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African American Women Faculty: Towards a Model of Coethnic Mentorship in the Academe

Ayana Allen
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Bettie Ray Butler
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

African American women compose 3.6% of the professoriate nationwide (Chronicles of Higher Education Almanac, 2009), and face various barriers within the academe such as isolation, marginalization, lack of mentorship, and hypervisiblity. Insofar as their experiences stem from the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, we utilize a Black feminist theoretical framework to examine African American women's underrepresentation and the role of mentorship within the academe. Our discussion includes the landscape of the professoriate, the benefits of mentor-mentee relationships, as well as successful models of mentorship for African American women faculty. The present study utilizes an elaborated theory building approach to conceptualize coethnic mentorship as a tool to develop, nurture, and sustain transformative mentor-mentee relationships amongst African American women senior and junior faculty.

INTRODUCTION

African American women faculty represent 3.6% of the professoriate (Chronicles of Higher Education, 2009), particularly lacking a critical mass at predominantly White institutions (Jones, Wilder, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). Although, there has been an increase in the number of African American female faculty over the years (Croom & Patton, 2012), this increase alone does not act as a panacea for deeply seated issues of exclusion, hostility, racism, and sexism in the academe (Patton, 2004). The extant literature reveals that African American women faculty negotiate various barriers within the academe such as experiences of isolation, alienation, marginalization of their research, high service loads, lack of mentorship, and hypervisibility

(Easley, 2011; Jones, et al., 2013; Redden, 2002; Robertson, Mitra, & Van Delinder, 2000; Rocquemore & Laszloffy, 2008; Strong, Causey-Konate, & Burrell, 2011). The intent of this discussion is not to highlight the abovementioned barriers in detail, rather to frame the way in which mentorship can serve as a mitigating factor for African American female experiences of disenfranchisement within the academe (Crawford & Smith, 2005).

Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought

African American female experience employs an intersectionality approach to the analysis of individual engagement in the academe based on multiple identities (Griffin & Reddick, 2011), notwithstanding, the ways in which individual experiences often illuminate, reflect, and enrich the collective Black female narrative. Strong et al. (2011) stated that a collective identity amongst African American women is fostered through shared interests, common experiences and solidarity. Hence, the theoretical framework upon which this discussion is founded is Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought brings the experiences of African American women to the center of analysis through the production of ideas that are created by and for African American women (Collins, 1986, 2000). Black feminist thought also examines the experiences of African American women as they relate to their multiple intersections of oppression along the lines of race, class and gender (Hine & Thompson, 1998; Jones, et al., 2013; Patton, 2009). Furthermore, Black feminist thought provides a framework by which to examine the micro and macro interlocking systems of dominance within the academe (Patton, 2004) such as the old boy network, consistent push back from students (Turner, 2002), as well the hegemonic forces that prevail in the ivory tower (Patton, 2004). We utilize a Black feminist positionality to discuss the landscape of the professoriate, the benefits of mentor-mentee relationships, as well as successful models of mentorship in order to conceptualize a coethnic approach to building and sustaining mentor-mentee relationships amongst African American women faculty.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

African American Women and the Landscape of the Professoriate

African American women have been deemed ‘outsiders-within’ (Collins, 1986, Patton, 2004) the academe. Although they are present (within), their daily outsider lived experiences are reinforced by exclusionary systems of the academe (Patton, 2004). Systems which Turner (2002) posited limit their authority and drain their energy. Historical and recent data illuminate the disproportional (under) representation of scholars of African descent in general (Jackson & Johnson, 2011), and African American women in particular throughout the various ranks of the professoriate. According to the Chronicles of Higher Education Almanac (2009), there were 1,371,390 total faculty members in institutions of higher education across the country in 2007. African Americans composed 6.4% (N=87,107) while African American women composed 3.6% (N=49,077) of the professoriate. African American women are also significantly underrepresented throughout the professoriate by faculty rank. African American women make up 1.3% of full professors (N=2,173), 2.6% (N=3,745) of associate professors, 3.6% (N=6,035) of assistant professors, 4.6% (N= 4,552) of instructors, and 2.8% (N=881) of lecturers (Jackson

& Johnson, 2011). These numbers paint the disproportional representation of African American women faculty.

