African American Females
Zamani-Gallaher, Eboni M., Polite, Vernon C.

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With the passage of the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, better known as Proposal 2, in 2006, race-conscious and gender-conscious policies and programs garnered much attention and review because Proposal 2 made such efforts illegal due to their exclusive and preferential practices (Michigan Civil Rights Commission, 2007). Women of color in Michigan, specifically African American women, find themselves in a peculiar situation because neither their race nor gender can be recognized in efforts to improve their status in the state, whether it is in terms of securing government contracts, government jobs, access to selective Michigan institutions, or merit scholarships. However, prior to the passage of Proposal 2, African American women have always had ongoing challenges due to their double jeopardy status (Moses, 1989).

In the arena of higher education, African American women of Michigan, before and after the advent of Proposal 2, have faced multiple challenges. Whether Black women are in the role of student, faculty member, or staff member, they face a regular dose of behavioral and psychological assaults that question their right to occupy spaces at predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Clayborne & Hamrick,
Understanding that there are commonalities to these challenges (Collins, 2005), we in this chapter will focus on African American female administrators and draw attention to the issues they confront being Black women at PWIs.

Many challenges that African American female administrators face today are similar to challenges of the 1970s, when large numbers of African American students matriculated at predominately White institutions. Ironically, who advocates for and represents the interests of junior, midlevel, and senior-level Black female administrators? Where are the safe spaces and systems of support for them? When their administrative titles are designated “minority,” “diversity,” “affirmative action,” or “multicultural,” are there added burdens and concerns? The goal of this chapter is not to generalize that all Black women administrators share the same experiences, but to give voice to the challenges and coping strategies of 10 African American female administrators on predominately White campuses in the state of Michigan. Additionally, this chapter advances several policy recommendations and discusses implications for practice with respect to navigating predominately White campuses and allowing institutions to place greater value on what African American women administrators bring to college campuses.

**Black Female Administrators in Higher Education**

Throughout the educational pipeline, rates of degree attainment for women of color, including African American women, have risen at all levels (American Council on Education, 2008 & 2006). Although the numbers of African American women securing bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral, and professional degrees steadily increased between 1995 and 2005, African American women still hold a small percentage (5.7 percent) of full-time administrative positions in higher education (American Council on Education, 2008). At each transition point throughout the education pipeline, African American women lose ground, along with other minorities, while Whites continue to hold the majority (81 percent) of positions in both private and public institutions (American Council on Education, 2008). As a result of this attrition and lack of representation, Black female administrators continue to find themselves in unwelcoming and hostile environments that lead to isolation, marginalization, tokenism, stereotyping, and few mentoring opportunities.
Extant literature discusses the multifaceted experiences of African American male and female administrators in academe (Becks-Moody, 2004; Benjamin, 1997; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Edwards & Camblin, 1998; Garner, 2004; Jackson, 2001, 2003, 2004; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Jones, 2001; Holmes, 2003; Mitchell-Crump, 2000; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Watson, 2001). The experiences of African American administrators vary. Historically, the climate for African American females in the administrative ranks has been shaped by institutional type. For example, at predominately White institutions, African American administrators have often been viewed as “window dressers” or “tokens” with diminished authority and power (Hoskins, 1978, p. 5). On the other hand, at historically Black colleges and universities, African American administrators have often earned their status by working their way up the ranks. Hence, while administrative positions can often be highly esteemed positions for Black administrators, the opportunity does come at a price (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

When the focus is specifically on African American women, the intersectionality of race and gender becomes salient and plays a vital role in their experiences and how they navigate PWIs (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2005; Holmes, 2003; Moses, 1989; Zamani, 2003). According to the paucity of literature that speaks to the experiences of African American female administrators, either in part or as a primary topic, Black women face and confront a plethora of roadblocks, challenges, and assaults on their humanity in these spaces, as they work in a system that provides very little institutional support and few rewards for what they uniquely bring to the environment (Blackhurst, 2000; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Holmes, 2003; Lindsay, 1999; Moses, 1989, Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Turner, 2002).

Universities benefit from a diverse workforce. The experiences and perspectives of African American women bring to the workplace are of increasing importance given the changing demographics of students in institutions of higher education (Jackson & O’Callaghan, 2009). Although the percentages of African American students obtaining college degrees is still below White students, the Chronicle of Higher Education 2010 Almanac (2010a) reports more than a 50 percent increase of African American female students at institutions of higher education between 1998 and 2008. African American women hold only 11.3 percent of executive, administrative, and managerial positions on college campuses compared to the
79.5 percent held by their Whites colleagues (*Chronicle of Higher Education 2010 Almanac, 2010b*). Detailed discussion on the most recent findings on the presence of African American administrators and faculty in higher education is provided by Jackson and O’Callaghan (2009).

