Marginalizing merit: Gender differences in Black faculty discourses on tenure, advancement, and professional success

Kimberly A Griffin, University of Maryland - College Park
Jessica Bennett, University of Maryland - College Park
Jessica Harris, Indiana University - Bloomington

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kimberly_griffin/25/
Marginalizing Merit?: Gender Differences in Black Faculty D/disourses on Tenure, Advancement, and Professional Success

Kimberly A. Griffin, Jessica C. Bennett, and Jessica Harris

Despite increased numbers, Black faculty remain underrepresented as compared to their presence in the U.S. population and undergraduate education (Ryu, 2008). Unfortunately there has been little change in representation in the past 40 years, with Blacks representing 4% of the faculty in 1975 and 7% of the faculty in 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). While scholars have documented the challenges faced and noted the lack of change in representation among Black faculty in higher education, little attention has
been paid to differences within this diverse group. For example, somewhat contrary to data and public discourses which suggest that Black women are represented in larger numbers and report higher levels of academic achievement relative to Black men in undergraduate and graduate education (e.g., Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2005; Cokley, 2001; Harvey & Anderson, 2005; Nettles & Perna, 1997), Black male faculty are more highly represented than their female counterparts, particularly at higher levels of academic rank (Harvey & Anderson, 2005; Ryu, 2008). In 2005, Black females outnumbered males at the instructor/lecturer level but were underrepresented among tenured faculty (44%) and full professors (36%) (Ryu, 2008). Further, there appear to be distinctions in the level of success that Black faculty experience in the academy. Thirty-nine percent of Black faculty overall had tenure in 2001, but the tenure rate for Black men was 43% and 34% for women (Harvey & Anderson, 2005).

These statistics suggest that, in addition to racial differences in tenure and advancement, there are persistent disparities based on gender. Reflections published by female scholars of color (e.g., Berry & Mizelle, 2006; McKay, 1997; Vargas, 2002) and a growing body of empirical work (e.g., Chambers, 2011; Pittman, 2010; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Turner, 2002) call attention to the unique challenges faced by female faculty of color as they navigate the success system in academia and try to distinguish the influence race and gender have on how they are perceived, treated, and evaluated as professors. The purpose of our article is to add to this emerging area of scholarship, exploring differences and similarities in how Black male and female faculty experience academic work. Specifically, we aim to differentiate the racialized and gendered nature of tenure and advancement, particularly focusing on how their abilities and qualifications are judged. We engage in a discourse analysis of the narratives of 28 Black faculty members that address “big D” Discourses, which explore how beliefs, actions, values, and people come together to shape one’s understanding of their experiences, and “little d” discourses, which reflect how language is used in enacting identity and activities (Gee, 1999). We argue that differences in faculty narratives (Discourses) and the language Black male and female faculty use to describe their experiences in the academy (discourses) speak to the distinctive ways they are perceived and engaged as compared to their White peers. However, our data also reveal nuanced ways in which Black male and female faculty define success and believe they are judged, creating unique burdens and challenges in the ways in which they experience the academy.

Literature Review

This study is framed by critical race theory (CRT), which is derived from legal scholarship that critiques the American legal system’s role in upholding
White supremacy (Delgado, 1984). As an educational discourse, CRT focuses attention on the individual and institutional racial inequities taking place within America’s education system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). In the context of education practice and research, CRT is constructed around five themes: (a) the centrality of race and racism, and their intersection with other identities such as gender and class; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology; (c) the commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano, 1998).

Three themes within CRT are particularly relevant for this study: the centrality and intersectional nature of race and racism; the challenge to dominant ideology; and the emphasis placed on experiential knowledge. First, CRT suggests that racism will be a key part of the experience of faculty of color, and researchers have confirmed the ways in which racism and stereotyping shapes how these professors are perceived, engaged, and evaluated for academic advancement (e.g., Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998; Menges & Exum, 1983; Turner, Gonalez, & Wood, 2008; Turner & Myers, 2000). Our use of CRT as a framework leads us to assume that faculty participating in the current study have had similar experiences.

Additionally, faculty narratives and research on women of color suggest that the interaction of racism and sexism create a unique experience for women of color in the academy (Gregory, 2001; Harley, 2008; McGowan, 2000; Pittman, 2010). While limited, this research suggests that multiple identities, not just one, shape the experiences of individuals in the academic environment. Thus, our study focuses on the intersectional nature of oppression, particularly on how multiple socially and culturally constructed identities interact with one another, often resulting in specific experiences of oppression and inequity (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectional analysis emerged from feminists of color and womanist critiques of feminist and critical approaches centered on White, middle-class women or on Black men (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008). In particular, intersectionality highlights both the political and theoretical interlocking of race, racism, gender, sexism, and other forms of inequity (Collins, 1998a, 1998b).

