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ARTICULATION OF IDENTITY IN BLACK UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN

Influences, Interactions, and Intersections

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The identity development of Black undergraduate women has been forced to fit within the constrained dimensions of theoretical frameworks based on the "perceptions and agendas of members of the dominant society" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 20). Previous theories fail to encapsulate the experiences of Black undergraduate women because they lack a more holistic perspective—one based upon their cultural, personal, and social contexts and intersections of identities. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to conceptualize how Black undergraduate women enrolled at a predominately White institution (PWI) articulated their identity as Black women by exploring factors that influenced their development before and during college. Exploring participants' experiences resulted in a conceptualization of identity defined by socialization processes, interactions with others, and intersections of identities. This study is important because current theories and models of student development have neither accurately represented nor critically analyzed the gendered and racialized experiences of Black undergraduate women. While there have been recent empirical and conceptual examinations of college students' race, gender, and class (Banks, 2009; Harper and Hurtado, 2011; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Strayhorn and Terrell, 2010; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), little is known specifically about the identity development of Black undergraduate women.

Black Feminist Thought

The current student development literature has not specifically addressed Black women. As a result, this study was grounded in Black feminist thought (BFT). Patricia Hill Collins offered an overarching intellectual framework for understanding Black women, their experiences, and their realities within systems of domination and subordination. BFT is not a student development theory but it can certainly inform empirical efforts, such as this study, to generate theory about Black women in college. In her discussion of BFT, Collins (1986, 1989, 1990; 2000) claimed that Black women hold an outsider status of marginality within academic settings. Collins (1986) argued that the voices of Black women have been ignored, resulting in stereotypical images, aggressive behavior, and overall negativity as a framework for articulating Black women's identities. BFT provides an intellectual platform that privileges the standpoint of Black women. It "encourages theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it" (Collins, 1990, p. 22). BFT is guided by the experiences of Black women and supports the importance of examining how Black women articulate their identity. BFT sheds light on the interlocking nature of oppression—the crucial intersections and similarities that connect Black women.

As a theoretical framework, BFT redefined the narrative of Black women and illuminated the multiple dimensions of oppression in their lives. The dominant representation of Black women throughout history, in addition to a legacy of subjugation to various forms of oppression and exploitation (Beale, 1979; Phillips and McCorkill, 1993), made it difficult for them to experience the freedom to choose and articulate individual representations of self. Educators and leaders within higher education institutions rely on a body of student development research that is unable to appropriately disaggregate the holistic experience of Black undergraduate women from other college students (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). BFT is a framework through which the experiences of Black undergraduate women can be individually and collectively placed at the core of empirical research studies.

Black Undergraduate Women and Identity

Crenshaw (1991) argued that Black women are marginalized due to the intersectional nature of their marginalized identities, such as race, gender, and class. She contended that the confluence of various aspects of identity resulted in exploitation and disenfranchisement that is unique to Black women's experiences. Similarly, McCann and Kim (2002) asserted that socially constructed identities (e.g., race and gender) are experienced simultaneously, not hierarchically, and that relationships among and interconnections between identities should be explored. Interactions with others and environmental contexts are also invaluable to understanding the development of and interactions between identity. Such interactions ultimately affect how Black undergraduate women articulate who they are individually and collectively (Porter, 2013; Porter and Dean, 2015; Porter and Maddox, 2014).

The ways in which Black undergraduate women develop their identity and thrive as holistic people (with multiple and intersecting identities) within a predominately White collegiate environment is largely absent in the discourse on Black women. In other words, the literature regarding Black women and faculty is...
Methodology

Thirteen Black undergraduate women from an institution in the Midwestern region of the United States participated in this grounded theory study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory as a methodology endeavors to introduce an alternative view on an existing body of knowledge (Birks and Mills, 2011; Goulding, 1998). Participants were 19–22 years of age with a variety of academic majors, ranging from biology to fashion merchandising; the sample included five sophomores, five juniors, and three seniors. Questions that guided this study included (1) how do Black undergraduate women enrolled at a PWI develop and describe their identity as Black women, and (2) how does attending a PWI inform or influence their identity as Black women?

Data collection consisted of two semi-structured interviews (Johansson and Christenson, 2008) with each participant and a reflective survey that provided the space for participants to comment on and add to the Model of Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women (MIDBUW) (Porter, 2013) constructed via their experiences and transcribed data. Axial and focused coding procedures (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2005) illuminated 82 codes that I collapsed into 17 categories.