The rate of growth of administrators of color must keep pace with the changing student demographic; students need to see representative reflections of themselves. Retention and persistence rates of African American students are positively associated with the numbers of African American administrators and faculty at PWIs (Jackson & O’Callaghan, 2009; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). The presence of Black administrators sends an important message to students and more specifically, the presence of Black female administrators and faculty provides more opportunities for mentoring the increasing number of African American female students entering the ivory tower (Patton & Harper, 2003). Unfortunately, African Americans females hold significantly fewer professional positions than their White colleagues at colleges/universities (Jackson & O’Callaghan, 2009).

### Black Women in the State of Michigan

Locating specifics on the numbers of African American female administrators in higher education in the state of Michigan proves extremely difficult. In Michigan, African American women hold significantly less (11.5 percent) executive, midlevel manager, and professional jobs across all professions than their White female counterparts, although more than African American men (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2008a). The EEOC also reports aggregates for the number of positions held by Black women in executive, midlevel manager, and professional positions in the broad terminology of educational services as 55 percent, whereas their White female colleagues hold 68 percent of those same positions. These findings indicated that African American women still hold proportionately lower number of mid- to high-level positions in the state of Michigan. It is not an anomaly that we see so few African Americans in mid- to high-level positions in Michigan, as the aforementioned aggregate numbers for higher education indicate. Jackson and O’Callaghan (2009) indicate that “location matters” and point out the geographic distribution of administrators of color (p. 30). Across all racial groups leadership tends to clustered in areas of the country where there are the greatest numbers
of concentration of their own specific groups; for example, African American leadership tends to be clustered highest in the Southeast (Jackson & O’Callaghan, 2009). There continues to be a lack of significant representation of both African American faculty and administrators of color in institutions across the country and in Michigan.

Theoretical Framework

The framework informing this essay was centered on the “four dimensions of the campus racial climate,” coined by Hurtado (1992) and later expanded on by Hurtado and coauthors (1998). Those four dimensions include exploration of the following: “an institution’s historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial ethnic groups, its structural diversity in terms of numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups, the psychological climate . . . , and the behavioral climate” (p. 3). Applying the tenets of the aforementioned dimensions allowed Hurtado and coauthors (1998) to analyze, interpret, and explain the type of campus climate for students of color, and informs the current authors’ understanding of the world that African American administrators exist in, navigate, and experience daily in higher education. Moreover, the campus climate affects personal congruence, satisfaction, and the desire to remain in one’s environment. Furthermore, the severity and number of both overt and subtle incidents of prejudice, racism, and racial microaggressions made toward African Americans and other persons of color is often a direct result of the campus climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al. 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Racial microaggressions are a manifestation of racism that happens in society and on our college campuses. Microaggressions can be subtle or overt, “automatic,” “intentional,” or “unintentional” comments or behaviors that serve to undermine persons of color (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Constantine et al., 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Sue & Constantine (2007) divide microaggressions into three categories. Microassaults are purposeful behaviors or words such as “explicit . . . name calling” or avoiding someone that are offensive and hurtful (p. 137). Microinsults are both words and actions that convey “rudeness, insensitivity, or demeaning attitudes” (p. 138). These microinsults can also be underlying demeaning statements. Finally, microinvalidations that serve to “exclude” and “negate” the experiences or
feelings of people of color (p. 138). Racial microaggressions occur frequently and are such a hidden part of dialogue and behavior that they are often overlooked by not only the hearer but by the perpetrator. Research indicates that these constant, nagging racial attacks lead to emotional distress and reduced self-esteem, which result in “sapping the spiritual and psychological energies” from the recipients (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008, p. 329).

**Methods**

**PHENOMENOLOGY**

As stated, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Black female administrators at PWIs in the state of Michigan to understand their challenges and coping strategies. Specifically, what are their challenges and how do they thrive in higher education environments, particularly PWIs. Similar to other studies (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Holmes, 2003; Lindsay, 1999; Moses, 1989; Turner, 2002, 2007) that have examined the experiences of African American women in higher education, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was used to explore their stories to uncover the essence of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological tradition relies “on the assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 104). As such, the phenomenon or meaning of the core concept emerges from the articulation and construction of their shared experiences, experiences that expose the salience of race and gender.

**PARTICIPANTS**

Purposeful sampling was done to recruit participants who could speak to the experiences that are at the center of this study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1997). Eleven colleagues in the state of Michigan were contacted via e-mail or telephone to participate in the study. A total of 10 African American women (Sharon, Hannah, Florence, Anne, Suzette, Diane, Rose, Marie, Beverly, and Alison—assigned pseudonyms) represent two four-year institutions in Michigan; however, collectively these women have worked in several higher education institutions as well as corporate America and government. Their higher education positions, past and
present, included entry, midlevel, and senior-level positions (i.e., associate director, assistant dean, associate vice president, and director). Five are native to Michigan. Three of the participants were married, three divorced, and five were mothers. Years of work experience ranged from five to thirty-plus. In order to maintain confidentiality, references to their former or present institutions will not be used.

**DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS**

Each respondent was encouraged to provide feedback on several open-ended questions, through either electronic mail or informal face-to-face or telephone interviews. Most chose to respond by replying by e-mail. Their responses were collected over the course of two spring semesters, 2004 and 2009. The respondents were assigned pseudonyms to protect their professional and personal identities, and all identifying information was deleted from their written and verbal statements. Finally, a thematic analysis was conducted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) assisted us with the study’s rigor and ensured that our articulation of the respondents’ voices and ideas were shared in ways that protected as well as honored their experiences.

**Findings**

Consistent with the literature, participants in this study have also faced numerous challenges, dealt with unwelcoming campus climates, encountered racial microaggressions, and have routinely relied on coping strategies to survive in such hostile environments. Three prominent themes emerged that clearly illustrate the type of challenges these women consistently tackle at PWIs: (1) the lack of access to mentoring experiences, (2) isolation and marginalization, and (3) the lack of respect and recognition of credentials. Each theme exemplifies the nature of their battles, but also points to the necessary tactics or strategies that must be employed to provide temporary relief. Although several strategies were broached and discussed, three salient coping strategies resonated most with them: (1) aggressively seek out mentoring experiences beyond their departments or campuses; (2) spirituality; and (3) working with associations, whether on or off campus. This combination of challenges and strategies frames their administrative experiences.
CHALLENGES

At the time of the interviews, all women were serving midlevel to senior-level positions in PWIs in Michigan and faced a myriad of challenges. The following narratives highlight the common themes of experience including lack of mentoring opportunities, isolation and marginalization, and lack of respect of their professional roles.

Lack of access to mentoring opportunities

While aggregate numbers indicate that Black female administrators outnumber Black female faculty on predominately White campuses (American Council on Education, 2008), they lack mentoring opportunities that one typically would assume are available to them. To the contrary, from middle to senior levels, the participants reported difficulty in finding such opportunities because either their gender or race posed a barrier. Dr. Cunningham/Sharon explained mentoring this way:

I find that mentoring comes in unexpected places and unpredictable forms. It’s hard to identify a mentor that looks like me because they are few. I have made a conscious effort to attend functions (i.e. workshops or events) that are attended by those individuals. I admire and with whom I desire to establish a mentor-mentee relationship…. Establishing contact, expressing genuine interest in needing support and being willing to go the extra mile to situate oneself in settings, on or off campus, to increase the possibility of meeting a mentor, are constant challenges for midlevel Black administrators.

Since establishing a mentoring relationship with another African American woman was difficult or not feasible, Sharon turned to her peers as an alternative. She said, “I have other colleagues at similar or greater levels of responsibility at other institutions who have established great mentoring relationships. A couple of times, I have benefited from wisdom shared with my colleagues by their mentors.” Sharon continued to share that when students or junior-level colleagues approached her that she would “try to emulate the type of mentor” she wished she had.

There were instances, however, when Black female administrators established mentoring relationships throughout their professional careers through networking with White colleagues. This approach benefited these women in ways that bolstered
their professional status and enabled them to provide opportunities for others, including people of color and women. Hannah disclosed:

I was very fortunate to receive excellent mentoring in my first professional position as a higher education professional. The program director did all she could to informally and formally recognize my professional experiences coming into my first position, but there were prohibitive institutional policies to acknowledging my skill set and professional work experiences with salary and other formal recognition. Most of my mentoring has come directly from my former program director. There were very few African American women in like positions at my institution and almost none in more positions that are senior. In fact, my former director was the first to formally create an assistant director position and then fill it with an African American.

Additional aspects of mentoring relationships involved trust and making oneself vulnerable, but with limited safe spaces on predominately White campuses for Black female administrators, there existed among the participants a level of apprehension to making oneself vulnerable because it led to disappointment in the past. Florence, who spoke to this type of fear, explained her mentoring experience this way:

My experiences… are limited. Many midlevel African American administrators assume that they will receive mentoring from higher-level African American administrators. This is usually not the case. I believe this is true because high-level African American administrators fear that they will not reach their highest potential if they are perceived as associating with other African Americans. So, they instead choose to mentor others outside of their racial identity to prove that they are “global” individuals. Higher-level African American administrators may fear, also, that mentoring other African Americans will give the perception that they are “bringing in too many people of their kind.”

Florence noted that in her experience race functioned as a dividing versus a uniting factor. She explained why selecting a mentor outside of one’s race is often inevitable for personal career survival or advancement purposes. Distancing oneself from others, even from other Black administrators, male or female, served as a means of survival.
Another dimension of mentoring relationships was convenience. Often, there is a void of viable options for mentors, irrespective of racial background. Due to campus size and/or demanding responsibilities, it was noted that in order to receive assistance these women must actively seek out mentoring opportunities external to their unit, department, college, or institution. Anne affirmed this reality:

Mentoring has not occurred during the 20 years in my ... current position. I am basically self-taught. I have availed myself of professional development meetings, conferences, institutes, and classes. It would have been great to have a mentor. One faculty member, now retired, said to me one day, “I see you have taught yourself how to run the ... office.”

