

Retaining Each Other: Narratives of Two African American Women in the Academy

Sharon Fries-Britt and Bridget Turner Kelly

This article explores how two African American professors both “outsiders” to the inner workings of the academy created a support system, which began nearly 10 years ago as a part of their formal advisee/advisor relationship. When they began their relationship one was a junior African-American female faculty member (promoted to associate professor in 2004) and one was an African-American female doctoral student (currently a tenure track professor). Utilizing elements of scholarly personal narrative and case study methods they reveal the process they engaged in over a nine-year period, which resulted in their retention and success in the academy.

KEY WORDS: African-American; women; faculty; retention.

INTRODUCTION

The marginalization of African American graduate students and faculty at predominately White institutions (PWIs) has been the subject of considerable research over the past 40 years. Much of the research conducted on African Americans in higher education documented the obstacles and negative experiences they encountered at PWIs. At the graduate level there were low numbers of students of color attending PWIs (Wilson, 20021), few

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role models (Valadez, 1998; Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991), less support for research interests (Turner & Thompson, 1993) and fewer research/funding opportunities (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Willie et al., 1991). At the professorial level African American faculty represented roughly 4.7% of the all full-time faculty at predominately White universities, and approximately 3.2% of full-time faculty in higher education were African American women (Myers, 2002). Similar to the pattern of women in the overall population, African American women were outpacing Black males in graduate education. However, their advancement in the higher education pipeline has not translated into faculty appointments and higher tenure rates (Wilson, 2002). The tenure and promotion rates of African American women were slower than African American men and White women and they received less mentoring (Myers, 2002). "Isolation and lack of effective mentoring processes are direct influences in these low promotion and tenure rates as well as low retention rates among African American women in academia" (Myers, 2002, p. 7).

Understanding the challenges faced by African Americans in higher education is important because it points to ways in which the academy can create a more just and equitable environment for all of its members. However, another line of research, which informs our conceptual framework, is one that focuses on the successes of African Americans in the academy and highlights ways that scholars themselves have created just and equitable environments for one another (Danley & Green, 2004). African American feminists have deconstructed ways of thinking about the academy and offered strategies that work to empower African American women (Bloom, 1998; Collins, 2000). In her seminal book, "Teaching to Transgress," bell hooks (1994) noted that in order to create equitable environments for ourselves we need to view education as a practice of liberation and freedom. She argued that education, as a practice of freedom, requires educators to become self-actualized, and to reflect critically on one's own practice in order to understand one's role as an educator. This is particularly important for African American female scholars who are marginalized by institutional racism and sexism in the academy because the process enables them to think critically about the role these forces play in their lives as educators (Myers, 2002). As hooks observed, through this self-actualization process, African American female educators may "develop important strategies for survival and resistance that need to be shared within black communities" (p. 118).

African American graduate students and faculty have long worked together to successfully retain each other in higher education. In fact, the research revealed that the presence of African American faculty strongly impacts the increasing retention rate of African American graduate students

(Myers, 2002; Willie et al., 1991). However, because there are so few faculty of color at PWIs, students of color often look to each other for mentoring. There are numerous examples in the literature of successful peer mentoring between African American graduate students who have come together to support and sustain each other at PWIs (Gaston-Gayles & Kelly, 2004; Marbley, Bonner, & McKisick, 2004). As one team of peer mentors reflected, "most importantly, we learned that students of color at predominantly White institutions must empower themselves when other people in the academic community do not" (Holmes & Rivera, 2004, p. 26). This is not only true for students who are marginalized, but also for faculty of color at PWIs. "Research shows that nontenured women faculty and faculty of color were virtually without mentoring, except for the mentoring relationships they pursued with each other" (Myers, 2002, p. 10).

The purpose of this study is to share how we, two African American females, created an environment for each other that enabled us to survive and resist our marginalized status in the academy. Incorporating elements from scholarly personal narrative methodology (Behar, 1996; Nash, 2004) and case study methods (Yin, 1994), we examine how we established a successful working relationship in the academy that moved us from untenured professor-to-tenured and doctoral student to tenure track professor. As fellow "outsiders" to the inner-workings of higher education we describe the process we employed to support each other and ultimately succeed in retaining each other in the academy.

We begin by examining the methodology of scholarly personal narrative and case study methods. We then describe our process of data collection and analysis. Because each of our stories is considered a case we offer a brief biological sketch to set the context for our entry into the professorate. We then move into our findings, which unfold around three themes (connecting as African American women, living with vulnerability, and maintaining motivation and momentum). The themes move the reader through an understanding of how we started off in a traditional faculty student advising relationship (assistant professor and doctoral student) and moved through a process that resulted in co-authorship on several publications and the establishment of friendship that sustains us professionally and personally. Throughout our work we identified many factors that contributed to our success (academic preparation, family, friends, socio-economic status, discipline, perseverance, etc). However, a central element was our shared experiences as African American women who were facing similar events in the academy that sought to keep us on the margins. We conclude by offering several observations about the importance of supporting informal networks, the importance of universities rewarding the significant contribution that mentorship makes to the academy and we submit that it is important for

African American scholars to find a space in the academy that sustains and supports an authentic expression of self.

