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January 2009

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My Sister's Keeper: A Qualitative Examination of Mentoring Experiences Among African American Women in Graduate and Professional Schools

The role of African American¹ women in the academy has been a significant one since the first, Mary Jane Patterson, received her baccalaureate degree from Oberlin College in 1862. She along with other trailblazers made higher education a reality for African American women. While the contributions of African American women in higher education have been numerous, their recognition has been minimal at best. Often their experiences are viewed through the lens of White women or Black men. Although African American women share common experiences with both the men of their race and White women, they also possess an individual, yet collective standpoint that warrants additional research and provides information about their unique presence in higher education. Furthermore, while research focusing on African American women in the academy has increased in recent years, much work remains to be done.

The research highlighted in this article explores the mentoring experiences of African American women in graduate and professional schools. Specifically, the study examined the following with regard to participants' mentoring experiences: (a) how participants defined mentoring, (b) participants' perspectives on their current mentoring relationships, and (c) the significance and availability of having an African American woman as a mentor. According to Bova (2000), "The experiences and life history of Black women project a different perspective . . . This coupled with the fact that the literature does not fully address the needs,

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The Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 80, No. 5 (September/October 2009)
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concerns, and achievements of Black women, the stereotypical images and expectations of these women are still held by many” (p. 6). Moreover, she shared that the research has not provided clarity about how these women are able to achieve and accomplish goals despite the obstacles they face in the academy.

Their success may be attributed to having a mentoring relationship with an African American woman. Welch (1996) stated, “Individuals tend to identify with persons who are like themselves on salient identity group characteristics” (p. 10). In addition, Okawa (2002) noted that cultural similarity is significant in mentoring, although not the only factor to consider. Similarly, the process of mentoring may feel more natural when the mentee and mentor share cultural experiences, language, or similar interests (Athey, Avery, & Zemsky, 2000). However, more research needs to be conducted, particularly in higher education to better understand African American women, their aspirations, obstacles and the significance of mentors (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995). Gregory (2001) purported, “Support systems in the lives of Black faculty women have been found to be important because of these women’s needs for guidance, strength, and encouragement to help them negotiate academic settings that are often unfriendly and isolating” (p. 131). Moreover, support systems are necessary in helping African American women overcome the dual-edge burdens of race and gender, particularly when they attempt to find mentors within the “old boy” network (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995).

For the purposes of this article, I will provide a brief review of the mentoring literature and then explain Black Feminist Thought as a framework for understanding mentoring relationships among African American women in the academy. I will also discuss the methodology and findings of a study I conducted that examined African American women and their mentoring relationships during graduate school. I will conclude with a discussion of the findings and offer implications that subsequently emerged.

Mentoring Literature

Mentoring is important in graduate education because of its many benefits including career advancement, job satisfaction, and increased pay (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995; Bova, 2000; Ellis, 1992; Johnson & Nelson, 1999). Crawford and Smith (2005) suggested that the essence of mentoring is the development of individuals on both professional and personal levels. They defined a mentor as one who can “afford the protégé with opportunities to learn and practice and to reward

him or her so that acquired knowledge, performance, and motivation can increase" (p. 64). Similarly, several scholars (Bova, 2000; Darwin, 2000; Schwiebert, Deck, Bradshaw, Scott, & Harper, 1999; Tillman, 1995; Welch, 1996) assert that mentoring enhances career-related and psychosocial development for the protégé.

Despite the benefits, Jacobi (1991) asserts that no widely accepted definition of mentoring exists. Traditional, male-dominated perspectives, such as the one offered by Levinson (1978) suggest that the broad process of mentoring is linear, exclusive, and self-perpetuating (Harris, 1999). Darwin (2000) purported, "Traditionally, the mentoring relationship has been framed in a language of paternalism and dependence and stems from a power-dependent, hierarchical relationship, aimed at maintaining the status quo" (p. 197). However, such interpretations have been challenged by a number of scholars (Darwin, 2000; Healy & Welchert, 1990; Kochan & Trimble, 2000). Harris (1999) stated, "By limiting the examination of mentoring based on one universal definition, the personal, complex nature of the mentoring experience by under-represented groups such as African American students, who do not fit into a male-oriented, competitive, individualist profile, will be excluded" (p. 230). Despite the increase in literature on mentoring, much work remains to be done on the mentoring experiences of marginalized populations, such as African American women. Patton and Harper (2003) contend, "African American women in graduate and professional schools often find it difficult to locate suitable mentors with whom to build such connections" (p. 67). Although scant in nature, the following sections highlight research that has examined mentoring among women in general and among African American women.

Women and Mentoring Experiences

According to Quinlan (1999), "Women often have different needs and concerns from their male counterparts . . . [and] face a complex, interrelated set of career issues that may be outside men's experience" (p. 32). Such issues may include feelings of isolation, high stress levels, and low self-efficacy (Quinlan) and can potentially cause women to have a more difficult time establishing mentoring relationships in comparison to their male counterparts.

Heinrich (1995) examined the mentoring relationships of doctoral recipients with their major male or female advisor. Some of the participants in this study referred to mentoring relationships with women as a form of mothering. Their relationships with their advisors resembled the "warm relationships" that they had with their parents. According to

Heinrich, the women “unconsciously transferred . . . aspects of their earliest relationships with mothering figures to their relationships with women dissertation committee members” (p. 447). She found that for those having women mentors, power-sharing and effectively handling conflict were important for the success of these relationships. This finding was consistent with Darwin (2000) who noted that women often view power as “with” rather than “over” in their mentoring relationships.

In an earlier study, Schroeder and Mynatt (1993) studied how female graduate students perceived their interactions with both male and female professors. Noting that female graduate students often feel ignored, invisible, and dismissed by faculty, these researchers explained the importance of having same-gender faculty with whom women could interact. Their findings revealed that women who had female major professors perceived their interactions more positively than they did with male faculty members. In another study, Neumark & Gardecki (1998) explored female doctoral students and the effects of mentoring by female faculty on the success of these students. They found strong evidence to support the idea that having a female faculty mentor reduced the amount of time to degree completion for women.

