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# **Mentoring While Black & Female: The Gendered Literacy Phenomenon of Black Women Mentors**

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Key Words: Mentoring, Black Women, Gendered Literacy, Higher Education

**Abstract:** Black women's social positions in American society allow them to experience life in ways that are different than other women. In this study, we are suggesting that the mentoring that Black women give and receive is a form of literacy that is distinct.

## **Gendered Literacy**

Black women carry particular understandings, or literacies, that are shaped by their unique culture and history (Richardson, 2003). This idea is an expansion of a concept first expressed by Anna Julia Cooper (Cooper, 1892). This belief that Black women have a separate truth would develop into womanism and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; Walker, 1984; Wallace, 1979). Richardson (2003) further explains in her book, *African American Literacies*, that Black women's literacies extend beyond verbal communication to include the way we act and move through the world,

Knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society. African cultural forms that are constantly adapted to meet the needs of navigating life in a racist society influence these practices and ways of knowing and coping (p. 77).

Examples abound in the traditional areas of composition, rhetoric, and linguistics that exemplify how writing, reading, and oral communication can be shaped by culture. Additionally, Black women scholars (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith; Collins, 1989; Dillard, 2000) have posited that understanding and embracing their lived experiences can be a direct path to empowerment. Black women academics experience their environment differently and apart from their colleagues (Harlow, 2003; Meyers, 2002; Thomas, Johnson-Bailey, Phelps, Tran, & Johnson, 2013). The stereotypes that have been formed about them influences the ways their students and colleagues regard them (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). Therefore, to mentor Black women necessitates an awareness of their historical position and their contemporary placement (Bova, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2012; Ntiri, 2015). We are setting forth that because of the phenomenon of gendered literacy that when Black women mentor other Black women academics special skills and practices that will allow both parties to interpret their environment through their lived experiences are necessary for success.

## **Gendered Literacy and Black Women in the Academy**

In this in-depth qualitative study we interviewed Black women who hold diverse roles: two doctoral students, a lecturer, and six tenure-track faculty members of varying ranks, asking them to reflect on their mentoring experiences. All of the participants are in the field of education, and represent both Research One (R1) and teaching institutions. The Black women participants were selected using purposeful and snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) and represent the spectrum of ranks in the academy. The participants were invited to write a narrative of their mentoring experiences with other Black women colleagues or students and to provide responses to four questions/probes: 1) what important culturally grounded lessons have you used in the academy; 2) how did you learn to navigate the academic culture, specifically drawing on how lessons from your culture might have impacted your learning; 3) describe an occasion when you were mentored by a Black woman; and 4) describe a time when you mentored another Black woman academic or student.

The purpose of the study was to examine how Black women understand the mentoring process as it relates to the demands of academia. We were interested in knowing how these women “found their place” and “made it through” an intellectually, socially, emotionally, a psychologically challenging work environments. We put forward that the diversity of the women’s experiences, and the depth to which they answered the questions on the qualitative survey provided insight into the varied and nuanced ways that Black women read and write the complex and often rocky terrain of the academy, and how mentoring serves as a guide.

Mentorship has long been a means by which individuals aspiring toward upper mobility or career success find support from a person who has already achieved that desired goal. Though there is no consensus on the definition of mentoring because it is frequently conflated with advising, numerous scholars have described the roles of mentors and benefits to mentees or protégées (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Hansman, 2001; Knight & Trowler, 1999; Mullen, 2000), namely providing career and psychosocial support as one works towards a goal (Hu, Thomas, & Lance, 2008). Recently higher education scholars have begun critiquing and expanding traditional mentoring models to increase retention and promotion rates of historically marginalized members of the campus community, acknowledging that mentoring is a cultural activity (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Guiffrida, 2005; Hu, Thomas & Lance, 2008). Contrary to traditional mentoring models, the ones developed to support Black female doctoral students and faculty, what Darwin (2000) situates within the radically humanistic perspective, are mutually beneficial and operate within a framework of collective achievement. This approach differs dramatically from a mantra of survival of the fittest that exists within traditional mentoring models. Instead, this approach reflects mutual dependence relationships (Griffin, 2012; Pallas, 2001; Tillman, 2002).

We draw upon African American female literacies (Richardson, 2003), and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) to articulate implications for the mentoring of Black women. Within the culture of individualism and publish or perish, we found that Black women’s mentoring relationships with each other were unique and provided an

opportunity for Black women to receive career and psychosocial support even within unsupportive environments through lateral mentoring or peer-to-peer mentoring. Although any person should be able to mentor anyone, mentoring within racial lines is advantaged by a distinctive understanding and skill (Griffin & Toldson, 2012; Moore & Toliver, 2010).

In this study on Black women in the academy, we are suggesting that the mentoring that Black women give and receive is a form of literacy that is particularly understood and executed by them. Using the constant comparative data analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) four major themes were found: 1) trusting culturally grounded lessons; 2) navigating the hostile environment and the unsafe spaces of the academy; 3) giving back to the community; and 4) surviving and persisting by relying on unspoken understanding and support.

