Black women. She states that "knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate" (as cited in Dixon & Dings, 2008 p. 819). Women who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible. Because knowledge comes from experience, the best way of understanding another person's ideas is to develop empathy and share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas. Common sense and intuition are ways of knowing that both White and African American women rely upon. In traditional African American communities, Black women find institutional support for valuing concrete experiences through families, churches and other community organizations. Given that Black churches and families are both woman centered, Afrocentric institutions, African American women traditionally have found support for their self-expression. These institutions allow Black women to share their concrete knowledge of what it means to be a

self-defined Black woman. Black women use their creativity and cultural understanding of their own personal histories, to transcend the formal institutional processes including the often unwelcome climates in professional settings (Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

The second dimension, the use of dialogue, is talk between two subjects, humanizing speech. Dialogue challenges and resists authority. New knowledge claims are worked out in dialogue with others in a community and not in isolation. Use of dialogue emphasizes connectedness rather than separation as an essential component of the knowledge validation process (Collins, 2000). The use of dialogue has its roots in the traditional African worldview of humanity and harmony. Asanta believes that "people become more human and empowered only in the context of a community, and only when they "become seekers of the type of connections, interactions, and meetings that lead to harmony" (as cited in Collins, 2000 p. 59). The use of dialogue has deep roots in an African-based oral and cultural tradition. Black women view the use of dialogue as speaking, listening, and finding their own voice.

The third dimension, the ethic of caring, finds that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central components to the African American woman. Three interrelated components make up the ethic of caring. The components are: individual uniqueness, appropriateness of emotions in dialogues, and developing the capacity for empathy (Collins, 2000). Individual uniqueness is defined as the unique expression of a common spirit, power or energy of each person (Collins, 2000). The metaphor of Black women quilters placing strong color and patterns next to one another while seeing the individual pieces enriching the entire quilt is an example of individual uniqueness (Collins, 2000). The appropriateness of dialogue requires the speaker to believe in the validity of their discourse. Emotions should not be viewed in a negative context but accepted as a necessary way to convey personal expressiveness. The third component,

developing the capacity for empathy, is based on the willingness to understand a person's point of view and situation in order to build a relationship with the individual. The emphasis on expressiveness and emotions is common to all women but African American women expand on both through the connection to the community through Black churches, community organizations, sorority sisterhoods and families.

The fourth dimension of the framework is the ethic of personal accountability. Moral development whereby women are more inclined to link morality to responsibility, relationships, and the ability to maintain social ties (Collins, 2000). African American women experience a convergence of values from Afrocentric and female institutions. Emotions, ethics and reason are interconnected essential components of the Afrocentric feminist framework. Collectively, the four dimensions of the Afrocentric feminist theoretical framework provide understanding and perspectives for the three African American female scholars based on: establishing meaning based of their experiences as African American women, using dialogue to make claims about what they know and understand, using ethic of care when dealing with others and demonstrating the ethic of personal accountability.

Black feminist thought is rooted on the premise that African American women, as a group, share common perceptions and experiences. A phenomenological case study explored the communicative practices of African American women as they function within their everyday lives (Bell et al., 2000). Four focus groups of African American women ranging from undergraduate students to middle age women participated in this study. Two main themes surfaced from this study; multiple consciousness and a natural connection. In their daily lives, the participants found that they experienced a "conscious resistance of hegemonic messages of dominant society (Bell et al., 2000, p. 51). Multiple consciousness is not seen as a point of arrival or departure, but instead as a dynamic process of constant nego-

tiation (Bell et al., 2000). The second theme, a natural connection, contends that communication among African American women is crucial to survive and succeed in a society where they experience a simultaneity of oppression. A distinction was made between a natural connection and a bond among African American women. The natural connection goes back to African American ancestors and cultural connections "food, hair, spirituality or music" (Bell et al., 2000 p. 54). However, the development of a bond was the result of a process and was not automatically assumed. The participants often sought sisterly relationships with other African American women but in some situations did not due to personal differences. Some cultural differences based on socioeconomic status, educational background, sexual orientation, age or geographical differences also created barriers in developing sisterhood.

## **METHOD**

Using the unique qualitative methodologies of critical and collaborative autoethnographies brings multiple interpretative and theoretical perspectives to our study which is related to a particular cultural and social contexts and conditions. Autoethnography contributes to our understanding of narrative inquiry both as a means of knowing and a way of telling about how social and cultural contexts inform and impact human experience (Ellis, 1999). In centering the self, autoethnography serves as both a critique of the colonial origins of ethnography (and its objectification of the other while hiding the subjectivity of the colonial author) and an assertion of relational knowledge. As a qualitative method, autoethnography is employed to understand one's self in deeper ways through a first-person account of events and relationships (Ellis, 1999). Additionally, Hughes and Pennington (2017) described autoethnography as "centering yourself as the subject of interrogation, analysis, and critique" (p. 1). Patton (2002) asserts, autoethnography

is the self-reporting of one's own experiences and introspections as a primary data source (p. 86).