The literature in this section suggests that women tend to feel comfortable with having women mentors and are more appreciative of these relationships. Mentoring relationships with women faculty and advisors help to alleviate feelings of exclusion, particularly in male-dominated arenas where it may be more difficult for graduate women to establish mentoring relationships.

African Americans and Mentoring Experiences

Providing mentors to students of color plays a major role in diversifying university faculty (Gregory, 2001). However, mentoring can be very time-consuming for African American faculty, who are usually too few in number, to serve as mentors to every African American student who enters an academic program. African Americans, women in particular, tend to participate in activities such as mentoring at the risk of reducing their scholarly productivity and career advancement (Gregory). Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) noted that for women of color in the academy, the establishment of mentoring relationships is minimal at best. Those that have mentors often go beyond their academic area to find such support.

Blackwell (1983) contributed one of the earliest studies of mentoring among African American graduate students. His findings revealed that women were less likely to have mentoring relationships in comparison to their male counterparts. Similarly, Johnson-Bailey (2004) examined

issues of retention and participation among Black women graduate students and found that their participation hinged upon receiving encouragement by the program's representative, as well as, personal recruitment by students and African American mentors who had familiarity with the program. Furthermore, their retention was contingent on continued funding, respect from program faculty, a supportive African American peer network, and established mentoring and support relationships with African American faculty and staff. Two major conclusions were drawn from this study, "1) there are not enough Black professors to adequately accommodate every Black student who might need help and opportunities; and 2) current interactions between White professors and Black students appear woefully inadequate and or insignificant" (p. 340).

Because finding a mentor is difficult for African American women, they often seek alternative sources of support or non-academic mentors. Munford (1996) examined mentoring experiences among reentry African American women and found that participants broadened their range of potential mentors to include friends and relatives, and perceived having a mentor as important in facilitating their growth. Howard-Vital and Morgan's (1993) study of African American women and mentoring suggested that psychosocial benefits, such as self-esteem, motivation, and self-confidence were perceived functions of mentoring relationships. The majority of the participants in their study felt compelled to serve as mentors to others as a result of their own experiences.

One of the greatest benefits of mentoring, in addition to facilitating growth and other psychosocial benefits, is career advancement. Dixon-Reeves (2003) examined the experiences of recently minted African American PhD recipients in the field of sociology and found that the majority of sampled respondents had experienced some form of mentoring. In addition, recent degree earners reported receiving more mentoring that resulted in career enhancement rather than emotional or advisory support.

Bova's (2000) exploratory study of mentoring focused specifically on professional Black women. Participants indicated the significance of mentoring to career advancement and the difficulties in fostering such relationships in their organization; particularly given that 100% of them had White mentors. Although they dealt with stereotypes of Black women and subtle racism, they credited their mentors with making them feel as if their ideas, presence, and experiences mattered to the organization. In addition their mentors were more active in providing career support as opposed to psychosocial needs. Participants in Bova's (2000) and Munford's (1996) study sought outside resources, such as church and community organizations to meet psychosocial needs.

Crawford and Smith (1995) investigated the significance of mentoring for African American women administrators in the field of higher education and how sociocultural and gender experiences shaped these women's career choices and development. They found that several mentors were necessary as opposed to having only one because each mentor represented a different type of expertise. They also noted that relationships with mentors differ and can serve very different roles for the student.

The literature presented in this section embraces common themes regarding mentoring and African American women. First, mentoring relationships for these women are few and far between when it involves African American women because there is an inadequate number of this population among educational disciplines. As a result, oftentimes African American women pursue mentoring relationships beyond the academy through social networks. The external mentoring relationships tend to support the psychosocial development of African American women. African American women who do establish mentoring relationships experience career-related benefits and are willing to serve as mentors for others.

As a whole, the literature review is helpful for laying a foundational understanding of mentoring, highlighting the research that has been conducted to explore how mentoring is defined and describing how mentoring relationships are experienced by women in general and African American women. Yet, there is space to contribute to the mentoring discourse as it relates to the experiences of African American women in graduate and professional schools. The following section outlines how Black Feminist Thought can be used to frame an examination of mentoring relationships among African American women.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study envisions mentoring as feminist practice. According to Moss and Debres (1999), a definition of mentoring as feminist practice, "means promoting women, people of colour and others who are less favorably positioned within the academy and assisting them in negotiating the relations within the academy" (p. 413). A feminist lens is pertinent when analyzing the place of African American women in higher education. It provides an outlet for a richer discussion that not only focuses on race, but also recognizes how the intersectionality of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation among other factors impact the lives of African American women. Hill-Collins (1998) explained, "Intersectionality thus highlights how African American women and other social groups are positioned within

unjust power relations, but it does so in a way that introduces added complexity to formerly race-, class-, and gender-only approaches to social phenomena” (p. 205). A feminist lens also allows for a discourse that de-centers traditionally accepted White, male-dominated power structures and embraces a point of view that places African American women and their numerous experiences in the center. Once removed from the margins they can be recognized in their proper historical and social context in the United States and in higher education.