Moreover, African American women faculty must balance innate responsibilities and pressures of the academe such as research, publishing, teaching, and service (Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Rockquemore & Laszoffy, 2008; Tillman, 2001), all while navigating the process as an underrepresented 'token' member (Turner, 2002). Tillman (2001) contended: "African Americans are likely to be in departments and colleges where there are few, if any, other faculty who share the same research, personal, and cultural backgrounds" (p. 300). With only 3.9% of African American women accounting for tenured full and associate professors nationwide, their ability to balance institutional demands and support the next generation of junior faculty is often challenged (Croom & Patton, 2012; Tillman, 2001). This lack of representation and shared experiences, coupled with the complexities of navigating the terrain of the academe have been noted as struggles for African American women in building the type of mentorship relationships that would mutually benefit and significantly support them both professionally and personally (Jones et al., 2013). Women who lack vital mentor-mentee relationships are susceptible to a negative cycle that may hinder their own advancement and decrease access to the pipeline of promotion and tenure for others (Kay, Hagan, & Parker, 2009). As fewer women rise and act as mentors for their junior counterparts, the negative cycle persists. Therefore, it is germane to explore the various benefits of mentor-mentee relationships for African American women faculty.

The Benefits of Mentor-Mentee Relationships

Mentorship is the process by which an individual of superior rank, special achievements, and prestige instructs, counsels, guides and facilitates the intellectual or career development of a junior faculty member. Mentorship is also purposed to support the personal development of the individual (Crawford & Smith, 2005), create social networks that offer mentees' access to inner circles (Kay et al., 2009), and can increase the number of African American women faculty in the academy (Tillman, 2001). By and large, mentorship serves as a mitigating factor for the challenges that African American women in the academe face (Croom & Patton, 2009; Kay, et al., 2009; Patton, 2004; Turner, 2002). Relationships amongst senior African American female faculty members and junior faculty can promote the development of the junior faculty's social capital; providing validation, guidance, and support as the mentee engages with her own personal and professional trajectories (Jones, et al. 2013). At the same time, the mentor supports the mentees' socialization into formal and informal norms and rules of the academe's culture (Patton, 2009). Croom and Patton (2012) asserted that mentor-mentee relationships can support African American women in their resistance to exclusionary institutional and organizational barriers that often exist to perpetuate White supremacy.

Another body of literature highlights when mentorship can be most impactful for mentees. Jones et al.'s (2013) research determined that mentorship relationships are most beneficial when they are nurtured while women are doctoral students. They also posit that these relationships should build upon core features of Black feminist thought, implicating a culturally responsive approach. Likewise, Patton (2009) investigated mentorship relationships among African American women in graduate and professional schools and noted that mentorship relationships between African American females were preferred due to commonalities and

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shared experiences, as mentors were key role models in their lives. The literature also provides insight into successful models of mentorship for African American women faculty.

Models of Mentorship

Mentorship is commonly referenced as a successful tool in junior faculty development, although, "mentoring remains a largely ambiguous process, lacking clear definitions of mentorship roles and expected behaviors" (Dingus, 2008, p.362). Hence, models of mentorship have been presented in the literature to support the experiences of African American women faculty. The SISTERS (Sisters Mentoring Sisters) Project (Green & King, 2001) aimed to help African American women in a collegiate setting break through workplace barriers ranging from subtle racist attitudes and prejudices to blatant discriminatory practices. It sought to create a unique, caring, positive and self-affirming "village" in which the participating women took collective responsibility for, and assumed leadership in identifying the barriers to their own career advancement. This model of mentorship reaped positive results for participants. Likewise, Sassi and Thomas (2012) proposed a methodological approach to mentorship through the fusing of a friendship/mentorship model in the doing of research. Their findings indicated that a stance of reciprocal mentorship and friendship resulted in richer research experiences for the dyad.