In particular, collaborative autoethnography is a group version of autoethnography, where individuals share their stories in their effort to collectively make sense of their experiences before they coconstruct their collaborative narrative (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). As well, critical autoethnography allows the researcher to become a participant in her/his study, turning inward to examine the self and complexities of the recollection of facts (Tilley-Lubbs, 2014). An introspective recollection of facts creates opportunities for individuals and in this case, African American women, to interpret their experiences from "socio-historical, socio-political, and socio-cultural [*sic*]" (p. 268). Sociohistorical, sociopolitical, and sociocultural experiences are the premise of which this study was designed, recorded, and interpreted. Our critical autoethnographic approaches are most appropriate for revealing our identities as African American women faculty who have matriculated from PK–12 contexts and are navigating academia and the ever-present historically racist and sexist oppressions related to their racial and gendered identities and often the intersectionality of these socially constructed identities.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

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*Research Question 2:* How have the barriers and challenges that you experienced (personally and/or professionally) contributed to your commitment to social change?

As three faculty women of color scholar-practitioners, we transitioned from PK–12 leadership positions to tenure-track assistant professorships. After meeting at an educational research conference, we realized that our

educational, personal, and professional experiences were uniquely aligned. As a result, we developed both an academic and personal relationship in the form of what we now call "Sister Scholars." Our belief as scholar-practitioners shows that we are committed to addressing barriers and challenges that prohibit the personal and professional development of African American female leaders and faculty. We desire to share our PK–12 experiences to inform the preparation of the next generation of PK–12 educators and leaders to become social justice leaders. With the increasing challenges of recruiting, developing and retaining Black women faculty, the preparation and development of aspiring educational leaders are best supported by PK–12 scholar-practitioners who seamlessly blend theory with practice for leadership praxis.

### ***GENERATION OF STORIES***

Three points of data were collected internally to support the personal, individual narratives of each researcher/participant story at (point a) educational experiences, (point b) experiences in PK–12, and (point c) experiences in the academy. Each researcher reconstructed her life experiences to "explore and facilitate insight into their evolving worldviews" (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 65). In Wertz (2011), Polkinghorne, (1988) detailed that "we achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story" (p. 150). The narrative configuration can be described as self as a story. Self as a story or self-interviewing provided us with the opportunity to internally collect data based on what stirred our emotions, what caught our attention, and what we choose to share as an expression of our own cultural principals. Individually, we provided narratives based on our educational, personal, and/or professional experiences of how we navigated as scholar-practitioners. Through

our individual narrative stories, we coconstructed our collaborative narrative or *her stories* (Alston & McClellan, 2011), considering the possibilities of identifying our collective and shared experiences (e.g., educational, personal, and/or professional).

### **MAKING SENSE OF OUR STORIES**

The multiple perspectives of each authors' individual narrative data were triangulated to account for the particular time, place, and moment in the collaborative narrative or *herstories* (Alston & McClellan, 2011) while being juxtaposed with the multiple and interpretative frameworks related to the two research questions. To capture and be authentic to the perspectives of those studied (Patton, 2002), a two-step emic (insider's view) process was used to analyze our perspectives through (a) memory recall and (b) transcribed memories linked to descriptions that are culturally contextualized (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Emic or the individual insider's narrative data was then represented in open coding to reflect the analysis of the individual researcher's story. The themes derived from the open coding of the individual narratives/stories were transcribed to render the collaborative narrative/story. Open coding was then employed to analyze the collaborative narrative data to determine similarities and differences and establish themes emerging within the theoretical and/or conceptual frameworks based on our collective experiences and historical and social contexts.

### **OUR INDIVIDUAL STORIES**

#### ***Dr. Johnson: Climbing the So-Called "Ladder"***

As a scholar and former practitioner, I want my work to matter. So, telling my story about how I came to be where I have worked and where I work, paves the way for explaining why I think that my experience as a practi-

tioner greatly impacts my work as a scholar. By dissecting and examining my uniqueness through multiple intersecting, and sometimes marginalized identities, I have evolved into the being that I am. It has not been without struggle and strife from my humble beginnings of being a single mother of two lovely daughters, that I realized that I needed to "handle" my business so that I could provide a productive life for my children.

