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2014

Informing Higher Education Policy and Practice Through Intersectionality

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Special Issue on Intersectionality: Informing Higher Education Policy & Practice Through Intersectionality

JOURNAL OF PROGRESSIVE POLICY & PRACTICE

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PREFATORY: Informing Higher Education Policy and Practice Through Intersectionality

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Intersectionality as a framework has garnered much attention in law, sociology, and education research, and conversations surrounding the framework and its utility now span the globe. Intersectionality addresses the junction of identities, and how the intersectional nature of identities, together, shape the lived experiences of individuals (Hancock, 2007) because of interlocking systems of oppression and marginalization often associated with those identities. Jones (2014) notes,

To only see intersectionality as being about identity is to ignore its historical and disciplinary origins and intent and thereby miss the mark of its full analytic power. ...intersectionality is only about identity when structures of inequality are foregrounded and identities considered in light of social issues and power dynamics. (p. xii)

In the United States, the demographic landscape of higher education is constantly changing and is increasingly becoming more diverse. There are more people who deal with both racism and homophobia, both sexism and ableism, and both classism and religious discrimination on college and university campuses. However, it appears that the use of intersectionality as a framework to critique existing policies and practices within postsecondary settings has yet to become a salient movement. With higher education becoming more culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse, educators within higher education contexts must think differently about the ways in which they provide services that acknowledge and address those who inhabit postsecondary educational spaces—intersectionality is a useful framework for that realization.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a scholar of law, critical race theory, and Black feminist thought first used the term *intersectionality* to highlight the unique experiences of Black women. Crenshaw (1989) indicated that Black women experience increased marginalization because of intersecting identities that are oppressed—their race and gender. Using an example of women of

color who are “standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion,” Crenshaw created an analogy to depict what happens when the two forms of exclusion collide (as cited in Lindgren, Taub, Wolfson, & Palumbo, 2011, p. 455). In the illustration, Crenshaw noted the responders to a collision scene (i.e., a race ambulance and gender ambulance) would not know how to respond because they are unable to determine whether it was racial or gender discrimination that caused the most damage (as cited in Lindgren, Taub, Wolfson, & Palumbo, 2011), highlighting the interlocking nature of systems of oppressions and hazards of identity politics (i.e., viewing identities in singular ways).

In this special issue, “Informing Higher Education Policy and Practice Through Intersectionality,” the authors build upon Crenshaw’s (1989) articulation of intersectionality to frame their work. We chose the *Journal of Progressive Policy and Practice* (JP3, Center for African American Research & Policy, n.d.) intentionally because of its mission to provide “contemporary and innovative contributions to the ‘Best Practices’ for service provision practitioners at all levels and from all fields” (para. 1). In addition, because JP3 is an open access journal, more readers are provided access to this collection of works, which—in the spirit of intersectionality—was important for us.

After our special issue proposal was accepted by JP3, we issued a call for abstracts in the summer of 2013. The abstracts underwent a peer review process, and authors of the abstracts that were accepted were invited to submit full-length articles. Each full-length article underwent a double-blind peer review process, and the articles that were eventually accepted are the collection of works presented within this special issue.

First, Jennrich and Kowalski-Braum highlight how they are using an intersectional lens to shape the work of three identity-centers at their institution in “‘My Head is Spinning:’ Doing Authentic Intersectional Work in Identity Centers.” In “Black Women Attending Predominantly White Institutions: Fostering Their Academic Success Using African American Motherwork Strategies,” Bailey-Fakhoury and Frierson highlight the ways in which predominantly White institutions in higher education contexts can learn from motherwork strategies to help African American women—whose racial-gender identities shape their lived experiences—achieve collegiate success. Smith adds to intersectionality discourse and challenges the ways in which society stereotypes and constricts U.S. veterans’ identities in “More than White, Heterosexual Men: Intersectionality as a Framework for Understanding the Identity of Student Veterans.”

In “Absent Voices: Intersectionality and College Students with Physical Disabilities,” Tevis and Griffen make the case that students with disabilities are missing from intersectionality-based scholarship and uses intersectionality from a strengths-based lens to highlight the experiences of three women with disabilities who are academically successful. Sawyer and Palmer bring focus to the diversity within Black male narratives as they navigate higher education in “A Different Kind of Black, But the Same Issues: Black Males and Counterstories at a Predominantly White Institution.” Finally, Charleston and colleagues highlight unique and marginalized experiences of African American women pursuing or having received degrees in the computing sciences in “Intersectionality and STEM: The Role of Race and Gender in the Academic Pursuits of African American Women in STEM.”

Mitchell (2014) notes, “Intersectionality is valuable as framework because it is not meant to be solely theoretical; it is a critique that fosters conversations for real-world change and progress” (p. 4). In the spirit of JP3 and social change, the aim of this special issue is to introduce readers to multidimensional ways of thinking about students’ experiences and the services institutions offer to inform practices and policies within higher education contexts. Also in the

spirit of JP3, we encourage readers to reach out to the authors to continue these important discussions on the ways in which using intersectionality frameworks might advance higher education practices and policies, with the goal of making higher education more socially just.

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“My Head is Spinning:” Doing Authentic Intersectional Work in Identity Centers

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In the fast paced industry of higher education, where the efficacy of a college education is regularly questioned, standing still is close to sacrilege for student affairs professionals. This article, however, advocates just that. Using intersectionality as a theoretical framework, the authors review its purpose and potential for use in identity centers. Specifically, this article uses a case study methodology to examine the work of three identity-based centers working together to inform *Intersections*, an intersectional, social justice effort. The authors conclude by providing suggestions for how to authentically engage in this work with the goal of stimulating different ways of leading, inspiring new relationships, and creating innovative practice in the field of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

As identity-based centers have grown in number and influence on college campuses, the frameworks that guide their work, as well as the ways in which these theoretical locations manifest, have undergone significant changes. Over the years, what we term identity centers, have also been called advocacy offices, cultural centers, and social justice centers, within the higher education lexicon (Magolda & Baxter Magolda, 2011). Much of what has been written about these centers focuses on their historical significance, most notably in connection to the student protests of the 1960s and 1970s (Patton, 2010), often utilizing a founding narrative to tell the story of a specific location. While there has been some recent writing on how the work in centers is evolving (e.g., Cuyjet, Howard-Hamilton, Cooper, 2011; Marine, 2011; Stewart, 2011) an explicit discussion about intersectionality theory and practice is a newer contribution.

In this article we briefly discuss the history of intersectionality in higher education, from its Black feminist theory roots to some of its current uses. In doing so, our assumption is that centers should be challenged to move beyond identity work to engagement in authentic social justice work, undergirded by intersectionality theory. To tell this story, we will use the experience of our own intersectional efforts with three identity-based centers that were originally initiated as spaces to address gender, race and sexuality, to tell this story. Throughout this article, they will be called “the three centers.” Finally, we will use a risk-benefit analysis to reflect on how we have made meaning of our journey toward intersectionality and embed recommendations for how others might also engage. It is important to note that we do not attempt to solve the tensions that arise from operating within an intersectional framework. Inspired by Bromley’s (2012) notion of engaging in critical intersectionality, “making my head spin” (p. 47), we provide suggestions to ease such tensions and hope our story motivates the continual struggle to contribute to transformational change, both as practitioners and as centers.

METHODOLOGY

In case study methodology, the outcome is an in-depth understanding of a case or cases set in their real world contexts (Bromley, 1986). We employed a quasi-case study approach by examining the work of the three centers through the lens of intersectionality. As participants in the centers, our closeness allowed for an insightful appreciation of the processes taking place. Case study was chosen because of the descriptive question we sought to answer: What is happening in the centers as we attempt to apply intersectionality to learning and in practice? Robert Saxe’s (1995) research on case studies makes evident that the type of phenomena studied by qualitative researchers “often takes long to happen” and “evolves along the way” (p. 45). Saxe’s insights about shifting phenomena are useful as we engage in an inquiry in a constantly changing setting and draw on case study methodology.

Upon entering this analysis, we rejected the positivist paradigm, which suggests there is an objective reality (England, 1994). We have also been influenced by Smith’s (1990/2007) assertion that researchers’ identities matter and we mustn’t attempt to stand outside the process. Thus, as we studied and reflected on the efforts of the three centers, we acknowledged our own positionality as both participants and observers. We embrace the social constructivist paradigm, which requires us to recognize that our life experiences shape our understanding of the world, and that those understandings are further influenced by personal, cultural, and historical contexts (Creswell, 2003).

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality as a means to understand the combination of identities in a specific location has been used for more than a decade to understand the combination of identities in a specific location (Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves 2007). Its usefulness is in connecting identity to systems of privilege and oppression (Jones & Abes, 2013) and has not been fully realized throughout the academy, although it is gaining attention and momentum (Mitchell, 2014).

As Jones (2014) points out,

to only see intersectionality as being about identity is to ignore its historical and disciplinary origins and intent and thereby miss the mark of its full analytic power.

Higher education scholars have been relatively unsophisticated in the application of intersectionality because they overemphasized its identity applications. In fact, intersectionality is only about identity when structures of inequality are foregrounded and identities considered in light of social issues and power dynamics. (p. xii)

In this article we suggest that doing the work of social justice (e.g., social change) cannot be done without engaging in the personal work of intersectionality. Thus, truly embedding intersectional thinking in social justice locations makes for an authentic application where participants must reconcile their own biases and identity conflicts in order to make true social change. Importantly, the layering of identity, intersectionality, and social justice is not a linear process, but rather a necessary journey for those doing work in identity centers in higher education.

Black feminists introduced the concept of intersectionality to highlight how the axes of identity interact on multiple levels within systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977; Crenshaw, 1994). “Instead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class, and religion, Black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination” (Collins, 2009, p. 3). Building upon this theory, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), a Mexican-American feminist theorist, posits that by engaging in intersectionality “the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That element is a new consciousness” (p. 02). Grounded in this thinking, a postmodern critique of identity challenges the stability of identity categories, and thus, adds to a robust theory of intersectionality. Identity not only contains multitudes, but is also subject to change the way in which an individual interacts with the world around them.

BACKGROUND

The earliest creation of identity centers were largely Black cultural centers (BCCs) and were created out of students’ demands to hold higher education accountable for racial inequity in the college experience (Patton, 2010). They provided stimulus for the growth of cultural centers that served racially and ethnically diverse students, in addition to other students with marginalized identities (Davies, 2002). Similarly, women’s centers “emerged as a phenomenon in their own right in the early 1970’s” (Willinger, 2002, p. 47) with the primary goal of making universities aware of the contributions of women as well as working towards gender equity. Following these, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) centers in the early 1990s, sought to provide voices to sexual minorities (Magolda & Baxter Magolda, 2011). While the specific history of each center type, and that of each individual location, contains variation, it is understood that what many consider identity centers have become a fixture on the majority of U.S. college campuses (Patton, 2010).

While centers have grown, expanded, and changed, their stories are largely represented as static in the current literature of higher education. As a result, little has been noted regarding the fluidity of theory that governs the work of these centers. Since inequity in higher education remains an ongoing social justice challenge (Bensimon, 2005), it is important to broadly examine the current theoretical frameworks and practices that centers use in undergirding their work.

The construct of identity can be found throughout higher education, and readily in student affairs practice (Jones & Abes, 2013; Renn, 2004). In the most basic of descriptions, identity has

shaped the creation of centers to bring together students with a shared identity (e.g., race, gender, and sexuality) in spaces designed specifically for them. These spaces strive to be free from intolerance and prejudice; build community; are staffed by people who share an identity and/or work as dedicated allies; offer programs and events about issues pertinent to this identity group; advocate for equality; and serve as sites of resistance (Patton, 2010).

When identity-based centers were first established, the structure and governance of their universities dictated their mission, vision, and goals. As a result, the frameworks that guided the efforts of these locations were understood as identity-based and linked to the notion of increasing diversity on college campuses. They have also been linked to the notion of increasing diversity. Many institutions, and as a result centers, are committed to *diversity*, although there are a variety of meanings attached to that word (Ahmed, 2006; Anderson 2008; Jones, 2006). Some define diversity in terms of numerical representation and others the presence of activities related to educating dominant identity holders about those with marginalized identities. These two almost contradictory notions about what diversity is poses challenges; diversity work may or may not entail a commitment to social justice (Ahmed, 2006; Iverson, 2010; Jones 2006)—and diversity work often does not question, much less try to alter systems of dominance.

As the landscape of higher education has continued to evolve and change, identity-based centers have been encouraged to be less singularly focused and be able to articulate the tensions among and amongst the groups which they serve. While the previous focus on identity certainly yielded clashes regarding access to power, allocation of resources provided by upper administration, and the types of students who associated with each location, the early 2000s shifted the focus of some identity-based centers to that of social justice. As women's centers were linked to feminism, Black cultural centers and/or multicultural centers to critical race theory and LGBT resource centers to queer theory, the research and scholarship of each field influenced the frameworks that governed the actions of these centers (Lee & McKerrow, 2005). As all three distinct, and yet complementary, theories articulated, oppression based on gender, race, and sexuality are all intrinsically linked. From this influence, what were once identity-based centers, grew into locations of social justice focused on attempting to dismantle systems of oppression. While social justice was certainly not a conceptual part of the creation of higher education, public education created opportunities for social justice to be seen as a tool for change in academia.

This transformation was, like many movements within the confines of higher education, subtle to many, but radical to those working closely within centers. A social justice perspective shifted a number of priorities in these centers, perhaps most significantly, serving as locations of resistance for minority populations. As previously noted, resistance has always been associated with centers, as their mere existence could be seen as an act of opposition against the hegemonic structures of higher education. This open shift in ideology and practice allowed for the acknowledgement of not only interlocking systems of control but also the subjugation of identity groups by one another. Poet and activist Audre Lorde (1983) articulated this shift:

The oppression of women knows no ethnic or racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical at those boundaries. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries either. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference. For then beyond sisterhood, is still racism. (p. 94)

There are no boundaries on sexism, Lorde (1983) astutely notes, just as are there none on racism or white supremacy, nor homophobia and heterosexism. This implicates each location ideally built on creating shelter and resistance as a potential perpetrator of counter subjugation. Using a social justice frame that recognized this lateral oppression (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2012), identity-based centers actively worked to connect with one another and expose the places where the struggles of each group were linked with each other. Thus, some still consider these spaces identity centers or advocacy centers while those who work within and support these locations often think of them as sites of social justice. On the surface this looks like intersectionality, and it certainly moves the work of centers closer to an intersectional approach, however, there are some distinct differences.

Intersectionality is associated with both the external work of social change as well as the personal work of understanding one's own identity. While Patricia Hill Collins (2000) understood that "cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society" (p. 42), she also recognized intersectionality to be a politics of difference. In her construct of dichotomous oppositional difference (1986), she notes that "intersectionality is characterized by its focus on differences rather than similarities" (p. 20). More specifically, while the social justice model of operation present in centers is vitally important, it must also be present in conjunction with an intersectional frame. According to Collins (1986), having a sense of self-value and a stable self-definition not obtained from outside influences helps to overcome the oppressive societal methods of domination.

Understanding the identity of oneself, and perhaps most importantly, one's role as both oppressor and oppressed, is a requirement to challenging the status quo. This way of thinking poses obstacles to those engaged in identity center work as it forces personal reflection while working towards social change. While a social justice frame illuminates an understanding of interlocking systems of oppression, it does not, implicitly, position everyone as potential perpetrators of oppression, nor motivate personal discomfort. Using a non-intersectional application of social justice has the potential to create spaces where one can engage in efforts to effect change outside but still retain unspoken bias and prejudice within.

This is why a diversity, or identity-specific approach alone, is not always effective to move a location towards social justice orientation. Some researchers have found that social justice may be more easily achieved through a diversity frame (Jones, 2006), however, others see operating in this way as problematic:

Whereas the concepts of equity and equal opportunities imply an underlying concept of social justice for all and active endeavors to change this, the notion of diversity invokes the existence of difference and variety without any necessary commitment to action or redistributive justice. (Deem & Ozga, as cited in Ahmed, 2006, p. 745)

What it means to be a woman, to be African American, queer, and so on is complex and as centers practice intersectionality, it becomes core to their work to consciously and consistently complicate identities, both among students as well as practitioners.

Before intersectionality emerged as a defined theory, Freire's (1970) critical theory emphasized the importance of examining inequities through a critical lens. Freirean theory offered a way to deconstruct hegemonic ideology. Intersectionality should connect, enhance, and further the deconstruction of identity to include action based challenges to systems of

oppression. As Naomi Zack (2007), a feminist philosopher, explains regarding the gap between understanding the importance of intersectionality but finding it difficult to apply, “The mantra of ‘race, class, gender’ quickly became the new expression of liberatory enlightenment, but the deeper scholarly implications of intersectionality are still working their way through the academy” (p. 193).

The movement towards an intersectional approach requires a shift of centers’ self-concept. Instead of assuming an identity group has a universal experience of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, and/or the combinations of these identities, intersectionality imposes no limits to the numbers or types of intersected identity experiences. According to Museus and Griffin (2011) intersectionality “enables a more accurate reflection of the diversity in higher education...centering the voices and experiences of those at the margins” (as cited in Jones, 2014, p. xi). At the onset, the limitless quality of this type of thinking can, as we indicated earlier, make ones’ head spin. Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, and Tomlinson (2013) advised that understandings of intersectionality are constantly developing and that it is important, as we move forward, “to assess what intersectionality does” rather than what intersectionality is (p. 304). . Carbado and colleagues (2013) have called intersectionality a “work-in-progress” (p. 304), and the experiences we will share related to this journey reinforce this.

PRACTICING A PARADIGM

As educators working from an intersectional framework, we are required to constantly look at the confluence of multiple identities and the systems in which they operate. As a result, the three centers, of which this analysis is about, are engaging in radical thinking; reconceptualizing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, functioning as transformative sites of resistance, and also rejecting additive approaches to oppression that essentialize identity. The work of these three centers linked together during the 2012-13 academic year under the title *Intersections*. *Intersections* allows the centers to engage in coalition work, with intersectionality as a frame. Examples include designing and planning of events, developing initiatives and facilitating shared learning. This process resulted in a shared mission, values, and goals, as well as agreements to guide our work (see Figure 1).

Intersections is about looking at the interlocking systems of oppression.

We need to understand that each form of oppression is intertwined with every other form of oppression. Not one of these oppressions can be isolated. Even though we are constantly trying to use a singular frame, a more thorough examination reveals the complexities of these issues. Systems of oppression include: racism (white supremacy), sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism (capitalism), etc.

Intersections practice requires stretching ourselves to develop a shared critique in how we approach our work.

Whenever one center responds to a particular issue/incident (bias incident, newspaper response, violence on campus, etc.), we should consult the other centers to examine additional intersectional issues we could respond to as well. Constantly refer to other forms of oppression as is done in liberation movements. Example: For our current need of single user restrooms to

accommodate our trans* and gender non-confirming community, we could incorporate the following comparison that just as people with disabilities could not access public restrooms because able-bodied people did not recognize their needs.

Intersections thinking involves understanding and critiquing the systems that are operating where we work and our role in them.

Higher education is not immune to manifesting and supporting systems of oppression. Therefore, we must both be members of the campus community – engaging in university-wide commitments to fulfilling our mission – while also working to strengthen the campus and make it more inclusive, equitable and just.

Intersections work requires recognizing and responding to the tensions that exist in our work.

We need to recognize that this work is not easy – that we may bump up against one another in the process of how we frame issues, ask questions and do our work. In the moments of dissonance, it is imperative that we examine our own privilege and sit with what is uncomfortable before responding. Examining what we have to lose -- is the most important and threatening aspect of intersectional work. We need to examine what is at stake for us in dismantling unjust systems: It may be our identity, our access to resources, and/or our comfort level.

Figure 1. Shared agreements (Kowalski-Braun, 2011).

The well-placed criticism of singular identity foci helps our centers understand our work as advocates in a more complex and systems-based way, but does not negate the multiplication of attentions we are now required to hold, and the resources allocated towards our work. An important aspect of social change is focusing one’s attention on the root causes of problems rather than on the surface level issues they create (Komives, 2009). As we move towards a socially just intersectional approach, our work must integrate resistance while attending to the fluidity of identity, which quickly becomes complex.

In our centers, our primary focus is on the experience of students who we know are largely shaped by their forced group membership. True freedom for students will occur when individuals have the right to move in and out of groups “much as we join clubs and other voluntary associations” (Collins, 1997, p. 375). Collins asks us to consider, how do we use our spheres of influence to challenge simplified thinking? For example, some staff in the centers feared that in sharing too much work the distinct identities and corresponding needs of our students would become diluted. However “fluidity does not mean that groups disappear” (Collins, 1997, p. 376). It became necessary to remind ourselves that intersectionality did not function to eradicate difference, but to illuminate the potential interactions among identity groups and to uncover how we are oppressed by the same systems. As we engage in fresh thinking and a new paradigm is understood, it was virtually impossible to go about any type of business as usual.

Risks and Benefits

As one can imagine, in addition to a hefty workload, this approach comes with considerable hazards and rewards. However, little scholarship is devoted to providing centers with guidelines on how to manage either. This section outlines the risks and benefits our *Intersections* work exposed, and makes suggestions on how to maximize opportunities for growth. The areas we will explore include: shared work; new leaders, new leadership; institutional structures; consciousness raising; and slowing down as a tool.

Shared Work

One of the first, and perhaps most exciting benefits, is being able to create a shared vision. Beyond crossing institutional boundaries, the invisible boundaries created during the formation of our centers needed to be—if not dismantled—examined. Consensus building was a necessary strategy to move *Intersections* forward. Similarly, this work needed a shared language and a common understanding of words and their power: words like oppression, social justice, advocacy and activism.

In our centers we were guilty of using these terms as buzzwords without deeply exploring what they meant to each of us. This misstep exposed how locations defined terms differently contributing to misunderstandings and confusion. These processes allowed for a *critical consciousness* around intersectionality to develop. Critical consciousness is defined as “a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including white privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny, and ethnocentrism” (Capper et al., 2006, p. 213). As a result, we began to see our centers as spaces that are inextricably linked.