In Dingus' (2008) examination of mentoring networks amongst African American women, findings revealed that these networks provided spaces to redress oppression through affirming relationships; and provided much needed cultural spaces for validation, knowledge generation, and knowledge acquisition. In the same vein, Easley (2011) called for a deliberate, formal, and system wide approach to mentorship through the creation of cross-institutional support groups and networks. This approach is also supported in the work of Kay et al. (2009) who utilized an integrated model of mentorship which explored characteristics of the organization and characteristics of mentors and protégés that impacted positive outcomes in mentor-mentee relationships. Our work seeks to expand the extant literature as we propose a coethnic model of mentorship to nurture transformative mentor-mentee relationships amongst African American senior and junior women faculty.

METHODOLOGY

Theory Building

The primary goal of the present study was to develop a theoretical understanding of the mentoring experiences of African American women in the academe. Although the mentoring literature is replete with data indicating that Black faculty benefit from mentor-mentee relationships established with other Black faculty (Tillman, 2001), few studies have theoretically synthesized the nuances of this relationship. This is particularly true as it pertains to the unique experiences of African American female junior faculty. What is needed, then, is a multidimensional theory of processes and outcomes that explains the different types of mentoring relationships available, the compatibility of these relationships, and its benefits and disadvantages to the mentee. Since it appears that no such theory presently exists, the present work seeks to develop an elaborated theory, whereby an existing theory is built into a more comprehensive model by extending its basic propositions (Thornberry, 1989), in an attempt to fill this void. In utilizing this theory building method, cross disciplinary conceptual frameworks

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of representation have been combined and extended to add new knowledge about the implications of mentor-mentee relationships between African American women in the academe.

Representative Bureaucracy and Coethnic Representation

When leadership mirrors the demographic characteristics of the general public, there is great potential for more responsive policy because the assumption is that that the leader will act in the interests of the constituents with whom they share similar attitudes and values (Selden, 1997; Thieleman & Stewart, 1996). This is the central premise upon which the theory of representative bureaucracy is grounded. Insofar as it relates to race, some theorists have extended this framework and have further suggested that African American access to positions of leadership influences policies to the specific benefit of the African American community (Meier & England, 1984). This form of coethnic representation, or racial/ethnic homogeneity, among leadership and the community gives further credence to the possibility that coethnic mentoring relationships between African American female junior faculty and their senior colleagues are not just a random occurrence, but rather a strategic and purposeful plan designed to facilitate career success. Given this, an elaborated theory is developed with the intention to demonstrate how coethnic mentorship, via the presence of African American senior faculty, might facilitate opportunities to improve the overall performance (e.g., faculty retention, research productivity, and job promotion) of African American women junior faculty.

Theoretical Elaboration

An elaborated theory building methodology is used to develop a theoretical model that articulates the nuances of coethnic mentorship. Utilizing a multidimensional process-outcomes approach, a model for coethnic mentorship is used to demonstrate how mentoring resources (inputs) are converted, or translated, into policy outcomes (outputs) through the presence, or rather existence, of shared experiences between mentors and their mentees. With this model, only the organizational/internal inputs and outputs are considered, as non-organizational/external resources and policy outcomes are beyond the scope of this study. Specific indicators of organizational inputs include, *same-gendered coethnic mentorship* (available relationships between women faculty who share similar racial/ethnic backgrounds), *coethnic mentorship* (available relationships between faculty who share similar racial/ethnic backgrounds), and *non-coethnic mentorship* (available relationships between faculty who do not share similar racial/ethnic backgrounds); whereas indicators of organizational outputs include *faculty retention* (length of employment at a single institution), *research productivity* (number of yearly peer-reviewed publications), and *job promotion* (conferral of permanent tenure). By developing a multidimensional framework, using the identified inputs and outputs, the ability to theoretically explain, and at some point empirically capture, the consequences, or effects, of certain mentoring relationships becomes feasible.

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A Model for Coethnic Mentorship

Figure 1 is an illustration of a general model of coethnic mentorship. Because coethnic mentoring is not specific to one racial/ethnic group, having a model that articulates broad concepts of coethnic mentorship proves useful for the purpose of theorizing mentoring relationships across different racial subgroups.