From the beginning, I knew that climbing this so called "ladder" to reach the "glass ceiling" (i.e., teacher to administrator, administrator to central office) was going to require hard work, that is, advanced education just to compete on the same playing field with others in my perspective fields, PK-12 and higher education. Navigating glass ceilings and climbing hierarchical and invisible ladders in my education and personal lives required both resiliency and self-determination. Even more, I quickly had to understand how my marginalized intersecting identities (e.g., race, gender, social class) played a critical part of the success of journeys in life. One example of how resiliency allowed me to adapt to the multitude of challenges that I experienced both, personally and professionally, specifically as an African American woman occurred when I was working full time in the private industry. As a single mother, I attended a junior college and a university at the same time to finish my undergraduate degree. During this time, not only was I closely involved in my children's academic and extracurricular activities, I also made the dean's list. It was challenging each day to meet the emotional, financial, and physical needs for myself and my children; but I persistent to make sure that they felt taken care of while I worked and pursued my education goals

As I matriculated through college while teaching in PK-12 and received various degrees, I was told that I needed additional degrees in order to advance in PK-12. However, I soon realized that it was not about the degrees that I needed to advance in this environment, it was my race, my gender, and other

identity markers that prevented me from advancing. Once again, the hierarchies prevented me from being considered for some advanced position even though I was qualified and met the required professional and education credentials for the job title. For example, as a central office staff member, I was not given the appropriate title for my job responsibilities and duties (these were far above “duties as assigned”). Therefore, my job title listed the many roles (e.g., coordinator, director, leader, district level, liaison) that I held without the highest hierarchical position in the district. This occurrence could have become the norm. However, the support and mentoring with my peers allowed me to achieve goals and move past oppression, bias, discrimination, sexism, and stereotyping that I had experienced at nearly every step of my journey. Resilience and self-determination helped me cope and adapt to the challenges and barriers of receiving the full acknowledgment of the work that was doing. Ultimately, when I realized that things were not going to change in the organization, such as systemic and institutionalized racism, sexism, and/or discrimination, I decided that I needed to make changes for myself. Higher education was the next adventure in my journey.

No matter how many degrees I had, how successful I was, or how productive I was, it seemed as though it was never enough. So, as a scholar in higher education, I had the opportunity to connect with two of my peers at a research conference. It was then that we soon realized that we shared very similar experiences. It was through those similar experiences that we realized that we could work together to successfully navigate the spaces of academe. Our shared experiences included being charged with “unofficial” responsibilities of mentoring younger versions of ourselves. To give an example, when I entered higher education, I noticed that I was advising most of the students of color. At first, I thought that it was because the students connected with me as a woman of color and that I understood their research centered around people of color. But,

I quickly was informed that students were “advised to reach out to me” because I was a Black woman who “probably” understood the challenges of inner city students. Pretty soon, I was advising and cochairing several dissertations in my first year as an assistant professor just because someone had designed my trajectory because of the way I looked and where they assumed that I came from. My “sister scholars” were experiencing the same practices of advising a large number of African American graduate students while our White male and female colleagues were selectively deciding which students that they chose to advise. We did not know at the time that we were providing counter narratives to the common stories and experiences of many Black women who are trying to make a difference for themselves and a difference in society. These differences in the form of societal change, in most scenarios, went beyond mentoring. When I worked in the private industry, in public schools, and now in higher education, I have always realized that I had a sense of care for others that I thought could make a world of difference in how women, particularly Black women, needed support in being successful in their career trajectories. It seemed as though the “mothering” or nurturing side of me encompassed the relationships that I had with others in the academy. Whether it was peers, students, or members from the community, I was dedicated and committed to supporting them in ways that I may not have been supported throughout my journeys. So, this commitment and dedication for my peers and students in academe could best be described as “academic othermothering.” Academic othermothering can be viewed as the support and mentoring of others from an ethic of care to assist them from a nurturing and unapologetic way for their ultimate success. To illustrate, after receiving his Ph. D., one student shared on a social media website that I was his academic mother because of my support of him during his dissertation and he felt as though I took care of him just as his mother (who was deceased) would. It is with this consideration

of peer mentoring and academic othermothering that I would like to make social changes in how Black women are viewed and in how we are recruited, hired, training, and retained in our fields.

***Dr. Edwards:  
Striving to Achieve VIP Status***

The acronym VIP has a positive connotation in many, if not most leadership contexts. Being identified or self-identifying as a V-very, I-important, P-person is indicative of a high status within an organization or a field. Of course, an individual who is referred to with the descriptor of VIP is most certainly respected, revered and often emulated due to this conferred status. I have spent much of my professional career striving to obtain VIP status, although I saw very few, if any, Black/Latina female VIPs in P-12 educational leadership contexts.