New Leaders, New Leadership

While a shared vision and language was a good first step, changes in leadership practice were also required. Authenticity as a leader is more challenging when needing to negotiate multiple and intersecting identities. In educational leadership theory and practice, some of the most common models are transactional leadership (Burns, 1979), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1979), and situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988), as well as some focus on leadership for social change (Astin & Leland, 1991; Komives & Wagner, 2009) and social justice (Diaz, 2011; Rusch & Horsford, 2008). We learned, however, that when multiple identities and the experience of marginalization are taken into account, the understanding of leadership practices, and the understanding of organizations, is substantially and qualitatively changed (Santamaria, 2014).

What an intersectional lens brings to higher education leadership required us to more deeply think about *who* both leaders and followers are. The dominant leadership paradigm remains white, male, hetero-normative, and non-poor leaving little room for the valuing of identity and oppression. When these are acknowledged they are still seen as additives and not core to leadership knowledge and practice. With intersectionality as the paradigm, the directors of the centers, supported by administrative leadership, began to lead differently. Transformational leadership theory focuses on obtaining trust and displaying respect for followers (Bass, 1985), but does not make clear our need to achieve an understanding of followers' identity oppression within systems. When striving to put intersectional thinking into

practice, we quickly found that few leadership models fit our work. In this space, leaders took risks by telling their own stories as well as asking and listening to the stories of followers. Our hope is that our interactions with each other, and the ways in which we value each in higher education environments, will lead to opportunities for deeper understanding of our work, ourselves and each other.

Institutional Structures

As this work began to pick up speed, institutional inequity among centers regarding budgets and resource allocation could no longer remain private and, at times, became divisive. Projects favored by upper administration were difficult to suddenly share when they correlated with high visibility and rewards. The centers continue to work to overcome this, but not without exposing the sources of these tensions, and more importantly, not without those possessing privilege (e.g., budget, staffing, visibility) being asked to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged partners. This area is one where the work of Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, and Tomlinson (2013) reminds us that intersectionality is a process. Moving from obligation to personal motivation is the desired outcome.

Consciousness-Raising

The most apparent risk in engaging in new learning together was being committed to confronting information that may make members of centers uncomfortable. This remains difficult as awareness of oppression within the centers unfolds. For obvious reasons this work can be uncomfortable, bumping up against norms of a depersonalized professional environment in higher education. All participants have to be committed to confronting the ways in which they benefit from privilege and suffer from oppression. This has proven to be an occasional breaking point, where dissonance causes individuals to retreat to their comfort zones. The answer to this has been to create sustained and purposeful spaces where people have to communicate and connect. This is motivated by the knowledge that social justice awareness is born out of personal and professional struggles with injustices, but can also be purposefully taught (Bussey, 2008).

Slowing Down as a Tool

One way to preempt the paralysis that confronting privilege can inspire is to intentionally slow down the pace of the work in anticipation of setbacks described above. As a team comprised of staff from multiple centers learns to trust one another enough to expose their gaps in knowledge and their emotional fragility, building in time to process this can be a great benefit. Naturally, this method of creating time and space for authentic stages of learning is ideal, but can be difficult to accommodate in a fast-paced higher education landscape.

Strong leadership and advocacy of intersectional learning allows the space for internal growth. “In an increasingly diverse and multiethnic world, leadership....needs to be re-formed as critical, reflexive and concerned with social justice and praxis” (Taylor, 1995, p. 60). In the centers, this reflexivity manifested through regularly scheduled meetings, shared readings, multiple daylong retreats, and reinforcement of successful *Intersections* work. The work is difficult so coming back together again gives opportunity to constantly revisit and keep building.

CONCLUSION

This article outlined the ways in which identity-based centers have evolved and makes the case for why intersectionality theory is critical to shaping practice. Specifically, we utilized a case study methodology to examine the work of three identity centers to highlight the risks and benefits associated with deeply embedding this commitment. As discussed, this is not easy. We consider our efforts a work in progress and hope our journey will motivate aspirational thinking about what can be achieved when intersectionality is applied. Additionally, as more research related to integrating intersectionality into multiple spaces in higher education occurs, we are encouraged by the possibilities. Creating a robust community of intersectional practitioners allows for emancipatory ways of operating within the academy.

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Black Women Attending Predominantly White Institutions: Fostering Their Academic Success Using African American Motherwork Strategies

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The number of African American women attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) is continuing to increase; however, understanding of the factors related to their academic success at these institutions is underdeveloped. An area that provides a launching pad for better understanding the lived experiences of these young women is rooted in the relationship between racial factors and adjustment to college. Applying an intersectional analysis demonstrates that gendered racial socialization and racial-gender identity development are instrumental to understanding African American women's academic success. We propose that a particular set of strategies conceptualized as *African American motherwork*—found among suburban, middle-class mothers with young daughters attending predominantly White schools—can help student affairs personnel, educators, and researchers better understand the academic success of some African American women attending PWIs of higher education. We offer suggestions for how PWIs can better support the academic success of these young women by understanding and adapting aspects of African American motherwork.

INTRODUCTION

African American women continue to increase their level of enrollment at four-year institutions (Strayhorn, 2011), yet there is a paucity of literature concerning the factors associated with their academic success at these institutions (see Chavous & Cogburn, 2007 for further discussion). How can their conceptions of self, personal histories and interactions with social systems and structures help scholars and practitioners to better understand their academic success at predominantly White, post-secondary institutions? Answering this question requires a holistic framework, one which attempts to examine the individual as an amalgamation of her experiences, situated within larger sociohistorical contexts. The African American woman undergraduate student attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) is a being composed of and transformed by her intersecting social identities and the global narratives and counternarratives that imbue race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and numerous other social constructs with real meaning. To situate, understand, and give voice to her experiences, an intersectional analysis is required. Dill and Zambrana (2009) note that such an analysis:

provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, physical ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality...[by combining] advocacy, analysis, theorizing and pedagogy—basic components essential to the production of knowledge as well as the pursuit of social justice and equality. (p. 1)

To identify, understand, and explicate the factors contributing to the academic success of African American women attending PWIs, researchers are charged to situate their experiences and voices within the context of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 1997).

One area of research which we believe holds great promise for undertaking such an endeavor deals with the relationship between racial factors and Black students' adjustment to college. Anglin and Wade (2007) reported that factors, such as racial socialization, contributed to Black college students' academic adjustment and that racial identity and racial socialization can predict academic adjustment. Healthy academic adjustment may lead to academic success as Anglin and Wade note that it "may improve the ability of these students to make it through to the end and graduate" (p. 214). Although their study did not specifically investigate gender differences, it does provide a direction for future research: Mixed-methods examinations of gendered racial socialization, racial-gender identity development, and African American women and girls' academic success.

It is our purpose to discuss how an intersectional analysis of racial socialization and racial identity development might contribute to our understanding of the factors associated with African American women's academic success at PWIs. We assert that gendered racial socialization, which influences one's development of a racial-gender identity, is instrumental to understanding African American women's academic success. In particular, we propose that a particular set of strategies conceptualized as *African American motherwork*—found among suburban, middle-class mothers with young daughters attending predominantly white schools—can help scholars and practitioners better understand the academic success of some African American women attending predominantly White institutions in higher education contexts. We believe that delineating these strategies—the ways in which they function, and their implications

for academic success on a college campus—can help post-secondary institutions “[center] the experiences of people of color in higher education and student affairs contexts [by requiring] a rethinking of programs, policies, organizational structures, rituals, and routines from the perspective of students from racially marginalized groups” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 144). In this article, we present a case for the importance of utilizing an intersectional analytic frame; discuss gendered racial socialization and racial-gender identity; describe the impact attending a PWI has on African American women; describe African American motherwork in the primary school context; and conclude with lessons PWIs of higher education can learn from motherwork in support of African American women’s academic success.

THE CASE FOR AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

Dill and Zambrana (2009) suggest that an intersectional analysis:

Explores and unpacks relations of domination and subordination, privilege and agency, in the structural arrangements through which various services, resources, and other social rewards are delivered; in the interpersonal experiences of individuals and groups; in the practices that characterize and sustain bureaucratic hierarchies; and in the ideas, images, symbols and ideologies that shape social consciousness. (p. 5)

Because the educational institution reproduces the racial order and gender and class hierarchies, the “goals of using an intersectional approach are dismantling structural inequalities and promoting social justice” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 136); therefore, a strong case can be made for its use in understanding, and giving voice to, the experiences of Black women attending PWIs. Fostering the academic success of Black women requires effectively disassembling these systems of inequality by understanding how they function at the macrolevel and microlevel; an intersectional analysis allows one to begin to do this.

Institutions of higher education often view phenomena through singular lenses (e.g., examining African American student attrition with no regard to gender or class); however, an intersectional analysis provides more veracity because of its greater complexity (i.e., examining an issue through a matrix of multiple identities). Improving the academic success of Black women and girls necessitates understanding the impact of intersecting social locations on student experiences within a sociohistorical context. Such an inquiry also requires an institution to examine its *own house* in an effort to illuminate its complicity in perpetuating racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and so forth, which together undermines the academic success of its Black women students. An intersectional approach can accomplish this seemingly daunting task because, as Weber pointed out, it:

operates on two levels: at the individual level, it reveals the way the intermeshing of these systems [i.e., privilege, oppression, inequality, agency, etc.] creates a broad range of opportunities for the expression and performance of individual identities. At the societal/structural level, it reveals the ways systems of power are implicated in the development, and maintenance of inequalities and social injustice. (as cited in Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 4)

Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives—to be effective—must address the microlevel interactions and macrolevel processes that an intersectional analysis illuminates, as a means for fostering social justice.

RACIAL SOCIALIZATION AND RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS GENDERED PROCESSES

Racial Socialization

Parents influence the racial identity development of their children through the process of racial socialization. This practice of transmitting messages regarding the meaning and significance of race and racial stratification, managing intergroup and intragroup relations, and personal and group identity (Lesane-Brown, 2006) is common for African American parents, but even more so for mothers as they are the ones to spearhead the socialization process (Harris & Graham, 2007; Thomas & King, 2007). Racial socialization is a gendered process as mothers transmit different types of messages to their daughters than they do to their sons. Boys and girls receive different socialization messages: Boys are socialized to overcome racial barriers (e.g., preparing for discrimination and prejudice) while girls are socialized to develop racial pride (through emphasizing group unity, learning about heritage, etc.; Brown, Linver, Evans & DeGennaro, 2009; Dotterer, McHale & Crouter, 2009; Hill, 2001; Thomas & King, 2007).

Exploring Gendered Racial Socialization

It is not surprising that racial socialization is a gendered process. If Black women are the bedrock of the community, then Black girls must be socialized to carry that mantle. Collins (1997) wrote that, “Black daughters are raised...to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential for their own survival as well as for the survival of those for whom they will eventually be responsible” (p. 270). In order to successfully carry that mantle they must have instilled in them a sense of racial pride so that they can aid the development and continuation of the community; for it is racial pride that encourages educational attainment and achievement in order to *uplift the race*. Chavous and Cogburn (2007) assert that “gender systems in many African American communities provide women with a unique set of resources that are important for generating interest and success in school” (p. 29). Assisting Black girls to prepare to take on such vital responsibilities requires that mothers teach their daughters “how to survive interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those very same structures” (Collins, 1997, p. 271). It is interesting to note that while Black mothers are preparing their daughters to be strong, independent, and confident in order to take on role-specific responsibilities, they are—at the same time—socializing them into alternative gender roles (Buckley & Carter, 2005).

Racial Identity Development

A person’s identification with a racial group has personal, interpersonal, and sociological implications. Omi and Winant (2008) suggest that “[a]ny claim to a racial identity necessarily connects the claimant to others making similar claims and to the sociohistorical system in which that identity acquires meaning” (p. 1567). A global sociopolitical system rooted in racism and

racial oppression is the catalyst for the racialization of African Americans and the subsequent development of a racial identity. To wit, the “primary function of an internalized racial identity is to protect individuals from the psychological harm that results from living in a racist society” (Dotterer et al., 2009, p. 64).

There exist various theories, models and assessments dedicated to investigating racial identity development. However, William Cross’s (1971) Nigrescence model is foundational to the field of Black identity development and gave rise to later theories and models. *Nigrescence*—a French word meaning the “process of becoming Black”—postulates that there are five stages that a person goes through to develop a Black identity. In stage 1—termed *Pre-encounter*—the person reflects an identity shaped by the dominant group and is ignorant of his/her real racial identity. Stage 2 is known as the *Encounter* stage and is so named because the person has a personal experience that requires them to question their identity, making the person open to exploring their truer identity. In the *Immersion-Emersion* stage, the individual is attempting to throw off the old identity and actively acquire the new, truer identity. The first phase of this stage involves “immersion into a total Black frame of reference, the second phase (Emersion) represents emergence from the dead-end, racist, oversimplified aspects of Immersion” (Cross, 1991, p. 50). Stage 4 is the *Internalization* stage and stage 5 is called *Internalization-Commitment*. During either of these last two stages the individual becomes secure in their racial identity and feels connected to their ancestry and the larger Black community. In 2001 Cross expanded his Nigrescence theory. The 2001 model is called NT-E or expanded Nigrescence theory. In this manifestation, according to Simmons, Worrell and Berry (2008),

Black racial identity is defined as a multidimensional set of attitudes which fall under three worldviews: Pre-encounter [reflecting the attitudes of Assimilation, Miseducation, and Self-hatred], Immersion-Emersion [reflecting Intense Black Involvement and Anti-White attitudes], and Internalization [reflecting the attitudes of Afrocentricity, Biculturalist, Multiculturalist Racial, and Multiculturalist Inclusive]. (pp. 262-263)

Mothers of daughters attending PWIs must wonder how to promote a healthy, positive racial-gender identity in their child while navigating an institution that perpetuates the racial order and gender hierarchy (Tatum, 2004). Understanding how mothers promote a positive racial-gender identity is important as such an identity is associated with “positive psychological outcomes, such as an increased tolerance of frustration, a stronger sense of purpose, enhanced school performance, and greater security in self” (Thompson, 2001, p. 156).

Racial-Gender Identity Development

Unfortunately, studies of racial identity development have yet to adequately take gender into account, neither have studies of gender identity development adequately taken race into account. Existing theories and models of racial and gender identity development often seem to operate in a vacuum. Adequate consideration is not given to race as being gendered nor gender as being raced. Some researchers (e.g., Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013; Hesse-Biber, Livingstone, Ramirez, Barko, & Johnson, 2010; Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005; Stewart, 2009; Thomas, Hoxha, & Hacker, 2013) are calling for a more multidimensional conceptualization and measurement of racial-gender identity that also takes the class construct into consideration. What

Thomas and colleagues (2013) found through their focus group study of the gendered racial identity development of African American young women, highlights the importance of constructing an intersectional formulation of race-gender identity:

What emerged from the focus groups was the role that familial and peer socialization played in countering distal influences of stereotypical roles and media images...results suggest that the importance of self-determination and overcoming stereotypical roles based on socialization messages seemed to provide an outlet for positive identity development for girls. (p. 93)

It is our hope that this article helps to push this burgeoning conversation of reconceptualization further.

BLACK WOMEN ATTENDING PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

As we have argued, there are serious gaps in the knowledge base when it comes to African American women attending PWIs and the factors related to their academic success. What we do know about African American women attending PWIs comes from studies often investigating African American students generally or students of color as a monolith. Although this knowledge is insightful and important, it only approximates a Black woman's lived experience, whereas we seek to put the Black woman's experience at the center, as the subject, not simply as an object or by-product. The knowledge that has been derived from these studies about Black women attending PWIs provides some context for researchers seeking to identify factors associated with their academic success.

In PWIs, Black students tread in territory "consciously or half-consciously [thought of as] *white places*" (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996, p. 51). These physical spaces (e.g., classrooms, cafeterias, libraries, playgrounds, etc.) become racialized, establishing who belongs, and where, and who controls the space. This exercise in racial demarcation is played out through everyday microaggressions (e.g., avoidance, exclusion, being told one speaks well, exposure to stereotypic images in media, etc.) or subtle actions of discrimination (Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Chan, Brief, & Bradley, 2003; Masko, 2005; McCabe, 2009; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Previous research demonstrates quite convincingly the troubling psychological, physiological, academic, and social effects—associated with racial tokenism, racial microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue—of inhabiting environments where one is *the only one* or *only one of a few* (Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004; Jackson & Stewart, 2003; Kelly, 2007; Mc Donald & Wingfield, 2009; Tatum, 2004; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003).

African American girls reared in race-conscious families internalize a positive racial identity and demonstrate resilience in white educational settings that work to undermine that racial socialization (Tatum, 2004). Black women attending PWIs have been found to have a broad perspective of racial identity and are able to see how social class intersects to inform their global identity (Baber, 2012; Stewart 2009). Additionally, informal support systems, like those found in residential communities, further foster the development of a multifaceted racial-gender identity in these young women while assisting them to contest one-dimensional representations of their identity (Baber, 2012). Hesse-Biber and colleagues (2010) suggested that Black young women attending PWIs who:

had a self-concept with a contingency of self-worth associated with a Black cultural identity...[or with a] cultural identity of diversity...demonstrated an increased level of racial identity that allowed them to have an increased sense of self-esteem and body image satisfaction. (p. 708).

It appears that young Black women with a strong racial identity are more likely to have high self-esteem and beauty ideals which are related to possessing a positive body image. However, Black women attending PWIs report significantly lower life satisfaction and less cultural congruity or “fit between students’ personal values and the values of the environment in which they operate” (Constantine & Watt, 2002, p. 185) than their counterparts at historically Black colleges and universities. Additionally, young Black women at PWIs struggle with social isolation and limited prospects for dating (Ariza & Berkey, 2009; Henry, 2008).

AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERWORK STRATEGIES IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL SETTING AND THE LESSONS PWIS CAN LEARN TO SUPPORT BLACK WOMEN’S ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Suburban, middle-class Black mothers with young daughters attending predominantly White schools foster their daughters’ academic success by employing a particular set of strategies representing one dimension of Collins’ *motherwork* phenomenon (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013). African American motherwork offers “emotional care for children and [provides] for their physical survival... [while also endowing] Black women with a base of self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a reason for social activism” (Collins, 1997, p. 266). In the Black community, motherwork extends beyond one’s blood family into the larger community making Black mothers “community othermothers,” charged with aiding in the development of the Black community (Collins, 1997, p. 269). Therefore, motherwork is the “reproductive labor” that women of color engage in to ensure the survival of family, community, and self (Collins, 1994, p. 52). A mixed-methods study conducted in suburban metropolitan Detroit identified three strategies—*presence, imaging, and code-switching*—mothers use to promote a positive racial-gender identity and to foster the academic success of their daughters attending a predominantly White school:

Presence consists of the keen awareness of one’s aesthetic presentation and the role it plays as mothers advocate for their daughters; maintaining visibility in the school and at school functions; and being strategic in interactions with school personnel to gain leverage that will benefit daughters. Imaging consists of mothers working hard to teach and show their daughters how to embrace their phenotypic features through the use of role models, home décor, and other consumables. Code-switching helps daughters navigate various cultural milieus with dexterity. (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013, p. 206)

The mixed-methods design of the study was pivotal to applying an intersectional framework (Griffin & Museus, 2011). The use of surveys and focus groups provided a more veracious analysis and interpretation of the data as they were analyzed using a sociopsychological orientation (White, 2009) that rests upon the intersections perspective and the social-cognitive learning theory.

We intend to demonstrate that African American motherwork provides an important foundation that may benefit daughters as they transition to predominantly White, post-secondary institutions. To counter the negative and pejorative messages and images a young girl attending a predominantly White school might receive, mothers work hard to instill a positive racial-gender identity. Mother's racial-gender identity, the gendered racial socialization messages that she transmits, and her support provides a strong basis for the young girl—a foundation which appears to contribute to her academic success at a PWI (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Baber, 2012; Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005; and Thomas et al., 2013). PWIs will be well-served by understanding how African American motherwork strategies at the elementary level might influence academic success at the postsecondary level. To be clear, we do not believe PWIs can replicate the motherwork strategies; however, we do believe that PWIs have a responsibility to be responsive to the needs of this segment of their student body, which has been historically ignored and made invisible. Motherwork strategies provide one vehicle for responding to the needs of African American women students. We offer these suggestions in an effort to help PWIs truly move closer to fulfilling the mission of developing students who are able to realize their full human potential. Applying the findings of Bailey-Fakhoury's (2013) study, we further discuss each strategy and propose what PWIs can learn from these strategies to support their Black women students.

Presence: Aesthetic, Visible, and Strategic

As mothers seek to encourage their daughters' academic success, they are cognizant of their aesthetic presentation and demeanor when interacting with teachers, administrators, and fellow parents. Mothers are keenly aware of their physical appearance and how it can hinder or bolster their use of presence as they advocate for their daughters. Mothers shared that they felt the need to carry themselves in the best light as they may be *the* African American/Black person by which White neighbors, parents, or teachers would judge all other African Americans/Blacks. Aesthetic presentation also encompasses annunciation, tone of voice, and the awareness of gestures used. Mothers feel that it is important to represent themselves and their daughters well when in the public sphere. Not only is it important for these women, it also seems they believe that it is vitally important for their daughters' self-concept and self-image. These mothers work hard to shatter the stereotypes and caricatures of Black women that prevail in American society, whether one resides in suburbia or in an urban center. Mothers are very aware of how instrumental their aesthetic presentation of themselves is at allowing them to fully exercise the two additional aspects of presence (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013).

Presence also entails attending school functions and strategically engaging teachers and administrators to the daughter's benefit. For mothers, being visibly present in the elementary schools of their daughters and using presence to instigate tactical interactions are paramount. These two aspects of presence allow mothers to flex social capital that will ultimately help their daughters. As mothers seek to rear their daughters with a positive racial-gender identity in a predominantly White school setting, they are exercising social capital, which can provide access that leads to optimal outcomes for their daughters. While flexing social capital, mothers are simultaneously becoming adept at amassing and transmitting cultural capital or the "high-status linguistic and cultural competencies (e.g., values, preferences, tastes) that students inherit from their parents and other 'cultural brokers' such as siblings, peers, and 'institutional agents'" (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 309). The aesthetic presentation of self allows mothers to more effectively

use their visibility and the interactions they deliberately create with school personnel. When encountering personnel, especially their daughters' teachers, mothers view these encounters as opportunities to gain leverage to be used to benefit their daughters, in some fashion, either at present or sometime in the future. Interactions with teachers may be used to elicit information that not all parents are privy to, to assess what supplies or additional things the classroom teacher needs/desires, or to forge an open line of communication between the mother and the teacher. In these instances the mothers seek to do what they deem necessary to give their daughters an advantage in a setting where they may be disadvantaged because of their race and/or gender (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013).