While intersectionality offers infinite possibilities, the intersections of certain identities may emerge as more salient in particular settings due to their likelihood of exposing individuals to a unique form of marginalization and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). However, it is not the intention of an intersectional analysis to assert a hierarchy of oppression (Berger & Guidroz, 2009); rather, intersectional analyses focus on the differences in experiences found all too often in generalized intra-groupings. Therefore, in our study, we use an intersectional approach to highlight the distinctions in
Black faculty experiences and assert that these experiences deserve separate attention, given their membership in multiple identity groups.

The second theme in CRT, challenging dominant ideology, critiques the assumption that rewards are fairly evaluated and distributed to individuals who work hard. Applied to the academy, this tenet of CRT problematizes merit-based tenure and promotion processes and asserts that meritocracy “serves dishonorable ends, advances racism, and deepens minorities’ predicament” (Delgado, 1995, p. 1720). A critique of definitions of merit in the academy offers many arguments, two of which are pertinent to this research: (a) the construction of merit by dominant society for dominant society, and (b) the arbitrary assignment of who is seen as meritorious (Delgado, 1995).

First, merit-based advancement is defined by, measured by, and consequently controlled by the dominant group in the academy. At research universities, merit is primarily determined based on a scholar’s research productivity (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). When assessing a professor’s research, decision makers often focus not only on how much a professor has published, but what kind of research he or she has done and where it was published (Blackwell, 1988; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Reyes and Halcon (1988) note that, given White ethnocentrism, “the general perception is that minority-related topics do not constitute academic scholarship . . . and that they are inappropriate and narrow in scope” (p. 307). This assertion is supported in recent research by Joseph and Hirshfield (2011), suggesting that faculty who focus on race and ethnicity in their scholarship are ignored or devalued by their colleagues. In his series on “imperial scholarship,” Delgado (1984, 1991) notes the pervasiveness with which mainstream legal scholars will cite each other on civil rights (1984) or engage in minimizing practices that selectively cite and dismiss critical race and feminist legal scholars (1991). African American professors interested in this type of research may find themselves vulnerable. They may be forced to choose between doing research deemed meritorious by the academy or working in areas that reflect their own experiences as ethnic minorities but thereby risk being labeled as not working hard enough for tenure or promotion (Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998) or not being considered “central” enough in engaging in conversations key in their disciplines (Delgado, 1984, 1991).

Merit is not only defined by dominant ideals; it is also assigned to those whom the dominant group believes are hard-working and worthy. In academia, assessments of merit in tenure and promotion decisions are often subjective and arbitrary (Delgado, 1995). Using Sweeney v. Board of Trustees of Keene State College, Fisher v. Vassar College, and other relevant case law, Gafford Muhammad’s (2007) analysis of the legal landscape for proving sex discrimination in the academic workplace highlights how gender discrimination has been covered by critical evaluations of women’s “leadership,” appropriate service, or time on the job in promotion decisions.
These proxy factors are not limited to women’s experiences. In Exum, Menges, Watkins, and Berglund’s (1984) analysis of the hiring and success of minority faculty, they liken academe to an internal labor market, where most jobs are filled by promotion and transfer of currently employed workers, with few new employees entering the system (Exum et al., 1984). Internal markets offer greater job security, opportunities for advancement, and perceived equity in promotion. However, these opportunities are determined by processes that are not completely objective and that do not rely on formal evaluation. In addition to considering research and publications when making tenure decisions, a professor’s likability and collegiality often come into play (Exum et al., 1984; Menges & Exum, 1983; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008). This literature highlights the pervasiveness of experiences with differential and discriminatory treatment, particularly in a shift from what one study termed “old racism,” which was a more overt form of discrimination, to the “new racism,” in which Black faculty encounter racism in the guise of a fair evaluation of quality (Cooper, 2006).

Finally, CRT centralizes experiential knowledge and voice. CRT encourages a focus on marginalized individuals’ stories or narratives, which allows for the deconstruction of the master narrative and the (re)construction of a counter-narrative in which people of color can name their own reality (Delgado, 1989). In addition to directing the methodology in this study and foregrounding participants’ voices in our analyses, focusing on the “naming of reality” affords a glimpse into the similarities and differences between the language Black female and male faculty use to describe their experiences in the academy. How people use language can reflect the unique quality and nature of an experience and its influence (Gee, 1999). Thus, in an effort to attend to the ways in which the same encounter can be distinctive in nature or how it is perceived, we specifically explore the language participants use in their narratives and the distinctions in how they describe similar experiences.