My career in PK-12 leadership began with my innovation of inclusive educational services in general education settings for high school students with special needs. The impetus for this innovative programming was my observation of the students' desires and struggles to achieve a sense of belonging in the general education population. As a first-year teacher, concurrently earning a special education certification via a regional alternative certification program, I had no idea that my campus-based model for inclusive education would garner attention and support from campus leaders, school-district administrators and my regional educational service center supervisors.

During the first year of my professional career, earning my certification and serving as a high school special education teacher, I was selected to participate in a regional and state-wide initiative to study special education inclusive educational services nationally. At the end of my first year as a special education service provider, I coauthored and was awarded a state-funded grant to launch an inclusive education program on my campus.

Serendipitous or intentional, in a school year, I navigated from the classroom as a first-year teacher, to the positions of grant administrator and academic coordinating teacher of a high school special education department (leadership). The pathway to VIP status appeared more accessible and achievable in PK-12 contexts, juxtaposed to the inaccessible and often ambiguous tenure and promotion process I had come to know in the academy.

More than 25 years later, I attributed my transition to the professoriate to the meritocracy of my educational and professional credentials, inclusive of a doctorate of philosophy in school improvement and educational leadership and my professional PK-12 practitioner credentials, which were symbiotic with my scholar-practitioner experience, service to minoritized populations and intentional research agenda based on my practices in PK-12 contexts. Cognizant of my multiple and intersectional identities; as female, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latina, practitioner and scholar, and how these identities had influenced and impacted my VIP status previously, I was compelled to reevaluate my conceptualization of VIP as a full-time tenure track, assistant professor and faculty member. My entry into the academy may have initially represented cracks and/or chisels in "academia's glass ceiling." However, my multiple identities and intersectional identities, specifically, resulted in my perpetual representations as the "first," "only," and "one of a few" in dually racial and gender stratified academic spaces and places. In the academy's minimally diverse and less inclusive spaces and places within my own institution, I had to understand, own and restore my *VIP*. Accepting my *V*-vulnerabilities, uncovering my *I*-identities and valuing my *P*-privileges, supported my transition from striving to achieve *VIP* status toward thriving with a reconceptualized *VIP* for self-valuation.

Understanding and owning my *V*-vulnerabilities and uncovering my *I*-identities were efforts I could complete independently through self-reflection, reflexive journaling and revisit-

ing my dissertation and published autoethnographic accounts. As an autoethnographer, I could articulate to myself about myself, thus revealing my vulnerabilities to better understand both my strengths and areas for growth. For example, acknowledging my vulnerability as a first-year junior faculty member with an emerging research agenda, inspired me to glean and learn various strategies for developing a unique and sustainable research agenda based on guidance from internal and external mentors and senior scholars. Additionally, my vulnerability as the only Black woman, Latina, junior faculty in my department and college motivated me to learn the research agendas and scholarship productivity of internal colleagues to seek similarities in research topics of interests, commonalities in theoretical and/or conceptual framings, and cohesiveness in research methods, in order to consider collaborative opportunities.

Owning and understanding my individual vulnerabilities was subsumed in my efforts to uncover my multiple and intersecting *I*-identities. Understanding and owning these identities amidst academe's minimally diverse and limited inclusive landscape, was a significant effort. My eyes, ears and heart bore witness to the visceral experiences of my identities, the intersecting nexus of some of my identities and the presumed roles and responsibilities inherent within my identities. This assertion manifested in dialog with more experienced, midlevel and senior, noncritical White female and White male scholars and colleagues, when they insisted I would be the best fit to mentor and advise Black or Latina graduate students who were pursuing dissertation research related to critical frameworks within PK-12 educational leadership.

The understanding and owning of my *P*-privilege, while delineated individually, were best completed in the company of others who shared my identities and could relate to my vulnerabilities. Filing through my own experiences independently, yielded limited ideas of privilege, considering how my multiple, intersecting identities are also often oppressed and

marginalized. Accepting that my very existence in academe, an institution that was not intended for me, is a privilege, supported my conceptualization that a more transparent unpacking of my privilege was best achieved in collaboration with others who share my experiences of privilege as scholar-practitioners, Black women junior faculty navigating and negotiating the academy's terrain. Thus, collaborative autoethnography was determined as the most authentic method of studying self in the company of others.

**Dr. Gray:**  
***Breaking out of the Cage***

The book, "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*," by the late iconic writer Maya Angelou, was a memorable novel that I first experienced in junior high school. I was enthralled by the memoir of an African American woman's struggles from childhood to adulthood. Themes of strength, love, endurance, family, self-creation and faith resonated with me in my youth and continues to do so today. To me, the "caged bird singing" pertains to the release of a restricted identity to become your true self. Angelou's story is one of triumph in the face of racism, sexism and ignorance. It is a story of survival and self-acceptance. It is the story of many African American women, including myself.