Coethnic mentorship first starts with *inputs*, that is the identification of available mentoring resources for the mentee within an organization (see Figure 1, Step 1). These inputs can include same-gendered coethnic relationships, coethnic relationships, or non-coethnic relationships. Once these resources, or potential faculty mentors, have been identified, Step 2 (see Figure 1) is to determine the compatibility of the mentor-mentee relationship- the ability of the prospective mentor to meet the specific needs of the mentee. In determining this form of compatibility, the mentee accesses whether there are any forms of shared experience (cultural knowledge acquired exclusively through group membership) between the mentor and mentee. In instances where there are no obvious shared experiences, the consciousness of shared experiences (cultural knowledge acquired by members outside the group) serves as an adequate proxy and will yield similar outcomes. Following this assessment, Step 3 predicts the outputs, or policy outcomes, that stem from the determination of compatibility (see Figure 1). When the presence of shared experiences, or the consciousness of shared experiences, exist between mentors and mentees the policy outcomes will likely be (+) positive (outcomes favorable to the mentee). Conversely, when there is a lack of, or no, shared experiences between mentors and mentees the policy outcomes will likely be (-) negative (outcomes unfavorable to the mentee).

Considering that the present model is particularly concerned with how mentoring experiences inform career success for African American women in the academe, the model depicted in Figure 2 is intentionally exclusive to this group. Using components of the general model of coethnic mentorship, Figure 2 illustrates the resulting consequences of possible mentor-mentee relationships established between African American female senior faculty and junior faculty.

Step 1 of this model assumes that African American female junior faculty at most academic institutions will be provided with some form of mentoring resources. Depending upon the institution, these resources (inputs) are in the form of African American female senior faculty (same-gendered coethnic relationships), African American male senior faculty (coethnic relationships), or female, non-African American senior faculty/ non-female, non-African American senior faculty (both constitute a non-coethnic relationship) (see Figure 2). The individual benefit of each mentoring resource for African American female junior faculty is presumed to be largely contingent upon an analysis of the presence, or consciousness, of shared experiences with senior faculty (see Figure 2, Step 2). The final step in the model, Step 3, predicts the effects of mentor-mentee relationships, with and without the presence or consciousness of shared experiences (see Figure 2). These predictions are articulated in the form of hypothesized outcomes. This model suggests that when a coethnic mentor-mentee relationship exists and cultural knowledge is transmitted as a result of racial homogeneity, the hypothesized outputs will reflect positive outcomes showing that African American female junior faculty will: (1) Be retained at higher levels (↑); (2) Experience productivity in publications (↑); and (3) Be awarded tenure at higher rates (↑). These predictions hold true for non-coethnic relationships whereby cultural knowledge is understood and acknowledged despite a lack of racial congruence. Yet, when a coethnic relationship is absent and there is no

understanding or awareness of cultural knowledge, it is further hypothesized that the outputs will reflect negative outcomes showing that African American female junior faculty will: (1) Be retained at lower levels (↓); (2) Experience unproductivity in publications (↓); and (3) Be awarded tenure at lower rates (↓). Even when a coethnic relationship is present but there is no transmission of cultural knowledge between senior and junior faculty belonging to the same racial group, the effects are presumed to be comparable.

DISCUSSION

While several institutions provide mentoring opportunities, in a variety of forms, to African American women in the academe, from the representation literature (Behr, 2000) it is often noted that not all racially homogenous relationships produce substantive benefits. Therefore, it is potentially the interworking of both descriptive similarities between the mentor and mentee, coupled with the presence of shared experiences- rather than descriptive characteristics, alone- that produce positive outcomes which are favorable to African American female junior faculty.