Anne's interview hints at the detriment of not having a mentor—someone to teach us about the culture of academia or our institutions. This is further illuminated in the comments by Florence, who recognized the importance of the navigating the political landscape. “I think that the biggest problem for midlevel African Americans in higher education is a lack of or limited knowledge of the political environment and how that limited knowledge can impact professional growth and promotion.” Mentors play an instrumental role in teaching mentees how to navigate these sometimes tumultuous administrative waters, but as the interviewees point out, there is a lack of mentors. Mentoring relationships are invaluable resources for both women and people of color in higher education (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995; Blackhurst, 2000; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Moses, 1989; Patton & Harper, 2003). In particular, the Black women in this study expressed the myriad ways in which meaningful mentoring experiences either escaped them or became a part of their career path.

**Isolation and marginalization**

With such a small number and proportion of Black female administrators in PWIs in Michigan and across the nation, alienation and isolation are natural outcomes. Such isolation can be debilitating, requiring a resolve to survive, fight, and flourish. Sharon offered this commentary:

Isolation is one of the most difficult challenges as a midlevel manager of color. I was once told by a former boss that I was lucky to be one of the few [people...
of color] at my level. This was his comment when I approached him regarding pay equity, as I was the lowest-paid, highest-educated person at that pay grade classification. I didn’t have anyone that I could share this information with [on campus] or obtain a reality check regarding his opinion. I felt further isolation after I inquired with the Human Resources department.

As shown in the above passage, not only was Sharon isolated as a function of her race, she was also expected to be grateful that she was one of a few but was rewarded with the least pay in spite of her educational achievements. This comment made by her former boss was a microinsult—a demeaning and insensitive attack.

Hannah, however, was able to connect with other African Americans on campus who were willing to share resources and coping strategies, inevitably making those relationships indispensable. Hannah explained:

When I first began my career in higher education at an academic/student affairs program office, there was an African American male working in the office. He provided me with direct mentorship [showing me] the basics of everything, to office culture, and expectations to writing in a business environment, to supervising student employees. This employee [along with] the inclusive, multicultural nature of the program I worked for translated into feeling little or no isolation with regard to race. What I did find isolating was the combination of my age, race, and gender. As a general rule, most of my student/academic affairs colleagues were White. Of the individuals who were African American or other people of color, most were male. Furthermore, most of my peers (staff in like positions) were 10–25 years my senior, making age a social identity I had to navigate very carefully.

While Hannah’s experience of isolation was first due to race, she found some connection though mentorship, and through the positive office climate—where her colleagues helped create a safe space. However, her experience of isolation continued because of the gender differences and generational gaps. Socioeconomic status, geographical/regional differences, and level of professional position also appear to have played roles in the isolation of the other women in this study. Rose underestimated the geographic difference, specifically how much of an “impact” it would make moving to a campus where there were fewer persons of color than
at her previous institution. She describes the “culture shock” she felt, explaining that “some of the isolation” had to do with the geographic location, a small town with few people of color. She continues:

I remember not fitting in with any of my peers and the ones I should have fit in with did not extend the invitations. . . . I did not fit in . . . because I was not married, had no children, and I did not fit into the one last category of being Catholic/attending their places of worship.

Sadly, Rose says that feeling of isolation led to feelings of insecurity in her job. She explains, “Being the only African American in my department, I often felt my job was not secure. I did not fit in/I was not in the circle, and my boss had uncomfortable communication with me.” Suzette explained isolation does happen but it is not a great concern to her:

There is some isolation, but I feel that it’s more from the work that I do in affirmative action, which is not popular, rather than myself as a Black female. It doesn’t bother me because if I want to do something or be somewhere or say something, I will generally do it. So not inviting me to participate in a meeting or activity is not important to me. I have enough to think about without worrying if someone doesn’t want to include me. I have a high self-esteem (thanks to God and my mom), so I’m not concerned about being excluded for the most part.

In comparison to Suzette, isolation was much more poignant for Diane. From her perspective, isolation is a by-product of being excluded, which is difficult to swallow because it permeates both dimensions of one’s professional and private life.

Working every day and feeling like you are always on your own—like everyone else is included and you are on the “outsskirts,” i.e., people have lunch together, meeting and having life and relationships outside of work. Feeling like you are only included in “formal” meetings where by the title of your position they can’t avoid including you. Even when you are in a meeting, having people not listen to or acknowledge your voice—only to have someone else say the same thing and others excitedly agree to the wise opinion. If you speak up, then you are labeled “difficult” or abrasive.
Not being invited to meeting or functions was also raised by Anne, who said that she often had to “initiate interaction with Whites to avoid isolation because Whites rarely [invited her] to join them, except for a handful of known liberal Whites.” This type of isolation was not as problematic for Florence because she had a unique work situation. As she explained, “I have not experienced isolation at the University. . . . This is true primarily because I have worked in two departments where the directors were African Americans. This is a unique experience.”