I have been in education for more than 30 years. As a middle school teacher and school administrator, all of my experience has been with at-risk, low income families and communities. It is where I thrived and found my motivation to serve others. Although I enjoyed being an administrator, I always wanted to express myself more than I could as a principal. I was thrilled and a bit nervous when I was accepted into a doctoral program in 2010 and was ready to take the opportunity to embrace this new experience and see where God would lead me. As a student in an educational leadership doctoral program in 2010, I can make the parallel to the caged bird. When I started the doctoral program, I had a point of view, goals

and beliefs that were hidden, and I was unsure of how to “break out of the cage.”

As an African American female secondary administrator on a high school campus, I was interested in examining the leadership styles and identities of my counterparts because I wanted to validate what I was feeling and experiencing in my role as a school leader. As the sole African American administrator (male or female) on my campus, I often found myself comparing my decision making and relational style with other administrators on my campus. Some would say I was being “confrontational” with students when I saw my behavior as “caring.” Others would observe my nurturing ways as “being a pushover.” Students and parents would contact me for assistance when they were unable to receive help from another administrator. I would ask teachers to reconsider a conflict with a student and try to find ways to connect and build a relationship. I began to wonder if my leadership and other-mothering style was just “being me” or was based on cultural and gender factors of being an African American female.

Five years have passed since I became Dr. Gray and since that time, I have been an Assistant Professor at two universities. The Afrocentric feminist dimension of “the use of knowledge in assessing knowledge claims” was put to practice in my first assistant professorship. Instead of trusting in myself, I was so overwhelmed with the thought of—becoming a “professor,” making my family proud, starting a new career, feeling accomplished—that I did not stop and ask myself some important questions such as “do you feel truly wanted here,” “do you feel safe here,” “can you grow here,” and “will you be appreciated here.” Instead of seeking answers to those questions prior to responding “yes” to the offer, those questions were answered with a resounding “no” after 4 years of passive aggressive interactions, claims of me not doing my share, putting too much focus on social justice leadership concepts and a lack of respect for my 14 years of experience as a school leader.

Presently, in our shared roles as scholar-practitioners, my coauthors are kindred spirits in our intersectionality as African American female junior faculty. To assist one another through the racialized maze of the academy, we became more than colleagues but peer mentors and “academic other mothers.” Peer mentoring for women of color in the academy, emphasizes a “network approach of sharing resources and presumes that all participants possess distinctive assets to contribute to one another’s development” (Nuñez et al., 2015). As peer mentors, we formed an accountability group to discuss our writing and teaching schedules, worked through departmental expectations regarding teaching and service and offered suggestions on the best ways to respond to microaggressions with our students and colleagues. As academic othermothers, we express our ethic of care to one another. Across states and many miles, our ethic of caring is demonstrated through personal connections, trustworthiness and honesty. An “ethic of care” can be defined as a “theory of moral concern grounded in responsiveness to others that dictates providing care, preventing harm and maintaining relationships” (Brabeck, 1993, p. 5). Carol Gilligan, a leading researcher on the concept of the ethic of care, asserted that it is achieved through perception of one's self as connected to others (1977). We demonstrate this connection to each other through our frequent dialogues that are often fiery, agonizing and celebratory but always empathetic and supportive.

## ***OUR COLLABORATIVE NARRATIVE***

### ***Peer Mentoring in Our Collective Triad***

Peer mentoring is not a monolithic construct. Our collaborative narrative exemplifies only one example of peer-mentoring among three women scholar-practitioners, who share multiple intersecting professional, educational and personal identities. Having written proposals and participated in national research conference venues independently, our collabo-

rative narrative began with our collective experience as participants in a very familiar national research conference, professional presentations, and networking venue. During this initial meeting we conversed, inquired, and quickly bonded around our scholar-practitioner experiences, our research interests, and the novelty of our full-time transition into academe. We committed to stay in touch and meet again beyond the time frame of the conference. Thus, our peer mentoring experiences began. We began our peer-mentoring with emails, phone calls, text messaging and informal meetings via virtual formats. The common and consistent opening for all our communications was our sharing of our current professional experiences. This level of sharing was rich with revelation of our vulnerabilities and inquiries regarding whether academe was the place and space in which our contributions were most valued and impactful. Utilizing the peer-mentoring practice of reframing and reciprocating validation (Khalil & Edwards, 2018), we reframed our positioning, as scholar-practitioners in the academy. For example, we shared our experiences navigating and negotiating the politics and bureaucracies that were often blind spots to us, as emerging scholars. Additionally, we affirmed and validated one another for the contributions that only we could recognize as paramount, as Black women junior faculty.