**Methods**

This study uses CRT to explore how Black faculty make meaning of how race and gender simultaneously shape their experiences in the academy, specifically as they strive to advance professionally. This study addresses the following questions:

1. How do Black male and female faculty define “success” in the academy?
2. How do Black faculty describe and understand the ways in which their identities shape the ways in which their teaching, research, and service are evaluated, and the role that these aspects of academic work play in their success?
3. What are the similarities and differences between the language Black male and female faculty use to describe their efforts to advance professionally in the academy and be successful?
4. How does their use of language reflect their multiple identities, as well as the quality and nature of their experiences?

We explore these questions through an interpretive multicase study. According to Merriam (1998), interpretive case studies allow researchers to go beyond describing phenomena, encouraging the collection and coding of data in ways that support, challenge, or develop theory-based assumptions about events, experiences, and outcomes. Critical race theory suggests that the centrality of race and the intersection of identity will influence faculty life in a multidimensional way, and this study explores whether data support these assumptions and provide deeper insight into how this process occurs. Further, multicase studies include data collection and analysis of more than one case or bounded system, allowing for comparison across cases and enhanced external validity of findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998). In the context of our study, we consider each professor as a case, enabling comparisons across rank, discipline, and institution; however, we focus specifically on distinctions between the narratives of Black male and female faculty.

**Institutional Sites**

The lead researcher collected the data for this study by interviewing 28 Black faculty members at two predominantly White research institutions that were similar in size: Oceanside University and Column University (pseudonyms). Both institutions are categorized as “Research Universities—Very High Research Activity” by the newest edition of the Carnegie Classification system. Oceanside is a public institution that was founded in the early 1900s and is located in an urban community in the western United States. In 2011–2012, roughly a quarter of the faculty members at Oceanside were members of minority groups, and 4% of its 1,900 faculty are African American.

Column University is located on the East Coast in the mid-Atlantic region and is the flagship institution in its state’s higher education system. Almost 1,500 faculty were employed at Column in the 2011–2012 academic year. Column has a similar population of minority faculty (22%) , with African Americans comprising 5% of its total faculty. Detailed demographic information on both institutions can be found in Table 1.

**Participant Recruitment and Characteristics**

Because of our interest in having sufficient representation by gender, rank, and discipline, the lead researcher selected and recruited interview participants using purposeful rather than random sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). She contacted the Black Faculty and Staff Association, African American Studies program, individual faculty, and administrative key informants at both Oceanside and Column Universities to obtain assistance.
in recruiting participants. At Oceanside University, Black professors were identified by their membership in the institutional organization for Black professors and staff. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed through the organization’s listserv by its president, with instructions to interested faculty to reply to the principal investigator. Black professors were also identified through their public faculty websites and contacted directly. At Column University, an administrator working on faculty retention endorsed the study and provided a list of Black faculty employed at the institution. The lead researcher then sent emails directly to these professors, inviting their participation.

In addition to these strategies, she also used snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to recruit participants. Participating faculty were asked to recommend other professors meeting the study criteria whose narratives could add additional insight to the research project. Nominated faculty at both institutions were contacted by their recommenders and asked to contact the principal investigator directly if they were interested in participating.

Out of 50 potential Black faculty at Oceanside and 100 at Column, 17 Oceanside (10 males, 7 females) and 11 Column (6 males, 5 females) professors agreed to participate in the study. Twenty-six were full-time professors, and 25 were tenure-line at the time of interview. Participants had been professors for an average of 16 years. Faculty represented a diverse group
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Tenured?</th>
<th>Taught at another? institution</th>
<th>Academic area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Dodd</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert Banks</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Full - Retired</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Butler</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Social Sciences &amp; Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin Carson</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrinne Davis</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren Coleman</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Full - Retired</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren Jefferson</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mathematics and Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Willis</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Life and Physical Sciences &amp; Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eileen Smith</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Carter</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicia Adams</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary &amp; Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris Hayes</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mathematics and Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson Brown</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Life and Physical Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Henderson</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Baker</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla Trent</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keira Bailey</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Jones</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard Freeman</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marilyn Taylor</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Tenured?</td>
<td>Taught at another? institution</td>
<td>Academic area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt Miller</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Stuart</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mathematics and Engineering &amp; Life and Physical Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Bate</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mathematics and Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula James</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reginald Spencer</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teryn Mitchell</td>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa Evers</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallace Pearson</td>
<td>Oceanside</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Social Sciences &amp; Professional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of departments and programs, with the largest proportion teaching in the social sciences (n = 12), followed by professional programs (n = 5). Four professors were in math or engineering, two taught life sciences, one was in the arts, and one was in an interdisciplinary program. (Table 2 contains more detailed information about each participant.)