Model of Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women

The 17 categories were then conceptualized into the following initial seven processes and influences that comprised the MIDBUW (Porter, 2013): personal foundations, precollegiate socialization, collegiate socialization, interactions with others, articulation of identity, influence of media, and influence of role modeling. Originally, the model was created as part of an unpublished dissertation (Porter, 2013). After further review, feedback from peer reviews and scholars within higher education and student affairs, and confirmation from the original participants, interactions with others (originally as a separate process) and intersectionality of identities (indirectly included in original model) became integral pieces of the model's framework, thus facilitating necessary structural alterations and bringing the processes and influences to a total of eight.

The purpose of the original and revised MIDBUW (Figure 7.1) is to serve as a point of reference that will assist in supporting the experiences of Black women on college campuses. The MIDBUW is distinct from other models because it depicts the unique experiences of Black undergraduate women as both raced and gendered beings who experience oppression and marginalization as Black women in predominately White collegiate environments. The model is also unique because it is grounded in three key assumptions that inform the identity development of Black undergraduate women. First, the intersectional identities of Black women are inextricably linked and must be discussed holistically (Collins, 1986). Second, the development of Black women and the articulation of their identities are influenced by social interactions within and as a result of their environment (Blumer, 1986; Mead, 1934). Third, due to the legacy of oppression and negative dominant narratives that target them (Collins, 1986), Black women resist by developing a sense of multiple consciousness (King, 1980), in which they not only recognize multiple oppression but also its influence on their identities. Each experience within the model is interrelated and cyclical, representing an ongoing journey of development within the lives of Black women. This chapter will illuminate participants' experiences specifically related to four of the processes and influences that comprise the revised MIDBUW: precollegiate socialization, collegiate socialization, interactions with others, and intersectionality of identities in order conceptualize how they articulated their identity as Black women in college.
Influences from Personal Foundations and Socialization Processes

Familial Influences

Several experiences influenced Black undergraduate women's socialization prior to and during their time in college, including religious and spiritual beliefs, their parents', birth order, their level of strength, and the media. Rachel (senior, 21) declared,

Oh that's [Christianity] like the biggest influence for me in everything that I do. I was raised in the church and I'm still in the church now so it's had an impact from childhood until my adulthood and it will always have an impact in my life… All the people I hang out with, they know. They were, even if they were not in church now they know, they were brought up in church and they know right from wrong. All the Black women I know have a lot going on but I don't see a lot of people being able to just give up. The Black women I'm around, we take it and we just keep going. We keep going.

Participants shared stories of their childhood and the influence their parents had that continues to have lasting imprints as they matriculate through their undergraduate career. Jacqueline (sophomore, 19) recalled her mother's influence:

The values my mom taught me was to always be true to myself and always have a sense of independence. She told me to never depend on anybody to get you where you need to be or to make you feel good about yourself. That was a lot of my grandma's influence too.

Iman (junior, 20) insisted,

My dad taught me to carry myself like a lady. I think the main thing [that] I learned from him is my confidence. I feel like I have better self-confidence than other females my age because I have a lot of friends who were raised just by their mothers and even with my sister I can see the difference between our confidence levels.

Mothers and fathers were not the only influential people in participants' lives. Many of the women shared anecdotal stories of their experiences with siblings and the roles they played within their families. Alice (sophomore, 19) affirmed,

I'm the oldest sibling, I only have one sibling—my younger brother—and so I always had that responsibility to watch after him. I really was my brother's keeper and it's still like that now.

Whether it was being the oldest daughter or an only child, developing and maintaining a level of responsibility for oneself and obligation to one's siblings at a young age remained a constant thread among many of the women. Traits such as being responsible, confident, and caring for others (e.g., siblings) stayed with them during college and shaped their desire to accomplish their goals and serve as an example to and for their family.

Socialization Toward Being Strong

All of the participants described Black women as strong. Whether discussing the present or the past, the history of Black women, their strength and resilience, or being the "only one" in various settings on campus (all of which were in the initial 82 codes), the term strong became synonymous with Black women. Alona (junior, 20) reminisced on the past when she discussed the word strong and its connection to Black women:

We're just so strong. I can't think of any other word but strong because when I think about where we came from, from establishing ourselves, not just in the workforce but all the way from slavery, the way that we were treated, battered, and raped and things that started a long, long time ago.