Lessons PWIs Can Learn from the Presence Strategy

Black women students may feel that they are the spokesperson or representative for all Black women and actively seek to shatter stereotypes and imposed constructions of Black woman identity. As they negotiate aesthetic presentations of themselves in White spaces, some Black women students may reflect upon the manner in which their mothers conducted themselves in White spaces and pull on these strategies as they interact with White professors, students, and campus personnel. Deliberation in speech or modulation of one's gestures and voice intonation should not be automatically assumed to be manifestations of low self-esteem or uncertainty of self. It may reflect a young woman who is aware of her surroundings—her actions in raced-gendered spaces and the associated stereotypes—and her attempts to contest racist and sexist perceptions. At the same time, behavior that is deemed to be expressive, animated, or *boisterous* should not immediately label the African American woman exhibiting it as defiant, rowdy, or oppositional. Behavior such as this, particularly when exhibited amongst peers claiming the same racial-gender identification, may function as a way of dealing with issues of authenticity as one constantly attempts to enact agency in White spaces. Operationally, it serves as an outlet—a means of decompressing—for these young women when they are in surroundings where they feel they are not being surveilled or *gazed upon*. In fact, Lipford Sanders & Bradley (2005) suggested that scholars and practitioners need to “examine how [African American women] use personal agency, that is, the ability to effectively change and intervene in one's own circumstance” (p. 302).

Universities and student affairs professionals can counter how “the dominant representations of people of color build upon and elaborate ideas, images, and stereotypes that are deeply rooted in American history and become the rationale for the differential treatment of groups and individuals” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 10), by educating the university community about this aspect of presence, how it might manifest itself, and how it should be interpreted. Such commitment to dismantling hegemonic power through privileging the lived experiences of young African American women, can create a more welcoming campus climate; one in which Black women report greater cultural congruity (Constantine & Watt, 2002) and are better adjusted to college, possibly improving their chances of staying and graduating (Anglin & Wade, 2007). Furthermore, university officials and student affairs practitioners should provide programming which allows these students a safe space to interrogate their multidimensional identity and do the work that is necessary to manage any struggles with authenticity (Stewart, 2009). Doing so requires bringing campus persons—specifically those traditionally marginalized and silenced voices—and assets into the decision-making process from the inception to the execution of this new programming.

Imaging: Through Hair, Role Models, and Home Décor

Another strategy mothers employ to promote a positive racial-gender identity and to advocate for their daughters' academic success is that of imaging. Mothers are sensitive to the images they put before their daughters whether through social interactions, household décor, personal grooming, extracurricular activities, or popular media (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013).

The subject of hair has a long, turbulent history in the African American community, especially for African American women. One's hair texture, hair length, hairstyle, and adornments have symbolic implications within and outside the community. Numerous African American women have *hair stories* to tell. As young African American girls attempt to find their place in their family, clique, school, or community—in a society that places overt value on long flowing, straight blonde locks—hair and the meaning it is imbued with can be a harbinger of things to come. Mothers are supremely cognizant of the American standard of beauty and realize that their daughter's phenotypic features are deemed antithetical. For the majority of these mothers it is essential to provide various alternatives to the American standard of beauty, images which reinforce the unique, versatile beauty of African American women. Mothers work hard to teach and show their daughters how to embrace their natural self and to take pride in what is uniquely their own (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013).

Another aspect of imaging that mothers used was that of role models. Mothers felt that it was very important to provide role models that reinforce a positive self-image for their daughters. Mothers were keenly aware of the lack of role models in the classrooms, schools, and after-school activities/organizations of their daughters; their daughters could go the entire school day and not interact with one individual who “looked like them.” To counter this, families who left the urban center for the suburb intentionally kept their membership in their church home, enrolled their daughters in dance troupes, Brownie troops, ice skating groups, and various clubs that were located in the predominantly Black city, and visited racially-/culturally-specific institutions (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013).

Mothers also work hard to be a role model for their daughter, demonstrating how to balance normative and alternative gender role expectations. One mother referenced her own upbringing and the lessons she learned which she hopes to recalibrate for her daughters. She stated that she developed her strength and independence—qualities which are usually labeled as masculine—prior to marriage, however, she actively seeks to background those qualities while foregrounding submission to and alignment with her husband, traits which are generally identified as feminine. This mother hopes to show her daughter that she can have/do it all as a woman, on her own, but that she does not have to. Her daughter can develop these qualities and has the option of foregrounding or back grounding them at will; she does not have to be beholden to one set of gender expectations or another. Many mothers seemed to be fully aware of the multidimensionality of the Black-female identity; an identity requiring a Black woman to simultaneously and effortlessly maintain normative and alternative gender roles (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013).

The last aspect of imaging which emerged in the focus groups was that of reinforcing reflections of their daughters through home décor (and other consumables). Mothers purchased paintings, statues, clothing, book bags, school supplies, books, posters and other items that reflected the phenotypic features of their girls. Many mothers reported that whenever they could purchase goods or bring items into the home that reinforced their daughter's image, they did it.

It appears that mothers believed this to be a key means of encouraging their daughters' positive self-image and racial-gender identity (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013).

Lessons PWIs Can Learn from the Imaging Strategy

African American mothers are well aware that daughters “are bombarded early with negative messages about their worth, intelligence, and beauty” (Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005, p. 301), and seek to counter “the pervasiveness of media images in television, movies, music videos, and even commercials that perpetuate negative stereotypes” (Thomas et al., 2013, p. 94) by reinforcing positive images of African American womanhood. Mothers are quite deliberate in providing their daughters with healthy presentations of Black female identity not readily found in the mainstream media. Emphasizing daughters' positions as *outsiders within* (Collins, 1986) and as experiencing the world through a *double jeopardy status* (Thomas et al., 2013) helps strengthen their self-worth and self-concept by preparing them to reject and transcend notions of the White feminine ideal. Some mothers see themselves as the vessel by which to demonstrate these maneuvers. Many mothers also turn to other Black female figures as role models for their daughters, pinpointing women who successfully balance normative and alternative gender role expectations.

Institutions of higher learning should be committed to not perpetuating the “unfeminine connotations attached to strength, persistence, expression of anger, and intelligence [that] inhibit understanding African American girls who have been socialized to believe that these attributes are both positive and functional” (Brown, as cited in Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005, p. 300). Institutional policies, programs, rituals, routines, activities, and pedagogies must be interrogated to determine how debilitating notions of femininity and race are being propagated. This truly transformative work requires an intersectional lens. Additionally, it is important for colleges and universities to create opportunities of mentorship for their African American women students. Staff, faculty, and community members at-large who may provide counsel/advice to these young women should be enlisted, helping to foster a sense of community and belonging for them. This may necessitate creating a critical mass of mentors who have managed to create healthy representations of themselves in the midst of a racist and sexist society. Lastly, Black women may feel isolated, especially in the dating realm (Ariza & Berkey, 2009; Henry, 2008). Student affairs can work with historically Black sororities and other student organizations to create intercultural dialogues, service-learning projects, and other opportunities to help connect Black women students to the larger campus community. Such actions will help African American women students navigate academe, create beneficial social networks, and persist and thrive.

Code-switching: Teaching Bicultural Fluidity and How to Navigate the Triple Quandary

Code-switching refers to one's ability to move between cultural milieus at will and with fluidity (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013). It involves knowing the appropriate cultural rules, prescripts, vernacular, and behavior unique to each setting and how and when to use them. Mothers use code-switching to help their daughters navigate the dominant, minority status, & Afrocentric cultural terrains. Parental racial socialization occurs across these three distinct milieus of our sociopolitical structure—Boykin and Toms (1985) named this phenomenon the *triple quandary*. African American mothers must navigate these three terrains when socializing their children. The dominant culture reflects mainstream messages and expectations; the minority status

experience is the milieu in which African American mothers must prepare their children to face an oppressive society, one predicated on subjugation and dominance; and the Afrocentric/cultural experience is the setting in which African American mothers educate their children about racial pride, traditions, and customs unique to being African American. Code-switching is an exercise involving direct instruction, hypotheticals, role play, and practice (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2013).

Lessons PWIs Can Learn from the Code-Switching Strategy

Code-switching is a skill that is actively taught by mothers with young daughters attending PWIs. Such race-conscious parenting (Tatum, 2004) allows daughters to develop biculturalism/multiculturalism, which helps them successfully navigate the Black community, White spaces, and their double-minority status. Successful code-switchers demonstrate leadership skills, have strong self-confidence, embrace a multidimensional identity, and possess skills that encourage their college adjustment and academic success (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Constantine & Watt, 2002; Hesse-Biber et al., 2010).

PWIs would do well to assist their African American women students in cultivating and strengthening code-switching skills. Constantine and Watt (2002) suggest that “culturally-sensitive interventions that help African American women develop the bicultural skills necessary to successfully navigate PWIs may be important in increasing their cultural fit and academic persistence” (p. 192). Creation of these interventions requires the talents and skills of persons—on campus and in the larger community—who have traditionally been excluded from the table. Nevertheless, such an endeavor requires a delicate balance between identifying and understanding normative institutional practices, while utilizing intersectional lenses to critique these practices. Critical examination provides opportunities for resistance—chances to exploit *cracks* in the normative system as a way to spur the creation of alternative institutional practices which benefit young African American women.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The number of African American women attending PWIs is continuing to increase; however, our understanding of the factors related to their academic success at these institutions is wholly underdeveloped. It is our contention that an area that provides a launching pad for better understanding the lived experiences of these young women is rooted in the relationship between racial factors and adjustment to college. Specifically, the processes of racial-gender socialization and racial-gender identity development are aspects which need to be further investigated using an intersectional framework. Anglin and Wade (2007) stated that “racial socialization was found to be a significant positive predictor of academic adjustment. . . . The role of parents seems to be a contributing factor in future academic success” (p. 214). We believe that the phenomenon of African American motherwork—strategies embedded in the racial-gender socialization process—occurring in predominantly White, suburban elementary schools is a foundational element of African American women college students’ experiences with academic success. We hope to encourage further investigations of African American motherwork that utilize an intersectional analysis, especially studies that examine socioeconomic effects as current Black college students are more affluent than their predecessors (Baber, 2012; Strayhorn, 2011). We realize that the ability to enact aspects of the African American motherwork strategies is

associated with the middle-class, suburban mothers' skill sets, resources, and social networks; that efficacy was enhanced by various elements of social and/or cultural capital possessed by these mothers. Studies which look at lower-income African American mothers with young daughters attending predominantly White schools will enhance our understanding of with-in group differences.

Just as importantly, we urge PWIs to do the hard, but transformative work of conducting thorough self-assessments utilizing an intersectional framework because:

social change cannot occur without institutions of higher education allocating resources to those alternative initiatives within their institutions that have an intersectional lens, that seek to promote inclusivity in knowledge production, curriculum transformation, mentoring, and pedagogy, and that actively seek to use knowledge to achieve social justice. (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 276)

Social change begins by amplifying the marginalized and often silenced voices of African American women college students.

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More than White, Heterosexual Men: Intersectionality as a Framework for Understanding the Identity of Student Veterans

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As a Black, female veteran who was medically discharged from military service, I advocate for the use of intersectionality within student veteran literature. Through this framework, the cultural complexities amongst student veterans can be recognized and embraced. Additionally, this framework gives power to those who have been silenced in the current body of literature on student veterans. Understanding how intersections at the microlevel (i.e., individual experience) connect to interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro social-structural level will provide a more accurate depiction of the identities and characteristics of student veterans. In this essay, I provide an overview of intersectionality, discuss the connection between intersectionality and identity studies, and conclude with a discussion of the potential benefits of intersectionality for student veteran programming, research, and policy.

INTRODUCTION

I have followed the resurgence of scholarly interest in student veterans since the Post 9/11 GI Bill was announced in 2008. Many higher education institutions have sponsored symposia, and numerous articles have been published about general characteristics, creating services, transition and engagement, and gendered perspectives. Although these efforts have sometimes focused on differences between active duty and guard/reserve or gender, I have yet to see full consideration given to the complexity of this student population.

The U.S. Armed Forces, like higher education, is a microcosm of American society and thus reflects the diversity of society. People from all states (and sometimes other countries), races, cultures, and religious backgrounds can be found within both organizations. Consequently, the diversity in both organizations is not something that has happened haphazardly; both systems have been intentional in their efforts to increase diversity (Sagalyn, 2011; S. Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012). Similarly, both systems have started to achieve greater diversity in the lower-levels of the organizations. However, higher up the administrative chain, there is still a lag in diverse leadership reflective of the lower-levels (Sagalyn, 2011). As such, the experiences of student veterans have been shaped, and continue to be shaped, by organizations that identify the dominant, Eurocentric view as normative.

The continued privileging of this dominant view acts as a catalyst for my advocacy of intersectionality in the academic discourse surrounding the experiences of student veterans. Intersectionality provides scholars with an interpretive and analytical framework for engaging the multiple social identities found within this student population. Therefore, a more accurate depiction of student veterans can be produced by exploring the relationship between microlevels (i.e., personal experience) and macrolevels (i.e., systems of privilege and oppression).

I write this article as a Black, female veteran who has felt silenced by many of the publications describing the experiences of student veterans. After serving on active duty and being medically discharged from service in 2006, I became involved in developing and evaluating programs and services for student veterans, and in researching this student population. Although I consider myself to be a qualitative researcher, I consider intersectionality to be useful in both qualitative and quantitative studies. Additionally, as a student affairs scholar-practitioner, I believe research should be used to promote social change within the academy and society at large. I am writing this article because conversations about veterans have continued long enough without full consideration being given to the cultural complexity of this student population. Following an overview of intersectionality, I discuss the connection between intersectionality and identity studies, and conclude with a discussion of the potential benefits of intersectionality for student veteran programming, research, and policy.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Scholars across multiple disciplines have begun using an intersectionality framework to explore the complexities of lived experiences (e.g., Fotopoulou, 2012; Linder, 2011; Nash, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). With this expansion, there has also been an emergence of different conceptualizations of the framework, “including different terms/phrases [and] interlocking systems” (Brueck & Grant, 2011, p. 25). As a result, intersectionality is evolving and scholars use a wide array of approaches when integrating it into their work (Dhamoon, 2011). However, central to most discussions of intersectionality is its focus on the intersecting identities of people from historically oppressed and marginalized groups. Because people from multiple historically oppressed and marginalized populations are its starting point, intersectionality examines the experiences of these populations in their own context and from their vantage point. For the purposes of this essay, I am defining intersectionality as a framework “to analyze how social and cultural categories intertwine to explicate the various inequalities that exist in society” (Knudsen, 2006, p. 61).

Scholars, who seek to examine the interactions between socially and culturally constructed categories (e.g., race, gender), also use intersectionality to better understand how the

interlocking of microlevel social locations and macrolevel sociostructural systems result in inequality (Brueck & Grant, 2011; S. Jones et al., 2012). Social location refers to one's group memberships (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, religion) because of their place in society and history (Macionis, 2006). This framework asserts that systems of oppression result from the interrelatedness of one's social locations. In the literature reviewed for this article, there were typically three or four characteristics used to describe how intersectionality has been used in researching various groups or systems. I have selected the three most relevant to discussions about the cultural complexity of student veterans: (a) intersecting power relations shape individual and group based social identities; (b) social identities are not independent, but multiple and intersecting; and, (c) social identities at the microlevel may intersect with macrolevel structural factors (e.g., sexism) to produce disparate educational outcomes and experiences (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2012; Ferguson, 2006; Grant & Zwier, 2011).

SOCIAL-STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS OF MILITARY SERVICE

Before fully discussing how intersectionality can be used with the student veteran population, I first need to provide a description of the military's cultural context. The military does not differ from the civilian world in its marginalization of particular groups (e.g., women), but it does institutionalize and amplify the socially prevalent attitudes and stereotypes (Smith, 2012). The promise of manhood through military service and combat remains a critical symbolic incentive. Consequently, servicemembers who do not pursue this incentive symbolically embody a contradiction for the military as an institution, as well as for how people think about soldiering (i.e., service). Although the military is composed of diverse cultural groups, the dominant culture is the product of masculine, Eurocentric philosophies and values. Consequently, individuals from non-dominant groups who enter the military are more visible as *the other* due to their uniqueness, and more likely to be stereotyped within the military if they choose not to conform (Kovitz, 2003).

An illustration of this *otherness* is the perception of soldiering as opposite to female and femininity (Cohn, 2000). The stereotypes of femininity are associated with mothering, weakness, passivity, and submission. In contrast, the stereotypes of masculinity are associated with physical strength, assertiveness, and agency (Baechtold & DeSewal, 2009; Kovitz, 2003). Femininity within the military is highly feared because neither individual servicemembers, nor the military can afford to be perceived as weak by their enemies (Cohn, 2000; Kovitz, 2003). Females that exhibit too many feminine characteristics are treated differently (e.g., shown lower levels of respect) and considered inferior (e.g., incompetent) servicemembers by their subordinates and superiors (Baechtold & DeSewal, 2009; Smith, 2012). Consequently, men displaying effeminate characteristics may be harassed and considered inferior by both male and female servicemembers (Cohn, 2000). In the following paragraphs, I discuss some of the other military-specific contexts influencing the self-perception and experiences of student veterans. I start with an overview of cultural schemas and then move into discussions of identity.

Cultural Schemas

According to Ferguson (2006), "cultural meaning systems are structured in cultural schemas, which define how the world works, the status of people in it, as well as the status of the individual relative to others" (p. 11). These systems influence how group members will treat

others in the group and individuals perceived to be outside of the group. Depending on the level of salience and the perception of others within similar social groups, the individual may perceive someone as an *insider* or *outsider*. For example, the military consists of five branches of service: Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy and Coast Guard. However, each branch has its own cultural schema. Someone from the Air Force may perceive a member of the Coast Guard as being too different and therefore outside the military group identity.

Another possibility especially relevant for discussions in higher education is the insider or outsider status of servicemembers being labeled as veteran. Someone who served three deployments may not recognize the veteran status of someone with no deployments; the individual with no deployments may also not consider themselves as a veteran. Although the term veteran has been defined as an individual who previously served in the military during a time of war and received an honorable discharge from active duty service (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2007), all separated servicemembers may not be so inclusive of who they place in this category. This does not mean the individual with no combat experience is outside of the military group identity, just that they may be considered an outsider regarding the veteran group identity.

Despite the many debates about who is considered under the framework of intersectionality, I do not contend that interlocking social identities are limited to racial minorities and women's discourse (Nash, 2008). Consequently, there are many characteristics, such as religion, socioeconomic status, mental health, disability, or sexual orientation historically linked to exclusion or discrimination. Any of these social constructs may influence one's experience of the military. Additionally, one's experience as a veteran may have an adverse or positive influence on the transition from military to college. However, I have reviewed no articles describing how an intersection of social identities (e.g., Black bisexual male veteran) might influence the experience of transition to college and subsequent educational outcome. Acknowledging the existence of multiple intersecting identities is an initial step to understanding the complexities of identity and understanding how the enculturation experiences of historically oppressed groups within the military may affect the educational outcomes of student veterans.

Marginalized Veteran Identities

Belonging and togetherness are important considerations when understanding one's place in society (Choo & Ferree, 2010; S. Jones et al., 2012). Therefore, social categories can help create common language around discussions of identity. These social categories often interlock in multiple ways to contribute to the individual's social identities. Membership in privileged *and* marginalized groups (e.g., White female veteran) requires a negotiation of privilege and oppression simultaneously. Membership in multiple marginalized groups (e.g., Black lesbian veteran) requires awareness and acceptance of membership. With both groups, privileged and marginalized, and multiple marginalized, movement toward self-defined healthy social identity status involves exploring and resolving complex psychological and sociocultural tasks (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Researchers have often explored social constructs separately, rather than considering how individuals and groups identify with multiple social identities (Bowleg, 2012; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Dhamoon, 2011; Fotopoulou, 2012). As previously stated, there have been very few studies exploring the sociocultural factors making up the student veteran. Additionally, even fewer studies explore the sociocultural factors that are more exclusive to this particular group, such as officer verses enlisted or combat veteran verses noncombat veteran (Radford, 2011;

Vacchi, 2012). These considerations are especially important to those wanting to better understand this population.

Awareness and acceptance of group membership varies; some groups are more easily recognizable to the individual and have stronger sociopolitical histories. Higher salience may be accounted for because of the recognizability. Awareness and acceptance of group membership may also be affected by interactions between groups. “Membership in two mutually stigmatizing groups may cause the individual to be more socially isolated than by identifying with either group alone” (Ferguson, 2006, p. 10). Choosing between the groups may be the only way for the individual to cope with the isolation or stigmatization. Sociopolitical factors may also influence group membership salience and the way individuals interpret the experience of being affiliated with a particular group. Membership in one group may buffer the experience of prejudice or discrimination faced by being a member of a non-dominant social group (Hancock, 2007). Therefore, individuals may elect to focus on the social identity offering the fewest negative experiences. For example, a White non-heterosexual male in the military may refuse or distance himself from his sexual orientation because of perceived or actual forms of harassment and prejudice from his peers and/or superiors. He may instead choose to focus on his membership in the military group or his membership in his racial group.

Because of the complexity associated with the individual experience and experiences related to the convergence of identities have been omitted from the literature on military and student veterans, it is appropriate to consider this population through an intersectional lens. For example, a non-heterosexual female’s experience of the military will likely be quite distinct from an African American male’s experience; likewise, an officer’s experience of the military is likely to be distinct from the experience of an enlisted servicemember. Because individuals do identify with multiple groups, while still identifying with the military system, there will be overlap and distinction among experiences. Consequently, all of these experiences are relevant for improved descriptions, increased understanding, and improved programming for this student population. Also, it is especially important to consider how identification with one group over another places individuals in positions of dominant and non-dominant status.