Measures and Procedures

At the beginning of the interview, each participant completed a brief questionnaire covering basic demographic and academic information. Next, participants engaged in individual semi-structured interviews with the lead researcher, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of the literature on the experiences of African American faculty and their experiences in the academy. The interviewer asked participants about their experiences as professors and paths to the professoriate; impressions of the ways in which race had shaped their experiences at the institution and in their departments; as well as the types and quality of relationships they had with students. All participants were asked for permission to tape-record interviews for later verbatim transcription. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Analysis

We treated transcripts of the interviews as narratives co-constructed with the lead interviewer and analyzed them using strategies consistent with Gee’s (1999) framework for discourse analysis and adaptations to critical discourse analysis methodology (Fairclough, 2001; Wodack, 2001). Discourse analysis is a broad field, focusing on both how individuals understand their experiences (“big D” Discourses) and language and how it is used to represent both identity and experience (“little d” discourses) (Gee, 1999). CRT framed our understanding and analysis of these D/discourses, focusing attention on participants’ marginalization and how their D/discourses interact with dominant Discourses in the academy around merit, tenure, and professional advancement.

We analyzed the narratives through a multi-stage process consistent with the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, to explore broader (“big D”) Discourses of how faculty experience racialization as they seek professional advancement in the academy and how these perceptions may differ between men and women, all members of the research team individually reviewed the interview transcripts. Male and female faculty narratives were read separately, and each member of the team composed memos that detailed, compared, and contrasted emerging themes. The team then met to discuss the themes and distinctions across participants’ Discourses. Themes with similar underlying principles were clustered, then translated into a list of codes, including those which were captured when participants labeled their
experiences as racialized or gendered, experiences with and perceptions of
campus climate, and when they saw themselves as being treated or perceived
differently. We constructed clear definitions of the codes, compiled them into
a codebook, and then applied these codes to the data using ATLAS.ti software.
We subsequently compared coded data and reports for specific codes to our
initial perceptions of emerging themes.

The second phase of analysis focused on the local (“little d”) discourses—
specifically, how faculty used language to situate meaning in relation to
themselves, the interviewer, and other discourses. Data analyses in this phase
were driven by critical discourse analysis, which examines how language is
used to communicate social relationships and inequality (Wodack, 2001).
While critical discourse analysis often centers on ways in which language is
used by those in power, it also emphasizes understanding the perspectives of
those from marginalized groups (Wodack, 2001). Thus, this study includes
a focused analysis of the distinctive ways in which Black female and male
faculty use language to communicate their marginalization and challenges
faced in the academy.

Critical discourse analysis suggests that a closer examination of a Discourse
should be based in functional linguistics, teasing apart how language serves
social functions and how ideas are presented (Fairclough, 2001). Therefore,
in addition to drafting memos on emerging distinctions in the Discourses
communicated by female and male participants, we wrote memos on the
forms of language that faculty used. We further discussed specific words and
types of imagery created in faculty narratives. Categories of language used
by faculty to communicate their experiences in the academy, especially as
related to their racial and gender identities, were created and revised, based
on our joint discussions. The researchers then mined the data for examples,
searching for supporting and disconfirming evidence of early perceptions of
how language is used, as well as differences in the language patterns observed
between women and men in the sample.

Limitations

While this study has a great deal to contribute, its limitations must be
addressed. As a qualitative project based on the narratives of professors em-
ployed at two research institutions, the findings cannot be viewed as indicative
of the experiences of all Black faculty at all college campuses. Generalizability
is beyond the scope of this project and inconsistent with the principles of CRT,
which focus on context-bound understandings of lived experiences. Thus,
it is important to remind readers that this study illuminates the experiences
of a specific group of scholars at two institutions with specific institutional
contexts that may be transferable to others; however, more work must be
done to confirm the consistency of these findings across environments.
There are also limitations associated with our method of sampling. Participants were free to choose whether they wanted to engage in this study, and it is possible that those who had stronger beliefs about their experiences as faculty at their respective institutions (good or bad) were more likely to volunteer. Thus, we may have a skewed view of the faculty experience, informed largely from those who have strong positive and/or negative perceptions, with less attention to the experiences of those who might have more neutral perspectives. Further, most participants in this study were tenured faculty at the time of interview. This achievement represents their ability to successfully navigate their environments and persist despite the challenges they face. The voices of those who faced similar challenges but did not fare as well are not represented in this work and should be the focus of future study.

**Findings and Discussion**

Our analysis of the faculty narratives revealed gender differences in how participants understood their experiences broadly (via the “Big D” discourses) in teaching, service, and research. In the area of research, the participants’ racial identities were the most salient to their understanding of success and merit in the academy, with common experiences between men and women. The areas of teaching and service were understood and enacted differently by male and female Black faculty, however. Participants shared different perceptions of demands and expectations in these dimensions of academic work, shaping how they construed success.

Although faculty described gendered experiences with teaching and service, the priority placed on research translated to a commonly experienced tension between research and other faculty activities. As faculty spoke about the interplay between their commitments in these areas, they often identified costs involved in meeting the terms of success for Black academics. However, the ways in which male and female faculty expressed these costs differed in significant ways. Upon analysis, competing (“little d”) discourses emerged in how men and women talked about this tension in relation to the costs associated with focusing on activities other than research, particularly in relation to service activities.