Outside of Florence, all of the women experienced degrees of isolation at their respective institutions. Whether isolation was due to working in an environment with a small population of Black colleagues who are supportive or colleagues who challenge one’s identity as a young, professional woman; or to job responsibilities that lead to isolation and/or White colleagues who are more inclined to exclude versus include their Black female colleagues, the challenge remained the same, a marginalized existence.

**Lack of respect and recognition of credentials**

In higher education, educational degrees and expertise are very highly respected. The profession is driven by degree attainment and professionalism that signifies the importance of knowing and being skilled in a field of study. As such, it is easy to assume that those who possess advanced degrees, are pursuing advanced degrees, or have a significant level of expertise in a particular line of work would receive respect and support from their peers and supervisors.

For all the Black women who shared their challenges, whether at midlevel management or upper level of the administration, support and respect were essential for maintaining positive experiences. However, there were varying degrees at which each placed importance on respect. While a few believed that the lack of respect was not crucial to them, others expressed how their academic credentials or expertise were minimized or ignored, overtly or covertly. Anne indicated how little her degree at a historically Black college was valued:

I was told by a previous associate dean of my current PWI that this institution does not calculate GPAs earned at HBCUs such as my undergraduate institution. I was applying for admission to the doctoral program . . . and was surprised to hear that the college would not recognize my bachelor’s GPA from my undergraduate institution. They did, however, recognize my master’s degree GPA earned at a PWI.
On another campus, Marie, director of a unit with high visibility, pursued her doctorate, and upon completion, a White male colleague told her that she now had to leave her institution to be called “doctor.” At the same time, Marie noticed that White students called her by her first name but went to someone else’s office and acknowledged their credentials by addressing him or her as doctor. While Marie focused on students and colleagues, Rose expressed how parents and her immediate supervisor would question her judgment and not afford her respect that others were given:

My concerns in this area as a hall director would come from parents. My name, as I put it, is “race neutral,” and my experience with speaking on the phone versus the first time meeting after speaking on the phone differed dramatically. Especially in discipline situations that involved their children. They would appear shocked to see an African American person and they would then approach the situation with their child with skepticism once their idea of the person on the phone did not match the reality of the person standing before them. . . .

My own experience with my boss was the discomfort he experienced with talking to me. In situations, I felt as though he too did not trust my judgment when it came to the discipline decisions I had to make with non–students of color. He would ignore/overlook their behavior as playful, and ask that I give them a chance and have more educational discussions. With students of color, there was always a discussion about safety and the impact of their behavior on the floor community.

Sharon, an administrator from a different PWI, who routinely had to prove her expertise, stated:

On a regular basis, in my former job and my current position, I am challenged to prove that I know what I know, which is both frustrating and time-consuming. Very little of what I say is taken at face value or as credible without extensive documentation or confirmation from another (usually White person) source. In my current position, I submit an annual data report in three parts. . . . The raw data for each of these reports is extracted from three separate university databases. The second year that I submitted these reports to [my supervisor] he returned them to me immediately and asked me to redo them because they didn’t “look”
right. When I asked him for clarification and on what basis he determined that the reports didn’t look right, he explained that when my predecessor (White male) did the reports, there appeared to be more students. When I explained to him that the reports were taken directly from real-time university databases, he indicated that he didn’t need to know where the numbers came from or how I got them because that wasn’t his area of expertise; he just wanted me to make sure the numbers were right. Needless to say, the numbers were correct, but in order to allay his doubt, I had to create a chart of where the numbers were derived so he had additional confirmation that I knew what I was doing. It’s during situations as indicated above that reaffirm that.

The constant checking, questioning, and rechecking that Sharon was forced to endure was a time consuming and an overt form of disrespect. Suzette, on the other hand, had a positive view of respect and how she received achieved it.

I don’t have a problem with people respecting me. Sometimes it’s for different reasons, but I do recognize it. It could be for wisdom because of my years on earth; it could be for the experience in my field; it could be for the networking relationships I’ve garnered over the years; but whatever it is, I’ll take it. Not much respect is given to minority females and I mean not even from their own.

These accumulate to series of microinsults and microinvalidations—leaving the women feeling disrespected and demeaned. Respect comes in many forms throughout academia. Normative behaviors indicate that respect is automatically given to certain offices, positions, or titles, such as president or provost or those with a doctorate. Respect is earned by faculty or administrators who go beyond the call of duty to ensure student success. Respect is given because of one’s abilities and/or unique expertise on campus. In spite of these norms, Black female administrators in this study expressed numerous situations whereby this is not the norm for them. When an individual constantly needs to prove her worth and value, it wastes the individual’s talents and misses opportunities to develop and embrace individuals who can potentially enhance their campus climates. As such, two parties lose, the African American female administrator and the campus community.
The strategies employed by these women echo the findings in other studies on the experiences of African Americans in the workplace and in university settings (Becks-Moody, 2004; Constantine et al., 2008; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Solarzano et al., 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). These women employed numerous strategies to help them cope with the feelings of marginality and isolation resulting from the series of both overt and subtle racial microaggressions thrust upon them. It is by pulling from internal resources of resiliency and being willing to seek help from others that they were able to continue to thrive in their leadership roles on campus.