In considering the evolving nature of intersectionality discussions, it is clear there are multiple solutions for incorporating an intersectionality framework. However, Shields (2008) describes a both/and strategy that may provide the best vantage point for connecting this framework to research on student veterans. This strategy involves a comparison of individual identities to one another, while also considering the patterns emerging from the intersection of these identities. Although an intersectionality perspective emphasizes the relationship or connections between identity categories, it is also important to remember the historical placement and cultural context from which the identity categories arise (Shields, 2008).

IDENTITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

To increase diversity efforts and create more inclusive learning environments, higher education researchers have often turned to the study of student identity (S. Jones et al., 2012; Grant & Zwier, 2011). One of the first empirical efforts to investigate intersecting social identities in higher education research is found in a study of female college students. The findings from this study highlighted the dynamic process of identity development and resulted in the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (S. Jones et al., 2012). Although this work on multiple social identities began to explore the intersecting nature of identities, the emphasis was

primarily on self-perceived identities through individual narratives rather than on the connection between social identities and larger social structures.

Ironically, the research on student veterans has not taken this cue and falls short in illustrating how difference and social identities exist among the student veteran population. In looking for veteran studies framed by an intersectional perspective, I was able to find one book chapter and one article discussing a multidimensional approach to understanding student veteran identity (see Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], 2011; K. Jones, 2013). The chapter presents a model called moving out, moving in, and moving through that identifies four typologies for student veterans: *the ambivalent*, *the skeptic*, *the emerging*, and *the fulfilled civilian* (ASHE, 2011). These typologies are organized as a hierarchy and positions *the fulfilled civilian* as the ideal typology to which *all* student veterans should strive to achieve. Although the chapter does emphasize the importance of various social dimensions, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation, no depth of consideration is given to how the intersection of these dimensions inform the higher education experiences of student veterans or how the individual experiences of student veterans intersect with the sociocultural privileges of the higher education system. In the article I found, Kevin Jones (2013) describes the use of phenomenology to explore the transition of three veterans from the military into college. He focuses on the interlocking nature of the participants' servicemember, veteran, and civilian identities. However, he does not discuss these aspects of the participants' identities in relation to their other social locations.

Identity Salience

When identity is considered from an enculturation perspective (etic/emic), consideration is given to how the person internalizes and makes meaning of the various experiences of their life. Therefore, social identity salience may be influenced by historical and sociocultural context, as well as power and privilege. Salience is also influenced by the individual's awareness of their membership in a particular social group (Bowleg, 2012; Cole, 2009). Members of the same group may have similar experiences but interpret those experiences in different ways leading to different outcomes, depending on their background.

For example, my friend and I separated from the military within two years of each other. We both experienced difficulty with the transition to higher education. However, I acknowledged the difficulty of the transition, but chose to focus on my studies and cope with the transition by researching the transition process of the student veteran population. She, on the other hand, internalized the difficulty of the transition by identifying it as a perceived weakness on her part, thereby further compounding the stress of the transition. Although we are members of the same *group* (Black female officers), our interpretation of separating from the military is different. I was able to complete my graduate work and she is still working to overcome the adjustment of being a student. To fully understand the different responses to a similar situation, there has to be a deeper exploration of our backgrounds and self-identified social identities.

Unfortunately, there is no simple model or single identity category that completely accounts for how individuals respond to their environment. Therefore, it is especially important to begin the research process by acknowledging the complexity of the participants and moving to capture the complexity through intentional methodological and analytical approaches. Because identities are fluid, our approach, as researchers, to understanding identity has to also be less rigidly constructed. The use of an intersectionality framework creates room for this suggested flexibility.

CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

Equally important to the discussion of intersectionality is a clear identification of potential challenges and benefits to incorporating this framework in current research practices. In particular, engaging multiple social categories and methodological considerations are challenges and common language and inclusiveness are benefits.

Multiple Social Categories

In determining which social categories to include in a study, the concept of intersectionality in this essay has been presented as transcendental to women of color and is broad enough to include any student veteran who inhabits dimensions of social privilege and oppression simultaneously (e.g., Black heterosexual men). Because social categories are often conflated, there may be risks associated with focusing on intersecting identities. One such risk is the forced placement of individuals into identity categories. Important to this discussion is how some identities are legally imposed rather than selected by the individual (e.g., veteran, race). Therefore, focusing on intersecting identities can erroneously position an individual in a multiply marginalized or privileged and marginalized group, in which the researcher wrongly attributes interlocking patterns to a social category. By attending to the potential pitfalls of identity studies, scholars can begin to place identity discourse within appropriate sociocultural contexts instead of reducing identity to just recognizable categories (Dhamoon, 2011).

In her 2008 work, Nash describes the work of Robert Chang and Jerome McCristal Culp Jr., who question the process of engaging multiple points of intersection. In their work, Chang and Culp describe three approaches to understanding the complexity of identity and the interrelatedness of microlevel experiences and macrolevel structures of privilege and oppression: *anti-categorical complexity*, *intra-categorical complexity*, and *inter-categorical complexity* (as cited in Nash, 2008). Anti-categorical complexity deconstructs social categories and emphasizes how the process of categorizing lived experience is exclusionary. Intra-categorical complexity considers the vantage point of multiply marginalized individuals to emphasize the problems with categorization. Inter-categorical complexity starts with the “relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups...and takes those relationships as the center of the analysis” (Chang & Culp, as cited in Nash, 2008, p. 8).

Methodological Considerations

From the existing research using intersectionality, qualitative and mixed methods seem especially appropriate and well suited for delving into the complexity of this approach. However, the incorporation of intersectionality as a framework for interpretations in quantitative research is viable. This would involve situating student veterans within historical and sociocultural circumstances, regardless of the sociocultural factors of the participants in the study (Bowleg, 2012; Hancock, 2007). By contextualizing the data within multiple intersectionalities at microlevels and macrolevels, the resulting studies would more accurately reflect the social realities of the student veteran, while also reflecting the social inequality and structural disparities affecting the higher education experiences.

SUMMARY OF BENEFITS

Intersectionality stands to increase the understandings of the student veteran population in three noteworthy ways. First, intersectionality provides a unifying language and theoretical framework for scholars already engaged in investigating sociocultural factors to improve the experiences of veterans in higher education. The framework also goes one step further by considering how the interlocking patterns of a veteran's social identities connect with the sociostructural level of higher education institutions. Privileging a focus on structural-level factors rather than an exclusive focus on the individual is likely to facilitate the development of institutional interventions more likely to affect the educational outcomes of this student population. Second, intersectionality prompts scholars to conceptualize disparities and consider the presence of social inequalities in the experiences of the student veteran population at microlevels and macrolevels. Finally, by situating the experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups as its vantage point, intersectionality can be used to inform the development of educational messages, interventions, and policies directed at student veterans.

CONCLUSION

Similar to increases seen with student veteran enrollment after the Montgomery GI Bill was first introduced, higher education institutions will continue to see increases in enrollment as a result of the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Vacchi, 2012). It is evident institutions are making efforts to accommodate this student population by developing programs and services, hosting symposia, and increasing research efforts centered around this student population. However, a more comprehensive stance must be taken to ensure all social identities found among student veterans are visible and well represented in the literature. Intersectionality is critical at this juncture because of the framework's ability to embrace the cultural complexities essential to understanding social inequalities and silenced voices, which in turn, may manifest as educational inequalities. If faculty and administrators are sincere in their efforts to assist this student population in achieving their academic goals, they must begin to reconsider the approaches that have been used to study this student population.

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Absent Voices: Intersectionality and College Students with Physical Disabilities

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College students with disabilities stand at a crossroads when transitioning from high school to college, and yet, are often absent from discussions regarding underserved populations in higher education. This absence is particularly notable in scholarship employing the lens of *intersectionality*. To address this gap, this qualitative case study employs a strengths-based lens to examine how typically marginalized college students used the strengths of their socially constructed identities as a dynamic force to find keys to academic success.

INTRODUCTION

“If they don’t understand, educate them on it,” stated Charlotte, the youngest of our study’s participants. Disabled students have been referred to as having *minority* status and share certain conditions of marginalization (e.g., oppressed, powerless and/or socially excluded) with underserved groups, such as students of lower socioeconomic statuses, but are often ignored or invisible in literature addressing these groups (Brantlinger, 1991; Cooper, 2012; Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mapp, 2002; Milgerode, Maes, Buysse & Brondeel, 2012; National Longitudinal Transitional Study 2 [NLTS2], 2004; Warren, Soo, Rubin & Uy, 2009). Thomson (1997) posits the absence is because the disabled are the “ultimate other” and “assure the rest of the citizenry of who they are not” (p. 41).

Postsecondary education in the United States has been touted as a critical step in economic and social advancement for both individuals and society (Yu, 2001). Currently, U.S. policymakers forecast the need for a college-educated workforce, but project a shortage of an educated citizenry to fulfill this need (Institute of Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2010). For

individuals with disabilities, obtaining the postsecondary education and training to meet these societal needs is a daunting task. According to the 2006 American with Disabilities report, 2002 census data reveals for those 25-64, 43.1 percent with no disability were college graduates as compared to 32.3 and 21.9 percent with a non-severe and severe disabilities, respectively (as cited in Steinmetz, 2006). The goal to fulfill the educational threshold for the nation's workforce is further exacerbated when high school degree completion rates for individuals with disabilities in this country are taken into consideration. According to Steinmetz (2006), for the same age range, 10.4 percent of individuals without a disability dropped out of high school as compared to 14.6 and 26.6 percent with a non-severe and severe disability, respectively. This lack of attaining a certificate jeopardizes their employability as well and the workforce as a whole. Until these considerable barriers are effectively addressed, the United States is at risk of losing out on a talented pool of contributors to the workforce (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999; IHEP, 2010; NLTS2, 2004).

The current article is a direct result of the scarcity of literature on academically successful students with physical disabilities. Having a disability of any kind intersects with all representations of identity: racial/ethnic, gender, class, religious, and cultural lines (Hirschmann, 2012). Furthermore, disability scholars define disability as a term constructed by society and based on a biased lens (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Hirschmann, 2012). Consequently, students with a physical disability are part of a socially constructed, marginalized population, a group for which the term *intersectionality* was developed. Therefore, we suggest that intersectional research, which is used to "excavate the voices of the marginalized" (Nash, 2008, p. 13), should also include the voices of students with physical disabilities. The overarching research question for this study is: What factors influence academic success for students with physical disabilities? The purpose of this article is three-fold: 1) to apply intersectionality to an often overlooked, unacknowledged sub-group, broadening the theoretical framework's utility and further expanding the field's understanding; 2) to understand intersectionality from a *strengths-based* point of view; and, 3) to give voice to an often omitted sub-group within the greater social and academic communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The labels *disability* or *special needs* are broad concepts encompassing a range of disabilities from intellectual to physical (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Greeff, Vansteenwegen, & Gillard, 2012; NLTS2, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Needs and Rehabilitative Services (EDOSERS, 2006) uses three main categories under the special needs label: medical, behavioral and developmental. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the developmental category of having a physical disability, defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014) as having a learning disability, a visual impairment, hearing loss or deafness, a speech impediment, an orthopedic handicap, or a health impairment. Students facing such challenges are entering higher education institutions at increasing rates (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Landmark, & Reber, 2009). In the United States, in 2008, 11 percent of the population enrolled in higher education institutions identified as disabled, up from six percent in 1999 (NCES, 2014). These students, regardless of cultural ethnicity or socioeconomic status, have lower persistence and degree attainment rates when compared to students without disabilities (Hirschmann, 2012). Unfortunately, having a disability is not a social phenomenon limited to a

select few, but is a societal issue (Hirschmann, 2012), which now impacts all students pursuing higher education.

For many, academic success is obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher from a degree-granting institution, and is the ultimate goal of those who participate in higher education. For the purpose of this study, we define academic success as both students' transitions to college: the decision to attend college and successfully matriculate (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, 2012); and, their persistence: "a student's postsecondary education continuation behavior that leads to graduation" (Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation, 1999, p. 5). Prior research has found that students with a disability demonstrate the potential for academic success early in their academic career, yet their success is short-lived. Students with disabilities score higher on 4th grade standardized achievement tests, however, they are more likely to drop-out and have substantially lower high school graduation rates than students without disabilities (The Equity & Excellence Commission, 2012). This underscores the importance of including the voice of academically successful students with disabilities in the conversation. The success of these students and their stories is important to increasing their presence in higher education and in the workforce.

To be part of the conversation is to have a voice, which is an opportunity for individuals to share their perspectives to invoke awareness, without censorship. The use of voice in intersectional research is often employed as a qualitative tool to bring the perspectives of marginalized groups to emerging political issues (Choo & Feree, 2010; Nash, 2008). As educators, voice is the space where students and administrators make meaning of their condition and experiences. Exploring the academic career and trajectory of students with physical disabilities is a highly sensitive and audacious task; however, voice in this study is the necessary dialogue that enables the *others* to convey their reflective stories to be better understood. Voice means to be part of a greater dialogue that one has been absent from due to being overlooked both socially, and in this case, within intersectionality scholarship. Intersectional scholars advocate for the inclusion of perspectives from those at the margins of society (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Hancock, 2007). Therefore it requires, in this case, for students and administrators to insert themselves within a scholarly discourse and framework that has been restrictive up to this point, but meant to be inclusive. As a result of sharing ones' voice, participants are empowered and liberated (inspiring others) to embrace this voice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality is a complex theoretical framework typically applied to the plight of a marginalized or oppressed group (Gopaldas, 2013). The concept of intersectionality is rooted in Black feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1991) and was traditionally used to explore how the multiple dimensions of race, class, gender and ethnicity *intersect* to foster privilege and oppression. Its origin helped people to understand Black women at a time when their voices were unheard and invisible in specific spaces, especially in political, academic, and scholarly spheres. Since its inception, intersectional scholars have broadened the framework's scope beyond Black feminism to include various social categories and experiences that shape one's self, blurring the lines between identity, oppression and privilege (Hulko, 2009). This expansion of intersectionality's utility makes it an ideal lens for further understanding the story of three women (one being African-American, all having at least one physical disability, and all being academically successful) to better understand yet another voiceless population who is often left out of the

political, academic, and scholarly spheres. However, applying intersectionality as a framework should not be limited to these categories of difference, nor should we constrain its application to only examine deficit perspectives for which it was historically developed. The study of intersectionality is not binary nor a study of one identity versus another, but rather the *deconstruction* of how all these categories work with one another; however, until recently, disability was not considered as a voice in the discussion.

By utilizing intersectionality to explore the academic success of students with physical disabilities, we expand the conversation to help scholars and greater academic communities understand additional groups who have been marginalized or ignored in prior research. We suggest these students used the strengths of their intersections as levers to attain academic success and strive beyond the constraints of the deficit view of their socially constructed identities. Intersectionality advocates for the inclusion of all oppressed voices, but noticeably absent in scholarship is the voice of the disabled. Museus and Griffin (2011) posit that to understand the experiences of students in higher education, researchers must evolve the use of intersectional frameworks to “ensure particular groups are not being excluded from discussions of equity in higher education” (p. 11).

The invisibility of the disabled voice in intersectional literature may be due to the broadness of the term disability, which cuts across all of the traditionally mentioned identification categories. Disabled students occupy many spaces regardless of race, ethnicity, geographic location, or socioeconomic class. Instead of viewing their intersecting identities as oppressive, the participants in our study used the *strength* of their intersections as a dynamic force to move up the ladder of academic success.

METHOD

To capture the experiences of students with physical disabilities and debunk the deficit point of view that is most often linked to intersectionality, we utilized a collective case study approach (Merriam, 2009) with “issue-oriented questions” (Stake, 1995, p. 65) to amass and compare information across three student respondents and two administrators. We were particularly interested in exploring the ways in which students reached academic success and what they attributed to it, as well as the ways in which administrators supported the students’ efforts and shape the university’s climate regarding students with physical disabilities. By working directly with the director of the disability services office, Cy, and the associate vice president for equity and inclusion, Virginia (names, places, and positions are pseudonyms), we focused on three *successful* students with physical disabilities: Charlotte, Stella, and Monica. The participants were divided into three subsets: undergraduate, graduate, and administration.

Site Selection: Bubbler University

The study took place at Bubbler University, a private institution on the West coast, situated in an urban setting, serving over 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students across three city campuses. We chose this University’s Disability Services Office because of their credible reputation and array of services. It is an all-encompassing office serving both its primary student constituency, as well as its larger tri-campus community, by providing a variety of support including: note-takers, classroom aids, braille embosser, faculty education and training, among other services.

Our purposive sampling strategy was specifically homogeneous because we were interested in how students with physical disabilities exceeded social expectation, transitioned to college, persisted, thus achieving academic success. The Disability Services Office's website describes physical disabilities as being related to issues of mobility, visual, hearing, or other on-going health limitations. Some of these *physical* disabilities are visibly evident, while some are not. The term physical disability can be interchangeable with physical impairment, and according to the Americans with Disabilities Act's Title III Regulations (2010), it is "[a]ny physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological; musculoskeletal; special sense organs; respiratory, including speech organs; cardiovascular; reproductive; digestive; genitourinary; hemic and lymphatic; skin; and endocrine" (p. 30).

Participant Selection

Our student participant sample met the following criteria: (1) have at least one documented physical disability (for which they may or may not utilize support services); (2) are currently enrolled; (3) in *good* academic standing with the university; and, (4) self-selected to participate in this study.

Charlotte. Charlotte was the only undergraduate participant in the study. Charlotte is White and comes from an upper-middle class family. She started her elementary education in an urban environment, but attended a public high school located in a rural farming community. She took Advanced Placement (AP) classes and graduated from high school with well over a 4.0 grade point average (GPA). Charlotte is the only student in this study who is not a first-generation student; both her parents and paternal grandfather earned bachelor's degrees. Charlotte, who utilizes services from the Disability Services Office, entered Bubbler University as a freshman political science major. And just as she was in high school, is socially popular, following in her family's footsteps by becoming a sorority girl.

Stella. Stella, an African-American, first-generation college student, describes her background as low-income. She first entered the University as a freshman, but stopped out to take care of family. Sometime later, she finished her general education at a two-year college before transferring to Bubbler University. Her undergraduate major was teacher education and early childhood education, and as a graduate student, she is studying to be a special education teacher. Like Charlotte, she too utilizes services from the Disability Services Office.

Monica. Also a graduate student, having completed her undergraduate career in the Midwest, she describes her background as middle-to-lower-middle class. Monica is the only one of the three who does not receive and has not received accommodations since elementary school. She transitioned from an urban region, where she grew up and attended K-12 schooling, to a college in a rural community. Monica is White, happily married, and a former special education teacher. Like Stella, she is a first-generation college student, now earning her doctorate in education.

The following table (Table 1) is a summary of the three student participants. It provides an easy reference to the overall picture of the participating academically successful students with disabilities.

Table 1. *Background Information about Student Participants*

Student Participant's Name	Disability	Background Information	Background Academic Information	Higher Education Information	Educational/Career Aspirations
Charlotte	Ankle-foot orthotic (AFO) and Upper-limb impairment	Female White Upper-middle class	Undergraduate student; high school GPA > 4.0 and took Advanced Placement courses (AP) Urban elementary; rural farming high school; self-described as popular	Political science major; sorority girl; utilizes services from the Disability Services Office; getting ready to attend law school	Law degree focusing on environmental and water rights law
Stella	Eye-sight impairment	Female Black Low-income Referenced having been married	Attended an urban high school in densely populated crime ridden area; grew up near Bubbler University; first-generation	Attended a two-year college; undergraduate teacher education major Graduate student; utilizes services from the Disability Services Office	Master of Arts degree in early childhood education; wants to teach at a school for the blind overseas
Monica	Orthopedic impairment	Female White Middle-to low-middle class Married	Utilized accommodations in elementary school; first generation; graduated from a Midwestern high school	Graduated from a Midwestern university; doctoral student; Does not utilize the Disability Services Office	Educational doctorate; wants to be a faculty member teaching special education courses

Data Collection

The data collection method for this study was implemented in two phases for both students and administrators, and two separate sets of interview protocols were developed. For students, in the first phase, a demographic survey preceded the face-to-face two-on-one interviews to collect basic background information and inquire about students' academic support prior to enrolling in Bubbler University. In the second phase, we conducted three two-on-one interviews with the participants. The interview protocol for the students was divided into five sections to solicit responses about *self*, *family*, *high school*, *college*, and *social interactions*. The purpose of these categories was to inquire about the ways in which the participants navigated and capitalized on their experiences, and how the intersections of being a woman, having a physical disability, and attaining an education created opportunities for success versus being at an intersection of oppression.

To maximize face-to-face interview time with the administrators, Cy and Virginia, the first phase of the interview protocol was conducted via email, and they were given the option to bring typed responses to the interview or submit them via email. In the second phase, we conducted a one-on-two interview. The interview questions were developed to gauge the University's campus climate regarding support for students with physical disabilities and how they facilitate and ensure academic success from an administrative perspective. Immediately following the one-on-two interview, follow-up questions were developed and emailed to the administrators to delve deeper into their initial responses and to capture the mechanisms that have been put in place to support students with physical disabilities. Cy submitted his follow-up responses via email, while Virginia's responses were collected in a one-on-one interview and transcribed.

All interviews were conducted in the Spring of 2014, ranged from 60-90 minutes, and were audio recorded. The questions were open-ended in order to elicit responses that would incite meaning-making of these students' *interactivity* (Gopaldas, 2013) of being physically disabled and academically successful, as well as to explore the role administrators play in supporting and facilitating academic success for students with physical disabilities.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis and coding are critical steps in qualitative research. Data analysis is "the process of making meaning or revealing the meaning of the actions at the site...something that happens during data collection and...engaged in by the researcher throughout the project" (Horvat, 2013, p. 106); whereas coding "begins the process of analyzing the large volume of data generated in the form of transcripts, fieldnotes...and the like" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 26). We, therefore, interpreted and organized the data we generated from interviews to provide an understanding of the participants' experiences and their academic success.

As explained by Horvat (2013), data analysis [and we would add coding] began at the start of this study. Having chosen Bubbler University, engaged with a purposive sampling process, and developed research instruments that explored the various intersections of our student participants, we were intentional in mapping our analytic direction. Therefore, data analysis and coding, like the data collection process, was conducted in several phases, keeping the research question and theoretical framework in mind at all times.