In considering African American women in the academy, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is the lens through which mentoring as feminist practice is utilized. Although several Black female intellectuals have asserted their voices to provide a pathway for Black women, BFT, introduced by Patricia Hill-Collins (1989, 1998, 2000) defines a form of critical social theory committed to justice for the collective population of Black women and other oppressed groups. The premise of BFT centers on the empowerment of Black women and the assertion of their voices as central to their experiences, while also recognizing and supporting coalitions with other social justice efforts. According to Hill-Collins (1989), BFT disrupts two dominant ideas:

One approach claims that subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression. The second approach assumes that the oppressed are less human than their rulers and, therefore, are less capable of articulating their own standpoint. (p. 746–47)

BFT contends that Black women have “a self-defined” standpoint and are most capable of presenting this perspective. Hill-Collins (2000) describes six distinguishing factors that characterize BFT. The first distinguishing factor is the “dialectical relationship” that exists among African American women as a collective and links their intersecting oppressions with activism. BFT embraces social justice through countering these oppressions broadly, not only for Black women, and draws on Black women’s experiences and consciousness, individually and collectively. The second distinguishing feature of BFT is that despite similar challenges faced by Black women, their experiences with these challenges can be markedly different. Thus the tension between group experiences versus individual experiences is understood to produce different responses or expressions from these women. The third distinguishing feature of BFT is the “dialogical relationship” that connects the collective experiences of Black women with the emergence of a group standpoint. A dialogical relationship suggests that continuous dialogue is necessary to process changes in thought and action. Because thought and

action inform one another, they have the potential to create a changing consciousness of Black feminism. This feature focuses on the autonomy of Black women to produce Black feminist thought and action. While this may seem exclusionary, Hill-Collins suggests that Black women take onus of how Black feminist thought, action, and consciousness are created.

The fourth distinguishing feature of BFT recognizes the intellectual contributions of Black women. Hill-Collins explains that being intellectual is not confined within the walls of academia. Black women intellectuals come from all walks of life and offer unique contributions to the creation of BFT by bringing a distinctive perspective on Black womanhood that enables them to introspectively examine multiple oppressions better than those beyond the collective group; realizing that struggle is an innate part of progress, despite the overwhelming nature of present obstacles and the uncertainty of the rewards gained; promoting self-definition through bringing the voices of the collective to the center to speak for themselves and advance an agenda of empowerment; and advancing autonomy instead of exclusivity in building coalitions with other social justice projects. The fifth distinguishing feature of BFT is the acknowledgment that change is necessary and inevitable. Given the constant shifts in society, so must Black women's methods of resistance change. Thus BFT must be critically analyzed to reflect the constant change in society, and more importantly situated in the changing conditions of Black women's experiences, thoughts, and actions. The sixth distinguishing feature of BFT is its promotion of coalition building with other social justice projects. This feature suggests that the struggles of Black women are unique, but not isolated from other social justice projects. Black women's struggles are situated in a larger domain of struggles geared toward social justice, empowerment, and humanity. This humanist approach succinctly identifies difference, yet is simultaneously committed to advancing oneness among all peoples.

Clearly, BFT is relative to this discussion of Black women in the academy and mentoring. If Black women are to develop BFT, they must first know themselves individually and have some semblance of how their individual selves are connected to the larger collective of African American women. Then, African American women situated in academic locations, must be mindful of the manner in which they go about creating and/or reclaiming knowledge that pertains to their collective struggles and identities. As scholars, and more importantly as Black women intellectuals, their mission must focus on empowering one another and fashioning their own identity through mentoring one another. These common concepts not only provide additional support for this research

but also lend credibility to the need for African American female scholars to move further toward transforming higher education, but doing so, by allowing their voices to be at the center of this transformation. One substantial method is through the establishment of mentoring relationships with other African American women and the production of scholarly and credible research.

Role of the Researcher

I became interested in exploring the mentoring relationships or lack thereof among Black women in graduate and professional programs during my tenure in graduate school. As I conducted the interviews for this study, six of the eight participants commented that they found my conversations with them to be liberating because first I cared enough to pursue this line of research and because they were afforded an opportunity to share their individual stories. What became most significant for me, as a researcher was the participants' ability to relate to me and for us to co-construct a unique and powerful narrative of the experiences associated with having a Black female mentor. Johnson-Bailey (2004) stated, "Black feminist thought draws upon a body of knowledge that sets forth the idea that the daily living of Black women has produced a collective consciousness that resists being defined as 'less than,' resists negative stereotyping, while seeking to define and empower its members by encouraging Black women to celebrate their survival as a significant phenomenon" (p. 333). My conversations with the participants represented the centrality of BFT. Although my purpose was to interview them, we ultimately participated in an exchange of experiences, found common themes in our interactions with departmental faculty and African American female mentors, and encouraged each other to continue successfully in our academic endeavors.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the mentoring relationships among African American women in graduate and professional schools. More specifically, the study examined the following with regard to participants' mentoring experiences while pursuing their degrees: (a) how participants defined mentoring, (b) participants' perspectives on their current mentoring relationships, and (c) the significance and availability of having an African American woman as a mentor. In an effort to capture the stories of these women and allow them to share their voices, the study was conducted using a phenomenological ap-

proach. One of the assumptions underlying phenomenological inquiry is that there is an “essence” or there are “essences” to the shared experiences of study participants (Patton, 2002). In other words, the meanings ascribed to a particular phenomenon are likely to be shared and mutually understood among participants. Moreover, from a phenomenological viewpoint, what emerges as important ultimately relies on how participants experience and interpret their world.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants in this study. According to Patton (2002), “Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). Participants were selected with the assistance of key informants who were familiar with the African American graduate women population at a large, predominantly White research university in the Midwest. I contacted members of four graduate student associations with largely African American memberships representing different academic disciplines, including law, education, business and a campus-wide group. I asked the members to assist me with identifying African American graduate women who might be interested in participating in this study. Upon receiving the names of eight potential participants, I contacted each woman to explain the purpose of the study and to personally invite her to participate. Each participant was either the only African American female or one of very few within her respective graduate program and agreed to be interviewed for this study. The participants’ ages ranged from 22 to 31 years old. Four of the women did not describe themselves as having a mentoring relationship with an African American woman in their academic department or in the larger university setting. The remaining four had identified African American women within their program, on campus, or through a professional organization who served as their mentors (See Table 1). Moreover, each participant was in the latter stages of her degree program nearing completion. Therefore, they could reflect on their past and current experiences in their degree programs, particularly as it pertained to mentoring relationships. Two participants were in the field of education, two were in business, one student was in law, two were in the humanities and one was in science.

