

Critical Race Theory and the Cultivation, Mentorship and Retention of Black Women Faculty

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Abstract

In this research, critical race theory as a framework is explored in order to understand the paradigm at work within institutions of higher education in relation to the cultivation, mentorship, and retention of Black female faculty using the methodology of duoethnography.

Keywords: Black female faculty; critical race theory; duoethnography; institutional racism

Introduction

2013 marked the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, which did not make slavery illegal; rather, it made the end of enslavement a war goal. It did not eradicate racism nor did it offer restitution to those in bondage. While the shackles were opened in areas of rebellion and later human rights were honored through constitutional amendments and federal governmental intervention, institutions of higher education remain problematic. Although over 150 years have passed, there is still much work to be done, particularly in the retention of Black female faculty in institutions of higher education when faced with instances of institutional racism. In this paper, critical race theory (CRT) is explored as a framework for understanding the paradigm at work within institutions of higher education in relation to the cultivation, mentorship, and retention of Black female faculty, using the methodology of duoethnography.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

As defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), CRT has four components: awareness of the pervasiveness of racism and critique and challenge of that reality; storytelling that challenges the false objectivity of positivist views and approaches; a critique of liberalism; and an acknowledgement that Whites have benefited most from the civil rights legislation meant to benefit people of color. CRT grew from work in critical legal studies and stands as its own separate discipline (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It engages in overt dialogue on the persistence and complexity of institutional racism and the systemic propagation of patterns that allow for institutional racism to continue existing.

CRT brings to the fore the idea that racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv). Despite the claims that the civil rights aims of equality in all fields, including academia, have been reached, the truth remains that racism is very much alive. Diversity policies may be created, enacted, implemented; recruitment practices may be critiqued and modified; hiring practices may be altered to be more inclusive; still, racist ideologies persist, which has an impact on the retention of faculty within higher education.

The second component of critical race theory is that of storytelling. Throughout this article, storytelling will be invoked to "analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv). In this way, experiential knowing is privileged: "Thus, the experience of oppressions such as racism and sexism has important aspects for developing a CRT analytical standpoint" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Storytelling, particularly in the writing and presenting of counter-narratives, illuminates more intimately the challenges at play within university to Black faculty relationships, while challenging the illusions of objectivity, neutrality, and color blindness in those relationships.

Storytelling interludes in the form of letters are used to ground the theory in relevant, subjective experience, giving depth to critical race theory as an approach to understanding the university to Black faculty dyadic relationships. This emphasis on the power of storytelling has a base within the literature: "CRT scholars (Bell 1992, 2004; Delgado 1995; Matsuda 1987; Williams 1991) have established the use of narrative and storytelling as central to connecting the voice of victims of racism within the documenting of institutional, overt, and covert, racism" (Hughes & Giles, 2010). Within this study, letters between two Black women professors, a mother and daughter working at similarly sized schools in different locales (rural and suburban, East Coast and West Coast), will be used to inquire into the university to Black faculty relationship through a subjective lens.

Third, CRT, in its critique of liberalism, argues that the pervasive and systemic nature of racism demands, not incremental advances, but sweeping, revolutionary social change. "Rather, liberal legal practices support the painstakingly slow process of arguing legal precedence to gain citizen rights for people of color" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 12).

Finally, White Americans have been the primary beneficiaries of diversity policies and affirmative action (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It is White women that have most increased in their access to education, and through education, to higher pay in professional positions, adding their increasing income to White households. When set in context, in fall 2009, there were a total 1,439,144 faculty members at degree-granting institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a). Of that number, 52.88% were male, 47.12% were female. Of the female faculty, 74.29% were White, 8.17% Black, 4.14% Hispanic, 5.32% Asian/Pacific Islander, .54% American Indian/Alaska Native, 5.35% Race/ethnicity unknown, 2.2% Non-resident alien. Of the male faculty, 75.51% were White, 5.22% Black, 3.91% Hispanic, 6.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, .45% American Indian/Alaska Native, 4.97% Race/ethnicity unknown, 3.33% Non-resident alien (percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding).