In the first phase of data analysis and coding, extensive field notes were taken by each researcher during the interviews. Oftentimes during the interviews, codes were generated by each researcher, and then later compared. Field notes were analyzed and not only led to coding, but also supported the basis for follow-up questions. During the student interviews, follow-up questions were developed on the spot to delve deeper into student responses, while during administrator interviews, follow-up questions were generated post-interview once the one-on-two interview was transcribed. In either case, we were constantly analyzing responses to make sense of our data for answering the research question.

In the second phase of data analysis and coding, we developed emerging themes that were consistent discoveries across all three student cases. Themes also emerged from the administrative interviews; however, since administrators were interviewed together, and were part of the study to help us understand their role in facilitating academic success for students with physical disabilities, their themes were developed irrespective to the students' responses or to each other's responses, but based on what emerged as their means of support to ensure academic success for students within the University community. Given the fact not all of the student participants utilized services from the Disability Services Office, we were most interested in and coded the administrators' responses as they related to the overall University climate regarding students with physical disabilities. We shared our field notes, compared our interview-codes, and developed a spreadsheet to house the themes. As explained by Merriam (2009), "you should be compiling ['themes or category names'] in a separate memo retaining those that seem to hold across more than one interview" (p. 182). This allowed us to organize our thoughts, name and revise our categories, create subcategories, and sort our findings.

Immediately following the student and administrator interviews, in our third phase of analysis and coding, the audio recordings were transcribed. While listening to the recordings post-interview, and after having time to reflect on what was shared, additional notes and themes were added to the spreadsheet. Once the interviews were all transcribed, each researcher took notes individually and collaborated to analyze and discuss final themes. These notes along with the students' verbatim responses were used as support for the final themes found in this article and were also recorded in the spreadsheet. By engaging in this process, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences, namely the strengths associated with the intersection of having physical disabilities and being academically successful.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has also been touted as a major component of qualitative research; yet, the concept also poses some *dangers*. According to Hallett (2013), having the participants review the material generated by their participation lends itself to validity and trustworthiness; however, as researchers, it is important to take into consideration our relationship with the participants, the psychological consequences of the participants *re-living* their experiences, as well as the idea of whether the information and documents need to be approved at all. We took both the standard practice of trustworthiness, also referred to as member checking, as well as some of the pitfalls outlined by Hallett into consideration when having the participants review the materials of this study. We employed first-level member checks (Hallett, 2013; Horvat, 2013). Since we were seeking to incorporate the voices of socially marginalized students, it was fitting that the participants had the opportunity to review the respective transcript of the interviews. This ensured that we had obtained the information they wanted us to have, and that

the data yielded from the interviews were an accurate portrayal of their experiences. We also separated any personal or professional relationship we might have had with the participants during the consent process, prior to conducting the interviews. We shared with the participants the potential psychological and sociological risks associated with participating with the study and did not use any proprietary information in collecting or analyzing data. Additionally, as researchers who may have had dealings with the participants after their involvement with the study, we assured them that anonymity was our priority and that the integrity of the data were maintained by only sharing related material between the researchers and being available to the participants for questions.

FINDINGS

Strengths of the Intersections

The interplay of the social identity structures we explore are disability and education. By employing a strengths-based view to the lens of intersectionality, we began to understand how the participants thrived at this intersection of their socially constructed identities. One might assume that, in addition to their disability, gender and/or race would be a factor, however, this was not the case. In multiple ways they transformed the challenges of their intersections to disrupt the status quo, which allowed them to flourish. The shape of their academic trajectories were guided, not by what societal contexts dictated, but instead, by how they pushed over barriers placed in their way. Along the path they engaged advocates and change agents who empowered them to achieve and inspired them to advocate for others.

Independence. This theme emerged as a component for all of our participants. Although the levels of their independence vary, each student participant classifies herself as an independent and successful person. The interplay of their intersections includes freedom: the freedom to choose how to maintain their independence; the freedom to choose their careers; and, the freedom to be viewed as or not viewed as the *disabled* person in the room. We asked our two administrator participants for their definition of independence. One thinks of independence in literal terms, defining independence as “the student’s ability to manage life details on their own,” while the other defines independence in terms of accommodations leading to academic and personal success by “empowering a student to feel more comfortable about communication and independently problem-solving disability-related challenges.” Each of our student participants demonstrated these traits.

Charlotte stated she had a “great childhood ...other than my physical disability, which I myself don’t really consider a hardship because I know no difference.” Her disability is her “normal” state, and although she relied upon her mother for personal assistance, she considered herself independent. Her biggest challenge was not academic, but in the ability to obtain a reliable source for the personal assistance she requires to maintain her independence. Much like Monica, she “hated” having a personal assistant in grade school and negotiated her own accommodations with the school administration. Stella also displayed her independence early, not willing to carry “heavy, large-type” textbooks to her high school classes, she purchased a tape recorder and taped all of her class lectures. She is very adamant when stating she “can’t get lost in the shuffle” and ensures she is ahead of the curve when using technology to maintain her independence. She finds her disability empowering as she stated, “Everything I need I have within myself in order to go the direction I want to go.” Stella makes her own travel

arrangements using the city bus system get to school, work, and home. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella view their individual situations as part of normal life. They do not see themselves as different or special, but as individuals who are doing what they need to do to fulfill their aspirations.

Although they identify as independent, each rely upon one or more types of aide whether it be in the form of a person or technology. However, their independence empowers them to recognize their need, to seek out the assistance they need, and the freedom to use it to move ahead in pursuit of their academic aspirations. When asked who helped her identify a personal assistant from an outside agency, Charlotte matter-of-factly stated, “[I] took care of it myself.” In part, their independence is also reliant on their ability to be flexible and adapt. Each of the participants “manage life’s details” on their own and are empowered to arrange for their own accommodations. Even though each has a physical challenge, which society may view as a barrier, when facing an intersection they used it as a springboard to freedom of choice. They did not come to these decisions alone, they are empowered by family members who assist in shaping their independence.

Families and independence. The role of each participant’s family was important in their journey to independence. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella all had one parent—whether it was their mother or father—who believed in them. Students with physical disabilities are often linked and regarded in the same context as students with cognitive impairments. Each of our participants’ families were adamant that their child’s academic journey would be in a general education classroom and their families expected them to function like their peers and/or siblings. Stella’s mother told an elementary school teacher “she doesn’t see well there is nothing wrong with her brain, she’s not going into special education.” In Stella’s case, her mother “instilled a strength” in her. She credits her mother with helping her to be “fiercely independent.” Charlotte’s mother insisted “she had to work for everything” and relied on Charlotte to take on the role of “sibling parent” to her younger brother. Monica’s father shaped her views of being normal and inspired her academic goals. She stated that he was her “anchor” who “pushed her to do things” and “treated her like a normal kid.” Each woman has a very strong sense of self and identified themselves as “self-aware,” “fiercely independent and headstrong,” and “comfortable” with themselves. Instead of wallowing in their situation, they seem to revel in it. When we asked Charlotte about this she said, “You’ve got to accept yourself before you can ever expect anyone to accept you; get over yourself.” For these three strong women, much of their strength is drawn from their families who gave them the freedom to choose independence by creating a space for them to recognize the power of their intersections.

Advocacy. Each time their disability intersects with another identity, they use it to advocate for themselves. Intersections are tools that empower them to move up the academic ladder. The participating administrators define advocacy as “an individual who ideally takes control ensuring that they get what they want” and “helping the student become his or her own best advocate.” They see advocacy as two-pronged in that it is necessary for these students to have “someone who is sort of championing [the students’] success.” Charlotte, Monica, and Stella speak up for themselves and others, but also had another person or persons along the way who “championed for them.”

Self-advocacy. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella are all initiators in seeking services and accommodations. As Charlotte so succinctly put it, “You can’t rely on mommy anymore.” Stella went to the Disability Services Office of a junior college seeking note taking services and she found that “we had to go out and ask for someone ... [the office] never assisted us.” She not

only initiated the search for her services, she then had to find the resource on her own. They must be resourceful and persistent in finding what they need. Monica believes that to get what she needs she has to “give 110 percent and really kind of push and do more.” We asked the three women to give advice to students who are in similar situations and are struggling. Stella was emphatic that the key is to “get the services you need and advocate for yourself.” Monica believes one must be resourceful and “embrace your disability to use it to your advantage.” Charlotte stresses a student should “advocate for yourself, speak up and use everything that is available to you. You just look for what’s in life that you can work with.” All three of these women are instilled with a strong sense of self and are driven to find what they need to thrive. Instead of withering in the face of a challenge, they view their intersections as levers to engage others to achieve academic success. Each woman is not only strong self-advocates they are equally as driven to help others.

Advocacy for others. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella each advocate for others in a number of peer and community organizations. Additionally, each said, in one way or another, that they are “fine with being the disabled person in the room” and “do not mind being the disabled person in the room to help change minds.” Even though each is from a different cultural and economic background, they know their disability is the first thing others in the room see. Charlotte and Monica were the first physically-disabled students in their respective high schools. Each said they wish they “had not been the first,” but in doing so, they brought a “fresh perspective” to the table. Charlotte and Stella were quite active in community organizations. In high school, Charlotte participated as a peer advocate in youth court for teens in trouble with the law; this has helped shape her career aspirations of becoming a lawyer. Stella is a strong advocate for the blind. She stated “that those with visual disabilities get *even less* attention in the literature and research than other disabilities.” She has volunteered at the community center for the blind and hopes to do missionary work in Africa teaching at a school for the blind. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella are continually finding ways to grow and keep moving ahead. Finding the strength in their intersections is due in part to having others recognize and acknowledge their contributions. We suggest that having a person—other than a parent—advocate for them inspired them to advocate for others.

Mentor advocates. Mentors played an important role in the academic success of each of these students. As our administrative voices said, having someone to champion them is essential to the academic success of disabled students. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella all identified a teacher or advocate in high school who helped them grow socially and provided the creative accommodations they needed to achieve academic success. In Charlotte’s case, a high school agriculture teacher involved her in Future Farmers of America (FFA); Charlotte excelled, thrived and achieved one of the highest awards the FFA bestows upon student members. Because of her involvement in FFA, she has a vast social network and a friend she has kept in touch with. Charlotte said the teacher “pushed me out there.” She also identified a college faculty advisor who is “amazing.” She stated he is the “one person that does not see me as disabled.”

Like Charlotte, Monica transferred to a new environment where she was the “disabled kid.” On her own, she tried to negotiate accommodations with a math teacher who had given her numerous detentions for not making it to class on time due to the four flights of stairs she had to climb and descend to get to class. A journalism teacher recognized the challenge and Monica’s love for journalism. She knew Monica did not like to be “excluded or to stand out” so she created “press passes” for the entire editorial staff. The passes allowed all of the editorial staff an excuse for lateness. Monica is still in touch with this teacher. She also identified an

undergraduate faculty advisor who noticed she was struggling her freshman year. He talked to her and told her “[the other students] are expecting you to fail.” Monica thrived and continues to thrive under the mentorship of this professor. He helped shape her career aspirations of becoming a faculty member.

Stella had a high school teacher who recognized her talents and mentored her to go to college. She helped Stella take the required entrance exams and obtain full scholarships to college. Like Monica, Stella identified a college faculty mentor who helped shaped her career aspiration of working in early childhood education. She also stays in touch with this mentor who provides additional guidance.

Whether they draw the conclusions or not, Charlotte, Monica, and Stella consciously or unconsciously advocate every day for those with disabilities. Through their everyday actions and successes, they are examples of what strengths can be drawn from their intersections. The three of them have crossed generational, cultural, ethnic, and economic lines to achieve academic success. Their experiences are best summed up by Monica: “I have embraced it (disability) not manipulated it and used it to my advantage. My disability is part of me, but it is not the whole part of me but it is part of me and that’s ok.”

PATH TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Academic success of students with disabilities is typically not part of the narrative when discussing barriers to academic achievement for marginalized groups and within the context of intersectional research. Through their stories, we see how Charlotte, Monica, and Stella’s intersections are not single lines crossing at distinct paths but rather multiple axes of strength they use to shape and transform their lives (Gopaldas, 2013; Hirschmann, 2012). The success of these three students surpasses national statistics and expectations for students with physical disabilities. Entering this study we assumed one of the contributing factors to their achievement would include a peer circle comprised of students with similar challenges, yet that was not the case. We found that the larger themes across all three student cases were independence and advocacy. More specifically, independence and the freedom independence can bring to exercise choice, as well as the importance of at least one family member’s support, created the freedom and independence to pursue a higher education. We also found advocacy is present in many forms including: exercising their voice as they lobbied for themselves, the choice to advocate on behalf of others, and lastly, the role mentor advocates played in helping them to set, actualize, and take ownership of their academic and life expectations.

We approached intersectionality from a strengths-based perspective versus one of oppression and strife. From a collective case study approach, we explored how three students: Charlotte, Monica, and Stella, all faced what most would consider to be challenges: Being a woman (one being an African-American woman), having a physical disability, and being within the confines of higher education. Instead of any one of these social categories shaping a negative sense of self, each of the participants are empowered by the challenges of their disability, and did not mention race or gender; they capitalized on the one socially constructed identity that had the most impact—their disability—to reach academic success. The participants used the complexities of their intersections to succeed instead of being limited by their fundamentally embedded gender, race, or class identities (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

By interviewing both students and administrators we were able to see how such students navigated academia, and how the mechanisms that were put in place by each participant and

person they encountered created opportunities for success. The results of this study demonstrate that the students in this study perceive themselves at an advantage well before attending college. Instead of being limited by any physical barriers, they chose to turn what could be viewed as a weakness into a strength, going beyond their transition to college to degree attainment. It is important to reiterate that these students entered higher education with a strong sense of self, despite their multi-layered identity. Their intersections created positive influences and shaped their academic success. Therefore, the role of administrators is two-fold: 1) support: providing campus-community access to reinforce what was already instilled in and given to these students prior to entering college; and 2) advocacy: to work on behalf of students with disabilities to prepare the university community for such students' arrivals, ensuring the academic environment is suitable for these students to persist and ultimately graduate. Since the services and programs provided by disability services offices are used at students' discretions, if at all, it is a testament to how critical the pre-college factors revealed by this study are for students with physical disabilities to achieve a college degree and how important it is to share these voices.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

This article had a three-fold purpose: First, to apply intersectionality to an overlooked sub-group: students who have physical disabilities who have reached academic success. We find that these students are actually empowered by the interactivity of their physical disability and their pursuit of higher education, and not suppressed nor marginalized by social identity structures. Further, the participants did not identify race or gender as having an impact on their academic success. Perhaps, as Hirschmann (2012) reminds us, disability is solely a socially constructed idea not an abnormal state for those with the impairment.

Our second purpose was to understand intersectionality from a strengths-based perspective. It is clear that these students do not perceive themselves at a disadvantage, but are strengthened by their intersections, so much so, that neither their disability nor the traditionally mentioned social categories are even of concern for these students. As noted by Nash (2008), "It is time for intersectionality to begin to sort out the paradoxes upon which its theory rests in the service of strengthening its explanatory power" (p. 14). Contrary to the deficit lens often used to examine students with disabilities, we found these women to be indomitable, confident, focused, and inspiring. All three students perceive themselves as strong, independent, enabled, and invested in their own success and the success of others, thereby disrupting the dominant intersectional discourse highlighting the connections between these students instead of their socially constructed differences (Hirschmann, 2012). Again, having a disability goes beyond race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, or any other socially constructed marginalizing attribute. Therefore, this study concludes that intersectionality is no longer a frame to only understand the plight of the oppressed, since neither the students nor the administrators see having a disability as a deficit, or mentioned race, gender, or socioeconomic status as incapacitating factors. Instead we believe that intersectionality is a lens to also view the strengths of those who have been socially constructed as a marginalized other and chose to reconstruct their identity and view how the strengths of their intersections led to academic success.

Further, the administrators, acting as the liaison between students and the university community, work to facilitate and ensure academic success by providing support and life skills that will carry these students beyond the classroom and their academic career. The director of

the disability services office and the associate vice president for diversity and inclusion have made it their personal and professional mission to create opportunities of access and equity for students with disabilities. Therefore, these advocates for social justice go beyond *surface-level diversity* (Robbins, 2005) to join forces with a group of seemingly marginalized students who have been misjudged and unheard; thus, taking us to our third purpose: to give voice to an omitted subset of the college population that is worth hearing.

Though we are adhering to the recommendation of Museus and Griffin (2011), who called to expand the voices included in intersectionality research, we would be remiss by not acknowledging the fact that these students—individually as well as collectively—had found their voice prior to participating in the current study. However, we have designed a study that provided a platform from which the academic community and institutional agents can hear them loud and clear. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella, though all very different from one another, each view themselves as strong and empowered students who transform the socially constructed views of their identity and live life as a “typical college student.” We would argue that these extraordinary students live life beyond that of a typical college student. They articulate that they would not give up their physical disability to be *normal*; they do not struggle, are proud of their identity, and are empowered to define what that is. They also embrace their role as educators and change agents. Through their voices, we learn that their disability is not a challenge for them, but their muse that inspires them to be successful academically, professionally, and socially, and we used intersectionality as a lens to examine what outsiders might view as the complexities of their identities, but what actually for the participants was a strength (Rasky-Levine, 2011).

Although the climate of an academic environment for students with physical disabilities is comparable to the climate for students of color and *others* given minority status, this article explains how those who are physically impaired combat it, establish their place in higher education, and in some cases, surpass their peers. Moreover, the participants’ academic success is not a selfish gain, but necessary for them to reach their goals, including giving back to students with special needs. These students have now positioned themselves in a place of power and influence, which further re-conceptualizes intersectionality as a theoretical framework applied to the plight of the marginalized or oppressed other.

It is imperative that in future research, studies continue to value voices of students with physical disabilities. These voices nurture hope and empower both storytellers and listeners. We now understand that disability services offices of colleges and universities primarily influence the academic climate and assist in reinforcing the identities students come to college with. Such centers, through their advocacy and services, also aid in students’ identity development and voice, but as we have found, it is imperative that students enter college with a strong sense of self. By illuminating the narratives of these three students, we highlight the importance of researchers further interrogating these narratives to gain a deeper understanding of how and why the strengths of intersections can lead to academic success. Consequently, such an understanding can add a meaningful layer to inform our efforts to expand the discourse around intersectionality and increase educational achievement for these students.

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A Different Kind of Black, But the Same Issues: Black Males and Counterstories at a Predominantly White Institution

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Much has been written about Black men over the years and in different institutional contexts (e.g., community colleges, predominantly White institutions [PWIs], and historically Black colleges and universities). However, very little of this research has emphasized how the intersecting identities of Black men shape their experiences in higher education. To this end, this article draws from intersectionality and counternarratives, both of which has roots in critical race theory, to discuss how race, class, and gender informs the experiences of two Black males enrolled in a PWI. This article concludes with critical implications to help institutional leaders at PWIs be more intentional about creating a more supportive and inclusive campus climate for middle-class Black male students.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a proliferation of research on Black males in higher education over the last several years (e.g., see Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2012; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008a, Wood, 2012). Considering that the enrollment of Black males in postsecondary education comprise between 4.3% and 4.5% from 1976-2006, this research is warranted (Harper & Porter, 2012). Current research on Black males discusses their experiences at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs; Palmer & Wood, 2012), community colleges (Wood, 2012), and predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b). Recognizing and discussing the experiences of Black men in

diverse institutional environments is critical because their experiential reality is different given the institutional type they attend (Wood & Palmer, 2015).

Black men are also diverse. As Harper and Nichols (2008) explain, there is tremendous within group differences among Black men. Most of the research on Black men in higher education, however, treats them as a monolith. More attention to the heterogeneity among Black male collegians could lead to better practices to improve outcomes among Black males (Palmer & Wood, 2012; Strayhorn, 2013). Given this, the present article will draw from intersectionality, which has its roots in critical race theory (CRT) to understand how race, gender, and income inform the experiences of Black males at PWIs. In conveying the stories of the participants, this article employs a counternarrative approach, which is also rooted in CRT. This article concludes with implications to provide institutional leaders at PWIs context regarding how to help create a more supportive and inclusive campus environment for middle-class Black male students.

While some researchers have used an intersectional approach to examine the experiences of Black men in postsecondary education, many have not. For example, Wood has investigated the experiences of Black men in community colleges, focusing specifically on their relationships with faculty (see Wood & Turner, 2011), predisposition to transfer to four-year institutions (see Wood & Palmer, 2013), and critical factors that helps to facilitate their retention and persistence (see Wood & Williams, 2013). Jackson and Moore (2006, 2008) have examined the experiences of Black males in PreK-12 and higher education contexts without using an intersectional lens.

Notwithstanding, some researchers *have* used an intersectionality framework in their research on Black men. For example, Harper (2006) examined the intersection of academic identity (i.e., high-achieving) and Black men in higher education. Similarly, Strayhorn and Scott (2012) focused on the intersection of Black male collegians and sexual orientation, while Palmer and Scott (2013) explored how socioeconomic status informs the experiences of Black males at HBCUs. While the aforementioned research is critical, little research has examined how race, class, and gender shape the experiences of Black students at PWIs (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2008b).

According to Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007), researchers need to place greater emphasis on examining how race, gender, and other factors intersect to engender disadvantages for Black students at PWIs. While not referring specifically to class, Smith and colleagues (2007) argued that Black males have *raced* and *gendered* experiences throughout their journeys along the educational pipeline that negatively impact their educational aspirations and outcomes. Further, they explained that PWIs often respond negatively to the presence of Black males in comparison to White students, as well as in comparison to other students of color. Although many associate CRT with only looking at the racialized experiences of people of color, CRT has been used as a research method to examine how other subordinated identities (e.g., gender, class, sexual orientation) and forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, homophobia, ableism) influence the lived experiences of people of color (Lynn & Adams, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Perez-Huber (2010) argues, “CRT in educational research unapologetically centers the ways race, class, gender, sexuality and other forms of oppression manifest in the educational experiences of people of color” (p. 78). In addition, Smith and colleagues (2007) states that most research focusing on the racial experiences of Black and Latino males renders invisible their unique gender and/or race-gender identity oppression.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) is the guiding theoretical perspective for this study. The experiences of Black males in higher education are often racialized, so CRT serves as a useful lens for the analysis of these complicated experiences. CRT in education has a multidisciplinary origin. It is primarily grounded in critical legal studies, however it also borrows from critical pedagogy, Black Studies, Chicano Studies, Black feminist and Chicana feminist thought, multiculturalism and multicultural education (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Ladson Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT into education in an attempt to advance research and theory where issues of race were concerned. In their article, Ladson Billings and Tate argued that race was under-theorized in education and that studies at the time did not have a way to discuss race that would move the field forward. CRT draws from a broad base of literature in law, sociology, and history (Yosso, 2005). Critical race theory serves as a challenge to the dominant discourse on race. Scholars, using CRT, attempt to disrupt master narratives and interrupt the processes of reproducing White supremacist, racially biased outcomes. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argue that these notions attempt to hide the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in society. A CRT framework allows for marginalized populations to have their lived experiences and stories validated. CRT is not the means used to validate—the stories and experiences shared are already valid—but is used as a mechanism for moving the experiences from the margin to center.