**“Big D” Discourse: Teaching**

As participants reflected on the role that teaching played in their academic advancement, two different kinds of responses emerged. Men repeatedly recounted the value they placed on teaching, while simultaneously articulating its irrelevance in evaluations for tenure and promotion. According to Jackson Brown: “Good [teaching] evaluations don’t do anything for you because everybody is pretty much . . . above average in terms of teaching capability. You’d have to be pretty sociopathic to have it [teaching] influence your ten-
ure decision.” Although delimiting tenurable behavior as non-sociopathic may seem extreme, this sentiment was echoed in many of the male faculty responses. Jackson Brown went on to describe teaching as a “distraction” from the other activities that he saw as more closely related to getting tenure (i.e., research), and Jason Henderson says, “It’s pretty much up to you to be the good teacher. You’re not rewarded for it.” Thus, these male faculty value their teaching experience and skills but acknowledge that time and energy spent in this area will not advance their careers.

While women also acknowledged the emphasis placed on research rather than teaching at their respective institutions, their comments suggest that they perceived teaching evaluations as playing a larger part in the tenure and advancement process than their male colleagues. Far from being sociopathic, Paula James described how her tenure case was initially denied because of a bad teaching evaluation:

> I mean, it was so outrageous that the dean was just, like, floored. . . . They managed to jam up my appointment for about two and a half years over one bad teaching evaluation. You know, there are full professors in [my academic area] that don’t have what they call, “Dependent Investigator Grants” from the National Institute of Health. . . . And I had two at the time and full publications in decent journals and the whole bit. . . . It all boiled down to this one teaching evaluation, and we all know at a major research university that no one cares about teaching anyway.

Paula James thus agreed to some extent with male perspectives, noting that teaching was not valued at research universities in the advancement process; however, she was able to recount a case where her teaching evaluations were scrutinized in a way that she perceived as different from the treatment her colleagues received, especially given her scholarly record.

Other women professors similarly mentioned evaluations and how they could be considered in the tenure process. For example, when asked what students could do to help her, Eileen Smith emphasized the importance that could be placed on teaching evaluations: “They [tenure and advancement committees] do look at letters. . . . When you do those course evaluations, you know, somebody’s looking at them.” Felicia Adams also sought to bolster her tenure file by including letters of recommendation from her students.

The emphasis placed on teaching evaluations in academic reviews, and the role that a single poor evaluation played in endangering one female faculty member’s bid for tenure, perhaps point to a different set of standards surrounding Black female academics. If Black women in the academy are, as Harley (2008) argues, the “maids” of academe, there may be additional expectations to serve as caretakers and teachers within their departments. Additionally, Kardia and Wright (2004) argue that teaching is expected to come easily to women, therefore diminishing perceptions of success in this
responsibility and heightening perceptions of failure. Black men seem to be able to deprioritize teaching without penalty, as evident in their lack of discussion in their narratives of teaching evaluations and their accompanying importance; Black women, however, do not seem able to do this without heightened scrutiny of their teaching practices. Perhaps in some settings, teaching evaluations become the proxy evaluation points that are embedded with and cover up gender discrimination, in addition to those cited by Gafford Muhammad (2007).

“Big D” Discourse: Service

Although all faculty members were tasked with finding a balance between research and other commitments, men and women spoke differently about how they responded to these demands, particularly when describing service to students. Men were more likely to clearly articulate the need to “say no” to service obligations. Albert Banks explicitly stated: “You have to learn to say no at least until you get your tenure because you get rewarded in academia by the number and the quality of the publications and not how much time you spend mentoring students.”

His comments reflect the responses of other men, who also focused on how they had learned to “say no” in order to succeed. Wallace Pearson described his first year as a faculty member as including the process by which he learned to “say no,” thus strengthening his position for attaining tenure. Black men articulated these boundaries on their time commitments and continued to reinforce and comply with an emphasis on research.

On the other hand, the women articulated a feeling that they should do less service or teaching, perhaps suggesting that it was more difficult for them to “say no” in the same ways as male faculty. Wallace Pearson had learned to “say no” in his first year as a faculty member, but Corinne Davis, who was an associate professor several years into her career, was still in the process of “learning to say no” to students’ multiple requests on her time. She had already attained tenure, but she still articulated a need to be stronger about guarding her research time from service requests. As Karla Trent described the ways in which she engaged students personally and professionally, she admitted that she probably spent too much time with them and certainly engaged them in a more personal way than her male colleagues:

We’ve already talked business, and they [students] want to talk about other things for a longer period of time. . . . So sometimes I’ll feel that I should be a little more judicious with my time and say, “You know, I’d love to keep chatting, but I can’t.” And I do notice that more of my male colleagues [do that]—I mean, you’re in there and you’re out.