I conducted semi-structured interviews lasting forty-five minutes to one hour and a half with each participant to ascertain her perspectives on mentoring. Each participant selected a pseudonym to be used during the study. Upon completion of the data collection, each interview was professionally transcribed and analyzed. Patton (2002) contends that identifying and recording emergent insights during data collection are components of both fieldwork and qualitative analysis. Therefore, initial

TABLE 1
 Participants at a Glance.

Pseudonym	Discipline	Black Female Mentor	Departmental Mentor	Marital Status	Status	Age
Afolabi	Law	No	Yes	3rd year	Single	24
Bliss	Business	No	Yes	3rd year	Single	27
Evelyn	Humanities	Yes	Yes	ABD	Single	29
Kim	Education	Yes	Yes	ABD	Divorced	28
Linda	Business	Yes	No	2nd year	Single	28
Lisa	Humanities	No	Yes	ABD	Single	31
Mocha	Education	Yes	No	ABD	Single	31
Sheila	Science	No	No	2nd year	Single	22

analysis consisted of reviewing and summarizing field notes that had been recorded during the interviews. Then each interview transcript was first read to identify and isolate the uniqueness of each participant's experience. Again, notes were carefully taken and summarized. A second reading of the transcripts involved content analysis in order to make sense of and identify consistencies among the respondents' mentoring experiences. The content analysis of the interview transcripts was significant in that it served as a form of open coding in which I recognized patterns among participants' experiences and allowed them to freely emerge. Following this portion of analysis, the patterns were grouped into thematic categories.

The next step in analysis involved elucidating the meanings associated with the phenomenon. Through reflection on the interviews, examination of research notes, and review of thematic categories, I began the process of meaning interpretation. Essentially, interpretation consisted of identifying the meanings of the phenomenon for participants, as well as using my own perspectives to make sense of and to attach significance to the meanings of the phenomenon for participants.

Following analysis, study participants were contacted and asked to offer their opinions, additional insights, and feedback on the findings of the study. Member checking (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999) was necessary to ensure accurate representation of the participants' voices. In addition, peer-debriefers (Creswell & Miller, 2000) were recruited to review the findings and offer constructive yet critical feedback. The peer-debriefers consisted of African American women in the academy that currently serve as mentors to African American graduate women. I also asked African American graduate women with whom I was familiar to offer

feedback on the findings section. All suggestions were taken into consideration and used to either reconceptualize or reorganize the content and presentation of the findings.

Findings

As a result of data analysis, four central themes emerged in this study: (a) Expectations and Perspectives of Mentoring, (b) Perspectives of African American Women as Mentors, (c) Perspectives on White Mentors, and (d) Perspectives on “Other” Mentoring Relationships. In the first theme, participants describe how they view mentoring and expectations that a mentor should fulfill. The second theme consists of participants’ thoughts regarding African American female mentors. They discuss the uniqueness of having a same-race, same-gender mentor as they pursued their graduate work. The third theme highlights the participants’ relationships with White mentors and the role that White faculty mentors have played in their graduate experiences. The participants also discuss the distinctiveness and challenges associated with having a White mentor. The final theme focuses on mentoring relationships that participants have established beyond the academy and their commitment to serving as mentors to African American women who follow in their footsteps.

Expectations and Perspectives of Mentoring

The study participants shared several expectations and definitions of a mentor. Consistent with many of the earlier definitions mentioned in the literature review, one participant shared, “I think they come in lots of different forms.” For the majority of the participants, mentors took the form of friends who provided leadership and career guidance. They were central to helping participants with networking and served as role models. Mentors also had the ability to empathize, understand, and care about the whole person.

Although the definitions of mentoring roles varied among participants, their comments converged in five ways. First, they were certain that a mentor was different from an advisor. Second, a mentor provided psychosocial support, often watching over participants and keeping them on task. Mocha, a student in education stated:

The mentoring relationship consists of someone who keeps me on task academically, who calls me oftentimes off the cuff to ask me how I’m doing personally. If I tell her “not too good,” we can talk almost for hours about how I get out of that rut [and] how I personally can feel better. Then if we need to, we translate it into how academically, I can feel better and do the work that I need to do.

Third, mentors were experienced. As one participant described, mentors “can offer advice that you can rely on, to be sound advice because they can speak from their own experiences and can share with you the path that might be beneficial for you to take, as well as, what you can do to navigate a system.” Fourth, respondents consistently referred to the importance of trust in mentoring relationships. It was crucial to have a mentor who was trustworthy. As one participant explained, a mentor was, “Somebody that you can confide in personally . . . Sometimes you need somebody to be able to sit down and talk one on one and talk about things that you may have on your mind.” Many of the participants provided examples of what characterized trust in a mentoring relationship. For example, their mentors knew personal information about them (i.e. divorce), welcomed them into their homes, and established friendships with them. In the words of one participant, the mentors “had their back.” Finally, mentors provided opportunities. Each of the participants discussed the many opportunities that came their way as a result of having mentors, including, participation in research studies, collaborative conference presentations, and scholarships.

The overall need to have a mentor was clearly articulated by the participants as a whole. They recognized the importance of mentoring, particularly for African Americans and other students of color. Moreover, they agreed that there simply was not enough mentoring taking place. Kim, a student in education captured this idea:

I think it's important for Black people [and] people of color to have mentors because there are not a lot of us in these academic settings and it's like the higher you go up . . . the smaller the numbers get. For me, one of the things . . . that I was very disappointed in is the lack of mentoring relationships that exist on this campus.

The participants noted that finding an African American female mentor was no easy task. Mocha explained that she had encountered difficulties in finding an African American female mentor since her undergraduate years. She noted:

I never had faculty that were Black women at my undergrad institution and there are very scarce administrators. Oftentimes they were so busy and overwhelmed, they really found it hard to be in that [mentoring] relationship. So, wherever I could find the people who provided the nurturing spirit that my own mother does, I gravitated towards them.

