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Here's the Tea: The Challenges Faced by African American Female Faculty

in Predominantly White Christian Institutions

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Abstract

Studies have shown that more diversity can contribute to a more well-rounded university population and can lead to less discriminatory acts on campus (Vanalstine, 2015). There is a lack of diversity regarding race and gender in higher education, specifically at religiously rooted, predominantly white institutions (PWI's) (Kim, 2010; Rowatt, 2004). This study focused on Black female educators in PWIs and the challenges they have faced.

The data was collected by interviews with African American female faculty who are all professors in PWI's. The years of experience or exact major was not taken as a requirement to be interviewed. The participants were from five predominantly white Christian institutions (PWCI's), representing five states.

The findings indicated a large amount of problems among this specific population. Further research will be needed to address the solutions to these challenges.

Here's the Tea: The Challenges faced by African American Female Faculty in Predominantly

White Christian Institutions

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to find the challenges faced by African American female

faculty in Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). There are multiple reasons for this research.

One of those reasons concerns inclusivity and diversity regarding gender and race, or lack

thereof, in PWI's. Secondly, there is a dearth of African American feminist studies. The

researcher's personal experience as an African American female at a predominantly white

Christian institution (PWCI) provided motivation for the study.

Existing studies have primarily focused on college students of color or black male faculty

members in predominantly white institutions (PWI). One study, (Ross, 2016) indicated that

many of the black faculty members experience some form of racism, either subtle or even overt

discrimination. Lack of mentorship, discrimination in the classroom, and lack of the respect

overall were some examples of racism that black faculty faced (Cole, 2001). This study also

discussed the concerns that African Americans have being at a PWI. Butner (2000) in her study

of a police brutality case noted the two nations that Whites and Blacks inhabit in this country.

The effects of past racism and the continuation of systematic racism has shaped the current

climate into two separate entities of White vs. Black experiences. Jennifer N. Samble (2008)

explored the unequal pay, the disparity in representation, lack of promotion, and discrimination

that females face in higher education. This leads one to wonder if circumstances would be

different in a Christian university. Many PWI's happen to also be Christian ("Colleges with the

Highest Percentage of Caucasian Students", 2019), which made the researcher wonder about the

correlation between the two. Lack of feminist studies in black female faculty led the researcher

to delve deeper into the issues among black faculty, and the challenges they have with not only race but also gender (Sulè, 2014).

The research that was observed focused on the concerns, discrimination, racism, and under representation of the participants. Ross (2016) focus was on the different experiences and concerns that African American faculty had at PWI's. He used the Delphi Method, which is "a process for gathering expertise and/or opinions from people with specialized knowledge of a particular subject for the purpose of making predictions or forecasts" (Ungvarsky, 2017). Though the Delphi Method can be conducted in quantitative or qualitative research, Ross's study was quantitative. Butner (2000) lead her research by using a police case to dictate the process of her research. Many of the studies examined had stories or cases that initiated the researcher's inquiry. Interviews were a primary source for many of the studies that were examined.

There are gaps in the research regarding the PWIs having any Christian background. This gave the researcher a specific opening to take on the study. Most of the studies did not focus on African American females, primarily on other students of color experiences at PWIs or African American males' experiences. When the focus was on African American females it spoke mostly of the journey to achieve tenure or some form of a promotion (Kelly, 2017). Christina L. Kim did give a similar study that focused on Asian American females (Kim, 2010). Other studies that focused on African American college students did so regarding the retention rates (Kelly, 2017). One study, by Wilma J. Henry, did focus on Black feminism ideals and critical race theory to give a framework on the discussion of opportunities in higher education for Black females (Henry, 2009). Overall the articles that I looked at never had any correlation between African American females and their challenges in PWIs, especially Christian PWIs. The question that drives this study is, what are the challenges faced by African American females at PWCIs?

Methodology

To find a possible answer to this query, a set of questions were created to guide the researcher. They focused on asking what the challenges are of being a faculty member at a primarily white university, the influences of Christianity on their challenges, and questions about the intersectionality of being black and female at a Christian PWI. Each of the articles helped formulate the research question: "What are the Challenges faced by African American Female Faculty in PWCIs?"