METHODOLOGY

The story being presented here is rooted in the scholarly personal narrative methodology. Scholarly personal narrative, which has also been labeled autoethnography, or personal experience narratives, is used in research to “use your life experience to generalize to a larger group or culture” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 737). It is a form of self-study research, the aim of which “is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). This methodology utilizes the author’s life experiences along with academic research to support the argument or questions being posed. It is situated in Black feminist thought which accepts and encourages researchers to situate themselves within their scholarship (Behar, 1996; Collins, 2000). In this case the methodology allows us to use our own narratives about faculty preparation in order to examine something larger than our individual stories—African American junior faculty’s preparation for thriving in predominately White research universities.

Scholarly personal narrative methodology is particularly well suited for documenting African American women’s stories because the methodology itself models education as a practice of freedom. As Nash (2004) noted, scholarly personal narrative allows those who “have been traditionally underrepresented, marginalized, and disenfranchised in higher education...an opportunity to tell their personal stories in formal scholarly writing...to challenge and question the dominant white, male, Western research ethos in the university” (p. 3). Telling the story of our relationship through scholarly personal narrative can offer insights and solutions on ways to increase faculty of color retention at predominately White research universities (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). It is our aim that the narratives provoke new ways of thinking about supporting future and new faculty of color, challenges the status quo, and illuminates the research that already exists on faculty of color in the academy.

There are several methods researchers can utilize to uncover stories of meaning in scholarly personal narrative. For the purposes of this study we employed qualitative case study to better understand how our relationship (between two African American women in higher education) served to help retain us in the academy. Case study research represents a holistic approach to examining a phenomenon:

A case study is an in-depth investigation of a single instance. Unlike other methods that carve up a whole situation into smaller parts, the case study tends to maintain the integrity of the whole with its myriad of interrelationships. (Sommer & Sommer, 1997, p. 193)

Utilizing a holistic investigation makes case study methods applicable for this study because the relationship was considered the “whole” under investigation and we are embedded cases within that whole. Our own narratives represented “information rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). We uncover the richness of these narratives by presenting them in dialogue form in the findings section of this paper.

Data Journey

Once we determined that we would document our story we decided to meet at least twice a year at national conferences of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) to identify primary themes in our working relationship and to present our story to other women of color at conference roundtable sessions. We began by brainstorming important events and dates on a time line beginning in 1996 when we first met each other. The timeline offered an initial structure for examining our narrative and remembering the “critical incidents” that were pivotal to our success in the academy. The timeline also served as a way of benchmarking when we began to establish trust, respect and commitment to each other.

Writing the conference proposals to present our story and then having those accepted enabled us to discuss our work with other colleagues across the country who were also engaged in similar relationships that provided them support in the academy. This strategy kept us focused, helped us identify segments of the article, and allowed us to learn from the experiences of others. As we proceeded through each of these data collection points we were able to establish a narrative that reflected the nature of our experiences as African American women and one that reflected the transition and development of our relationship over time. Under each theme we provide dialogue about how the process impacted us, how we made decisions, and how we behaved in ways that allowed our relationship to expand and grow. Our commitment to documenting this narrative increased the more we realized the degree of support we offered each other in the academic process. We hope our experience can offer insight into how we as African American women can construct environments of support and opportunities for professional development that are mutually beneficial.

Biographical Sketches

Bridget Turner Kelly

I have always wanted to be a teacher. From leaving my three-year old class in pre-school to lead twin two-year old girls around the playground, I have long held the desire to teach. Yet, I didn't have any models of what being an African American teacher meant. I spent my childhood in predominately White towns and schools, and then much of my adulthood attending predominately White universities. In all that time I did not come across my first African American teacher until I was a doctoral student.