A central reason for having a mentor according to one participant was to feel like a member of a family because her construction of family involved helping one another and she wished to establish this sense of family with her mentor.

Perspectives on African American Women as Mentors

As mentioned in the methods section, four of the eight participants reported having an African American female mentor. All respondents expressed similar views on the importance associated with securing an African American female mentor, whether African American female faculty was located in their academic departments or not. For example, it was easier to identify and feel comfortable with someone who “looked like” them. African American women were central in breaking stereotypes as well. Most of the participants had received scholarships and fellowships. In some cases they believed they were subjected to being labeled and perceived by others as having an unfair advantage or privilege. This was the case for Sheila, a student in the hard sciences. She often felt that she had to prove that she was worthy of being in her program. Respondents expressed that plenty of African American women had endured the same hardships, but had played a major role in encouraging them to move beyond what others thought and to do their best. Kim’s example was particularly telling:

With Black women, we are few and far between. It’s like we’re low on the totem pole in the academy, as far as how we’re viewed, and how we’re perceived. It’s very easy for people to try to shut us up and try to quiet us because if we come on campus being outspoken, speaking up, being active, we’re kind of labeled as trouble-makers or bitches. It shouldn’t have to be that way. You shouldn’t have a negative label placed on you as a Black woman just because you are assertive. I think that’s the way that mentoring relationships can come in from other African-American women. They can be a support system and [say] that it’s okay to speak up, speak your mind, and continue to move forward despite what people might have to say about you.

Respondents reported that an African American female mentor had a deeper understanding of the issues present in the academy and could understand many of the challenges that participants faced because they had experienced similar situations. Moreover, African American female mentors were deemed as trustworthy and less likely to misinterpret the participants’ emotions. An African American female mentor who could understand these students’ perspectives and relate to them on so many levels was described as a “shortcut.” Evelyn, a student in the humanities noted, “I don’t have to spend 30 minutes explaining why I feel uncomfortable in a situation . . . [My mentor can say] ‘I understand because I had to do it.’ So there’s a bit of a shortcut and I don’t have to start from scratch.”

African American female mentors were also viewed as role models. This was a major benefit for women with mentors as opposed to those without mentor relationships. For participants who did, it was refreshing

to see someone who had attained the goal that they were striving toward. These women provided a real life example of success as one student described:

It's been beneficial for me because when I see this woman and I see her with a PhD, it makes it seem like what I'm doing is not so far fetched. If she can do it, I can do it. That's one of the things that I feel is very important. You need to see pictures. You need to have ideas of role models. When you see people who look like you and came from the same background as you, it makes it easier to imagine that that could be you one day.

African American female mentors also provided special advice that might not be present in other relationships. Their mentors wanted them to be taken seriously among colleagues by projecting an image that garnered respect and authority. Linda, a business student explained that her mentor told her to always look like she is in control even when she does not "have a clue." She explained that her mentor emphasized the significance of physical appearance. She was told, "You need to have a professional look. You need to say 'Okay it doesn't matter [that] everyone in the office doesn't want to wear stockings because it's summer time.' You need to make sure that you're projecting an image; that you're not wearing open toe shoes to work and you're not wearing sandals. Make sure that the outfit is put together well."

Last, but not least, participants reported that African American mentors "kept it real." They did not avoid certain topics; nor did they put on a façade. These women were honest and open about the realities of the academy. This was what participants wanted in their relationships. One student stated, "I just can't have a mentor who I feel is going to be like an Uncle Tom or that's going to sing and dance for 'the man.' I need for them to be real, knowledgeable about who they are as Black people, and knowledgeable about their position."

In terms of establishing a relationship with an African American female mentor, the participants discussed rumors that had circulated about these women on campus and in their departments. The mentors had been perceived and stereotyped as cold, anti-social, and intimidating due to their excellent scholarly skills or if they were outspoken. Evelyn explained the situation with her mentor stating, "I think people in fact were intimidated by her being so confident, so well spoken, well written. She's an excellent scholar and it was more intimidation that sort of brought about those labels and not something that she really was."

The participants who had not identified an African American female mentor discussed the difference that having such a mentor would make in their academic experiences. Bliss, a business student mentioned that a

mentoring relationship with an African American woman would likely be more “nurturing.” Afolabi, a law student captured the difference when she stated:

I would be able to connect with them on a deeper level because they’ve been through the experiences that I’m going through [as far as] trying to make my way in the world and trying to make the right choices in terms of my career. I think only Black women would be able to understand, empathize, and offer guidance better than anyone else. I think that an African American woman would be helping me to sift through issues. It’s like they’re a double threat. It’s like nobody can address the issues they can address, the issues of being Black and of being a woman. There is no other person that can address both of those at the same time in terms of career, your personal life, and everything. I just don’t think that you can offer guidance or truly empathize with a person or truly advise people on what they should do, what things are important, and the best way to go about it, unless you’ve been where they’ve been.

Participants also shared their perceptions of the African American faculty women in their respective departments. In most cases, there were two or fewer African American female faculty members and a relationship had not been cultivated with these graduate women. The participants’ comments suggested that these African American faculty women were either disinterested or under pressure to adjust and achieve tenure. Afolabi stated:

We only have one African American law professor. This is [just] my impression of her but . . . this is only her second year of teaching and she is so focused on trying to fit in with White America and the culture of the professors at that school that she really hasn’t reached out to students.

Participants also discussed the role of African American male mentors. They shared that if no African American female was available, their second choice would be a male of the same race. However, they recognized that while they shared the same race, issues of gender could certainly emerge in such relationships. Evelyn explained, “There is a little difference between having a Black male mentor and having a Black female mentor, you get beyond the race issue, but you still have to get beyond the male vs. female.” Another student stated the difference that an African American female would make but added that a Black male would likely be the best alternative.