Nonetheless, most junior faculty, irrespective of race, aspire to have career success; which, generally speaking, can be considered a function of faculty retention, research productivity, and job promotion (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). For reasons that have not been systematically explored, African American women find it particularly difficult to achieve these forms of success, or other measures of career satisfaction (Moses, 1989), given the mentoring resources available to them. However, with the model of coethnic mentorship presented here, the utility of racially homogenous mentor-mentee relationships for African American women in the academe is underscored demonstrating that career success is attainable.

Moving forward it is recommended that African American junior faculty seeking to establish mentor-mentee relationships with senior colleagues do so along the lines of racial/ethnic likeness and gender coupled with, shared experiences. This matching strategy is theoretically significant in that it is likely to produce the greatest substantive benefit and yield more favorable career outcomes for African American women junior faculty.

LIMITATIONS

The major limitation of the theorized model of coethnic mentorship is that it has not been tested. Although the variables within the model are clearly identified and its indicators properly operationalized, no formal empirical analysis has been performed to confirm the validity of the model. The model is further limited in two additional respects. First, the model only considers organizational human capital as a mentoring resource. This narrow focus on the internal staff makes it extremely difficult to hypothesize about the potential effects of the external influences (e.g., social networks, economics, motivation, organizational culture, etc.) on career success for African American female junior faculty. Second, the model makes a huge assumption that shared experiences facilitate positive responses, which may not always be true in every situation. There may be some instances wherein senior faculty are simply disassociated with their junior colleagues despite racial/ethnic likeness and/or shared experiences. In cases, such as this, the impact of coethnic mentorship is compromised.

CONCLUSION

Mentorship can serve as a mitigating factor to barriers often faced by African American women faculty in the academe. In the same vein, a coethnic mentorship approach has the potential to foster a paradigmatic shift (Crawford & Smith, 2005) in the ways in which African American female senior and junior faculty mentor-mentee relationships are developed and sustained. Beyond the nurturance of such relationships, it is equally important for institutions of higher education to continue to prioritize the diversification of the academe and strategically combat the hegemony that often disenfranchises African American women faculty and their daily lived experiences. Dingus (2008) asserted that there is a continual need for culturally based models which encompass holistic approaches to mentorship for African American women faculty. We acknowledge that more work is needed around the development of successful mentorship models, such as the one that we have proposed through coethnic mentorship. Furthermore, an empirical testing of the model has the potential to bring about a richer understanding of the nuances and outcomes of coethnic mentor-mentee relationships. Initiatives such as The Sisters Mentoring Sisters Project (Green & King, 2001), friendtoring (Sassi & Thomas, 2012), and organizations such as Sisters of the Academy (SOTA) represent successful mentor-mentee models amongst African American women faculty, and encourage us as the community of the academe to follow suit.

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Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Ayana Allen, Post Doctoral Fellow, University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Email: aallen96@uncc.edu.