Similarly, as Felicia Adams described the way that she interacted with students, she repeatedly shared comments suggesting that she perceived herself as engaging with students more than she should. For example, she stated:
I believe we’re here as a resource. I try to be as available as possible to my students, which I know is probably not the right thing, because, you know, it frazzles you a little bit. So, I do—some of them I even give my home phone number to, but I usually stop myself most of the time.

Thus, in addition to experiencing challenges in “saying no” and limiting her availability, Felicia Adams tends to provide students with a level of personal access that she also wonders whether she should curtail.

The differences between how men and women in the study approached “saying no”—with women articulating more struggle than men—suggest that the competing demands on faculty include the expectations they place on themselves, particularly in terms of availability to students. Although faculty of color have been generally found to devote more time to service than White faculty (Allen, Epps, et al., 2000; Banks, 1984; Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Turner & Myers, 2000; Umbach, 2006), it is not clear if the types of service engaged in by male and female Black faculty are different. Perhaps Black men’s comfortableness in “saying no,” particularly to individual students, allows them to be more strategic with their service commitments, enhancing their tenure portfolios. Alternatively, Black women’s personal struggle with “saying no” may contribute to higher levels of stress, adding additional challenges to their tenure bids (Griffin, Bennett, & Harris, 2011).

“Big D” Discourse: Research

The importance of scholarship for professional advancement in the academy pervades literature concerning professional advancement in the academy (e.g., Tierney & Bensimon, 1996), as well as the faculty narratives within this study. However, their narratives indicated that Black scholars may face a different set of standards when their work is evaluated. Unlike their experiences with teaching and service, gender differences did not emerge; instead, their identities as Black faculty were the most salient. This finding is congruent with intersectionality tenets, which argue that certain identities or combinations of identities will be more or less salient in different settings (Crenshaw, 1991).

For Black faculty in this study, the type of scholarship they produced was at times considered suspect, particularly when doing research on marginalized communities. Eileen Smith discussed this distinction in thinking about her own department, in which multiple approaches to her discipline are valid but which, however, are weighted differently in prestige and value. As a Black woman social scientist in a largely scientific field, she wondered whether it was her ethnicity or her academic emphasis that sometimes called her work into question. In some ways, the Black faculty and their peers have fused comments about the validity of racial, ethnic, or gender studies with
comments about the validity or rigor of research. In fact, Reginald Spencer breaks this tension down explicitly, noting that, despite using the dominant methodology in his field, the quality of his work was still questioned:

I think that there is a combination of race, the fact that I’m working on race, and that I have other dimensions of my work that sort of make me be perceived to be not a real [social science discipline] scientist around here.

Thus, both for the Black faculty and their peers, particular topics and methods are considered less valid than others—raising further complications for Black faculty. Disciplinary and departmental values interact with faculty members’ own agendas to advance knowledge about ethnicity and race. Delgado (1994) suggests that, as larger numbers of faculty of color entered into the discourse of civil rights law, many White scholars moved on to different topics; this “White flight” from topics of race and equal rights is accompanied by a loss of prestige associated with these topics. A focus on these topics may carry a different cachet for Black scholars than for their White peers.

For some faculty, focusing on race and ethnicity elicited greater scrutiny during their review process. Theresa Evers, whose research focused on issues related to the African Diaspora, described the questions that arose regarding her tenure evaluation:

It was questionable whether or not I had done enough, whether or not what I had done was quality enough, had I published in the right journals. . . . I did come up for tenure and they didn’t approve it. . . . It wasn’t [that] they didn’t approve it, they just had questions.

The added scrutiny for faculty who study race and ethnicity could lead some to employ the following strategy: amass impressive publication records that are tough to question. As Aaron Dodd puts it, many Black professors who do race-related work have “to be twice as good as people who work in other areas and [have to] to publish in places that are twice as high. And you have to do more of it.” Eileen Smith concurred, noting that some scholars who do race-related research “are in departments where their research is not as valued as the research agenda of somebody else. So they have to have a lot of publications and a lot of good publications.” Thus, the lengths to which one had to go to be determined “successful” were perceived as being different for Black scholars. These expectations place further pressure on Black faculty to produce at high rates that leave them less vulnerable to questions and doubts when seeking promotion.