Perspectives on White Mentors

All of the participants shared their experiences with White mentors. They described both positive and negative interactions with these individuals. Afolabi described the White male with whom she worked in the law school as more of a “resource” and “career mentor.” In essence, she felt comfortable asking him general questions, but had no desire to con-

nect with him on a deeper level. Similarly, another participant stated that she wouldn't "feel comfortable sharing that part of me" to a White mentor. Dealing with some White mentors was particularly challenging for participants in the sciences. For Sheila the atmosphere did not foster the type of mentoring relationship she desired. She was assigned a mentor, who also served as her supervisor. Unfortunately, this proved to be quite problematic in that she felt no support from him. She explained:

Sometimes I just feel like there's nobody out there watching out for me. You have a mentor, you're working in their lab, and you're there to produce work for them. So basically that's the most important thing they want out of you. They don't care about what's going on with you personally. They just want you to be there to do what you have to do. Other than that they just don't even care.

Perhaps the most pervasive concerns among participants were that White mentors were not trustworthy and were unable to and in some cases unwilling to understand their perspectives as African American women. As Evelyn summed it, "That sense of awareness of blackness ... I think White people don't necessarily automatically have." As a result, a communication barrier was often present in their interactions making her question the meaning of the interactions. She wondered, "Was that a snide [comment] or were they trying to say something negative? Was that a racist comment? Was that a classist comment?"

The issue of trust was mentioned by all of the participants. They found it difficult to establish trust in their mentoring relationships with White people and never felt comfortable sharing their full selves, which was inclusive of personal struggles. Kim noted:

I just don't trust them. I just don't trust White people. To me there are just some things inside that I feel they shouldn't see. I just feel that they already come with their preconceived notions and ideas. I just don't want to fit the stereotypical mold. I just don't want my business out there and I feel that it would be.

When one participant wanted to open up to her White mentor, she refrained due to the belief that this person would not understand, or would at least pretend to understand although he could not relate. Despite these concerns, White mentors in most departments were the norm. There simply were not enough African American faculty members (male or female) who could serve in this capacity. Therefore, many African American women had to depend on them, particularly men, to establish mentoring relationships.

Most of the participants shared that even when African American mentors were not available, White mentors could still share some of the

particulars of the academic field they were pursuing. Lisa, a student in the humanities commented, "There aren't very many Black professors that I could probably choose to be my mentor. I believe if there were, then I probably would have a Black female mentor. I think what's important for me is to have a mentor who is also in my area." Another noted that she kept the focus of conversation in her mentoring relationships on an academic and professional level because she felt uncomfortable. However, it was important to at least maintain a cordial relationship because she viewed White mentors, as gatekeepers who could provide certain information and benefits that were important for success.

Unlike other respondents, two participants offered different experiences pertaining to White mentors. Bliss expressed that she was "okay" with having a White mentor and made no effort to reach beyond her department to establish a relationship with an African American mentor in a different department. She noted, "The mentor relationship I have right now works for me so I've not really felt the need to really go outside my discipline to find someone else. It's not really something that's that important to me up to this point." Her perspective was a sharp contrast in comparison to the other participants in this study. She attributed this to her background adding, "I guess I wasn't really raised in an environment where I felt it was always important to really only connect with Black people."

Evelyn also shared a different perspective of working with White mentors. In her view, she was less of a threat because her research interests would not coincide with the White professors in her program. Therefore, they did not have to worry about someone infringing upon their line of research. Her views suggested that there is a great deal of territoriality in the academy, especially as it pertains to research agendas. She stated, "I think that I'm less threatening to White professors than I am to Black professors." Thus, there might be a greater likelihood that her research interests would be more aligned with an African American professor and might potentially pose a conflict. Similarly, a mentoring relationship with a White professor was accepted and seen positively because according to some of the participants, White mentors had more time in comparison to their African American counterparts. Lisa characterized her relationship with a White female as positive. She explained:

I think she has given me more guidance. She really, really has my best interest in terms of my development, preparing me for exams, and preparing me to go out into the field. She keeps in close contact with me. She's always sending me emails of different literature to read. She gives me that one-on-one guidance that I was really looking for from [a Black male mentor]. He may have more demands on him because of being one of few Black profes-

sors in the department and then being a young professor. Just from that school he has more pressure on him in terms of trying to get tenure and all that. She's [my White female mentor] very busy but somehow or another she has found the time to really give me the guidance that I have been looking for. She's been the one.

Despite the positive aspects of the aforementioned relationship, issues of trust still emerged in this participant's voice. She explained, "I'm very comfortable with [mentor's name] but there are just some things that I probably wouldn't talk to her about [that I would] if my mentor were an African-American female." Other participants who had White female mentors also mentioned positive interactions. However, while issues of gender subsided, race was still a factor in these relationships. White women, according to some participants could not alert them to things that might arise due to race because they had not experienced it. Much of the advice from White women tended to underplay race. To some degree this was helpful in seeing things from a different perspective. As Linda stated:

One of the key lessons I learned from her is that you can go into an environment and it doesn't matter what your color is or what your gender is. At the end of the day people want to know, "Did you do a good job?" So if you view yourself every time you go into a situation as "the new Black woman" then you won't learn. So what they have been able to offer me is just a look from their perspective to see that their having some of the same problems that I'm having and it's not a Black issue.

Perspectives on "Other" Mentoring Relationships

Participants also discussed other types of mentoring relationships that they had established prior to and during their tenure in their graduate programs. These relationships consisted of mentors outside academia. They recalled their mothers (more than any other person), grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and friends who were able to provide support when they needed it. The lessons they learned from their "other" mentors focused on life in general, dealing with White people, humility, the value of education, independence, cultivating self-worth, and remembering their roots. Mocha creatively termed such relationships as "home grown remedies." She shared:

I would certainly consider my mother or aunt to be mentors because they mentor in a different capacity. What I get from the professor here is mentoring about academics. My mother and aunties have always given that sort of mentorship and guidance about politics in our society, how to interact with people, how to let things run off your back and also how to challenge things.