A major tenet of CRT is counterstorytelling or producing counternarratives. People of color and other oppressed groups are given space to voice their experiences and concerns in an effort to counter the discourse that marginalizes their existence (Lopez, 2003). Race and racism are placed at the center of the narrative and counternarrative in CRT. These theoretical foundations provide the tools for understanding the complicated existence of Black male students in college. Our goal was to focus on their experiences and center their voices in our discussions. By centering, we mean that our intent is to have their voices visible and at the forefront of our work. With CRT, the participants in a study are valued and seen as co-contributors of knowledge being explored in research projects. We understand that as researchers, we have the authority to choose and craft which stories we tell, but a commitment to a reflexive and respectful methodology grounds us in an understanding of the value of our research participants.

Participant Selection

The two cases we analyze in this article are part of a larger qualitative project on the intersectional experiences of Black males at PWIs. The larger project started in the fall of 2013 at a private university in the North Eastern United States. The students for this study were recruited from the undergraduate Diaspora Union (DU). Campus advisors were also instrumental in suggesting students for the study. In order to participate, students had to: (a) identify as Black/African American; (b) identify as male; (c) identify as a non-first generation college student; and, (d) be a full-time undergraduate student. We decided to focus on full-time students because we wanted to get a sense of their experiences in all aspects of campus life including, but not limited to, experiences in the classroom, on campus, in the cafeteria, in the

residence hall, in group meetings, and so forth. None of the participants were paid for their participation in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants met with one of the researchers to discuss the aims of the study and ask any questions they had about the procedures and the larger goals of the study. Data were collected through two methods—focus groups and individual interviews. After the focus groups, a researcher contacted participants to set up individual interviews to take place on campus. Each student participated in the focus group and one individual in-depth interview. The individual interview followed up on themes that arose from the focus group and also explored a more in-depth understanding of students' experiences on campus. The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and usually lasted between 60-75 minutes.

An *open coding* method, which involved analyzing the data line by line, was used to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this process, data were broken down into smaller sections and reread to become familiar with the text; a code list was created to describe the data; data were assigned codes based on themes that emerged; data were separated based on assigned codes and reread to see if any codes needed to be shifted based on a cross-examination of the data. After the final coding process, the data were placed in thematic categories and then interpreted by the researcher. During interpretation, analytic questions were asked related to the themes and later to existing literature. In addition, selected participants were consulted about the emerging themes as a form of member checking. Pseudonyms were used in the transcription of the data to protect student identity.

FINDINGS

The narratives we explore in this article come from interviews with Garvey, a first-year student, and Solomon a second-year student, both students at Oak University (pseudonym). Both of these men identify as Black, middle-class, and non-first generation college students. Garvey identifies as heterosexual and Solomon identifies as gay. These students were interviewed individually after participating in one of the initial focus groups. Both shared stories of racial microaggressions and the stresses of navigating their college experiences as Black males. Both discussed the different ways in which their identities impacted their existence and how the dominant framings of Black males impacted their interactions with peers and employees of the university. Their narratives are organized and framed by the themes raised during the interviews—identity/perceptions and Blackness; racial microaggressions and campus experiences; parents and educational messages; internalized oppression; and, the “proving them wrong” syndrome.

Garvey's Experience

Educational drive and parental drive. Garvey (pseudonym) was one of the youngest students in the study. At the time of the interview he was a first-year student. He was very active on campus and quickly became known by his peers and faculty members as a self-driven and dedicated student. Garvey often talked about taken advantage of the opportunity to be in college and making the most of it. He knew that many young Black men did not have the

opportunity to enjoy a private college education. For him, educational success was not an option. He grew up in a household where education was stressed. It was important to share his story of his educational training before college and to understand how discussions about college were situated in his family. He spoke of his mother and father as being extremely intelligent. His mother is an attorney and his father is a nurse. In one of our meetings he reflected on the importance of his parents in his educational foundation:

My mother went to college. I don't know the exact dates. She went to Liberal Arts College (pseudonym) in Massachusetts and then she went to Small Private College (pseudonym) in Atlanta. And then she went to Law School (pseudonym) in Massachusetts. My dad was in the Army; he was a nurse in the Army. He was doing that and he didn't go to school but my dad was very intelligent. He always used to read and write. I learned how to read and write from my dad. He would always bring me into the basement and make me learn. And take little notes. I remember this. Then we would go out and do stuff and play and then I would have to come back and read into the alphabet more. So he taught me how to write and read.

Garvey described his father as a nurse who did not go to school. His mother went to college and then to graduate school. Although his father did not go to college, he learned how to become a nurse through the military. Indeed, you cannot become a nurse without schooling, but Garvey made the distinction between military training/education and the more traditional route to college. He also qualified that despite the fact that his father "didn't go to school," he was very intelligent. Garvey wanted to make sure that intelligence was not tied to school and that his father is intelligent even though he did not take the same route as his mother:

He used to always teach me life lessons. Like my dad is not the greatest person in the world but he is very smart he taught me life lessons. I can tell that he reads books all the time. He suggests books and things for me to read. It's just something about his character that's like...it imposes this intelligence. You can have like a simple conversation with him and then he just be spitting wisdom and breaking stuff down.

Again, he highlights his father's intelligence and his habit of reading. Not only did his father read, but he also passed the knowledge to Garvey. This counternarrative highlights the importance of the father-son relationship and alternative forms of learning that result. These simple conversations instilled a sense of intellectual curiosity in Garvey. During our discussions he talked about his desire to "break stuff down" as a result of the many conversations he has with his father. This interaction showcases the ways in which educational practices can be transferred within a family structure. Again, although Garvey's father did not go to college, he was able to create a solid foundation for him to be successful on a college campus.

For Garvey, the idea of college was implanted at a very young age. Both his parents stressed the importance of education. Their story contradicts the popular deficit narratives of the dysfunctional Black households with uninvolved parents that *don't care* about education (Ladson-Billings, 2007). His parents stressed the importance of education and not settling in life. He pushed to be more than just a *negative statistic*:

The idea of college started when I was young. My dad said he wanted me to go to college in Boston at first. He said that Massachusetts was where the best schools were. So after that, my parents got divorced, so I don't really see him that often. My mom was always talking about school. She always urged her children to go to college. I have three siblings and we are all in college now, wait my youngest sister is in high school and is about to go to college. I have a brother who's in college and I have a sister who's in college. My mother always urged her kids to go to college. So for us, if we didn't go to college we would have to leave the house. We couldn't stay there.

Again, education was not an option. All of his siblings were pushed to college and understood that if they did not attend, they would not be allowed to live at home. His parents saw education as an equalizer and one of the only ways for Black people to be successful. They saw education as a key to open up doors to great opportunities. As a young Black male, he was repeatedly told that education was the only way he could ensure he would not end up as a statistic and meet the fate of many of his classmates. Here he discussed his mother's view of being above average:

To be successful, my mom always said, "You don't want to be the average African-American. You don't want to be average, you want to be more. You don't want to just be a statistic." That didn't really [make sense] to me until I became a freshman in high school. I didn't really start to think about college serious until my sophomore year. And then I was like, "Yo, I really need to get good grades." I always wanted to go to college; it's never been a doubt in my mind, I always wanted to go to college. There's never been a point in my life when I didn't want to go to college.

Garvey's mother, as a person who successfully navigated higher education, understood the benefits of a quality education. She understood the negative representations of Black males and wanted to ensure her children did not meet that fate. He described his mother as stern when it came to his school performance. He understood that college would only be possible if he put in the work to attend. The talk of college for him started early and having been exposed at such a young age, he received reinforcement of the idea throughout his life. The constant reminders kept him focused and eventually he was admitted to a number of schools, and decided to attend Oak University. His in-home educational preparation is key in helping one understand the importance of parental college attendance and the generational transfer of cultural capital to future generations.

Double consciousness and resisting popular representations. In this next section, we focus on the experiences of Garvey at Oak University. He attended the institution with the support of his family and an understanding of the importance of education. He also had his mother as a resource to assist him in navigating some of the issues he faced while on campus. Even with this support, he often found himself dealing with issues he did not plan to encounter. As a Black, middle-class male on campus, he often struggled with the ways people perceived Black males. He was not an athlete, nor first-generation student, but he felt that people put all Black men into the same box, as described by Harper and Nichols (2008). In one of our conversations, he wanted to speak about his feelings related to the one-dimensional representations of Black males. He immediately began to focus on representations of Blackness in popular media and how it impacted perceptions people had of him:

I hate it I hate it. The show “Love and Hip-Hop,” I hate it so much. I hate it with a passion. I mean it’s like entertainment and all, but we all are not just rappers and stuff like that. We are more than that. We’re not popularized, or not the majority, so I just really hate the fact that sometimes... I’m wise enough to not believe it. The stuff that I see. But some people are not wise enough. Like, you can talk to me and some African-American students and we won’t believe what we see. But then you can talk to some African-American students who would believe what they see and that’s who they are supposed to be. I’m sorry but if you talk to White people, I think they probably would believe everything that they see on TV about us. It just bothers me to the point where it’s like, “What are you going to do about it?” It becomes their reality.

Oak University is not very diverse and there is not a lot of visible interracial interaction seen on campus. For Garvey, the lack of interracial interaction caused people to look to popular culture to get their “dose of reality” about different people. He struggled with the idea that people on campus could not tell the difference between what they saw on television and reality. He often talked about how people looked at him and assumed he was like what they saw on reality shows. They assumed he was first-generation, poor, and not smart. He constantly attempted to upset these notions but was often disheartened when he thought about the fact that without positive interactions with diverse groups, what his White peers saw on TV became their reality. This perceived reality impacted the way they viewed him. Dubois (1903) discusses this double consciousness, the two-ness that the American Negro feels when having to view himself through the lens of others. Garvey and his peers discussed feeling pressured to behave in a certain manner because of how people may perceive their actions. This burden of representation manifested in social and academic settings.

Garvey talked about his inner struggles with representation of Black males and went on to discuss his feelings and how he internalized some of these beliefs. As a Black male on campus, he is forced to think about his race and how he is perceived in addition to his student work. In hostile, non-diverse college environments, Black males balance the burden of representation with doing well academically and fitting in socially:

Sometimes I feel bad because sometimes I start to believe it. Like what they think about us. There are moments where I question myself. Like I’m at a time right now where I question everything. I’m trying to make sure I make the right moves to make the best decisions. I don’t want to be caught in this trap. Because I feel like that’s where African-Americans go wrong, or Black people in general, we get caught in this trap where we want to be this thing on TV. Like I feel like Africans and African-Americans, we are at war with ourselves because we believe everything that we see on TV about us and we believe what this White person is saying about us. We are at war with ourselves.

Navigating the college environment is difficult and complex. Garvey often struggled with his identity in relation to the external perceptions. He wanted people to know him as an individual and not be overshadowed by society’s infatuation with presenting one-dimensional caricatures of Black males. Above, he mentions starting to believe the images he sees and his struggles with internalized oppression. Similar to double consciousness, dealing with identifying as a Black male on a college campus and seeing themselves through the lens of others, often

takes a toll for these students in a way that's not shared by their White peers. He understood the landscape and aimed to avoid the *traps* of becoming the image that was put before him in the media. He wanted to be seen as an individual, but felt the added pressure of being a representative for other Black males. He also articulated an understanding that he is not alone in these struggles and others were facing internal conflicts related to their identities as well.

Another issue that Garvey faced is the belief that all Black students were *diversity admits* and not as qualified as the other students. Students often approached him as a *charity case* and did not view him as an academic peer. These views often led to Garvey to deal with disrespect from classmates because of their misconceived notion of who he was and what he was capable of accomplishing:

I don't want to be like inferior to anyone. You know, I treat people with respect. I speak and I treat everyone with respect. It sounds idealistic, but I want everyone on the same scale just equal. I don't know man. I'm going to sound crazy but there's something about the White race. You have the White people who understand, then you have White people who just do not. Like [White] people don't know about anyone because they don't have to be subjected to people of other races like Asians, Africans, Latinos, and stuff like that.

Garvey had the experience of being one of very few Black males on campus. He was often the only person of color in his classroom and the only one on his residence hall floor. He had experiences with being singled out on the floor and often felt alone in his struggles. He voiced concerns about the importance of creating a safe space where everyone could feel as if their presence is valued on campus.

Although he discussed his struggles, he also articulated his desire to be different. The negative experiences have also served as a source of motivation. He used the pressure to keep him focused on proving everyone wrong:

It kind of motivates me; I want to be challenged. I don't want to do the same things that everybody else is doing. I don't want to do the same things these white students are doing. I want to prove everybody wrong. I'm very motivated to do things. I use it as a positive thing to motivate me.

Students can struggle with the internalization of oppression, yet in dealing with the conflict are able to find ways to overcome and thrive in hostile environments. Garvey understood the issues he dealt with were not the same for his White peers and that he has an added burden of representation. At times, it seemed as if he got bogged down with the pressure when reflecting on his campus experiences, but at other times he was able to get motivated and keep pushing to achieve high levels of success. He understood that if he was successful, there would be a chance for him to counteract the negative perceptions of him and other students of color on campus. He welcomed this challenge, but also acknowledged the toll that it took upon him.

When we were about to end the interview session, he asked if I had a little more time for him to tell me about a problem he was dealing with on campus. He then proceeded to tell me about a situation that was taking place with his roommate that he did not know how to handle:

My roommate called me a *nigga* the other day. My roommate he never said the N-word before, but he just started saying it to me. He said like, “Yo, wassup my nigga.” And I’m I stopped at first and I was like, “What?” And I feel like I signed up for the school and I’m gonna hear the word once in a while. I’m here so it’s not like I can do anything. He’s not from the hood. He’s like your average White student here. I want to say that I’m not comfortable with it. When I hear it I’m just like, “Damn that gives him power.” I haven’t asked him about it yet because he’s only said it about twice.

The exchange with his roommate is complicated. For one, Garvey did not know how to feel about his White roommate’s use of the N-word. What was a bit more troubling is that he convinced himself that he was going to hear the word on campus at some point. During this part of the discussion he was a little irritated at the fact that a White student called him *nigga* and he did not know how to respond. Some might say he should have responded violently to the word and “showed the White boy a lesson” for using that term, but he understood the complexity of the situation and where he would end up based on a violent response. Rather than outright address it, he was dealing with it internally, trying to understand what could have led his roommate to feel comfortable with calling him *nigga*, especially when that was not the type of relationship they enjoyed:

And I was like, “What was up with this kid?” I don’t even say it! I don’t even say it! Back home I may say the word with my boys. But now that I’m here, it’s like that word has meaning now. I don’t even say it to some of the other guys. The Black guys.”

While looking at Garvey squirm in his seat as he retold the story, it seemed as if he felt he was letting his people down and relinquishing his power by allowing a White male to call him *nigga* without consequence. He even tried to rationalize it when he stated he felt like the term would be used against him at some point because of the makeup of the campus. It is troubling to think that a Black male student expects to be called a *nigger* on a college campus. The idea that certain behaviors should be expected highlights the work that needs to be done to create safer campus climates for all members of the university community.

Solomon’s Experience

Solomon was the oldest student in the study. He was a junior at the time who was very active on campus with the NAACP and other student organizations. He attended Oak University with training in social justice and activism. As a high school student, he led student groups and was able to connect on issues with community leaders and elected officials. He has a history of college attendance in his family. He mentioned that both of his parents graduated from the same selective, research-intensive institution and were both athletes and activists during their college years. He mentioned that his grandparents were also college graduates. Solomon was taught by his parents to be outspoken and to stand for justice. He knew how to navigate most issues on campus, but he still faced hardships at Oak University. Similar to Garvey, he became increasingly frustrated with people trying to put him on a box based on their perceptions of who he was as a Black male:

I'm not who they think I am. I'm able to recognize cues. I'm able to pick up on cues. I get stories from my parents. They tell me stories from their experiences in college. They both went to Upstate University. My mother was the captain of the track team and my father was a defensive end on the football team. That's how they paid for college. My mother is an attorney and my father is a pastor. So with my mother being an athlete and my father being an athlete, and my mother being [in a Black sorority], they told me a lot of the experiences that they had back in the day. And so knowing what they've gone through and the things that I've seen through my activism, I'm able to pick up on cues that most students are not able to pick up on.

Solomon discussed how he was taught by his parents and had been able to learn from their stories. As the child of college graduates, he was equipped with resources that a first-generation student would not typically be privy to during their transition to college. When he talked about "picking up on cues," he referred to how he analyzed different situations to understand the underlying context. He was always on guard and willing to fight for justice. This is how he was raised. He aimed to use his knowledge to be successful and better the lives of others:

At Oak University, they are not used to someone who is going to hold you accountable for the things. Most students would just probably report it to the multicultural office, or just keep it to themselves. But I'm not that way; I'm going to be vocal. When I tell other students about these issues they're like, "Why do you care?" "Why is it a problem?" They don't understand the significance of some of these issues. You know asking for ID or something like that. Some people would say that's protocol, but to me that's not protocol if I'm the only one you're asking for an ID.

Solomon was very vocal on campus and would try to assist his peers with recognizing unequal treatment or racist interactions on campus. He at times grew frustrated when students would not respond to their negative treatment on campus. As he stated, some students would tell the multicultural office, but would never go beyond them in reporting incidents. For Solomon, if something was wrong, it needed to be addressed.

Macro/microaggressions and differential treatment. Some of his peers thought he made situations worse by being vocal and some of the administration did not know how to handle his determination. Solomon was able to see injustice and had no problem addressing it. He felt as if the school rules were not applied equally to all students and this difference in treatment was often drawn along racial lines:

I'm tired of consistently having the rules apply differently to different people. I see *them* driving onto campus with a car full of kids and they only make them show one ID card and then they just go on through. But that doesn't happen if it's Black kids. When Jordan's brother was trying to pick her up they searched his car for drugs. The security guard just made an assumption that he had drugs in the car. Like when my boyfriend was bringing me and my friends back in, we are all Oak University students, but we all had to show our IDs. These are students that come the campus, get drunk, go to the residence halls, bust windows, strip down ceiling tiles, and rip out water fountains. You make such

of an effort to profile Black students when it's the guests of the White students that are coming on campus and destroying property.

Solomon articulated his frustration with campus policies that were only enforced for certain populations. A major issue for some students of color was the heightened security presence on campus. Oak University is a suburban school and has 24-hour security presence at all campus entrances. Students often say the university exists in a bubble and that all of the security is overkill based on the location of the institution. When you drive on to campus, the driver of the vehicle is supposed to show an Oak University ID card before they are allowed to drive on to campus. Many students of color talk about the fact that security made everyone in their vehicles show an ID in order to be let on campus. Solomon talked about how certain populations of students were allowed to circumvent the rules. He felt that security was so busy profiling the few people of color on campus while White students were damaging the campus and not profiled by security. For Solomon, students of color were *othered* on campus and constantly dealt with campus surveillance.

During the interview he was energized about telling his stories of mistreatment on campus. Although he was taught to deal with injustice, it did not shield him from the emotional stress of mistreatment on campus. He had faced a number of smaller issues on campus, but he shared two major events that he experienced during his time at Oak University. What follows is a longer story describing another negative interaction he had with campus security:

Me and my boyfriend got stopped walking on to campus. We were walking through the gate, we weren't driving. So I showed [the security guard] my ID. So that didn't even suffice. He automatically wanted to see my boyfriend's visitors pass. My boyfriend didn't have a visitors pass because he wasn't staying the night. So then when we walked back over, I took precaution and I did make a visitors pass on my *iPad*. I expected something to happen, so that is why I went ahead and did it. So we got to the quad and who's there but another security officer. So he says, "Hey sir, I just want to make sure that he gets his visitors pass." This was not the same security officer. This was a different officer. So they had to have called another officer on campus to look out for "these two" and give a description of what we look like. What was funny is that it was parent's weekend. So people were coming in and out of campus who didn't go to the University but somehow we got singled out. So that's why I was ticked off. So that turned into a whole huge controversy. So I just realize, you know, that the rules apply differently to different students, you know. It's something that's expected just being on this campus you know.

Solomon articulated being singled out on campus during a busy parents' weekend. Usually people show identification when they are driving on to campus, but he was stopped, more than once, while walking on campus to be asked for an ID. This was during a busy weekend with crowds of people on campus, but his skin pigmentation stood out and he was apprehended. He paid tuition like everyone else, but articulated being made to feel as an outsider on campus. Similar to Garvey's incident with his roommate calling him *nigga*, Solomon also stated that treatment he received was to be *expected* on the campus. However, being the activist that he is, Solomon went to the campus safety office to report the incident:

Before I met with these people, I met with some of the other security guards. They weren't the chief. I tried to meet with them first, but they were not pleasant. One of them was a very aggressive. One was yelling at me. I was trying to explain to him what the rules were and the reasons why did not need a visitor's pass. It got reported because I took it upon myself to report it. That was a consistent thing. That wasn't just something I was experiencing, but something that other students of color were experiencing [as well]. I informed the chief of campus safety. I got in contact with the vice president. I even gave a report to the president of the University himself. I sent him a big packet of events that happened. All of it was documented, so you know, so he was aware of it.