Although research is the primary measure of excellence in the tenure and promotion process, particularly at research-intensive institutions (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996), focusing on and valuing scholarship does not seem to guarantee advancement for Black faculty. Several studies suggest that faculty
of color and female faculty espouse stronger value commitments to research than their White, male peers, despite lower rates of research productivity (Antonio, 2002; Bellas & Toutkoushian, 1999; Blackburn, Wenzel, & Beiber, 1994; Toutkoushian, 1998). However, the ways in which Black faculty describe the evaluation of their scholarship suggest that something other than commitment and activity is affecting their attempts to be promoted. Although their tenure portfolios formally receive the same review as their White peers, a hidden set of standards seems to be operating. These different standards are not clearly articulated to Black faculty, yet participants are attuned to the myth of meritocracy embedded within tenure review. In order to avoid being caught in the meritocracy trap, they do more to bolster their files.

“Little d” Discourse: Language of Costs

The different ways in which the costs of concentrating on activities other than research are understood and described by male and female Black faculty become clearer in a detailed examination of the ways in which language is invoked. Given the emphasis placed on scholarly productivity at research universities, it is not surprising that the most specific language emerges as each faculty member negotiates his or her relationship with research. Both male and female Black faculty repeatedly discussed the cost of service commitments (to students in particular) in terms of time throughout their narratives, noting the consequences on their tenure and promotion process. This finding is relatively consistent with those who argue that faculty of color are pulled in multiple directions, which leaves them little time to complete their research (Joseph & Hirschfield, 2010; Padilla, 1994; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

Women, however, seemed to identify significant personal costs as well, using words like “exhausting” and “overwhelming” to describe the costs of engaging in non-research-related work in ways that male participants mostly did not. For example, in describing her work with students, Eileen Smith shared: “Because it’s [working with students] so time consuming and exhausting, I probably have made some wrong choices.” Corinne Davis also described working with students as “taxing and overwhelming” and was making efforts to better balance that work with her other scholarly duties. Felicia Adams used the words “time consuming and very exhausting” to describe her perceptions of the challenges associated with working with students outside of the classroom and with service more generally. She went on to admit that it was because “I do it the wrong way—as I said, I sort of try to be very accessible.”

In these women’s words and narratives, we hear echoes of emotional and physical exhaustion. The cost extends beyond time, away from efforts at publication, to a very real sense of exhaustion. Additionally, these women identify the problem with this exhaustion as being their own faults—by doing it the
wrong way or making wrong choices. This pattern of expressing personal responsibility suggests a potential misalignment between their values and those of the academy. This misalignment would become more pronounced if these Black female faculty continued to persist in pursuits that they found of value ethically, personally, or in service of the academy, but which they were told were not the right things on which to be spending time.

Alternatively, the male interviewees framed the expectations beyond research activities placed on them in terms of economic metaphors. Matt Miller, who was one of the few male professors to speak of personal costs, simultaneously used economic language in speaking of the professional “price” and lost “investments” of time and energy: “There probably is a personal professional price that is sort of extracted because I can’t invest that energy, for example, into my own writing work.” Two male professors referred to the time commitment Black faculty are expected to invest in Black students, supporting and guiding them, as a tax to be paid. Wallace Pearson explained, “Being a Black faculty member, there’s a tax you have to pay. You’ve got to put in a little bit of extra time.” Jackson Brown also discussed “the Black Tax,” acknowledging it as a term commonly used and understood by his colleagues. He said:

You probably heard of the tax that African American faculty pay per student. It just sort of happens, you can’t avoid it, and you’re expected to do things and you sort of have to because there’s nobody else to do it.

The tax metaphor is interesting in that it acknowledges that there is a cost to be paid (which both Jackson Brown and Wallace Pearson acknowledge), but also that the investment is going toward the collective good—much as taxes paid to the government support services that assist the community. For example, Wallace Pearson willingly pays this tax because someone paid it to support him and sees it as a contribution to building the next generation of scholars. By using the language of payment, price, and tax, the Black men frame the costs of service, in particular, in a language of transaction, where, as Eric Carter puts it, “Time is a commodity.”

This use of economic language suggests that there may be a different perspective from that of the women in framing these extra responsibilities. Even, as in the case of Matt Miller, when they are discussing the drain of emotional energy from intensive work with students, they reframe the costs involved in the language of a professional “price,” rather than a self-evaluation of whether the work is “right” or “wrong.” The bracketing of these expectations into a specific, economic phenomenon perhaps allows the men to separate the demands of the academy—in which the feedback or demands of others is set in the context of a professional game—from their conceptions of self as competent individuals who are making appropriate choices. These
differences in views of the self either as competent or as making incorrect choices may be contributing to the gender disparities among Black faculty in regards to promotion and tenure. Past research has found that women feel less self-efficacious in research and related faculty activities, and have related lower levels of research productivity (Landino & Owen, 1988; Vasil, 1992); this phenomena may be persisting for Black female faculty, resulting in slower advancement rates.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Both men and women faculty interviewed in this study share narratives that are consistent with the literature on Black faculty and their challenges in navigating the tenure and promotion process. Both groups have to balance their teaching and service responsibilities with their commitment to research, which can be particularly challenging given the multiple requests for their time on committees and engagement with students (Allen, Epps, et al., 2000; Banks, 1984; Menges & Exum, 1983; Padilla, 1994; Stanley, 2006; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Turner & Myers, 2000). However, the discourses of male and female faculty diverged in important ways, suggesting that they experience the academy—and consequently negotiate that balance—somewhat differently. These distinctions are consistent with the first tenet of CRT: highlighting the intersectional nature of race and gender and their impact on the lived experiences of Black professors (Solórzano, 1998). The similarities and differences in these discourses speak to the nuances in the lived experiences of Black faculty in the academy, and the data suggest that race and gender converge to create a unique set of challenges for Black men and women as they strive for success. In addition to encouraging new lines of research, the findings of this study offer insights for institutional leaders and policymakers who must develop strategies to support these faculty in unique ways to truly promote equity and success in the academy.