In these cases, we validated how we were uniquely and resiliently navigating our multiple roles and responsibilities without formal “mentoring” therefore, affirming our creation of our strong mentoring and networks with peers. Our peer-mentoring also increased our individual and collective research productivity. We scheduled and participated in writing accountability meetings and forums to bolster our scholarship production. Most impactful, we coconstructed our collaborative research proposals and papers, developed research presentations and participated in symposiums to expand our overall professional, scholarly networks. This practice of coconstructing supported our cultivation of our own academic

space, informed by our multiple, intersecting identities.

In summary, our peer mentoring experiences often manifested in our talking through situations, walking one another “off the ledge” of a politicized issue and reframing critical conversations. Nuanced and more intentional, our peer-mentoring experiences inherently encompassed an ethic of care that was uniquely situated. As we discovered, our peer-mentoring efforts contributed to our conceptualization of academic other-mothering.

### *Academic Othermothering in Our Collective Triad*

Our triad of peer-mentors illuminated our familiarity as communalistic, service-oriented, cultural workers navigating and negotiating academe with a unique cultural capital. Through our peer-mentoring experiences, we recognized and cultivated a collective cultural capital that was visceral in our ethic of care, supportive efforts, and collaborative scholarly contributions. Thus, our collective cultural capital was the impetus for our conceptualization of our roles as “academic othermothers” for one another.

Collins (2000) coined the term othermother to explicate the service women provide to the Black community through expressions of an ethic of caring and personal accountability. We have expounded upon Collins’ (2000) original definition of other mothering with the addition of the term “academic.” Our conceptualization of “academic other mothering” accounts for our peer-mentoring, guidance, support and ethic of caring extended to one another in the context of the academy. To exemplify our acts of “academic other mothering” we considered efforts and outcomes that we created to ensure community and opportunities for success. For example, we identified ourselves as “sister scholars” which supported our coconstructing of scholarship and ensured our warnings regarding overextending ourselves in service, to the detriment of our research productivity. More importantly, our

community acknowledged the inclusion of our own families as integral components of our community, as often viewed as the challenge of achieving work-life balance. Instead, our triad of academic other mothers, adopted a sense of “work-life integration” (Khalil & Edwards, 2018). In these cases, we intentionally planned and implemented our professional roles with consideration of how these roles and their related responsibilities were subsumed in our personal lives.

Specific examples of finding work-life integration (Nino et al., 2015), highlighted the understanding, acceptance, empathy, and creation of exceptions we provided to one another when our personal challenges conflicted with our professional, academic responsibilities. Dr. Johnson was forced to contend with working in academic spaces while distanced from family and supportive loved ones. Dr. Gray was caring for an aging parent, while traveling to her academic assignment in another state. Dr. Edwards was mitigating the debilitating effects of chronic health issues, while matriculating through a tenure and promotion, third year review process. In each of these cases, the authors as academic other mothers, ensured an ethic of caring and collaboration with one another that resulted in nurturing, productive and sustaining relationships as well as professional and personal achievement.

The following interpretative findings from this research identifies the ways in which our multiple and intersectional identities are used to affect their approach to research, practice, and teaching: (1) resiliency in the midst of barriers and challenges (2) multiple intersecting roles and identities as practitioners and scholars; (3) Collective voices as peer mentors and academic othermothers

### ***Finding #1: Resiliency in the Midst of Barriers and Challenges***

Resiliency is defined as the ability to “bounce back” from a stressful or traumatic experience. Sitek-Solatka (2005) identified 10 resiliency attributes of educators in their work

settings; communication skills, flexibility, perseverance, perceptiveness, problem solving, competence, inner direction, love of learning, self-motivation and developing relationships. These characteristics were displayed through our stories and experiences from youth, early practitioner careers and as junior faculty in the academy. Our awareness of our resiliency provides us with the determination to take on difficult challenges that are a part of our daily work. Each researcher shared how resiliency allowed them to cope with barriers and challenges that they experienced either as practitioners and/or as scholars. For the intent of this study, resiliency was used as a holistic framework and not being a requirement to discard traditional or colonized philosophies. Furthermore, a holistic approach to adaptation and a unified sense of self (resiliency and self-determination) conceptual framework was derived from the research findings of two theoretical frameworks (resilience and self-determination) which supports participants’ need to develop ways to respond, monitor, anticipate, and have the ability to adapt as necessary when working as school leaders and educators (Johnson, 2015, 2019). Resilient Black women handle hardships differently and may not exhibit resiliency characteristics the same as others. Resilient Black women adjust to adversities quicker and stronger than others and use their experiences to develop new skills and to gain more confidence in the process.