Looking at this breakdown, White women faculty, in fall 2009, had almost reached parity with their male counterparts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), Black faculty make up 6% of all professors. For ranked faculty, numbers remain troubling: full professors (4%); associate professors (6%); assistant professors (7%); instructors (8%); and lecturers (5%). This is the total percentage for Black men and women. According to the 2010 census, Black or African American was chosen as an identifier alone or with another race or ethnicity for 14% of the population, or 42.0 million out of 308.7 million people (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). The numbers tell one story; narrative adds another.

Methodology: Autoethnography and Duoethnography

It was the work of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (1996) and Laurel Richardson (1997; 1994), among others that created the conceptual framework for understanding the importance of subjectivity within qualitative research, particularly within the methodology of autoethnography. In this study, through linked, duoethnographic letters between a mother and daughter, we seek to engage in the collaborative, questioning process that allows for the development of sociological and personal understandings.

As an introduction to the August 2006 issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, the editors, Scott Hunt and Natalia Ruiz Junco (2006) remarked that ethnography could benefit from a "reflective re-collecting of its present in light of its past and its promised futures" (p. 371). They argue that ethnographers often explore the latest debates and topics, exclaiming the newness and originality of an argument, while forgetting the ethnographic past of that very same topic and opinion. They point to the work of contemporary ethnographers who, in their explorations of analytical autoethnography, offer a particularly powerful future line of inquiry within ethnography.

In that same issue, Leon Anderson defines analytical autoethnography as opposed to evocative autoethnography, which draws upon postmodern sensibilities. Anderson defines analytical autoethnography as:

analytic autoethnography refers to ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (p. 375).

Anderson goes farther in his qualifying of analytic autoethnography to insist on five key features: The five key features of analytic autoethnography that I propose include (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis (p. 378).

A Complete Member Researcher (CMR) as defined by Anderson is one who has either developed through a separate research interest or been born into intimate knowledge of a group. What is significant when it comes to this role is that the autoethnographic researcher is always a researcher observing the subject.

When the opportunity arises to devote one's full attention to the observation of a phenomenon, the analytic autoethnographer shakes off the mantle of the self and becomes strictly a distant researcher. The observation is always first, while the reflection is secondary to that.

As for analytic reflexivity, Anderson (2006) favors a traditional ethnographer's approach, acknowledging that reflexivity should have a space within the research, but not a large one as the goal within ethnographic research is the study of the other. Within his analytic autoethnography, the researcher may be influenced by the phenomenon itself and may explore that influence, but not to trump the observation itself in importance.

In association with analytic reflexivity is the narrative visibility of the researcher. Anderson (2006) writes:

... autoethnography demands enhanced textual visibility of the researcher's self... Furthermore, they should openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships over the course of fieldwork, thus vividly revealing themselves as people grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds.

Autoethnographers should expect to be involved in the construction of meaning and values in the social worlds they investigate. As full-fledged members, they cannot always sit observantly on the sidelines (p. 384).

Within autoethnography of any type, Anderson argues that researchers should be highly visible within the narrative as active and reflexive participants in the phenomenon. It is essential to acknowledge the role that the researcher had in the phenomenon itself as a change agent or as an observer, but that the autoethnographer does not become self-absorbed.

The fourth key element of analytic autoethnography is dialogue with informants beyond the self. Anderson makes it clear, again, that there are two parts to autoethnography, that of the reflexive self (auto) and that of the observation (ethnography). Just by looking at the length of the words we have a visual example of the importance he places on both within the intersection of the two. As Anderson (2006) states: "Unlike evocative autoethnography, which seeks narrative fidelity only to the researcher's subjective experience, analytic autoethnography is grounded in self-experience but reaches beyond it as well" (p. 386). This combines with the final key element Anderson (2006) details, commitment to an analytic agenda where he notes that the purpose of this particular form of autoethnography, which he calls tellingly "analytic ethnography" is not only:

...simply to document personal experience, to provide an "insider's perspective," or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves (p. 387).