**Aggressively seeking mentoring experiences beyond department or campus**

First, the women did not let the lack of mentors on their campus or others’ unwillingness to mentor them keep them from seeking mentors elsewhere. Sharon recalls how important maintaining ties with former colleagues has been to her success.

Many of my strongest mentoring relationships are provided by people that are not on my home campus. One of my dissertation committee members has been an invaluable mentor although he is at least 10 years my junior. His experiences have been so different from mine and his perspective is so unique and varied. Knowing him has provided a wealth of learning for me. Our relationship is very reciprocal and he lets me know that he has gained much from knowing me. I feel as if our relationship is one of those rare professional gifts that I have been lucky to experience.

Though Sharon is thankful for the relationship, it is unfortunate that mentorship like this, which has the potential to provide growth and learning, is so “rare,” as she calls it. Sharon adds that she sees her peers serve one another as mentors, stating, “We also share the wisdom gained from our mentors with each other, so it’s almost like having a mentor by proxy relationship.” Anne also said she was not afraid to reach out to others, stating, “I utilize resources by calling upon other successful minorities around the country for mentoring.” Despite the aforementioned feelings of vulnerability, these women actively sought resources and support on their campuses and beyond.
**Spirituality**

Faith and spirituality have been known to play a central role in the lives and coping strategies of many African American women (Andrews, 1993; Edwards & Camblin, 1998; Becks-Moody, 2004; Mattis, 2002; Watt, 2003). These women called upon their inner reserves—their faith and spirituality—to help them through times of trouble and instability in the workplace. Sharon says that spirituality keeps her alive, as she explains.

My faith has been an important component of my survival. I use silent prayer and meditation when situations seem to need a greater intervention than I have the strength to muster. I observe actions by people with whom I work that appear to be mean-spirited, rude, or lacking ethics. It’s during those times I decide if it’s worth my time and energy to explore the situation to see if I can be a positive influence or if I just say a prayer and let the situation take care of itself.

Similar to Sharon who has had to push away the hurtful words of others, Hannah says that her spirituality is what “grounds” her, particularly in times when she is bombarded by negative external messages as she explains.

My spirituality grounds my life. Further, my faith is the motivation for my work in trying to make the institutions I work for more inclusive and diverse. Without my spiritual beliefs and practices, I would certainly have internalized the negative messages sent from a poor institutional climate for young African American women. The lessons my family taught me—from a very early age—about race and gender have stayed with me—I have understood from quite some time that others negative reactions to my race or gender is not about me, my worth as person, my capabilities or talents.

Interestingly both of these women discuss the important role that spirituality has played in helping them maintain a sense of self-respect despite attacks of racial microaggressions by of colleagues and acquaintances, and the negative and unsupportive institutional racial climate.
Networking

Having multiple avenues of support can help to ensure success for African American female administrators. Networking is crucial in not only navigating the workplace, but it in receiving answers to professional questions, as well as getting tasks accomplished quickly and efficiently and helping to ward off isolation (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Sharon points out networking has been her life preserver; she calls out to others for help and within “minutes” receives invaluable professional advice. She explains the importance of her network. “My ability to effectively network has been the saving grace on many occasions. It’s not that I need to be connected broadly and deeply, just strategically.” Suzette’s network extends beyond the workplace, and she explains that it is a “good outlet.” She talks about the joy she receives from both spending time with her network of friends as well as seeing them succeed.

I enjoy networking with colleagues; my investment club, my book club; at conferences; and any gatherings I may want to attend. I like to hear others’ ideas, and hear of their accomplishments. It makes me feel good to see my sisters being successful.

Both Suzette and Sharon have reached out to others and been successful, but Diane has not been as lucky. Her personality and busy schedule seem to hold her back, and unfortunately, that leads to having a much smaller reserve of individuals to pull from when she needs help.

I have attempted to bring women together when I can. I try to reach out to others when possible. I am not great at professional networking. I know how but really have trouble balancing additional relationships and taking advantage of opportunities. Taking classes is the biggest prohibitory to going to additional conferences and connecting beyond my current program and circle.

Although individuals may want to reach out to others, networking is not always easy as Anne explains. “Networking within PWIs is very challenging, because you have to work extremely hard at initiating and reaching out to them, because they seldom reciprocated and reach out to you.” Again we hear the theme of vulnerability, because to put oneself out there and to not be accepted leads to reminders
of being on the outside. Similar to the mentoring, the burden seems to lie with these women; they seek out others, they invest the time and the energy into building new relationships, and when it works the result is positive.