There were notable similarities and distinctions in male and female discourses concerning how their work was judged. In addition to calling attention to the centrality and intersectional nature of racism, CRT challenges dominant ideologies suggesting that professional advancement is based on objective assessments of merit and worthiness (Delgado, 1995; Solórzano, 1998). In alignment with CRT, faculty narratives challenge this dominant discourse of meritocracy, noting the levels of scrutiny they faced as their files were reviewed for tenure and advancement. Similar to past research (e.g., Johnsrud & Sadao, 1996; Stanley, 2006), participants noted the ways in which their research could be critiqued as less rigorous and as politically motivated by self-interest, particularly if they were studying issues related to communities of color. As such, more attention must be paid to review processes,
addressing how the subjective dimensions of the process may allow research on race and ethnicity to be relegated to the periphery. Strong consideration must be given to the value placed on race-related research and journals, ensuring that they are regarded as valued scholarly contributions. Institutions that value a diverse and vibrant intellectual community would also be well served in applying a vigilant eye to cases of tenure-denial for faculty who study race or any other topics that are often maligned as “identity politics.”

While men and women agreed that research trumped teaching in the promotion process and that research on underserved communities was often marginalized, there were distinctions in the perceived role of teaching in advancement, with women suggesting it has greater potential to negatively influence their advancement than male participants. This finding is particularly compelling given literature suggesting that Black women face an increased likelihood of being questioned or are assumed to be less competent in the classroom (McGowan, 2000; Pittman, 2010). Thus, while exceptional teaching could replace research, women seemed to perceive teaching as something that could be problematic, describing the importance of good teaching evaluations in ways men did not. This finding has not been documented in previous literature and is certainly worthy of further study. Future research should examine not only how male and female faculty from various racial and ethnic backgrounds describe their experience in the classroom, but also the varying roles that teaching can play in their evaluations for academic advancement.

These findings also lend themselves to several practical implications. Tenure and promotion committees must clarify the role and importance of teaching as faculty are reviewed. While the review process articulates few clear guidelines or standards (Exum et al., 1984), a clearer understanding of the ways in which teaching evaluations will and should be considered in the evaluation process is important. This understanding needs to be advanced for both those under and engaging in reviews, or else faculty of color may still be subject to the “new” racism that poses as equitable judgments on quality (Cooper, 2006). Further, peer evaluations can and should be used to triangulate student assessments of teacher quality, providing a clearer sense of whether student critiques are fair or based on racial and gendered expectations of what Black male and female faculty members should know or how they should act. Additionally, internal audits can ensure that teaching evaluations are given equitable weight across faculty under review, not impacting some faculty more negatively than others.

Finally, this study has implications for understanding the repercussions of how and why Black male and female faculty engage in service. If both men and women cite personal benefits to be derived from service and teaching engagement, but only the women persist in what Felicia Adams refers to as
“do[ing] it all,” then the question remains: Why? Intersectional analyses must be applied to studies of faculty of color and their service commitments to gain deeper understandings of the similarities and differences in the activities in which they choose to engage, as well as their motivation for participation.

From a critical race theory perspective, women participating in this study may be choosing service as a way to engage in resistance by refusing to conform to the standards they feel are enforced by the dominant value system that does not align with their own. However, this resistance may come at a cost. Men and women are both aware of the time costs of teaching and service, but women speak more often of the exhaustion and overwhelming nature of academic work. Thus, in terms of practical implications, these findings suggest that institutional leaders and policymakers need to look beyond productivity to determine how their faculty are faring. The challenges described and associated with exhaustion may make faculty life less satisfying for Black women, not only factoring into their likelihood of advancing through the tenure and promotion process, but also their desire to persist in the academy. Therefore, review committees must go beyond applauding faculty generally, and Black women particularly, who manage heavy service loads and maintain high rates of productivity; it is important to assess whether these loads are manageable, sustainable, and appropriate given their additional roles and responsibilities.

References