In *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Ellis (2004) outlines her definition of autoethnography. She writes that autoethnography "refers to the process as well as what is produced from the process" (p. 32). Within her autoethnographies, she focuses on the telling of the story, particularly those stories that emotionally resonant for her: "In autoethnography, we're usually writing about the epiphanies in our lives and by doing so, we open ourselves up for criticism about how we've lived" (p. 33-34).

Within this study, the researchers engaged in the process of duoethnography through the form of letters, grounding our inquiry and personal and professional exchanges always with a mind for social change. This is in line with a larger body of research about the methodology, which has been developing since 2004 when Sawyer and Norris wrote a dialogic autoethnography: "They began working with duoethnography to 1) (re)present their stories and 2) expose the culturally symbiotic nature of sexual orientation in a heteronormatively framed world" (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p.5). They were engaging in a practice of (co)constructing meaning while "deconstructing their topics of investigation, (p. 5). This format of duoethnography deeply connects to the practice of ethnography created through letter writing and creates a space for the furthering of social justice (Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

Description of Research

So here we are, poised in resistance through narrative: a Black woman, now in her 60s, who, at the time of writing, was seeking tenure at a small, rural college on the East Coast after leaving a position with tenure at another university and her daughter, a Black and Puerto Rican woman, early 30s, in the first year of her appointment as an assistant professor at a small, liberal arts college in a large urban area. Letters were exchanged over a three-month period in the first semester of the junior faculty member/daughter's experience as a first year professor. Both women within their letters organically echoed CRT considerations, particularly in respect to racial battle fatigue, the persistence and high frequency of microaggressions (Sue, Richardson, Cook, 1991) within their academic experiences (as graduate students and faculty members), stereotype threat, and the challenge of engaging in academic lives while having a larger purpose of educational transformation, especially in the support of other persons of color in academia. This study and application of theory is highly significant, particularly for the impact of the narrative exchange between two Black women, a mother and daughter, at different stages within their academic careers talking about the impact of race on their own cultivation, mentorship and retention. In this article, three of the letters are explicated in relationship to themes that crossed individual experiences but were best explained by individual letter excerpts.

Emergent Themes

In the first letter, a number of themes emerged: the importance of service (a value that arose throughout the letters) that is complicated by race, gender and class; the isolation of often being “the only one” in an academic setting; and the disconnect between the lived/community-based experience of the faculty member and crafting of learning short-term learning experiences for the benefit of students.

Letter I:

Daughter: It was exactly that concept – the wearing of the mantle – that prompted the suggestion to begin this project: a series of letters between a mother and daughter both working in academia. As women of color, I thought that this conversation would be especially important within a much greater discussion of academia. I came across something interesting when I was doing a little research. In 1995, a study was conducted concerning race and ethnicity in the American professoriate (Astin, H.S., Antonio, A.L., Cress, C.M., & Astin, A. W., 1997). Of the 33,986 respondents, only 8.7 percent were from racial or ethnic minority groups. Pointing even more so to the problem at hand, faculty of color tended to be younger and in lower-ranking, non-tenure academic positions. Latino/a faculty are also disproportionately concentrated in lower ranked faculty positions. African-American faculty was heavily concentrated in the disciplines of education and the social sciences with a higher proportion of women than any other group. When comparing the groups, African Americans were more likely to say that they had experienced subtle discrimination. Considering that, according to the study, subtle discrimination was a major stressor that led to job dissatisfaction, the revelation is powerful. The study also noted that faculty of color come to the professoriate in the spirit of enacting transformative change within society. Benjamin Baez (1999) expands upon this in his consideration of the general pressure upon faculty of color to do more service within the university because of their visibility and assumed investment in diversity issues, service that is often not weighted as strongly in rank and tenure decisions.

The last point is especially poignant for me here ... I decided to apply for the position, because I identified with the ... principles [of the university], particularly that of social justice. In my new faculty orientation, I asked one of the presenters about service and if service to national community would count in considerations for rank and tenure. I was told that while this was beneficial to the community, it would not count towards rank and tenure. The priority was on service to the college.