**Discussion**

The narratives illuminate the challenges African American female administrators face on college campuses. The experiences vary for each woman because of their institutional context and climate and because of their own personal characteristics. First, considering the introductory framework of institutional racial climate we hear that these women all experience a lack of structural diversity—there are relatively few African American administrators on their campuses. Furthermore they all experience the consequences of negative climates—degrading comments from co-workers—microinsults; the exclusion from collegial and personal interactions—microassaults; and the lack of respect given for their positions and experience—microinvalidations. Despite these negative experiences, women found ways to survive and thrive at their institutions.

Women in this study pushed themselves to find colleagues and friends who could either mentor them or be a part of their support network. Sometimes they found those individuals on campus and other times it was off campus. Several authors discuss the concept of “counterspaces” in relationship to college students coping with microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998). Counterspaces are the safe spaces where persons of color can join to have positive dialogue and interactions with others of like minds. These havens are places to go where their points of view can be affirmed and validated. Essentially these women have created their own “counterspaces,” by finding and creating networks where they feel safe and valued.

Repeated racial microaggressions, both subtle and overt, lead to the feelings of isolation and marginalization in their workplaces and communities as evidenced by these women’s narratives (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Solarzano et al., 2000). A lack of mentors from the same racial background, the low numbers of Black colleagues at their institutions, and the exclusion by White and Black colleagues all added to their feelings of marginalization. These women, refusing to accept isolation, reached deep within themselves to their spiritual center and reached out
to their spiritual family of friends. Managing to maintain their sense of self-worth and self-respect is key to their resiliency and retention in the workplace.

The narratives also point out repeated microinsults and microinvalidations and their impacts on the women. Not only are having professional expertise repeatedly challenged and being disrespected by peers, supervisors, clients, and students central themes here, but similar experiences exist throughout the literature on the experiences of not only Black administrators but also Black faculty and managers (Constantine et al., 2008; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Sue, , Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Without understanding the rich history of Africans and later African Americans, who take pride and value in respect, it is easy for White administrators and others to credit respect as an attribute only worthy to a specific population, primarily, White people. Historically, laws, policies, and social forces (such as Jim Crow and Black Codes), as well as a culture of entitlement that many White people hold, have restricted the rights of Black people to have civil liberties in several spectrums of society while simultaneously affording to Whites generational wealth and privilege (Anderson, 1988; Cruse, 2005; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Wise, 2005).

**Gender**

Gender, akin to race, is another social construct in America. Higher education is not exempt from discriminatory practices against people of color and/or women (Collins, 2000; Feagin, 2001; hooks, 1981; Smith, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2002). Women and people of color have been considered second- and even third-class citizens in regards to their positions and social order within the United States. For Black women in particular, their identities as Black and female have placed them behind White males, White females, and Black males (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000). Another experience for Black female administrators, if not being constantly questioned about their competency or labeled as the “sapphire” or “angry Black” woman who speaks out of place in meetings (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981), is being objectified to a sexual being and dealt with accordingly.
Implications for Practice and Policy Recommendations

Although this chapter shares insights from a few African American practitioners, their comments covered a myriad of topics that can aid other practitioners and institutional leaders in understanding the nature of challenges faced by Black administrators. Collectively, they give voice to and expose their realities at PWIs, revealing how these challenges shape their experiences and ways they manage assaults in order to increase opportunities for themselves and future practitioners of color.

Understanding the diverse challenges placed before administrators of color at PWIs. Once a person understands the campus norms/cultures and the local community, one is better equipped to respond to the limitations of the environment, using several strategies:

- Depersonalizing campus issues of discrimination and prejudice by not allowing others to limit your contributions and capabilities to diversity issues. Although addressing inequalities is critical, owning campus diversity as your sole responsibility is detrimental to one’s personal and professional growth.
- Identify spaces (i.e., safe havens or support systems) to minimize isolation. Establishing social networks where individuals share similar interests, concerns, and values, decreases or in some cases alleviates feelings of isolation and despair for Black administrators.
- Actively seeking and establishing both formal and informal mentoring relationships. Whether the connection is among peers or established with colleagues who hold higher-ranking positions within or outside your institution, mentoring continues to be a worthwhile investment.
- Preserving and protecting your mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being by establishing and maintaining both professional and personal boundaries.

Nevertheless, these soldiers continue to find ways to be successful. Extant literature discusses best practices for responding to the opposition that African American administrators encounter in the academy (Elam & NAEOHE, 1989; Harvey, 1999; Jones, 2001; Rusher, 1996). A plethora of strategies and recommendations can be
applied to enhance the quality of experiences that African American administrators have in PWIs. For example, Guillory (2001, pp. 111–123) suggests seven “Strategies for Administrators of Color.” Of those seven, three strategies complimented the four dimensions of campus racial climate that Hurtado and coauthors addressed, as well as speaking directly to the respondents’ shared experiences in this study. The three strategies included the following.