Iman (junior, 20) verbalized her individual strength:

I'm strong because I've been through particular things in my life like losing my mom my senior year of high school and I still push through that, and just going to an all-White school, that has a lot to do with my strength and confidence.

Each participant shared examples and stories of either themselves or other women in relation to strength; some even became very passionate in their descriptions. I engaged in significant probing to encourage participants to define strong. However, their definitions of themselves were never separate from being strong. Instead, being a Black woman and being strong were synonymous. In other words, the women suggested being strong was just who they were as Black women. The participants' comments suggested they were socialized to believe they were strong. Whether directly emphasized by the affirmation of family and friends or indirectly expressed through experiences and modeling of behavior they saw in other Black women, the participants personified strength in their daily lives. For some, strength enabled a sense of vulnerability with people the women could trust, while for others, strength implied a sense of independence and isolation while enduring their daily lives.

Media Influences

The participants also discussed the influence of media and the negative effect it had on the collective snapshot of Black women's strength, as well as the detrimental expectations these images placed on Black women's behavior and
ways of being. In discussing the media, many of the women became frustrated with how influential it has been on how Black women see themselves. Jacqueline (sophomore, 19) expressed:

It's very easy especially for Black women to get caught up in that [media influences and stereotypes] because we're held to so much and I guess when comparing ourselves to women of other races we're not really seen in the best light and that's something that's easy to get caught up into.

Not all of the women agreed that they had a clear identity of what being a Black woman was, but they agreed there were certain behavioral expectations placed on them, specifically as a result of stereotypical images portrayed in the media (e.g., reality television). Vivica (sophomore, 19) stated:

It is about being different; being different than what I'm surrounded by... having a stigma put on me and having to really work on breaking the stereotype [as seen on television] of what I'm expected to be like by society especially being here [at host institution]. I guess just breaking the stigma and being my own individual.

Participants agreed that they could not control the stereotypes other people directed toward them. Specifically, Delilah (sophomore, 20) referenced stereotypes of Black women as "you know the loud, raucous, and a curvilinear image." We discussed how interactions with others (including their own actions and involvement in certain organizations) can disrupt or perpetuate the stereotypes and images presented by media.

Interactions with Others
Participants found solace, affirmation of their identities, and sisterhood among Black women on campus. Even though not every interaction was constructive, participants painted a positive picture of interactions with other Black women. Erica (junior, 20) stated:

I have found a like-minded group of people. My closest friends are Black women and it's just so much easier to talk with them and mention race to Black women. My interactions are a little bit more laid back, I'm not thinking about something I could say that might offend someone else.

Although participants discussed positive interactions with other Black women, they also articulated the challenges of being a Black woman, in addition to a variety of other identities, within a predominately White campus environment and while interacting with people who were not Black. While discussing her experiences on campus, Inara (junior, 20) asserted, "I feel like an outsider. But when I say that I feel like an outsider I don't feel inferior here. It's a different type of segregation; I don't feel inferior to White people, but I do feel different." Although Inara characterized herself as having a higher level of individual confidence and self-awareness, she recognized the system within which she existed as a Black woman on a predominately White campus and thus still felt marginal in the campus environment and overall structure.

The participants were learning (through ongoing processes) how to not only survive and thrive as Black women, but also how to navigate academic and social spaces (e.g., classrooms, student center, and locker room) that remained a part of their campus experience. These particular campus spaces in which they interacted with others influenced and framed how participants discussed their identities, created and enhanced community, and understood their place within the campus environment.

Intersections of Identity
Some participants were able to articulate relationships between identities, while others were still working through how to even identify who they were, let alone the interconnected nature of oppression. When referring to the college environment, Alona (junior, 20) expressed, "I'm learning so much about myself... who I was when I first got to college is definitely not the same person." While most agreed they were strong, able to work through their personal and academic challenges, and able to ask for support when necessary, others still remained unsure of their identities and were learning how to both be vulnerable and confident despite expectations placed on them by other people. Jacqueline (sophomore, 19) shared, "College is the foundation where it all starts and so they [her influences and interactions with others] kind of inspired me to be a better Black woman for myself." Skye (senior, 22), elaborated specifically on the ways her identities intersect in the predominately White environment:

Experiences, both positive and negative, that I've endured have mostly occurred due to me being Black, gay, and woman at a predominately White, conservative, male-dominated university. I think it's [being authentically who she is at a PWI] made me a stronger person but it's definitely a challenge because you always have to think about "well, okay if I didn't get something [a job or a leadership position on campus] is it because I'm a woman or was it because I'm Black, was it because I'm gay, because I'm Black and a woman or Black and gay?"