Having a highly formally educated family (grandfather and uncle with medical degrees; father with doctorate in education and mother with masters in social work), I was encouraged and inspired to pursue more schooling after my undergraduate degree. I went to graduate school mainly to forestall working in the "real world." Once there I was unexpectedly introduced to my first African American teacher and for the first time I saw myself in the role of a professor. Prior to this professor, no one had offered to conduct research or publish with me. I knew that if I wanted to be a college professor I would need to demonstrate skills in teaching, service and research. I had no trouble gaining the first two of these skills. A White female professor allowed me to co-teach a doctoral course with her and I was afforded the opportunity to design and teach undergraduate courses with White faculty while I was obtaining my doctorate degree. Numerous invitations also came to serve on committees and work on projects that would give me experience in professional service. Despite the fact that several of my doctoral course papers were accepted at national professional conferences, no one encouraged me to publish any of my work. Thus, once I found out that Sharon, my first African American professor, and I shared similar research interests I asked if she would serve as my doctoral program advisor. Even though she was not in my program, she agreed and after taking three of her courses, she invited me and other students to continue working on research with her. I was the only student who remained actively involved in writing our research up for publication. We worked on two research articles and as I took my first position as an assistant professor on a tenure-track line, the articles were published in top-tier journals in our field. These articles gave me the breathing room in my first 2 years as a professor to launch my own research agenda. I see it as a responsibility and a gift that I pass on what I know about writing and research to other students, especially students of color. I used this professor and others to mold my career as a faculty member. Now that I am a faculty member, I am determined to give voice to my marginalized existence as a woman of color and I invite others who are marginalized in the academy to utilize their own powerful voice.

Sharon Fries-Britt

I am first-generation college educated and the first in my immediate and extended family to earn a Ph.D. My mother at the age of 52 earned her undergraduate degree and my father had a distinguished career in the Armed services. My four siblings have established successful careers in the federal government or private industry. My entry into the professorate was unexpected. I spent the first part of my career (13 years) working in administration. I had every expectation that I would pursue a career in student affairs administration with ambitions of moving into a Vice Presidency at a large research university. Yet, despite these plans, my interest shifted towards research as a direct outgrowth of my dissertation work and the mentoring of my academic advisor. I became very engaged in my research and simultaneously was inspired by the excellence I witnessed in my advisor as a teacher and scholar. I have had diverse mentors including African American mentors (one Black male who is a college president) in my administrative career. However my doctoral advisor was a White male who was extremely supportive and demanding. He was also different than most White professors I had encountered because he demonstrated an ease and familiarity with African American culture. When I learned that he was a scholar of African American history at the master's level and spent considerable personal and professional time with colleagues in the African American community, his level of comfort, genuine interest and knowledge of issues impacting African Americans made sense. Given the horror stories I had heard about doctoral advisors I considered myself fortunate to have an advisor that was committed to my success and went out of his way to seek opportunities on my behalf. For the first time in my career I began to see the potential of influencing the field of higher education through research and teaching. I had African American professors in my undergraduate and masters program but none at the doctoral level.

In 1996 my tenure clock began in the very department and program where I received my doctorate. In retrospect one might look at my appointment and assume that I was part of an institutional effort to "grow its own" faculty of color (I earned two of my degrees at the university). This however was not the case. The opportunity to pursue the professoriate was a result of the direct intervention of my advisor and other higher education faculty who made a case to bring me aboard. My appointment was also aided by the incentive lines sponsored out of the Provost's office to recruit faculty of color. The department received funding and support from the Provost's office to fund my line and to recruit another White faculty member. Within 3 years my line was transferred to a traditional line which most White faculty are hired on. I remember when this transfer occurred

and I was placed on a “normal” line. In fact the line that I secured was the line my former advisor vacated when he left to become a professor at another university. My colleagues seemed relieved that the stigma of my line was removed. If only other stigmas were so easily eliminated. Some have commented that my appointment represents the department’s willingness to take a risk in hiring one of its own. As I thought about my transition from administration I decided that it would be to my advantage personally and professionally to pursue the professoriate at a place where I had an extensive circle of support in the community and on the campus. This is not to suggest that I did not face challenges and obstacles, rather it reflects a conscious decision to pursue the professoriate under a set of conditions that I believed were in my best interest.

FINDINGS: THE UNFOLDING OF A CONVERSATION

We chose to present our narratives in the form of dialogue because as Ellis and Bochner (2003) found with scholarly personal narrative writing:

The narrative rises and falls on its capacity to provoke the readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into words of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered. (p. 748)