Each of the universities included in this study had a non-white population percentage of less than 40% in student body and less than 32% in the faculty body. The population of black students and black faculty was miniscule at each school. Also, at each school the faculty population was not as diverse in terms of race and gender in comparison to the student body.

Participants

The research had a wide variety of participants. Professors, assistant directors and adjuncts faculty ranged from biochemistry, The social work program, English, and business. There was a total of 9 participants in the study. They were all 30 years old or older. The participants were gathered from around the United States from 5 different universities. The researcher located the participants by researching universities that had a low non-white population, specifically regarding their faculty. Through two initial interviews the researcher was able to get more subjects via the referrals from the participants. Each of the participants were given a consent form before having the interview. The participants had a variety of years at the university that gave the research more experienced knowledge to delve into.

Table of Participants			
Participants #s	Positions at the University	Years at Position	Area of Instruction
Participant 1	Adjunct Professor	11	Education and Psychology
Participant 2	Adjunct Professor	4	BioChem
Participant 3	Adjunct	7	English
Participant 4	Assistant Professor	2	Accounting
Participant 5	Instructor	1	Nursing
Participant 6	Associate Professor	19	Business Administration
Participant 7	Associate Professor	11	Social Work
Participant 8	Associate Professor	2	English
Participant 9	Assistant Professor/Director	20	Social Work

Instrumentation

The interviews were conducted in a couple of ways, face to face and phone calls. Eight questions

were asked to the participants to examine their challenges in a Christian PWI:

Interview Questions:

1. What is your current position at the university?

2. How long have you been at your university?

3. Do you know what percentage of students at the university are not white?

4. Do you know what percentage of faculty at the university are not white?

5. What have been your biggest challenges in teaching at a predominantly white institution

    (PWI)?

6. Do you think that teaching in a Christian university makes a difference?

7. Do you think the challenges you faced were due primarily to race or gender or both or

    some other factor?

8. What are some coping skills you use for the challenges you've faced?

Procedure

During the interview process the researcher made sure the participants were comfortable, by setting the questions in an certain order to break the ice and had a relaxed atmosphere with the participants. The participants were encouraged to answer the questions to the best of their ability and leading questions were avoided. There was trouble with the phone call interviews to make sure the time zone and connection was right for the interviews. The interviews were recorded in an audio application and emailed to the researcher then transcribed later. Each participant was assigned a number to make sure the confidentiality was kept.

The transcriptions were verbatim to the actual discussions aside from the taking out of certain sentences that identified the participants, words like "um" and laughs. When all the interviews were done, they were transcribed then they were analyzed to view the common themes among challenges. Highlighting in different colors was a tool taken to visually see the themes in the transcription. The themes included:

Challenges	% of Participant reporting
Sexism	90%
Students	70%
Intersectionality	70%
Imposter Syndrome	50%
Inequity	60%
Stereotyping	50%

Results

Each of the challenges that appeared came to no surprise. In the research 6 themes

seemed to emerge. Each one has some connection to one another so that it is not a standalone

factor.

Stereotyping

When the researcher looked through previous studies stereotyping was identified as a

thing that impacted the populations. Stereotyping is an overgeneralized idea of a set of people.

African American females stereotyping made them seem not as competent as their white

counterparts. The use of that type of discrimination ignited lack of respect. Participant 1 stated:

> "Black women cannot just say what's on the top of their head. You have to make sure
> you're not being too emotional or too passive, because there's this general idea that black
> females are not as smart as white females or whites' people in general. You have to
> demonstrate your knowledge without being a know it all or still being very collegial and
> kind. So, I think it's just walking that line of needing to prove yourself and still being a
> grateful, gentle, upbeat person."

In some of the interviews the researcher found that it was harder for African American

female faculty to reach fellow peers and students when they had these perceived misconceptions

about black people. For instance, Participant 4 stated:

> "I found that people had those stereotypes they were more likely harder to reach because
> they had already made up their mind about me."

One of the ways one participant handled the use of stereotypes was by trying to

communicate with the people. To get an understanding of why they act like this:

> "Just overall thinking about the stereotypical black female and just not knowing. Some
> would tell me they didn't know how to respond or react to someone who is black or
> someone who is black and female. There are times that students were intimidated by me
> because they thought of the stereotypical picture of the black female. They would say
> they didn't really know how to approach me or didn't want to offend me."