I was floored. I wondered aloud to one of the assistant provosts how one can be involved in social justice work while serving only the student population of a private university. I was told that one way to serve the community was through service learning projects conducted with students, but, still, that was problematic to me as it allows students to potentially descend from the mountain to help a community for a short spell and then return to the mountain with no real connection to that community.

In the shared story, it also became clear the inconsistency in institutional messaging about values. It seemed that one vision of social justice work was used to attract new faculty, but this was not consistent even within the initial orientation of new faculty. This can be confusing and undermine the potential success of new Black women faculty members who seek to become tenured.

In the second letter from the senior member of the dyad, there was an emphasis on the need for institutional investment to recruit and retain Black faculty and students. This could be demonstrated first through scholarships and fellowships. There is a distinct loneliness that comes from being “the only one” or one of very few Black faculty or people of color on a college campus, which may lead to greater isolation due to discriminatory or racist practices. It may also lead to Black women faculty, even those who are successful in attaining tenure, to leave an institution in search of a more personally and culturally fulfilling experience.

Letter II:

Mother: As you remember, at one point I left academia after teaching at [one university] and then for ten years at [another]. At [the second], I was only the second or third African American faculty person on the main campus, [in] a city which is about 93% African American in population, to receive tenure. Wearing the mantle of the diversity go-to person got to be too much. When I came to the Department, there was one other African American faculty member who soon left the university because of personality conflicts with the then Associate Dean. There were very few African American students and no other students of color from any other group. In fact, one of the interview questions for the position had been to respond to how I would handle being one of very few faculty of color in the university. I responded that since I was from a small town in western Pennsylvania, I was very used to dealing with white people. However, I vowed that day that I would not be alone and started “Minority Student Recruitment Day” to seek a diverse applicant and ultimately student pool. This recruitment effort worked so well that at some point we discontinued it, because significant numbers of minority students were coming to our regular recruitment activities. We eventually also increased our African American faculty in the department as well. However, [it] was a lonely place overall for faculty of color. In addition, students would show up at my office with obvious surprise to see that I was an African American woman. Some even expressed their thoughts that I probably got my job because of being Black to which I would reply that I got my job because I am damn good! Somehow I also became in charge of the “Diversity Day” experience where students were exposed to diversity through a variety of mediums. ...

[S]ervice in the academy is always secondary to teaching and scholarship and service to the university counts the most. This is the primary reason that faculty of color don't succeed in getting tenure. Culturally, we believe in service to community. The code of ethics for my profession upholds service as the cornerstone for the work that we do. This is not the case in academia. So to get tenure, you must do what academia wants, but to not lose your soul, you must also serve your community. For people of color, often the “soul” wins...The irony is that everyone wants to know about your service to the community, because it looks good for the universities, which can say that they are “giving back” through their faculty.

Letter III:

In the next letter, feelings of being viewed as incompetent and fears of the inevitable trajectory of the “revolving door” play out from a junior faculty perspective.

Daughter[...] I find myself beleaguered with thoughts of how I fit within the academy. Putting race and ethnicity aside for just a moment, just as a woman, there are challenges. I am a huge fan of the work of Laurel Richardson in writing as inquiry and wanted to check out some of her previous books. Turns out, she co-authored a book with Anne Statham and Judith A. Cook, *Gender and University Teaching: A Negotiated Difference* (1991), that hits on the differences that women professors experience:

... Consequently she might find job retention more difficult than her male colleagues. One possibility suggested by these arguments is that women professors might encounter job strains that their male counterparts do not experience. The deck may be stacked against women, reducing their chances of professional success. Thus even though women are allowed entry into these high-level positions, their work setting might not be equitable in demands of time or energy – not because the institution is discriminating but because women face the additional tasks required to deal with normative ambiguity and with the accompanying reactions that their presence in academic creates.⁽⁹⁾

The authors go further to talk about a double identity faced by the women professors who have to decide what place their personal identity/femininity has within their teaching practice.