In describing the relationships with their mothers, participants said that they received spiritual advice. They also admitted that in some in-

stances, their mothers likely had no idea about the politics and challenges of the academy. Moreover, the paradigm under which their mothers solved problems, offered advice and provided support was considered “old school.” Evelyn explained:

I can call home and ask my mom what she thinks about something, she’ll tell me what she thinks and it makes perfect reasonable sense to me. You sort of have to know what the old school way would be and then figure it out for yourself or how to [make it] work in the new school.

One participant succinctly stated, “The lessons that she’s given me have been so valuable. You can’t even put a value on them because I’ve gotten life lessons.”

Other support networks that participants established were their sorority memberships and peer contacts. Peer mentoring developed in the form of discussions with friends and negotiations about decisions affecting their experiences in their programs. Peer mentoring also consisted of sharing information with friends, writing and studying together, seeking advice and simply enjoying conversations with a person they could trust. In addition, peers served as a sounding board for ideas.

Overall, the participants in this study felt a responsibility to serve in a mentoring capacity. The consensus among the group was that each needed to continue the legacy of mentoring. In sum, they offered three reasons. The first reason that mentoring was important was to keep African Americans in the pipeline as evidenced by the following comment of one participant:

I just have this sense of responsibility and this sense of commitment to my people. For those of us that are receiving PhDs at predominantly White campuses, you know how hard the system is and you know how they view us and how you get treated. To me, I just think that you should want to help a brother or sister out that’s coming along and help them go on to get their PhDs so they can do the same as you.

The second reason that mentoring was central was because it had been done for the participants in some form or another. While half of the participants had not described themselves as having an African American female mentor within their academic department or the larger campus, they still gave credit to African American women in their families as well as other mentoring influences in their lives. Lastly, mentoring was important because it was a way of remaining grounded. As one student shared, mentoring will help you “keep your human side so that you don’t float too high and forget that there are other people that are coming after you, as well as, people that gave you that support.”

Discussion

This study is important because it provided insights into the experiences of female African American graduate women. As previously mentioned, African American women are important for yielding research findings that address the void of this population's experiences in the literature. Few studies have explored mentoring relationships among African American women and this study addressed that gap. The findings are central to placing Black women at the center of their own realities as students in graduate and professional schools and support the importance of mentoring among African American women as a method of empowerment and uplift in the academy.

The voices expressed in this study produced a great deal of rich data pertaining to lessons learned from their graduate experience, characteristics, and behaviors of African American female mentors, challenges with having White mentors (male and female), and stereotypical images of African American female mentors. In the findings, participants made statements that alluded to a collective link or commonalities between their perspectives. Their comments supported Hill-Collins first distinguishing feature of BFT, which focuses on a dialectical relationship. All participants acknowledged the difference that having an African American female mentor could make in their graduate experiences. They agreed that an African American female mentor would have the capacity to relate to them in a unique way. She could share advice and offer observations from her own experiences to help them avoid pitfalls and mistakes.

Another significant finding was that the relationships with and role of African American female mentors was likened to "mothering" or a familial connection. The participants' voices echoed those in Heinrich's (1995) discussion of mentoring relationships experienced by women mentees in her study. While much literature suggests that anyone can serve as a mentor, the findings presented here indicate that in the case of African American women, mentoring relationships need to be contextual in nature, and be a "counterspace" for graduate women to deal with the daily challenges they face in pursuing their degrees.

In conjunction with the second distinguishing feature of BFT, all of the participants had dealt with similar challenges (e.g. oppression), but experienced and reacted to them in different ways. This likely contributed to some of the diverse responses that they shared during the interviews with regard to the clear expectations that they had of mentors. They wanted a mentor who they could "trust." The emphasis on trust suggests that one of the major challenges they experienced in the past

(and in some cases were still dealing with) resulted from negative interactions with others during their academic experiences that bred feelings of mistrust. Trust issues were most profound in their discussions about White mentors. This could be indicative of larger concerns that the participants had about White people in general or specifically in regard to their mentoring relationships. The participants expressed that having a mentor who was trustworthy was as important as finding someone who provided career advice. At times, they participated in peer-to-peer mentoring, where they found fellow students who were encouraging and helped them to reach their goals. In return, they provided the same type of support to their peers, whether they were in or beyond the department.

In terms of the third distinguishing feature of BFT, which focuses on the link between thought and action, the dialogue that took place during the interviews prompted participants to think introspectively about their mentoring relationships. In doing so, they described the actions that produced greater consciousness for them. They were committed to serving as mentors and actively planned to help uplift others. Some were already engaged in mentoring relationships with undergraduate African American women.

Another form of action was their purposeful search for mentors beyond their academic departments and the university, particularly when their needs were not being met. They were open to alternative types of mentors. Support for psychosocial well being emerged as the main reason for seeking external mentors. Participants received this type of support from African American women at church, through sorority memberships, and among family members. Consistent with Bova's (2000) study, the women in the church and in the sorority were not affiliated with their academic programs, but were encouraging and pushed them to succeed. The "other" mentors represented Hill-Collins fourth distinguishing feature of BFT, which notes that African American women intellectuals are not confined strictly to the academy. "Other" mentors had life experiences and learned lessons that qualified, validated, and justified their value as mentors.

The findings also revealed that despite race, mentoring is a vital component in the academic experiences of African American graduate and professional women. Those having an African American female mentor found significant value in those relationships, citing them as highly unique in comparison to other relationships. Participants, who did not have an African American female mentor, believed that such a relationship would have made the difference in their experiences. However, they were able to secure "other" mentors to help fill this void and used non-

traditional forms of mentoring to facilitate their success. In terms of having no mentors, Crawford and Smith (2005) maintain that mentoring relationships carry a sense of reciprocity in that the mentee seeks guidance and support that the mentor provides. However, those who have no African American female mentors are not doomed to be unsuccessful, but may simply miss out on certain opportunities, connections, and resources available to those who do. In conjunction with these findings, some researchers (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Ellis, 1983) have found that family members, individuals in the community, and school teachers were also viewed as “other” mentors and role models for African American women.