These stereotypes did not just affect the females emotionally it also inhibited them from having an academic relationship with some of their students.

Students lack of respect

Students represented the biggest surprise factor in the challenges experienced by African American female faculty. In most of the interviews students were spoken as a primary antagonist for the faculty. Primarily in white male students there was a poignant lack of respect for the African American female professors. Participant 1 gave an example of the obstacles dealing with the students:

> "Students can perceive you a certain way and can be racist. Ex. great history professor that taught in depth history of racism and got called out by a student for being "racist" for speaking her mind and the status of the students' parents got the professor reprimanded."

Certain participants found the students to be more challenging to deal with than their fellow faculty members. Participant 4 stated:

> "That was a challenge for me, but I found that challenge more with the students than with the faculty. Because the faculty that I worked with knew me, and so that makes a difference when the people actually know you. Versus people who don't really know you as well and all they have are stereotypes to go by."

The students also seemed to hold a certain amount of power over the African American female faculty. The students could easily get them in trouble as Participant 4 stated:

> "Case in point there is something in my class where I had to talk about marijuana because I was tax teacher. So, there's things about marijuana and taxation and because I'm black and talked about marijuana. So, students construed it as me promoting marijuana. Kind of like would you think that if it was a white person. I said nothing about let's go smoke a joint. I said here are the rules. Then you had people saying I was promoting marijuana. Why would they say that it's because I'm black and it's an illegal drug."

Some participants know that students are the way for change for the challenges they face. So, they seek out their students to start the change with them:

> "What I've done is to acknowledge or identify the individuals lack of awareness that their ignorance is through no fault of their own they just simply don't know. It's because they

have never truly had a relationship with an individual different than themselves. So, I just worked to gaining those relationships with students."

While the students are one challenge the faculty must face, being African American and Female in a majority white and male dominated place is no small feat.

Intersectionality of Race and Gender

The intersectionality means that African American females encounter not only racism in the work sector but sexism as well. Participant 7 noted the challenge that this specific population feels:

> "I think that there are more challenges if you're female and there are more challenges if you're black and there are more challenges if you are black and female. It's just like a tier. If you're black and female, it's like a double whammy."

When the question, "What have been your biggest challenges in teaching at a predominantly white institution (PWI)?" was brought up a large number of the participants saw both Race and Gender as the source:

Primary Challenges	
Gender and Race	70%
Gender	20%
Other Factors	10%

One participant saw race as a main contender for the challenges they've faced, but age was also another factor:

> "For me it would be race. Not so much gender, but definitely age. I taught at a place for 15 years took a hiatus and went and did a directorship. I've been in academia if you add it all up for 18 years. I've been the senior partner and sometimes that is a challenge."

As the African American female faculty got over the effects of the intersectionality. The looming effects of belonging at a place that doesn't look like them was still there.

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome occurs when a person doubts his/her ability and accomplishments and fears the consequences of being outed as a "fraud". It is a common experience among minorities. When placed in a scenario where the person is repeatedly told or shown that they don't belong, one starts to believe it. Participant 8 stated:

> "I've always wanted to excel but when I took a look of how that impulse is based on proving myself or some imposter syndrome. I felt that I really have I felt this idea of do I really belong here. Things that I do not know that many of them know just from there growing up in the environment."

Imposter syndrome is consistent with stereotyping. By trying to conform one may fall into a stereotype. This is done to make the people around them feel comfortable and to further make this persona. Participant 7 stated:

> "You have two reasons for people to think you're not smart enough or good enough to be where you are. And two reasons to monitor your behavior and make sure you are not making people uncomfortable. We call those stereotype contingencies; when you do things in order to keep everyone feeling comfortable about who you are. And so you know often in PWI if there are not a lot or just a few people of color the faculty members of color are usually very nice and they smile and they dress up and they do all these things to counter the stereotypes and the opportunities for people to mistreat them."