I faced that the other day within a course. While I may lecture on occasion, generally my teaching style is very centered on activities. I constantly monitor the understanding of the students. I allow them an opportunity to figure things out before I swoop in to lead the way. I envision my role as a professor in the classroom as more of a guide, teasing out a path when students stumble, but also acknowledging that there are multiple paths to knowledge.

During one of the sessions in a recent course, I provided students with a webquest on critical pedagogy, which, among other things, challenges teachers to realize that students can be agents in their own learning and social change. The students were provided with resources, questions to answer, and told that they would have to do a presentation in groups to synthesize their knowledge. I constantly circulated to give them some guidance throughout the class, and at the end, it seemed as if they had learned a great deal about the topic and a different style of teaching. In the debriefing session with the students on the final day of the class, I expressed how pleased I had been that they had done such tremendous work in coming to an understanding of knowledge. A student remarked that it was not impressive that students had taught themselves. I was literally struck speechless. One of the core principles that critical pedagogy fights against is “banking education”, the idea of the teacher simply pouring in the necessary language. The student had depicted my teaching as simply letting the students teach themselves, as if I had done nothing. I felt strongly that if I had stood at the front of the class each day and pontificated that I would have been held in a higher esteem. Now, this was not the perspective of all students, but that incident continues to stay with me. I found myself questioning, in the moments that followed, my teaching style, my approach, saying to myself that perhaps I should have added more background information or done it another way. I had to put aside my own ego and consider what I could have done differently to make the experience better.

I suppose that says something about the quality of my teaching, that in the end, it is not about my ego; it is more about how the students learn and altering my style to hit at the needs of those students.

Still, I worry about perception of my youth, gender, and teaching style, and how this might lead one to believe that I am incompetent. Add in race and ethnicity, and it is potentially a recipe for disaster. Again, Baez (1999) wrote about that revolving door for faculty of color.

In this passage, it is clear that a philosophy of education enacted in a particular educational practice is directly at odds with the expected classroom activity norms of this particular student. In discussing this particular incident, the mother shared with her daughter one strategy for preparing students for educational practices and activities that may be related to experiences with which they are not familiar; now, both of us, at the beginning of each semester, start our discipline-specific classes with explanations of why we emphasize communication and collaboration as well as our lived experiences as teacher and social worker (respectively) and persons of color. We have found that this is necessary so that potential conflicts around race and cultural framing are pre-empted. Of course, we also note that we both have heard of nor worked with no white professor, female or male, who situates their educational practices specifically in terms of race, cultural, or proof of expertise.

Recommendations

As a result of this exchange, we offer some suggestions for the retention of Black women faculty

- Throughout the process of recruiting, hiring, and mentoring new faculty, the values of the college should be consistently spelled out. This should be clear in the job call, interview questions, orientation process, and in the mentorship of faculty through the rank and tenure process. For example, if an institution states that it believes in community engagement, evidence of community engagement courses could be provided in the campus visits; new faculty could receive additional training to teach these courses; mentorship by faculty who have taught such courses could actively be offered; new faculty could receive a course release that allows them to grow in their teaching; and they could also be invited to write about these efforts after being given a list of possible journals in which to seek publication for articles framed around pedagogy.
- Institutions should actively seek improvements in relation to improving the diversity of the college. This starts with a keen awareness of the demographics of the faculty, staff, and students, demographic changes (positive or negative), and the reasons for those changes. In the instance of one member of this dyad, demographic information for a 10-year history of the college was requested over 5 times in the span of one year, specifically to look at race and gender among faculty, students, and staff and the changes in those populations over time. To date, no such information has been shared with the requesting faculty member. One must ask, how can you have upfront conversations about race, gender, privilege, and consistency of expectations when there is hidden data?
- Faculty of color need support in institutions where they are in the spot light because they are so few, but also need help in dealing with being in the spotlight. Since academia is a culture of its own, newly hired minority faculty need a mentor to guide and educate them in relation to this culture so that they will be successful.
- Faculty of color also have to develop a support network outside of the university. Often, faculty of color who are used to social interaction among peers of color in graduate programs find themselves alone as university faculty members and suffer from isolation. Universities who seek to retain faculty of color must be aware of and assist in the building of support networks.

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