Solomon addressed his concerns with his treatment on campus with the officers, but his report was not well received. However, Solomon did not stop there. He continued to follow the chain of command to ensure his story was heard and the administration was aware of the treatment of students of color on campus. He understood the way he was treated was wrong and that nothing would change if he kept it to himself. Even with the administration being made aware of his treatment and him meeting with the vice-president of the institution, he still faced other incidents on campus:

So I let the administration know about the incidents. I explained to them about the incident before when my roommate didn't want us there. My boyfriend had a visitor's pass and so my roommate didn't want us to stay in the room so they made us leave campus. So we had to stay at the train station overnight. We have a legit visitor's pass, but to force me to leave the room?! To go through all that trouble to bring the security guard and the residence hall director and two resident advisors?! And then escort us out of the building at 12:30 in the morning?! And then have us dumped off at the train station just to prove a point?! Ok so my guest doesn't have the right to stay because my roommate didn't want my guest here?! Ok. But the way the school conducted it. They just dropped us off there. It was explained to them that we had nowhere to go and they just dropped us there. So this was probably the worst experience we ever had. So that was in the packet that I sent to administration.

Here Solomon described another unpleasant incident with campus safety officers. He had been through a lot on campus and fought for the rights of others. He worked on campus to make it welcoming for all people, but he still dealt with horrible treatment by campus officials. In all of his work and experiences on campus he considered this the worst. He was taken from campus and driven to the city transportation station to sleep there overnight. For him, this was an example of the unequal treatment of students of color on campus. He did not think this would be the same course of action taken against a White wealthy student. For him, his race blinded people of his humanity. The perception they had of him and other Black males determined the type of treatment he received on campus.

Being Black, being gay, being a Black gay male. In addition to the mistreatment based on racialized perceptions, Solomon talked about his identity struggles he faced on campus as a middle-class, gay Black male. For him, being gay complicated his experiences and he often struggled with internal conflicts based on his multiple identities. When reflecting on the incidents with campus safety and his roommate, Solomon was able to categorize the treatment based on the intersection of his multiple identities: "So that was in the packet that I sent to

administration. But that's beside the point. That had to do with gay and Black." His treatment was complicated by him being Black and gay. He felt campus safety took issue with his Blackness, while his roommate took issue with his gayness and Blackness: "My roommate felt uncomfortable cause if my boyfriend came over he would go to sleep in the common room because he wasn't comfortable if my boyfriend was in the room. We made it very clear that we would never do anything in the room. Then again that's not my problem if you are uncomfortable." Solomon knew his roommate was not comfortable with having a gay roommate and assured him that he would never "do anything [sexual]" with his boyfriend in the room. Other students were allowed to bring their significant others into their rooms, but Solomon faced complications because of his sexual orientation.

When asked to describe his identity struggles, he mentioned feeling in conflict with himself based on the intersection of his multiple identities:

I feel like I can't always be myself. It's a constant battle. Because being in a professional setting, I would say I often use my gay personality to mask my Black personality. I either feel this overwhelming pressure to make people feel comfortable because I think that there's this assumption that they're making about me. Then there are situations where I feel like I don't need to suppress my Blackness. So like, usually with White women, I am prone to mask my Blackness with gayness. And with White men, I often try to assert my Blackness. And kind of prove to them that, yes, I am an intimidating, culturally macho male, but at the same time I'm also smart enough intellectually spar with you. I'm smart and I'm badass!

Solomon articulated seeing himself through the lens of how others viewed him. Mitchell and Means (2014) posit that Black gay male students feel a need to code switch and hide parts of their identity more often than their gay White peers. Similarly, depending on the situation, Solomon seemed to hide parts of his identity. He viewed his gay identity as less threatening than his Black identity, so he "upped his gayness" when he wanted to make others feel comfortable in his presence. In other situations he "upped his Blackness" in order to counteract false perceptions of his masculinity and intellect.

Juggling different presentations of his identity was difficult to manage. Constantly thinking about what identity he needed to "up" was tiring for Solomon. His intersecting identities complicated his daily existence on campus:

And then there other times when it's like I'm racially paranoid. Then I started being prideful because I'm making the assumption once again that you have these inferior expectations of me. In terms of my intellect; in terms of my accomplishments; [and] in terms of the complexity of my thought process and my character. Because I'm making the assumption that you think I'm inferior I'm going to be even more prideful and put it in your face that I'm Black and I'm smart.

Similar to Garvey, Solomon was aware of the perceptions associated with Black males and always tried to prove *them* wrong. He articulated feeling the need to highlight his accomplishments and intellect in an effort to counter the perceptions others held of Black males on campus. He understood that he lived with the burden of representation and unfortunately, having to serve as a representative for all Black males.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In this study two Black males articulated their realities and placed their experiences at the center of educational research. While this study provides critical insight into Garvey and Solomon's experiences at a PWI, it is preliminary in scope. This study, however, provides rich descriptive details of the participants and their experiences to help institutional officials assess the transferability of the findings to students at their institutions. The stories shared by Garvey and Solomon are very powerful and highlight issues that Black males continue to face on college campuses. Their stories highlighted their raced, gendered, and classed experiences as Black male college students. Although they are not first-generation students, some of their stories are indivisible from those of other Black male students (Strayhorn, 2008b; Harper, 2009). For example, Harper (2009) has noted that the experiences of Black men at PWIs are defined by racism and racial stereotypes. In fact, Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, and Platt (2011) argue that even way Black men have been admitted to the university through similar admissions criteria as their White counterparts, they are still likely to be viewed as students who benefited from affirmative action. Findings from this current study echo that of other studies on Black men (see Cuyjet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Specifically, this study revealed that regardless of the students' socio-economic status, and in some cases, sexual orientation, race continues to define the experiences of Black men on the campuses of PWIs (Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010). Indeed, both of these students were prepared by their families to be successful in school, yet they still faced difficulty navigating their campus environments. They may have had a different upbringing than some of the first-generation Black males on campus, but they were all viewed in a similar lens by people on campus. Smith and his colleagues (2007) argue, "At minimum, Black males carry the burden of two negative social identities as the move through society, one as a member of the African American race (i.e., anti-Black racism) and the other as a Black male (i.e., Black misandry or anti-Black male attitudes and oppression" (p. 553). The experiences of being Black, being male, and being Black males intersect to impact the lived realities of the students in this study. Race and gender are visible markers that lead to negative treatment for Black male students at PWIs.

Although we only focused on a small portion of the experiences of two middle-class Black males, their stories are important in continuing to provide counterstories to the dominant narratives of Black males on campus. These students often feel the need to fight against negative assumptions about their existence on campus. They perform in a manner in which they feel shines a positive light, not only on themselves, but for other Black males. They exist on campus burdened by the forced responsibility of serving as representatives for all Black male students. Indeed, given the findings from this current study, PWIs need to be more intentional about creating a campus climate where Black males feel a sense of mattering and belonging. One of the ways to do this is to host forums about the importance of valuing diversity and facilitating cross-cultural interaction. Given the negative perceptions that the Black students' White peers had of minority students, providing outlets of this nature could be extremely beneficial to help create a more inviting campus climate for Black males on campus. In addition to implementing a forum to discuss issues of racial diversity, these forums could also be used to help educate the campus community about GLBT students.

Aside from hosting forums on diversity, institutions might also consider implementing programs to help students engage in meaningful interracial dialogue. An example of this might take the form of the *Bridging Building* program that was implemented at Shippensburg

University. With this program, a select group of students were trained to enter the classroom and facilitate discussions on racism and other forms of discriminatory behavior against minority students. Moreover, both students discussed issues with different forms of racial microaggressions. According to Solorzano and his colleagues (2000), racial microaggressions are subtle forms of racism, which can lead to psychological stress and cause minority students to prematurely depart from a university. Given Black students' encounters with racial microaggressions at PWIs, these institutions should not merely conduct a campus climate survey in order to better understand how pervasive racial microaggressions are for Black students, but also use the results of survey to implement programs and policies to help increase the campus climate for Black students. In addition to surveys, PWIs need to provide cultural competency training to institutional agents (e.g., faculty, staff, and administrators) to help them become aware of racial microaggressions and their impact on Black students and also provide them with knowledge about practices that could be used to support the development and success of Black students. Moreover, there also has to be an understanding that Black male college students are not a monolithic group. Socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, prior schooling experience, and other identities, all impact the educational experiences of Black male college students. Recognizing the intersecting identities of Black male college students will enable institutions of higher education to more effectively implement practices and programs to support the individualities of Black male collegians. Finally, scholars and practitioners must continue to counter the dominant narratives about Black male identity and their academic achievement.

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Intersectionality and STEM: The Role of Race and Gender in the Academic Pursuits of African American Women in STEM

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African American women are disproportionately underrepresented in the domains of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in relation to their share of the United States population. This disparity must be reduced in order for the United States to maintain its global standing in the competitive arenas of technology and innovation. However, current research tends to underexamine how the intersection of race and gender identities impact the experiences of African American women pursuing STEM careers. This dearth of knowledge is addressed in this study, which examines the multifaceted marginalization that African American women typically experience in the process of obtaining their STEM degrees, particularly in the computing sciences. Accordingly, this study utilizes intersectionality theory as a theoretical foundation to explore the role race and gender play in the STEM pursuits of African American women, offering a window into some of the strategies this population employs in accomplishing STEM educational goals and pursuits.

INTRODUCTION

The director of the National Science Foundation (NSF), among others, has identified increasing the number of minority graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields as a national priority. In 2010 testimony before the House Subcommittee on Research and Science Education, then director, Arden L. Bement Jr., noted that changes in national demographics no longer allow for “linear growth” but that increases in minority STEM graduates must shift into what he called “geometric growth” (as cited in Basken, 2010, p. 1). Accordingly, the goal of increasing the proportion of women and minority graduates in STEM fields is driven, in part, by research about these groups’ lack of representation in STEM academia and industries.

The NSF's National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2010 dataset illustrates the significant hurdles facing women and African Americans in science and engineering (S&E) fields. Analyses show that despite African Americans comprising nearly 11% of the total 2010 U.S. labor force, 5.5% or 247,000 jobs classified as S&E occupations were held by African Americans; and of those 247,000 S&E occupation jobs, 108,000, or 2.4% of all S&E jobs, were held by African American women. However, those African American women who do work in STEM fields enjoy a smaller wage gap compared to women in non-STEM fields (as cited in Beede et al., 2011).

In light of the statistical documentation demonstrating both women, overall, and minority women’s underrepresentation in STEM occupations and academic programs, numerous scholars have contributed empirical evidence and theoretical conceptualizations concerning the factors affecting women's college decision-making processes in regards to STEM fields (Morgan, Gelbgiser, & Weeden, 2013). Among these empirical and theoretical contributions include the role of stereotype threat in hindering women’s performance in mathematics (see Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999); institutional variables affecting undergraduate STEM student completion rates (see Eagan, Hurtado, & Chang, 2010; Griffith, 2010; Perna et al., 2009); faculty influence on minority women's persistence in science (see A. C. Johnson, 2007); the postbaccalaureate career and educational goals of women in STEM majors (see Cole & Espinoza, 2011); and the overall role of gender-based stereotypes (see Nassar-McMillan, Wyer, Oliver-Hoyo, & Schneider, 2011). While these contributions serve to inform the current study, this study aims to better understand the intersections of race and gender, and how these identities intersect in the process of STEM education and matriculation among African American women in computing. As such, the primary research question driving this study was as follows: What role does race and gender play in the academic pursuits of African American women in the STEM field of computing sciences?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Women hold STEM jobs at a far lower rate compared to their overall participation in the job market—while African American women make up about 6.4% of the total population, they hold only 2.4% of all S&E jobs. Within mathematical and computing science occupations, African American women accounted for 65,000 of the more than 3.5 million people employed in these fields in 2010, or approximately 2% of the total mathematical and computing sciences jobs (Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering, 2013). Additionally, statistics measuring income disparities between White and African American

women in computer information systems (CIS) fields show that on average, African American women earn 25% less than their White women counterparts (Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering, 2013). While these numbers demonstrate an underrepresentation of African American women in CIS for one recent year, the proportional lag in the representation of African American women in STEM fields overall has persisted since at least the 1970s (Ong, Wright, Espinosa, & Orfield, 2011).

While some have drawn on stereotypes to explain the underrepresentation of minority women—attributing it to a lack of interest among these women to pursue STEM-related majors and occupations—research provides no evidence of STEM aspiration gaps (Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Smyth & McArdle, 2004; Staniec, 2004). On the other hand, underscoring the salience of social identity in minority women’s STEM academic and career goals, Ong and associates (2011) consistently found social identity to be among the most important in assuring STEM success. In their analysis, Ong and colleagues (2011) note that the intersectional identities of minority women play an important role in the development and persistence of these women in STEM fields. Additionally, Carlone and Johnson (2007) noted that the development of a *science identity* provided a solid foundation for future career success among the 15 minority women who participated in their study. Conversely, others identified factors decreasing the likelihood of persistence of minority women in STEM majors include: the lack of science talent development (Ong, 2005), the delegitimization of minority women within STEM communities, and the isolation minority women often experience when they are all-too-often among the few, if not only, minority woman in their laboratory or academic department (Carlone & Johnson, 2007).

Intersectionality and STEM. An intersectional analysis of minority women’s experiences in STEM fields holds that minority women are subject to the complex interplay of sexism and racism, conceptualized as the *double bind* (Ong et al., 2011). The double bind consists of a set of “unique challenges minority women [face] as they *simultaneously* experienced sexism and racism in their STEM careers” (p. 175). In the context of African American women interested in STEM fields, the double bind concept holds that these women face the unique problem of pursuing career paths that are not only in conflict with their racial identity (A. C. Johnson, Brown, Carlone, & Cuevas, 2011) but also with their gender identity while situated in an environment historically dominated by White and Asian males (Jackson & Charleston, 2012; Brown, 1997; A. C. Johnson et al., 2011; Malcom, 1996; Margolis, Goode, & Bernier, 2011).

Research supporting the importance of intersectional identities suggests that African American women’s success in STEM fields may hinge on the development of an identity that is compatible with their gender and racial identities, as well as their academic interests (Borum & Walker, 2012; Espinosa, 2008; Fogliati & Bussey, 2013; A. C. Johnson et al., 2011; Ko, Kachchaf, Ong, & Hodari, 2013; McGee & Martin, 2011; Rosenthal, London, Levy, & Lobel, 2011). Although the development of strong, intersectional identities have been identified as critical cultural and societal factors in development (Rosenthal et al., 2011), the intersections of Black women’s racial, gender, and scientific identities may conflict with many of the messages Black women and girls receive throughout the educational pipeline, and may thus pose a significant challenge to their ability to successfully develop a Black woman scientist identity.

Challenges in the educational pipeline. From a young age, girls tend to be alienated by science (Brickhouse, Lowery, & Schultz, 2000). The conflation of numerous factors, including gendered-stereotypes, pedagogical techniques, and science curricula, conspire against many young women’s ability to develop and maintain an interest in science, as well as to develop a

science identity (Brickhouse et al., 2000). Other factors, such as exposure to science and technology outside the classroom, have been identified as an impediment to young women's interests in STEM fields. For example, researchers have shown that as compared to Whites, Black girls are less likely to be exposed to computers and technology at an early age, contributing to limiting their initial interest in the field (Fisher, Margolis, & Miller, 1997; Margolis et al., 2011). In addition to the likelihood of decreased exposure to science, technology, and computers outside the classroom, young women and girls of color are less likely to succeed in the areas of math and science at all levels of their academic careers, leaving them underprepared to achieve success in STEM fields at the undergraduate level (ACT, 2006; Buzzetto-More, Ukoha, & Rustagi, 2010; Espinosa, 2008; A. C. Johnson et al., 2011; Perna et al., 2009). Despite the likelihood of depressed avenues of exposure and underpreparation, the literature posits that the underrepresentation of Black women in STEM is due not to a lack of interest or competency, but instead is owed to the tendency of the American education system to disengage, under-educate, and underutilize women of color at all levels of the academic pipeline (Farinde & Lewis, 2012; A. C. Johnson et al., 2011; Ko et al., 2013; Margolis et al., 2011; Syed & Chemers, 2011). From the elementary to high school level, young Black women have historically underperformed in the areas of math and science in comparison to their White counterparts, which has negatively impacted young Black women's intentions to strive for careers in STEM fields (ACT, 2006). Although efforts to eradicate this disparity have been studied, and some models which have achieved success have been developed (e.g., the Meyerhoff Scholars Program described in Maton, Hrabowski, & Schmitt, 2000), exemplars demonstrating broad-based, successful initiatives remain sparse. Thus, for young Black women, several significant factors compound early on to generate barriers to their success in STEM including: The socially-constructed incongruence of gender, racial, and science identities (A. C. Johnson et al., 2011); systemic educational barriers to Black girls' engagement in STEM (Brickhouse et al., 2000; Farinde & Lewis, 2012; A. C. Johnson et al., 2011; Syed & Chemers, 2011); and barriers inhibiting early science and technology exposure (Fisher et al., 1997).

In the transition from K-12 to higher education systems, much of the published literature to date has emphasized adequate preparation at early and secondary levels of education as most integral to sustaining Black women STEM scholars in higher levels of academia (Ehrenberg, 2010; George, Neale, Van Horne, & Malcolm, 2001; Perna et al., 2009; Price, 2010). In light of the significant obstacles confronting many young Black women in the K-12 pipeline, particularly early on, it may be that young Black women develop lower levels of perceived self-efficacy in math and science, a related factor contributing to depressed levels of later STEM degree attainment (Espinosa, 2008). Indeed, research examining the decision to choose a STEM major found that that earlier achievement in mathematics contributed both significantly and positively to perceived math self-efficacy for underrepresented minorities, which in turn played a significant role in students' decisions to choose a STEM major (see Wang, 2013). In light of Wang (2013) and others' findings (e.g., Frank et al., 2008; Rieggle-Crumb, King, Grodsky, & Muller, 2012; Rieggle-Crumb, Moore, & Ramos-Wada, 2011), significant attention should be paid to early science and math achievement as a precursor to later high math and science self-efficacy development.

At the undergraduate level, many studies point to social factors and academic rigor as hindrances to Black women's persistence in STEM and computing sciences. Evidence that demonstrates that students of color are more likely to discontinue their STEM studies for a variety of reasons, such as social isolation, academic difficulties, and financial stresses

(Buzzetto-More et al., 2010; Charleston, 2012; George et al., 2001), and may negatively contribute to Black women undergraduates' experience based on their racial identity. Other scholars, such as Palmer, Maramba, and Dancy (2011), discovered that underrepresented minorities are apt to experience feelings of alienation in STEM classes, and underlined the need for institutions to be more mindful of minority student integration and support at all levels of undergraduate experience including in the classroom culturally, and in terms of extracurricular activities (e.g., academic-related student clubs and organizations). For Black undergraduate women in STEM fields, the intersections of gender and race present unique barriers, as Black women often report instances of multifaceted discrimination based on both their gender and racial identities (D. R. Johnson, 2011).

These barriers to success remain for Black women at the graduate level, where they are often faced with cultural boundaries that discourage their ability to amalgamate their other, and often-conflicting gender, racial, and academic identities. Studies concerning students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), many of whom have gone on to pursue graduate degrees at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), have shown HBCU environments to be conducive to Black students' success in STEM fields (Malcom, 1996; Owens, Shelton, Bloom, & Cavin, 2012; Perna et al., 2009; Perna, Gasman, Gary, Lundy-Wagner, & Drezner, 2010). In one qualitative study, "From one Culture to Another: Years One and Two of Graduate School for African American Women in the STEM Fields," Joseph (2012) investigated the HBCU-to-PWI pipeline and found that these students, who had experienced extremely nurturing and supportive cultural support at their undergraduate HBCUs, found their experience at the graduate-level in PWIs to be markedly cold and alienating, causing many of them to question their academic abilities. A similarly alienating culture was found in laboratory settings, where Black women often reported feeling like the *other* instead of successfully assimilating into their respective laboratory settings (see Ko et al., 2013).

At higher levels of academia, such as doctoral or faculty positions, African American women face even more obstacles in advancing their careers in their respective fields (Syed & Chemers, 2011). These women face the unique problem of balancing their career advancement and their family lives while upholding culturally acceptable roles for their gender as well as their race (Cech, Rubineau, Silbey, & Seron, 2011; Ko et al., 2013). Moreover, many underrepresented minority women in STEM who pursue careers in academia report experiencing instances of sexism at their institutions of employment when faced with family-related matters such as maternity leave, which negatively affects their attitudes toward their own success (Turner et al., 2011). Another barrier to the retention of Black women in STEM fields at higher levels is the desire for activism. A qualitative study conducted by Ko, Kachchaf, Ong, and Hodari (2013) found that many women of color in STEM express a strong desire to improve conditions for younger generations of underrepresented racial identities and women through recruitment, volunteerism, charity work, or other activities—all of which can take precedence over their own professional advancement.

Despite an increase in the amount of attention paid to the experiences, challenges, and barriers to women and minorities in STEM fields, research is still needed to better understand the specific barriers causing the underrepresentation of Black women in the computer sciences and the merits of various proposed prescriptions. By qualitatively exploring the experiences of African American STEM aspirants in computing science academic trajectories, this research study seeks to investigate and illuminate the current gaps in the literature in an effort to better formulate solutions to these obstacles. As mentioned previously, this study is guided by the

following question: What role does race and gender play in the academic pursuits of African American women in the STEM field of computing sciences?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptually and practically, intersectionality serves a dual role as both a theoretical lens and methodological framework. Intersectionality both critiques and offers alternatives to traditional modes of understanding the subjugating experiences of women whose marginalization emanates from multiple angles—in the case of Black women, as both a subjugated racial minority and as a woman. Further, intersectionality shifts the focus, as Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) put it, “beyond the more narrowly circumscribed demands for inclusion with the logics of sameness and difference” (p. 791). This shift in focus “addressed larger ideological structures in which subjects, problems, and solutions were framed” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 791). In other words, intersectionality’s utility is not confined to conceptual or theoretical applications; it also offers scholars a set of practical methodological tools to give voice to individuals with multiplicative marginalities. Through the creative and innovative deployment of empirical methodological traditions, researchers are better able to uncover, challenge, and undermine the phenomenon of multiple overlapping sources of subjugation.