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APPENDIX A

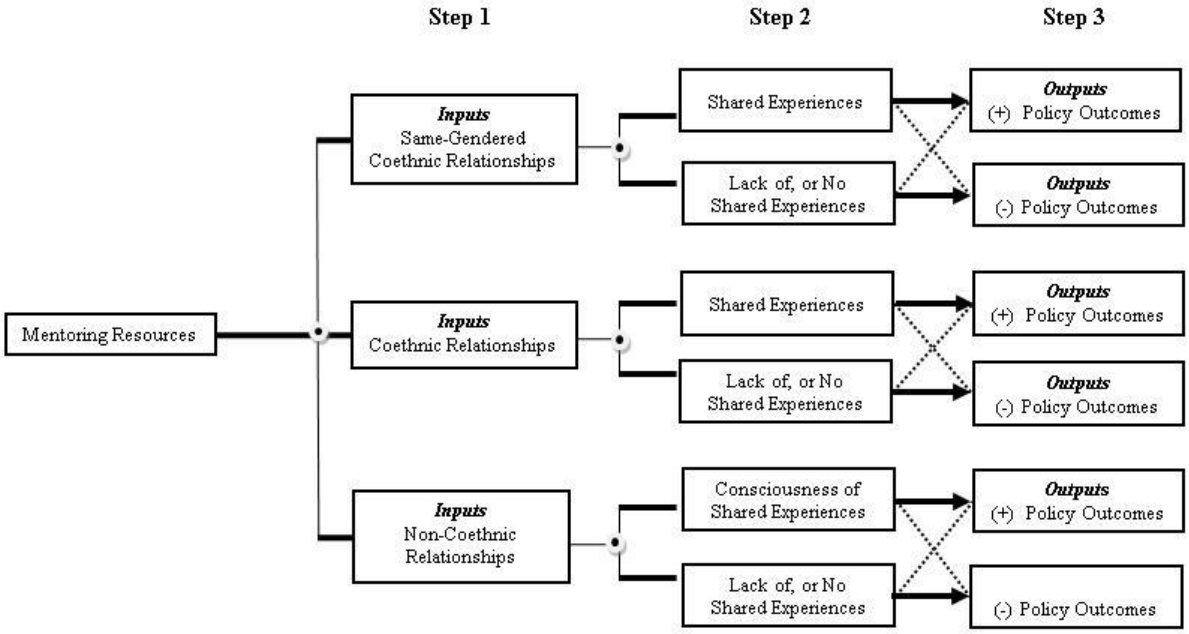

Figure 1. Model of Coethnic Mentorship (General).

APPENDIX B

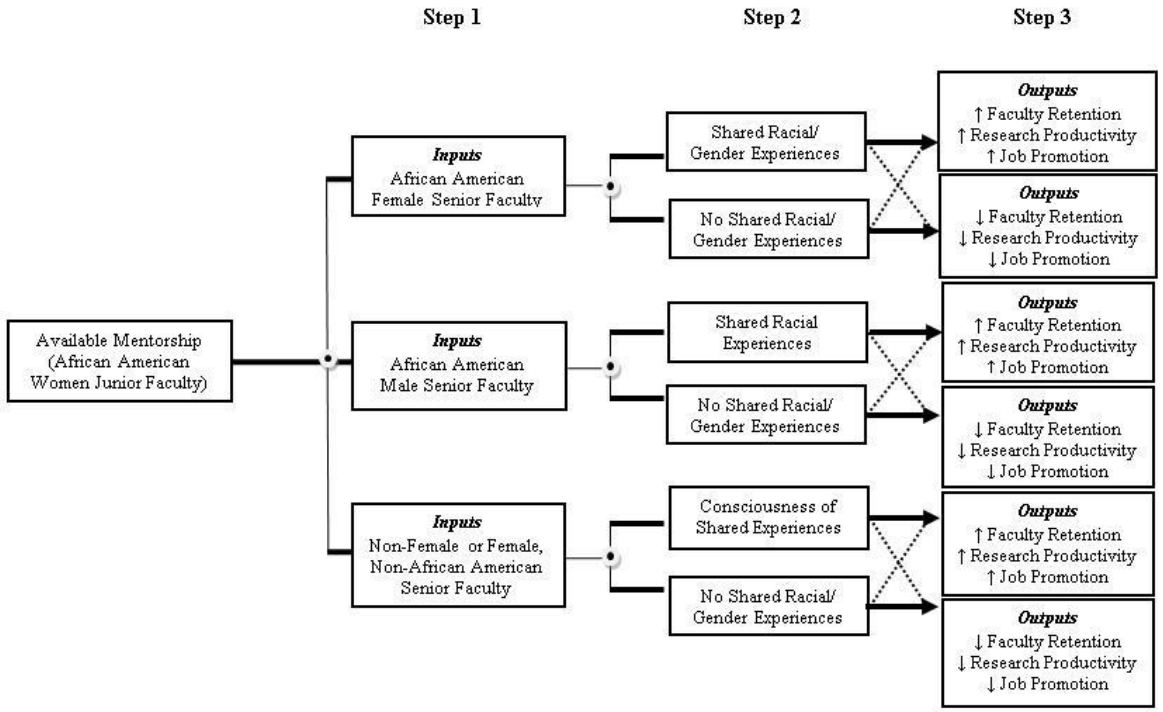

Figure 2. Model of Coethnic Mentorship (African American Women).