***Trusting Culturally Grounded Lessons.*** All of the nine women interviewed related culturally grounded messages. One note that resounded unanimously across the data was stated succinctly by Yvonne, a tenure-track assistant professor at an ivy league R-1. She wrote,

Black folk in general, and I think, Black women in particular have been told that they have to be twice (or even three times) as good and often for less. I use this often as a measuring stick, sometimes to remind me what I am up against and sometimes to remind me what I am working to resist.

A second culturally grounded message that occurred in seven of the nine Black women's interviews was the understanding and appreciation of the importance of community as the unshakeable foundation upon which they had built their careers and their lives. Imani, a third year doctoral student who plans to go into the professoriate wrote,

Initially this was a difficult question for me because I don't normally see my day-to-day interactions with the world with a "culturally grounded" lens. I know that the way that I see and do things may be different from my White colleagues, but I'd never really viewed the difference as being culturally grounded. ... A culturally grounded approach to developing ones scholarship within the Black community, however, honors the work of pioneering scholars and builds upon their work instead of trying to discredit it.

***Navigating the Hostile Environment and the Unsafe Spaces of the Academy.***

Across all of the data, in the interviews and in the written narratives, the women spoke of finding their way through the treacherous environment of the higher education. Ernestine, who holds an endowed chair at a large Southwestern R-1 said of higher education, "*It is a hard ... I continue to try and do not give up, even when the odds are against me.*" And Amille feels the same even though she is a full professor and a department head at a Southeastern flagship Research University for almost twenty years. She says that at times she has to conquer her fears. Indeed the pain expressed by Amille seemed as raw and immediate as the

sadness that a young Mallory described when she recalled that she frequently found herself, “crying in her major professor’s office” about the unfairness and antagonism that she experienced.

***Giving Back to the Community as a Responsibility and Honor.*** Perhaps the most surprising theme to emerge from the data across the ranks and generations of the participants was their belief that they were part of the a community of Black scholars that had a responsibility to give back to others. And this idea of an obligation to pass it on seems deep-seated in the group of scholars interviewed, regardless of geographical location, type of institution, or generational membership. This is evidenced by Janice, who in her sixties, is three decades older than the thirty-something Erika, and as a born and raised Northern, she is far removed from the Arkansas born Erika, but she expressed the exact same understanding of passing on advice and knowledge. Janice said,

As a child growing up, as I listened and watched in the presence of Mama and her friends while they talked and interacted with each other, I had no idea, that I was being mentored in the lessons of life that would carry me forth ... I always keep my door open to support and encourage those who are coming up after me. While I support all who enter my office... For some Black students, I have been a familiar, welcoming face in waters that are new to them...

***Surviving and Persisting By Relying on Unspoken Understanding and Support.*** One final theme from the data, *Surviving and Relying on Unspoken Understanding and Support*, was only seen across the tenure-track faculty. The researchers reasoned that these five women carried an understanding borne from their battle-scarred years in the academy that the students did not yet possess. It seemed that the senior group of Black women faculty were singing from the same hymnal. Janice introduces the song, by explaining, “...there have been other women and particularly Black women who... helped me to navigate the waters of the academy. Unlike my mother, these women ... have swum in these waters long before I entered them.”

A concise and sad example of this was provided by Amille, who found herself at the height of her career, at an international gathering of scholars sitting in a back hall way crying. She was discovered by a senior Black woman scholar, who told her, “Finish crying... Dry your eyes...And expect even more resistance as you move on and up.” Katrina, who was attending the same gathering, gave her advice instead of sympathy when she said that she wanted out of administration, “If not you, then who? Do you want others to keep making decisions or do you want to sit at that table?” Amille concluded, “It was specialized hands on Sistah-Girl mentoring, no sugar coating. But it came when it was sorely needed and it saved me when I was lost ... I took her advice and I’m still at the table.”

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Despite the expansion of the literature on mentoring Black female graduate students and Black female faculty, very few studies examine mentoring along the pipeline or mutually beneficial mentoring relationships between Black female graduate students and faculty and junior faculty and senior faculty members. This study adds to the

research on mentoring by including the experiences Black women professors and scholars in various academic settings and roles.

We constructed a definition that is informed by the literature and the findings from this study:

Gendered literacy as it relates to mentoring Black women in the Academy is a distinctive skill and practice that reflects Black female ways of knowing and acting. It requires particular knowledge of the Black woman's socially constructed role in society and how that role impacts her decision-making, action-taking, and silence in academe. This form of literacy, exercised in this particular space is executed to ensure the professional success, social, psychological, and emotional survival of Black women academics. At times it requires a reliance on linguistic and spiritual literacies particular to Black women cultural ways of knowing.

Finally, we end with what seems an unwritten contract or pledge within the circle of Black women studied, those known or unknown to the others. It was articulated by one of the senior members, Janice,

Each generation of Black women who enter the academy clears the path for other sisters who follow. While the path may be cleared, it needs constant weeding because the bush quickly grows back... When a sister knows her own strengths, recognizes her vulnerabilities on which she is willing to work, has the counsel of a trusted few ... she can then use this information to inform her choices and decisions in the academy.

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