Dr. Johnson shared that,

So, it was challenging each day to meet the emotional, financial, and physical needs for myself and my children; but I persisted to ensure that they felt taken care of while I worked and pursued my education goals.

Dr. Edwards recalled that,

For example, acknowledging my vulnerability as a first year junior faculty member with an emerging research agenda, inspired me to learn various strategies for developing a uniquely intersecting and sustainable research agenda based on guidance from

internal and external mentors and senior scholars.

Dr. Gray indicated that

transitioning from a very collaborative environment in PK–12 to a setting that can often be isolating and competitive in the academy took was initially difficult. Resiliency characteristics of determination and adaptability helped her feel more comfortable in the role of professor.

### ***Finding #2: Navigating Multiple Intersecting Identities and Roles***

Intersectionality has been identified as a conceptual framework based on the foundation of an individual's identity, specifically in the workplace, that is examined through experienced intersecting identities and oppressions (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991). According to Crenshaw (1991) intersectionality rejects the notion that there is only a "single axis framework" used to rationalize the multiple dimensions in which gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, age, or other identity markers that defines a person's, in particular women's, experiences (p. 1244). Intersectionality is a concept that enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias.

We, as researchers, realized that our intersecting identities could be perceived negatively among certain people. However, it was how we, as scholar-practitioners, perceived our multiple and marginalized identities to explain our ways of dealing with the challenges and barriers as we navigated our careers in both PK–12 and higher education. Therefore, multiple marginalized intersecting identities theorize that the many experiences and/or interpretations of experiences, that people of color, particularly African American women, cannot be explained within a single boundary or context. Intersectionality is based on the

premise that variables work in groups. According to Collins (1998), the multiple aspects of identity mutually construct each other. For Black women, being female influences their experience as Black and being Black influences their experiences as females. Therefore, there is significant importance for understanding the intersection of multiple identities (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

As a conceptual framework, intersectionality grounded the individual examination of the ways in which Black women's racial and gendered identities informed (or not) their educational, personal, and/or professional experiences in their matriculation from serving as educational leaders in PK–12 to faculty in higher education educational leadership programs. With that being said, careful consideration was given for exploring how our gender, race, ethnicity, and social class may possibly impact either our failure or success as leaders in either PK–12 and/or higher education. Considering a specific focus on the formation of social identities, this study examined the notion of intersectionality to determine if and how, Black women faculty perceived their experiences as being influenced by both race and gender simultaneously, within the context of educational leadership.

Our findings related to intersectionality are identified as the following.

Dr. Johnson shared that,

At first, I thought that it was because the students connected with me as a woman of color and that I understood their research centered around people of color. But, I quickly was informed that students were "advised to reach out to me" because I was a Black woman who "probably" understood the challenges of inner city students."

Dr. Edwards stated that,

"My entry into the academy may have initially represented cracks and/or chisels in academia's glass ceiling." However, my multiple and intersectional identities, specifically, resulted in my perpetual

representations as the “first,” “only,” and “one of a few” in dual racial and gendered stratified academic spaces and places.

Dr. Gray reported that,

the identities of African American public-school teacher and administrator carried a different expectation (caregiver, supporter, problem-solver) than that of African American junior faculty member.

### ***Finding #3: Collective Voices as Peer Mentors and Academic Othermothers***

Our narratives highlighted the struggles, challenges and successes in our roles as cultural workers. Cooper (2009) defined a cultural worker within the context of education as “an educator who validates and draws on knowledge that is critical, multicultural and interdisciplinary. We have carried on our identification as cultural workers from our practitioner experiences into our current roles as scholars. As cultural workers, we recognize and cultivate cultural capital and form alliances with those who hold a similar vision of equity and inclusiveness. This cultural capital is evident through our roles as “academic othermothers” for one another. Other mothers can be defined as women “who work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability” (Collins, 2000). We have taken on the role of academic other mothers to one another and depend upon each other as a source of support, rejuvenation, and direction.

The case could be that intended outcomes from African Americans women band together to create communities and opportunities for themselves by forging ahead to do the work on their own. Our study identified us as “sister scholars” who were able to establish a community and opportunities to peer mentor and collaborate with one another in ways that were productive, nurturing, and sustaining. As scholar-practitioners, our experiences of connectedness aligned with Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs—belongingness, physiological,

safety, self-actualization and self-esteem, self-esteem (ego) and self-actualization are deeply rooted as motivating factors in the concept of work motivation (Waxman et al., 2004). Most of these needs are related to how we perceived ourselves both individually and collectively as “sister scholars.”

For example, the scholar-practitioners, shared the following similarities related to academic other mothering and peer mentoring:

- Academic other mothering:

Dr. Johnson acknowledged that,

To illustrate, after receiving his PhD, one student (a student that I was mentoring and who had requested me to be on his dissertation committee) shared on a social media website that I was his academic mother (his mother was deceased) and he felt as though I took care of him just as his mother would.