Participant 3 had the problem of always being tested by her students. When students test others to see if he/she belongs there that's just another section of the imposter syndrome, because he/she thinks some of those thoughts will start to be proven:

> "I found that I was stereotyped by my students, in that way a lot of the students they always tried to see if I was smart. So, it was like she is really smart and the only way she could be here is if she's smart. One comment that I would always get on my comments is that she's smart but. There is always a but. There was always a but."

Inequity

Inequity is the idea that one must work twice as hard to get half as much as your counterpart. Many African American female faculty had to face this to get where they are. In a lot of minority groups, they had to do something extra or use their minority struggle to get where

their counterpart was already at. Either they had to get an extra degree or internship compared to

their counterpart that only needed one. It could be that they had to use their experiences as a

minority member to appeal to someone while their white counterparts more than likely did not

have to go about this route. Participant 8 disliked this notion:

> "I also struggle with this idea of being twice as good to get half as much. That ticks me off because to me that's not fair. I'll show up and do my job but I'm not trying to prove I'm worthy to be there. I have the credentials I have the whatever that shows I'm supposed to be there. There are some people there with fewer credentials than I. I'm not going to spend all of my time trying to impress you or trying to prove I'm worthy of being there. And coming to that point in my career has been interesting."

To get ahead Participant 1 knew that you had to get past the gates of the boy's club, a

term used in comparison to the patriarchy which is a system of society that is male dominated, by

having the credentials and more to back up their claims:

> "Getting passed the boys club" Minorities have to be more educated and do more to get some of the same accolades as the white counterparts."

Sexism

In Christian sectors the traditionalist view that women should be submissive to the man

or are not as intelligent or strong as the man is still very apparent. Even in Christian universities

this is still a strong idea. Participant 8 states:

> "Yeah especially in the more conservative fellowships gender plays a much larger role I think than in some of the other fellowships which I'll say are progressive. So constantly trying to negotiate how do I use my talents and gifts to the best of my abilities my god given talents and gift knowing for some that my role should be very limited anyway."

Getting the belief that a man is not the only one who can lead and be an authority figure

has been a feat many of the participants have had to face. From when children start school till

high school they are predominantly taught by females, because teaching is primarily thought of

as a women's job. You get into higher education a shift happens where the males are the

dominant force in that sector. Participant 9 observed:

"I think it was both. Adapting to the stereotypical black female. Adapting to leadership by a female in general. Being that many have grown up conservatively that the one teaching them or telling them what to do has been a male. That was a transition for some and then just dealing with an African American female was very different."

The research revealed sexism as placed strongly on the challenges among the African American female faculty.

Discussion

Findings

This study was developed to explore the challenges that African American female faculty face in an environment where the in representation is scarce. Delving into the challenges that African American female faculty face revealed several problematic themes jumped out. Common themes of stereotyping, students lack of respect, imposter syndrome, inequity, sexism and intersectionality of race and gender. As these themes were discussed the common denominator among all of them seemed to be the ignorance among people. When a sheltered population that has not had an ideal interaction with those different than them, those misconceptions start to develop and make for an environment that is vulnerable for fellow students or faculty.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was that the research was conducted over a summer break, the majority of the researchers' population were unavailable due to vacations or not having teaching responsibilities. Getting in communication with the participants had to be done through networking. Since the participants receive so many research emails, most of them would have ignored the researchers if she hadn't had the connections to get in contact with them. Another limitation was the lack of face to face interviews. Since the participants interviewed were scattered around the United States it was impossible to have those face to face interviews, so phone call interviews were primarily used.

Recommendations

One suggestion for future studies would be to start seeking out data from participants during the regular school semesters. When able to get them during their regular working hours it's better for meetings with them. Future research could look at the student's perceptions of the challenges that were explored, as well as exploring potential religious correlations with the intersectionality of being African American and female. The study can also be developed to pursue other minority populations, in terms of their experiences such as Hispanic American, Asian American, LGBTQ+, and other minority factions in Christian university environments.

Conclusion

This paper was made to discuss the challenges of African American female faculty in PWCI's. The need for change at these university is apparent. When the challenges can be addressed then the change can happen. Further research will be needed to explore possible resolutions to these problems. Finding solutions is enhanced when one fully understands the challenge.

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