The findings of this study suggest that more African American women professors and administrators need to be paired with women in graduate and professional programs. However, this may be difficult given the limited number of this population in most academic fields. Moreover, the findings point to the abilities of African American women to seek resources and mentors despite the challenges they endured in graduate programs. Consistent with Dixon-Reeves (2003) study, the participants indicated that African American women use very sophisticated measures in seeking and working with mentors. Most of the participants had more than one mentor, each providing differential support and functioning based upon the context of a particular situation.

Hill-Collins fifth distinguishing feature of BFT is that such thought be grounded in a dynamic and changing environment. This feature was also present in the findings. For example, participants who did not have mentors in their departments realized that they still needed to press forward toward degree completion. They continued on even in environments that they described as oppressive. Their tenacity, and ultimate success could become a significant contribution to changing the status and number of African American women in their respective disciplines.

The sixth distinguishing feature relative to building coalitions with other social justice projects and realizing that African American women’s struggles exist within a larger domain were also present in the findings. The participants were in graduate and professional programs pursuing an education that would span beyond the academy. One thing that was important, especially for those with African American female mentors was that they could share struggles with this person that were not necessarily situated within their educational experiences, but were instead life experiences. Having an African American female mentor made this okay. Women without an African American female mentor instead noted that they only shared what was necessary with mentors in their department. Their interactions were strictly focused on concerns related to the academic program. From a Black feminist standpoint the

struggles of not having an African American female mentor might be the same for women in other universities and academic programs, which suggests space for intentional coalition building among students.

Implications

Clearly, the research findings presented in this article, as well as those of previous studies indicate a prevalent pattern that needs to be addressed; there is simply not enough mentoring taking place, particularly for African American women. While many of them are successful in their graduate programs, the struggles and challenges they face should not go unnoticed. The fact that many of these women lack ample support during their graduate and professional programs suggests a sense of resiliency on one hand, but on the other hand reveals inadequacies in the educational environments of graduate and professional schools, that necessitate such resiliency.

There seems to be a consistent pattern that African American women, plainly stated, have difficulties with securing fruitful, beneficial mentoring relationships that appeal on both career and psychosocial levels. The literature is replete with assertions that there are not enough African Americans, male or female, to fulfill the mentoring roles needed in the academy. This suggests two things; The first is that those who have a greater presence in the academy should feel a sense of responsibility and have a willingness to serve as a mentor. The second is that there should be some type of accountability to ensure that not only African American women, but also all graduate students, receive the benefits of a solid mentoring relationship. This study, while focusing on African American women, has implications for mentoring in general. While the participants in this study voiced some discomfort with their White mentors, this should not be viewed as an excuse for White faculty to avoid establishing mentoring relationships with African American women. Instead, it should be viewed as an opportunity to be reflective about the importance of mentoring relationships and to actively and consciously work toward developing relationships that foster the qualities that African American women seek.

Faculty in graduate and professional schools should recognize that establishing mentoring relationships is difficult and accept that this issue is valid and warrants attention. Once this mentoring is given major priority and more faculty become willing to serve in this capacity, the invisibility that African American women experience in the academy can be addressed (at least in terms of mentoring). To be sure, many graduate departments have mentoring programs, but perhaps establishing mentor-

ing as an active priority and catering the programs to student needs would enhance the experiences of African American women in various disciplines.

While faculty commitment is important for establishing mentoring relationships, the roles that African American women play is even more significant and can be addressed on a broader scale. Reid (1990) stated, "Indeed, all women of African descent must face difficult and stressful challenges to achieve success in the academic world" (p. 159). Thus, African American women who are currently in the academy should conduct more research, not only focusing on mentoring, but on the wealth of experiences of this population in higher education. African American women should conduct critical research and publish information that would continue to shape the presence of African American women in the academy and reclaim their voices by placing them into a proper historical and current context. Clark-Hine (1995) further encourages, "With the reclaiming and narrating must be the development of an array of analytical frameworks that allow us to understand why Black women behave in a certain way and how they acquired agency" (p. 386).

African American women should also continue to share their stories and experiences by participating in research investigations. Hooks (1989) refers to this process as "talking back." The writing and publishing of works by African American women is a method of calling attention to their presence in all spheres including higher education and empowering one another to ensure that their voices are heard. African American women should work diligently to bring their concerns and issues to the center of discourse to bring about positive change. In order to do this, hooks (1989) suggests that African American women create a paradigm that consists of talking, listening and hearing in a new way. McCluskey (1994) further purports, "Feminist discourse needs to be structured around plural themes and voices that recognize differences among women based on their nationality, ethnicity, economic class, sexuality, etc., as well as the commonalities between given politically oppressed groups (p. 110). This can be accomplished by taking on leadership roles within various organizations and/or establishing formal and informal mentoring networks to provide positive role models for African American women in the academy, and knowing the culture of the institution and taking an active role on campus/university-wide committees where new initiatives, such as mentoring programs are implemented.

African American women can also build partnerships and coalitions with women of other races and backgrounds in academia to foster the overall increase of numbers and personal support for graduate women.

Hill-Collins (1998) explained the concept of “difference” and its importance for not only building stronger alliances between different women of all cultures, but also the significance of Black women building a sense of identity that promotes partnerships with others, while not shadowing their own unique needs. This type of partnering, she describes, should be “a well-intentioned effort to explore differences among women in order to build a multiracial, multicultural feminist movement” (p. 74), which could change the role and recognition of all women in higher education.

Last but not least, it is paramount that African American women keep their legacy alive by serving as mentors and consistently working to create networks that would provide more positions and opportunities to put African American women into the pipeline of academia. While it is certainly possible for White men and women or Black men to serve in these capacities, the efforts of African American women can create a sense of solidarity among this group to support one another. Furthermore, it creates a model from which others can follow to improve the presence of African American women in higher education.

Note

¹For the purposes of this paper, the terms African American and Black are used interchangeably.

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