Dr. Gray reported that

the ability to meet and talk to African American female associate and full professors has helped me understand the tenure and promotion process and the “unwritten rules” of the university policies.

- Peer mentoring:

Dr. Johnson acknowledged that,

So, as a scholar in higher education, I had the opportunity to connect with two of my peers at a research conference. It was then that we soon realized that we shared very similar experiences. It was through those similar experiences that we realized that we could work together to successfully navigate the spaces of academe.

Dr. Gray reported that

having accountability partners who understand my worldview, culture and work style allows me to have a place here I can be myself and feel supported.

## ***OUR UNIQUE STORIES***

The purpose of this collaborative autoethnography was to provide an overlay of our common experiences through the narratives that we shared. However, during our data analysis, we noted that not only did we have some of the same experiences as we matriculated through our professional experiences in PK–12 into higher education, we acknowledged our differences as well. One of the major differences that we identified was our experiences with our support systems. For example, Dr. Edwards shared that before transitioning into the academy, she lost her parents who were her foundation and ultimate cheerleaders during her pursuit of her doctorate. Therefore, her husband then became her major support and had to quickly adjust to picking up some of the support that her parents provided. Her children also became her support systems as she transitioned from PK–12 into the academy. Similarly, Dr. Gray experienced solitary transitions through her career trajectory from a school administrator into the academy. After the passing of both her brother and father, she became the caregiver for her mother. Consequently, her support systems were no longer available and she became the support system for her aging mother.

On the other hand, Dr. Johnson transitioned from central office administration into higher education with a support system from her children. She served as a support system for her children while they pursued their college degrees during the same time that she was pursuing her college degrees as well. So, her support systems were reciprocal. More so, she moved to another state some 1000 miles away from her family when she transitioned from PK–12 into the academy. As a result, Dr. Johnson worked in solitary with occasional visits with her family which kept her grounded. Each of us shared our experiences which intersected at some points; but deviated at other points. However, it was through our narratives and our stories that we are able to respect, understand, and acknowledge how we are similar. It was

equally important to view the value of our differences.

## ***CONCLUSIONS***

While working collaboratively, we as “sister scholars” realized our experiences while navigating and matriculating through our careers required us to think about our identity development. Specifically, the results of the scholar-practitioner’s collaborative autoethnographic accounts align with the practices detailed in a peer mentoring virtual community of practice (Khalil & Edwards, 2018). These peer mentoring practices include reframing oppressive experiences, validating and affirming with an ethic of care, and coconstructing counternarratives. Also, we described an additional practice of academic othermothering which proffers self-valuation in practice and research.

Our collaboration was an effort to center dialogue in an effort to “broaden our profession and knowledge base to be more critical and inclusive,” this paper addresses the roles and value of (a) mentoring, both peer and “intergenerational”; (b) empathy based on similar experiences with subalternity; (c) navigational capital along the faculty journey; and (d) centering identity in research on behalf of students and leaders living parallel realities. For this study, we hope to offer unique perspectives of Black women educational leadership scholars as they have continued to navigate spaces at distinct stages in their academician trajectory despite being viewed and treated as subaltern colleagues.

Our goal was to establish a cohesive narrative that demonstrates that Black women scholars, although underrepresented in the academy, can and do navigate and survive its oppressive halls in resilient ways. In pursuing this purpose, the Black women scholars offer a counternarrative to the racism that can be present in educational leadership contexts while corroborating research that champions the faculty pipelines plagued by minoritization. The scholar-practitioners offered a counternarra-

tive to the racism that can be present in educational leadership contexts while corroborating research that champions the faculty pipelines plagued by minoritization. With the aim of introducing academic other mothering as a complementary support for peer mentoring, our findings help to positively impact faculty learning culture in PK–12 and the academy. Both academic other mothering and peer mentoring can transform sustainability, support systems, and learning in educational spaces while promoting skills to adapt and adjust to the policies, practices, and procedures in higher education. These attributes as ways to address personal, educational, and professional challenges while successfully navigating promotion and tenure in the academy. Specifically, by being keenly aware of the professional and academic roles necessary for success in the academy, academic other mothering and peer mentoring allows ways to develop resiliency, to utilize multiple intersecting identities, and to promote others to share their collective voices of their experiences to make social changes.

In addition, our perspectives can help to disrupt discourses that simply tokenize Black women scholars. In contrast to shallow deficitizing descriptions focused solely on their perceived lack, the research shared here offers narratives that depict how they strive to accomplish their professional and personal goals on behalf of the communities they represent.

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