Intersectional lenses and methodologies have been deployed well beyond the law—intersectionality’s field of origination—and have made contributions to other fields such as geography (e.g., Valentine, 2007); sociology (e.g., Choo & Ferree, 2010); psychology (e.g., Shields, 2008); leadership studies (e.g., Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010); religion (e.g., Lee, 2012); queer theory and sexuality studies (e.g., Battle & Ashley, 2008; Fotopoulou, 2012; Moore, 2012; Stirratt, Meyer, Ouellette, & Gara, 2008); international and transnational studies (e.g., Choo, 2012; Lewis, 2013); and education (e.g., Alejano-Steele et al., 2011; Grant & Zwier, 2011; C. E. Harper, 2011; S. R. Harper et al., 2011; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Museus, 2011; Pifer, 2011; Stirratt et al., 2008). Although intersectionality has been widely applied in other areas of social science research (particularly in gender and critical race theory research contexts), Museus and Griffin (2011) noted intersectionality has been applied less frequently, and indeed runs counter to trends among higher education researchers, who tend to examine singular identities. Museus and Griffin (2011) further contend that contemporary unidimensional analytical frameworks at best obscure and overlook, and at worst contribute to the perpetuation of marginalization of some groups in higher education. By ignoring the true diversity of populations in postsecondary institutions, such scholarship overlooks those whose identities exist at the margins and reinforces ignorance about how intersecting identities impact inequality.

Qualitative research methods have been identified by, among others, Stephanie Shields (2008) as appropriate for tackling questions of interrelated and intersectional identities. Shields (2008) observed that qualitative methods “appear to be more compatible with the theoretical language and intent of intersectionality” (p. 306). Further, unlike traditional quantitative methodologies of hypothesis testing, researchers employing qualitative methods are less burdened by *a priori* knowledge making (Shields, 2008). McCall (2005) identified research tools commonly employed in the anticategorical complexity approach that “crosscut the disciplinary divide between the social sciences and the humanities” (p. 1778)—both of which feature traditions strongly rooted in qualitative methodologies. McCall (2005) hailed ethnography as an appropriate intersectionality research design, while Nash (2008) noted the successful application

of poetry, narrative, and standpoint epistemological methods in the service of conducting intersectional research.

METHOD

Chism and Banta (2007) suggest qualitative methods, especially those employing semi-structured and open-ended approaches, allow participants to “introduce themes that the interviewer might not have anticipated in framing questions” (p. 16), which can be informative in measuring a wide variety of topics within institutions of higher education. Further, researchers suggest qualitative methods can be useful for assessing institutional cultures related to diversity (see Museus, 2007), and they are especially appropriate for discovering variables and conducting initial explorations of a research problem (see Creswell, 2012). In the case of this study, which seeks to illuminate experiences based on the intersectional identities of African American women in computing sciences, we chose to employ a qualitative research design to allow for participants to give voice to their own identities and experiences (Cole, 2009).

A phenomenological design was well-suited to the study because our inquiry aims to understand a common experience of a group of people, allowing the researchers to use data from participants to develop foundational knowledge about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Shank, 2002). A focus group was conducted lasting approximately 90 minutes in duration and moderated by an African American woman. Participants provided consent orally and were made aware of their right to suspend the session at any time. The focus group session was recorded and the tape was transcribed and filed for possible future use as a promotional/professional aid (based on the consent of the participants). The session was comprised of a series of closed and open-ended questions designed to gather information relative to the participants’ experiences, with specific attention to the roles gender and race play within their academic trajectories within the computing sciences.

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

This study employed purposeful sampling techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), wherein all participants identified as “African American” or “Black” women, were enrolled full-time or were recently (in the last three years) in an academic computing program, and were no younger than 18 years of age and no older than 35 years of age. Fifteen African American women participants from a 2007 conference dedicated to African Americans in STEM were recruited and took part in this study. Each participant either majored in or were majoring in a computing-science related area of study as an undergraduate or graduate student. While all participants attended colleges within the continental United States, their schools were geographically dispersed. Likewise, at the time of the study, two participants had already obtained a PhD in computing sciences, 12 were current graduate students (PhD aspirants), and one participant was completing her baccalaureate degree. The undergraduate student participant was attending an HBCU, and all graduate students and current PhD holder participants were receiving or had received their graduate degrees from a PWI. Though the researchers involved with this study were only able to interact with this small group of participants together during this singular session, the following efforts to ensure the validity of this study bolster the study’s findings.

Validity

The researchers employed a naturalistic approach to address reliability and validity of the qualitative inquiry within this study. Validity in terms of credibility and fittingness were the main goals of this qualitative approach as prescribed by Lincoln & Guba (1986). More clearly, special care was taken to create a research design that could be replicated if so desired contingent upon a similar set of circumstance in an effort to establish reliability. Moreover, in the tradition of naturalistic inquiry, data were coded based upon replicable themes and theories that emerged from the data.

Prolonged engagement, persistent observations, field notes and the analysis of multiple data sources helped to establish credibility based on triangulating these multiple data sources. Through spending ample time with study participants to check for distortions during the data collection process, both corroboration and prolonged engagement with study participants were simultaneously achieved. Due to the allotted length of the focus group (90 minutes), the participants' experiences were explored in sufficient detail, enabling persistent observation to occur. The significant number of open-ended (and follow-up) questions enabled the researcher to more effectively comprehend the nature of the participants' assertions. Additionally, the multiple sources of data were attended to through the process of comparing digital audio recordings, field notes as well as physical transcriptions. The aforementioned comparisons of multiple forms of data enabled the in-depth assertions from participants to be captured by the researchers, and was illustrative of the collective and individual voices of African American women's experiences in the STEM educational pipeline. The collaboration of the researchers, along with the interaction with study participants, assists with the credibility of this study through the process of peer debriefing, revising working hypotheses throughout the data collection process, clarifying preliminary findings with study participants, and audio/video taping the interviews in an effort to compare to other means of data collected, which Rudestem and Newton (1992) asserts are necessary procedures to ensure the credibility of a study.

Positionality

As cultural outsiders as it relates to race, gender, and/or educational foci, this study was approached with both sensitivity and a strong desire to uplift the voices and experiential realities of African American women in STEM fields. In order to do so, the team of investigators sought to be reflective of our own positionality and how our multiple identities might interplay with the data collection process and analysis. As such, the researchers regularly interrogated their interpretations to be reflective, addressed potential assumptions and biases, and attempted to ensure consistency with phenomenology. While the investigators had varying roles throughout the research process (e.g., some were involved in analyses but not focus group interviews), having multiple team members enabled each team member to serve as an auditor of the research study as a whole (Creswell, 1997). Multiple members of the research team transcribed and coded the focus group recording, which allowed for peer debriefing and the inclusion of thick-rich descriptions in the findings. Moreover, the use of inductive data strategies allowed the data to serve as the foundation of understanding wherein the findings are acutely descriptive and conveyed through direct quotes and thematic analyses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Utilizing the guidance of the intersectionality framework, this study explored the role that race and gender play in the academic pursuits of African American women in the STEM field of computing sciences. Two main themes emerged from the data: (a) racial and gender challenges related to the computing sciences educational trajectory; and (b) a shared sense of isolation.

Racial and Gender Challenges Related to the Computing Sciences Educational Trajectory

Conflicts and integrations of racial, gender, and academic identities arose repeatedly as participants reported grappling with their self-identities as women of color in race- and gender-exclusive academic spaces. Although participants described their experiences as women of color in computing sciences in a variety of ways, the group's consensus was that it is exceptionally challenging and difficult. One participant simply and directly exclaimed, "It's tough." Participants' racial and gendered identities were proclaimed largely depending upon the situation context. In other words, their primary identities varied based upon the social space within a particular educational environment. One participant relays this sentiment like this: "At different times, different identifications come to the forefront," demonstrating a set of unique—although previously-documented—challenges facing Black women at the intersections of race, gender, and science identities.

Many participants indicated that ascertaining the root of maltreatment proved difficult, wondering whether this treatment was based upon either their racial or gendered identities (e.g., a result of being a woman or a result of being Black). Several participants emphasized that their skin color was the initial focus of identity that dictated how others would treat them. "My belief is that the perception is that I am seen as a Black person first," expressed one participant. However, other participants indicated that their intersections of race and gender were inseparable. "At the end of the day, I am who I am. I am a Black woman, and there's no middle ground," exclaimed one participant. The stereotype regarding being a Black woman in a STEM field was an area of confluence among all study participants. One participant described it like this: "There are often assumptions that I am supposed to act a certain way because I am a Black woman," continuing that it was clear that others expected her to act angry or attitudinal when challenges or conflicts would occur. This is in congruence to broader societal stereotypes of African Americans and women that run counter to the assumed qualities of the researcher and scientist. Popular stereotypes assume African Americans to be intellectually inferior (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002), and scientists to be men (Cromley et al., 2013). Prior research investigating the effects of stereotypes on the academic performance of students with stereotype-congruent (e.g., Asian men in mathematics) and stereotype-incongruent (e.g., women in engineering) identities demonstrated that the effect of stereotypes is especially pernicious for those whose identities are both salient and *threatened* by the stereotypes. That is, the negative academic effects of stereotypes accrue the most among those whose stereotype-incongruent identity is the most threatened. Thus, among the participants of this study, their intersectional identities as Black women are placed squarely within a *double-bind* first described by Malcom, Hall, and Brown (1976) and elaborated upon by Ong and colleagues (2011). Collectively, and against the backdrop of perceived stereotypes associated with their intersectional identities as Black women, all 15 participants expressed how the computer science culture in their respective

departments was clearly unwelcoming to women, and even more ostracizing to African American women.

Among participants, identifying as a Black woman conjured a wealth of misperceptions and stereotypes regarding their academic identity as well as their intellectual capacity. Like similar stories told by many of the participants, one participant described an encounter with a White male peer who blatantly questioned her academic abilities when they were paired on a team assignment. This participant explained how her teammate would submit components of the group assignment, making all of the decisions for the group, fully dictating how the project would be carried out without her input. “Maybe there was the perception that I was female, I was Black, and I was incompetent. His perception was I was going to pull him down,” she shared. Another participant added, “I get to [University] and the first question someone asked was if I was someone’s secretary... because I’m Black? A woman? I can’t tease those things apart.” These aforementioned examples illustrate the complexities and intersections of race and gender in computer science and support previous scholarship documenting the broader challenges associated with establishing oneself and gaining legitimacy as a Black woman academic (Brewer, 1999).

A Shared Sense of Isolation

Feelings of isolation were salient findings among the participants in this study. Social interaction with peers proved limited among study participants throughout their STEM education trajectories, particularly in STEM graduate degree programs. One participant remarked how “it took a good six weeks before people were finally opening up to me.” The inundated consistency of isolation, precipitated by the lack of support from faculty and their respective institution alike, was a critical factor in participant’s considerations to withdraw from their programs and reconsider their choice in majoring in their computing-related discipline. Participants also indicated that the field of computing as a whole is very sexist in nature and indicated that based on their experiences, computing “isn’t seen as a discipline for women.” Additionally, participants posited comments they would receive from their White counterparts that they felt were directly resultant of their race, gender, and thoughts about their inability to achieve in STEM: “Why are you still in school?” and “Why aren’t you married and taking care of somebody?” were common expressions of astonishment among their White colleagues during their initial interactions.

These stories highlight the confluence of race and gender for Black women in CS departments and further bolster findings from multiple bodies of literature related to the isolation experienced by African American students, including those in STEM fields, graduate programs, and women in the sciences. Among the findings relevant to this study, Sharon Fries-Britt’s (1998) scholarship on Black undergraduate participants in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program observed that high-achieving Black students in STEM fields experienced isolation within the larger African American community. Fries-Britt’s (1998) findings underscored previous scholarship showing high-achieving African American students too often experience isolation from their African American peers due to larger educational disparities in the K-12 educational pipeline that persist at the collegiate level. While Fries-Britt (1998) found evidence that the community isolation experienced by these Black scholars was, to some degree, ameliorated by participation in a race-specific program and the resulting social networks they fostered, such social ties were not experienced among the participants of this study. In fact, as one participant

indicated, developing a race- and gender-peer social network was nearly impossible to establish within an institution and field with so few Black women. Similarly, the experiences reported by this study's participants echo the findings of two previous works: Genva Gay's (2004) study documenting the isolating experience of being among African American women in graduate-level studies, and that of Settles, Jellison, and Pratt-Hyatt (2009) which found that over time, women who increased their self-perceptions as scientists and women fared better as scientists than those who did not. While the latter study did not specifically interrogate the role of race as a factor in the integration and co-development of gender and scientist identities, the findings do suggest that increases in both lead to positive personal and professional outcomes.

Given that most CS departments are heavily populated by White males, cultural isolation and was highly prevalent throughout participants' educational experiences related to STEM. While feelings of cultural isolation are commonly associated with acclimating to highly technological environments, wherein Black women are typically an anomaly, the intersection of race and gender were factors that proved salient in the negative experiences recounted in-depth by study participants. As many projects at the graduate level are collaborative in nature, the intersectionality of race and gender in these spaces facilitated consistent challenges to study participants. One participant explained it like this: "[As] the only Black [student], no one wants to partner with you and you have to do all the experiments by yourself." Additionally, this sort of discrimination, particularly if facilitated by the professor was contagious in that classmates "no longer want to work with you," as one participant recounted. As other students attempt to look favorable in the eyes of the professor, pairing with a Black woman in class was seen as detrimental to the academic progress of other students. In other words, participants felt that their experiences were definitively unique, even as it related to the subject of gender. "Just having other females there just doesn't cut it because there's no one there that has your experience... there are no common threads that connect you," asserted one participant. Participants consistently echoed each other in the context of the focus group that illuminated the unique divisions and experiences as a result of the intersections of race and gender identities.

Computing science and other STEM faculty were particularly instrumental in creating an environment characterized by isolation and ostracization for this study's participants. One participant tells a story of a fellow (Asian) graduate student who intervened to address the professor on her behalf after recognizing maltreatment. This Asian student had a good working relationship with the faculty professor and upon the Asian student's inquiry, the professor said:

I don't think she has talent. I think White professors gave her grades because of her race and they felt bad about slavery. I don't think there are any real computer scientists who are Black, and maybe she can be the first.

What was also salient among participants was their recognition of many similarities between being Black in highly technological domains, and being Black in broader society. They indicated that much of the isolation they experience in their academic department mirrors the isolation of the Black race in broader societal terms. However, the added intersection of the women gender on to the Black race also illuminated differential gender experiences among Black men and Black women in STEM educational spaces. More clearly, the isolation Black women experience could be remarkably different for Black men in the same space. Participants indicated that though many experiences are familiar due to issues germane to Blackness and the Black race, another peer who is of the same race is not always a valuable source of support or

collegiality. Gender, as well as the isolating and competitive nature of STEM fields themselves, promote and entirely new element. One participant summarized this sentiment like so: “Just cause there’s another Black brother [in class] doesn’t mean they want to work with you either.” Participants posited that because White males were often seen in a favorable light, particularly from professors, Black men were more likely to establish relationships with them than their other Black women counterparts.

CONCLUSION

In concert with research from a wide array of social science fields (e.g., Settles, 2006), this investigation suggests that many Black women see their racial and gender identities among the most salient of their identities. Additionally, this study corroborates other empirical examinations of the racial and ethnic, sex and gender identities of Black women (e.g., Levin, Sinclair, Veniegas, & Taylor, 2002) that posit that some Black women hold their Black racial and ethnic identities to be more salient than their sex and gender identities, while other Black women view their sex, gender, racial, and ethnic identities as uniquely situated. Settles (2006) describes this uniquely-situated racial identity as being different from Black men, and Black women’s identity as being “distinct from other women because of their unique experiences, such as being potential targets of racial and gender discrimination and harassment,” therefore “tak[ing] precedence in their self-concept over the individual identities of Black person and woman” (p. 590). While the Black women from this study (and several others offered within this manuscript) may view their identity as unique, further investigation of the marginalization experienced by these Black women demonstrate that racial identities become, in certain settings, more salient than sex or gender identities. Settles (2006) postulated that a Black woman’s racial identity may take precedence when in a room of White women while, in contrast, in a room of White men her identity as a woman may become most salient. The data from this study of computing aspirants, while situated in a different academic and social context, indicate similar dynamics.

The uniquely-situated Black woman identity described by study participants defines what is meant by intersectional identities and speaks to the basis upon which Crenshaw (1989) first outlined intersectionality as both a form of identity, and a theoretical framework for understanding how identities interact with and inform one another. Originating from her critique of the American justice system’s treatment of Black women’s experience of workplace discrimination, Crenshaw’s (1989) original intersectionality framework sought to illustrate how Black women experienced systematic erasure not only within the justice system, but within feminist theory and social justice political organizing and broader identity politics. As a departure from other research studies that aimed to explicate factors that increase recruitment, advancement, and retention in STEM fields among African American women (e.g., Charleston, 2012; Jackson & Charleston, 2012), the data from this investigation illuminates the inseparability and confluence of race and gender in the lives of Black women aspirants in the field of computing. Crenshaw (1989) further wrote, “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (p. 140). Through the theoretical lens of intersectionality, the analysis from the data provided by participants’ own stories within this study exposed academic, social, and institutional barriers

that are unique to this population, particularly within the STEM educational trajectory that remains virtually cordoned off in terms of racial and gender demographics.

Utilizing intersectionality theory enabled us to examine the intersectional identities of our participants while addressing the broader social and systemic erasures faced by women living with multiple marginalities in the STEM field of computing. The theory also helps put into perspective how some experiences of marginalization cannot be wholly accounted for within broader and widely-recognized marginalized identity statuses. This theoretical lens enabled us to discover not only how participants' multiple *personal* identities were *internally* formed and understood, but also how participants' multiple identities informed their social interactions. Many study participants had already obtained measures of success through undergraduate and graduate computing-related programs, despite many times being forced to work independently or with their same-race women counterpart in an effort to resist and respond productively to racist and sexist stereotypes. Participants of this study described instances of not feeling welcomed to work with their non-similar peers, including their African American men counterparts. An additional particularly poignant occurrence of such marginalizing interactions was shared by a participant who described being explicitly discriminated against by one of her professors, who told another student that he doubted her talents, and suspected that she received special, undeserved treatment from other professors out of guilt. Despite such experiences, however, the participants demonstrated that they were still able to persist in STEM. More clearly, the educational gains achieved by these participants (re)affirmed their ability to overcome their collective understanding of the challenges of pursuing STEM education as Black and as women. As a result of these challenges, future efforts that aim to address diversity in STEM fields should consider critically the educational climate for diversity, especially ways in which race and gender intersect to create spaces for privilege and oppression.

Recognizing that intersectionality and its definition vary and are research-field-specific, the application of intersectionality theory for the purposes of this study maintained "a consistent thread" wherein the social identities of study participants served as organizing features of social relations that mutually constituted, reinforced, and naturalized one another (Shields, 2008, p. 302). This study confirmed the enduring presence of racism and sexism throughout the STEM and computing science educational trajectory. Although former studies alluded to the proliferation of racism throughout primary, secondary, and postsecondary education (e.g., Jackson & Charleston, 2012), this study presented an unbridled view of the racialized and gendered experiences of African American women in pursuit of STEM education and success. While the sample of focus group participants did not attempt to generalize, their stories illuminate vividly an unwelcoming and socially isolating culture in STEM and computing science in particular. This observation may provide at least part of the rationale for this demographic population's low participation rates in the computing science field.

As a theoretical contribution to higher education, intersectionality introduces the possibility for deeper analyses of identity among members of academic communities. The data from this study reinforces the notion that institutional culture is a significant consideration in the study of underrepresented and underutilized populations. This study also confirms others (e.g., Kvasny, Trauth, & Morgan, 2009) showing that power relations are indeed at the intersections of gender and race within STEM education. The unwelcoming computing landscape asserted by study participants, particularly at PWIs, is significantly more of a barrier at the graduate level of the trajectory (e.g., master's and PhD) than at the undergraduate level, emphasizing the need to redouble efforts intended to broaden participation among differential racial and gender group

effects in the design of interventions. More concentrated and specific efforts are needed to ensure equitable and inclusive STEM education environments in order to reverse the trend of lagging attainment of master's and doctoral degrees among women of color (National Science Foundation, 2011).

Implications

There are a variety of implications for practice and policy based on the findings of this study. For higher education faculty and practitioners in STEM fields, a critical examination of personal biases and prejudices toward racial-ethnic minorities and women must occur in order to foster more inclusive STEM environments that broaden and ensure the educational success of *all* STEM aspirants. The complicit nature of the subjugation of African American women students in computing by peers and faculty alike led participants to question their belonging in the field at several points in the STEM education trajectory. As such, interventions that seek to improve the learning environment in STEM-related fields are needed. These may include developing and implementing student/faculty support groups or other efforts intended to create safe spaces where women of color can reflect on negative experiences, practice self-care, develop healthy responses to adversity, and develop a scientific identity that overcomes the negative external influences due to the intersection of race and gender.

In concert with the American Council on Education (2006) and the National Science Board (2012), the present study echoes the national call for broader participation and greater parity of representation among faculty and students of color in the computing sciences and other STEM fields, both within the academy and industry alike. Scholar Mary Howard-Hamilton (2003) suggested research concerning African American women in higher education is well suited for critical race theories and Black feminist thought theoretical frameworks—within and among which intersectionality is widely employed (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). The utilization of these sorts of frameworks for research may help to illuminate ways to create more diverse faculty in scientific fields like computing, which may in turn promote a healthier educational climate that may serve to mitigate the isolating and insensitive culture of these fields, particularly toward women of color. Improving the recruitment and retention of women faculty of color serves to strengthen the pipeline for students who might aspire to enter STEM fields but lack same-race and/or same-gender role models. Broader representation among faculty may increase the likelihood for culturally specific mentoring and advising experiences for Black women that may result in increased entry and persistence in these fields.

The scientific leadership within the United States continues to support efforts to broaden STEM participation. Therefore, it is increasingly important that industry and institutional leaders address the varying needs of the diverse populations whose contributions are necessary in an effort to maintain a strong scientific workforce that enables the United States to remain globally competitive. The viability and effectiveness of current and future intervention programs will be greatly enhanced by recognizing and adequately addressing racial and gender issues affecting matriculation rates into computing science and other STEM-related programs. The merits of this study might be broadened by investigating African American women who did not persist in computing sciences and other STEM fields. Additionally, future research might investigate existing interventions and how they enhance or impede STEM participation by gender and race.

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