Ashanti (junior, 21) discussed how her appearance as a Black woman intersected with her religion:

As a Muslim woman, it's the juggle of it all. It is the balance between an African American woman and a Muslim woman, because there are
stereotypes about being a Black woman, there are stereotypes with being a Muslim, and these two do not even mix. I can’t even begin to mix them.

But that is who I am.

Black women’s identities are discovered, challenged, and supported at the intersections. Identity intersections influence how Black women see themselves and therefore identity within the various processes of socialization of the MIBDWS. Understanding intersections of identity and the relationship among identities, however, complicates previously learned behaviors and how women view their influences and interactions. Both Ashuri and Skyre were socialized by their parents based upon religious beliefs; however, they realized that at the intersections of their identities was where they found their true strength, independence, and motivation to articulate for themselves who they were and who they had become as a result of their influences (prior to and during college), interactions with others, and intersections of identities. Skyre emphasized, “I would definitely agree that my experiences have been strongly due to the various intersections of my identities…When I put them altogether [her identities], I feel like it makes me a much stronger person.”

Articulation of Identity

Not all the participants were able to make meaning of relationships among and intersections of identities, but they all, at some level, were able to articulate who they believed they were as Black women. They all discussed their ability to show up as themselves. No matter the stigma, expectation, influence, or interaction, they described their lives as works in progress. They recognized that being able to articulate who they were was only part of the process. The MIBDWS emphasizes that Black women’s influences, interactions, and intersections all play vital roles in their ability to articulate their identity. As Black women interact with others on campus and reflect on who they are as a result of their influences, they are able to better articulate their identities. Erica (junior, 20) shared:

When I think of who I am, Black woman is not necessarily the first thing that pops in my mind automatically…being a Black woman definitely has a certain impact on my everyday life but it’s definitely not prominent to me on a daily basis. My identity as a Black woman is definitely still developing.

Alice ( sophomore, 19) did not initially identify as a Black woman. When asked about her racial identity, she answered, “The first thing that pops into my head honestly is American because when you say America, it’s such a diverse place, such a melting pot.” Conversely, Lila (sorority, 21) articulated:

I come from an African American community that has been so supportive in defining who I am. They tell me that I am beautiful; they tell me that I

don’t have to be that stereotypical person on television; that I can make a name for myself by just being me.

There was a diversity of thought, socialization processes, influences, and articulation of identity as Black women discussed their experiences. For some, being a Black woman was most salient and remained at the forefront of their everyday existence and a lens through which they interacted with and were influenced by others. While others identified with being a Black woman to serve as a participant for the study, the way in which race influenced their perspectives was minimal. The variance in racial saliency and articulations of identity demonstrates that Black women are not a monolithic group with a single world view but instead quite diverse. Black women’s upbringing and socialization processes toward being Black women are contextual and shape the extent to which they associate their core identities with being Black and woman.

Implications

The MIBDWS provides one perspective to the identity development literature by illuminating experiences of Black women and their interpretations of influences, interactions, and intersections of their identities. By using BFT as a theoretical framework and grounded theory as a methodology, Black women were situated as the experts on their identities. Their conceptualizations led to the development of the MIBDWS. This study provided space for Black women to reflect on the components that influenced their development and the ways in which they articulated their identities to themselves and others.

Mentorship as Influence

Participants did not learn how to be Black women on their own. Their ability to articulate who they were was a result of interactions with others and influences throughout their socialization processes. The documentation of Black women’s stories (Collins, 1986) via the media and research can impact how Black undergraduate women make sense of their identities, but family members are most crucial to the development of this population because they provided significant validation and support (Porter and Maddox, 2014). University administrators, peers, faculty, and other groups with whom Black women interact must be able and willing to serve as mentors and to foster similar environments reminiscent of family and home. Interactions with mentors and role models must provide space that consists of validation, support, and strategies that contribute to the success and survival of Black undergraduate women. These interactions should also provide strategies that help these women navigate oppressive spaces that marginalize them (Porter and Dean, 2015).
Relationships among Identities

Crenshaw (1991) introduced the discourse on intersectionality and the multiple oppressions that exist with being both Black and woman. Results from this study critically challenge the discussion to extend even farther. The identities of Black women are intricately linked (Collins, 1986), and thus Black women do not show up or interact solely from a single identity standpoint. The findings of this study highlight the need to not only acknowledge that Black women have complex identities, but they also make sense of their identity in diverse ways: disrupting the myth that Black women are a monolithic group. Black women are often "forced" to pick a primary identity or acknowledge their identities as competing against one another. The MDRUWH calls educators and leaders to not only acknowledge but to also affirm Black women as holistic beings with multiple and intersecting identities as opposed to individual and disconnected pieces of a whole.