**Aligning oneself with an accomplished mentor**

Here Guillory (2001) encourages administrators of color to be proactive about the connections of support needed for their survival in higher education. The author particularly addressed the importance of mentoring relationships with other African American administrators who have acquired multiple levels of success within higher education and who possess the ability to assist you in accomplishing your goals and objectives. Equally critical to having other successful African American mentors is having their firsthand knowledge of survival on predominantly White campuses. Here, Hurtado and coauthors (1998) would contend that examining the history of exclusion as well as the impact of structural diversity would help Black administrators gain knowledge from the past. Such information of how former people of color combated discriminatory practices may allow future Black administrators to apply strategies that serve in resisting prejudice and discrimination. The respondents shared examples of such useful tools, including depersonalizing the hateful acts of others as well as the importance of having mentors.

**Enhancing one’s credibility**

Guillory (2001) discusses working toward educational and professional credentials beyond the baseline requirements and/or expectations of one’s current position. This recommendation would equip Black administrators with a greater sense of confidence and accomplishment while also giving them freedom in that if opportunities presented themselves internally or external to the institution, they would be prepared to assume the role for career advancement. Hurtado and coauthors (1998) would offer that it is fundamental to challenge and reframe the psychological and behavioral tendencies of complacency that may keep Black administrators in fear and in constant threat of losing their job. Rather, Black administrators would have the chance to alter the views that not only Whites have of them but also the limitations that society has taught Black people to have/place on themselves. The
respondents discussed such evolutions of thought when they applied their faith and spirituality to challenging situations. By doing so, Black administrators were able to transcend the aftermath of racism and focus on improving their skills, helping others and reclaiming the power of their voices and positions on campus.

**Avoiding marginalization**

Guillory (2001) contends that by diversifying one’s areas of expertise and broadening the scope of one’s job and the people that one assist, African American administrators demonstrate that they have the ability to contribute their talents and expertise beyond the scope of their current position or role. Hurtado and coauthors (1998) discusses the historic stigma that has been placed on African Americans as well as other groups who have been traditionally underrepresented in academia. By extending their focus, concern, time toward issues pertaining not only to African American students but also to other students, Black administrators can demonstrate that the improvement of the campus racial climate affects students of color in addition to all constituents of the institution. Respondents disclosed that while they feel that it is their responsibility to assist other African Americans, be they peers or students, their goal is to illustrate the necessity of their role on campus. They want to be validated for their hard work and dedication and to receive recognition for the visibility that their diverse identities bring to the institution—they desire to be seen as assets rather than approached as deficits. In short, the Black administrators want to be seen, heard, validated, recognized, rewarded for their contributions and supported in their efforts that help make the campus climate inclusive for all students, faculty, staff, and administrators who seek advancement through research interests, academic achievement, and social and professional development.

An institutional climate that strives to be inclusive of all members provides a campus culture that offers much-needed support and respect. The preceding recommendations emphasize what individual midlevel Black administrators can do to cope with hostile and unwelcoming institutional environments. For campus leaders wishing to transform their campus communities into places and spaces that are inclusive and accepting of Black administrators and their unique roles, returning to the four dimensions of campus climate is critical—historical, structural, psychological, and behavioral (Hurtado et al., 1998). Addressing each dimension with the intention of improving the climate for administrators of color is the most appropriate place to begin.
Examine the historical legacy of the institution with respect to traditions, values, hiring practices, and programs that promote inclusion or exclusion. Also, leaders should consider ways to address historical elements in order to preserve tradition without marginalizing administrators of color, specifically midlevel Black administrators. Structural diversity points to a relatively simple solution that speaks to fostering a critical mass of administrators of colors who can bring diversified perspectives to the campus community while contributing to all facets of the educational enterprise. Both psychological and behavioral dimensions are difficult to resolve because they are driven by misinformation, myths, and stereotypical thinking (Hurtado et al., 1998). However, if leaders are willing to assess the status of these dimensions, solutions will emerge from a campus-driven assessment that does not simply focus on students, but incorporates all contexts of the campus climate. As such, institutional strategies can potentially be devised to reduce isolation, foster mentorship relationships, provide opportunities for advancement, and ultimately recognize and value the many contributions of administrators of color.

Limitations

Statistics on specific numbers of African American females working in midlevel managerial positions in the state of Michigan are difficult to access. This study could have clearly benefited from more readily available, organized, and systematic data points. The goal of qualitative research is not to generalize, but rather to give voice to the participants and acknowledge experiences and challenges; due to the small sample size there is limited generalizability. However, the findings in this research study mirror findings in similar aforementioned studies. Furthermore, the participants of this study are all self-selected. We are up-front about our positionality in this research, noting that our own experiences as African American female administrators certainly inform our inquiry. We as researchers had to attend to our subjectivities to ensure trustworthy and authenticity in the research (Peshkin, 1988; Glesne, 2011).
Suggestions for Future Research

There is a paucity of research on African American female administrators in higher education. First, limited data is available on the numbers and functions of African American female administrators and particularly by state. Future studies could (a) address quantitative measures of satisfaction and experience by African American midlevel administrators, (b) explore the exit of Black female administrators in the workplace, and (c) explore the intersection of resiliency as it relates to coping strategies in response to racial microaggressions in the workplace.

REFERENCES


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