Spaces of Affirmation

Empirical studies have placed emphasis on the need for spaces of dialogue and connection for Black women (Patton, 2006; Porter, 2013; Porter and Dean, 2013). Although previously discussed in literature as espoused implications, formal organization and implementation of sister circles and the necessary collaboration between women's centers and cultural centers remain crucial to the development of Black undergraduate women. As discussed in this chapter, Black women are not the same, and thus will need varying levels of support and affirmation. A sister circle, or an organized group and space for women to discuss their experiences within a safe and supportive environment, offers a more intimate setting for all Black women but primarily for those who are searching for a smaller community of peers and leaders to arrive along their journeys. While there are a variety of campus departments or individual leaders who can host sister circles as informal spaces of affirmation, Black cultural centers and women's centers should collaborate to ensure sister circles are included as structured and funded (if necessary) programmatic initiatives. Both women's and Black centers need to honor the intersections of identities by providing space for and support to the continuum of development on which Black women show up. Similarly, to the Black women in this study, other Black women in college will continue to speak to and advocate for space to dialogue, develop, and receive affirmation. Space will continue to serve as an implication because Black women, specifically on predominately White campuses, need their experiences to be valued and heard by their peers, members of faculty, and campus leaders (Patton, 2006).

Conclusion

The Model of Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women (MDRUWH) conceptualizes the development of Black women in college and reflects the reality that their identities are affected by a variety of influences and interactions throughout their socialization processes. The predominately White collegiate environment fosters opportunity for growth in a variety of ways—some of which include oppression, empowerment, confidence, and strength. Despite the environment, however, and because of influences and interactions and the articulation of identity intersections, Black undergraduate women are learning to navigate, to thrive, and to show up. As Alona (junior, 20) stated so boldly, "As Black women, we bend, but we don't break."

The Black undergraduate women in this study proved their ability to survive, to remain resilient, and to ask for help when needed, but most importantly, they allowed themselves to open up in ways I would have never imagined. They wanted their experiences shared; they believed their stories were worthy of being captured and conceptualized in a model. The MDRUWH will always be a part of them; my goal is that it will serve as a collective storyline of many other Black undergraduate women on campuses around the country.

References


The Experiences of Black Immigrant Women Transitioning into College

Kimberly A. Griffin, Chrystal A. George Mwangi, and Shawna M. Patterson

Based on discussions in the media and recent research, it could be surmised that Black women from immigrant families are particularly likely to enter and graduate from college. Black women are generally described as successful, and they have consistently represented two thirds of Black bachelor's degree recipients for the past two decades (Harper, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). A similar narrative has been crafted about Black students from immigrant backgrounds (George Mwangi, 2014; George Mwangi and Fries-Britt, 2015). Researchers have identified steady increases in the number of Black college students who were born in other countries (first generation) or are the children of immigrants (second generation), and data suggests that they are overrepresented within the Black college-going population (Bennett and Lutz, 2009; Kent, 2007; Massey, Morey, Torres, and Charles, 2007). For example, Black immigrants represent approximately 40.6 percent of Black students in the Ivy League, yet compose less than 15 percent of the population of Blacks in the United States (Massey et al., 2007).

While these data suggest, they lack complexity and provide limited understanding of how Black women and Black immigrants navigate their transitions to college. A review of the literature by Carter, Locks, and Winkle-Wagner (2013) documents the multiple challenges that students of color face as they begin college; yet, little of the reviewed work specifically addresses the experiences of Black women. Students from immigrant backgrounds can also face distinct challenges with financial aid and limited college preparatory information (Erimson and Looney, 2007). Perhaps most importantly, there is little understanding of the unique lived experience at the intersection of these identities. We were unable to find work addressing how race, ethnicity, and gender confluence, shaping the experience of Black women as they transition into college. In some sense, all...