Connecting as African American Women

Bridget: Sharon, I’m not sure I ever told you what led me to ask you to be my academic advisor. Even though I was not in your academic program, I needed you to advise me throughout my doctoral program. It began when I entered graduate school as a master’s student. I received a letter from the academic program detailing specifics such as the first day of classes and the name of my academic advisor. All throughout my schooling I was accustomed to being proactive so I immediately called my new academic advisor to introduce myself before the start of school. My advisor answered the phone and said, “Why are you calling me?” I replied, somewhat taken aback, that maybe I had contacted the wrong person. I reiterated that I was a new graduate student that had been assigned to this person. My advisor responded, “Don’t call me unless there is a problem.” I proceeded to take several classes from my advisor throughout my master’s program and at different points was asked why I was studying race or class. Finally, nearing graduation, I turned in my final paper only to hear from my advisor that the

paper was weak, the writing was not strong and I was not ready to graduate. I was determined to graduate and found another faculty member to approve my paper. However, I left my master's program feeling devalued, not academically proficient, and unsupported. The following semester I entered my doctoral program in the same department. I began taking coursework in other programs and in your class in particular, I was literally mesmerized staring into your face, the face of my first African American professor in all my 18 years of schooling. The directness and skillfulness with which you talked, the professional attire in which you were dressed, and the caring way you interacted with students gave me my first idea that I wanted to be that person for other students of color. I wanted to have students walk into a classroom and see the professorate as something they could aspire to. I never wanted to be a college professor and given my negative experience with my academic advisor from my master's degree, I didn't think faculty life was something to which I could aspire. But, I worked hard in your class and finally got the courage to ask you if you would be my academic advisor.

Sharon: I can remember that semester when you took my class. It was actually my very first semester teaching. I had just transitioned from 13 years in administration and was very excited and confident about teaching but was also very naïve about what it would take to get my research agenda up and running. I can remember when you first approached me and asked me if I would be willing to serve as your advisor and to mentor you on writing and research. My immediate reaction was that there was no way that I could serve as a mentor for you on research. I was trying to figure out every aspect of the professoriate, particularly how to establish a research agenda and write for publication. I felt confident in serving as your advisor on general issues but I distinctly remember that you indicated that you wanted to be a professor and I felt inadequate in my ability to guide you. I remember telling you that you would benefit more from working with a professor who was already "established," a person who was senior in the field with more research experience than me. I was very frank about my own need to understand the research process and shared with you that my limited knowledge could serve as a barrier to your own growth and development. To my surprise you insisted that I was the person you wanted to work with.

Bridget: There should have been no surprise as to why I was sure you were the right one to advise and mentor me. After you so graciously agreed to take on yet one more advisee (I know you had more than your share) you asked if we could go out for tea and get to know each other. I knew my instinct had been right about you as we sat and had a chat off-campus about my family, educational background, hopes and dreams. After that whenever we would meet you pulled out a file with my name on it and showed me that you took my education seriously. In that file you kept a record of every

meeting we had and were able to offer me insight into classes I should consider taking, topics to write papers on, but beyond that, you modeled for me how to deal with racism and sexism in the academy. I knew if I were to be a professor in higher education I would need to absorb all I could about how you carried yourself in the midst of challenges you encountered. And to hear you say you were unsure about how you could mentor me in writing for publication is hard for me to accept because I see so much wisdom in you and I've seen the accomplishments you've had. Do you remember when I was sitting in your office one day having an advising meeting with you when a full professor came in from your program to congratulate you on getting an article accepted in a top-tier higher education journal with minor revisions? Again, I knew you were the one I needed to mentor and advise me.

Living with Vulnerability and Establishing Trust

Sharon: Those early days were really vulnerable times. As I think back over the last 9 years several different incidents stand out that provided an opportunity for me to learn how to live with being vulnerable. I remember when you took the second retention class I was teaching and only five students registered which was the minimum needed for a graduate class. I had to completely revamp my strategy for teaching and shift the focus of the class. I decided to turn the class into an opportunity to actually conduct research. I had not prepared to teach the class in this manner but I was beginning to understand some of what I needed to do to create opportunities for research. Although all of the students participated in the research process you were willing to remain engaged and to work on the project through the writing and completion of a manuscript. Here again I was facing the challenge of trying to figure out how to redesign the class and be effective as a teacher. Although I was working with very accomplished colleagues in my program area I never felt like I had a mentor in the department who I could go to and ask the “dumb” questions without them questioning my capability. I remember sitting in my office one day wondering how I could have given up a promising administrative career to become a professor at this time in my life.

Bridget: Well thank God that you did decide to become a college professor, because that enabled me to become one. To watch you be so flexible with that second retention class was a gift and it has been something I rely on now as a faculty member. I now have the confidence to be flexible and vulnerable in the classroom when things are not going as expected. Because you changed the class to an actual research group where we submitted forms to the institutional review board, got permission from universities to conduct research with their students and administrators, developed literature

reviews, created interview guides, and collected data, I gained useful knowledge I would need as a faculty member at a research university. Thus, you being vulnerable with having never taught a class as an actual research team enabled me to gather original data that we would later work on to write for publication and prepared me to be a better teacher in my own career. The vulnerable part of me did not want to disappoint you in this research process. I knew that if I messed up any part of the data collection or writing of the literature review you might not want me to continue on the research process. I was still not feeling completely confident in my own academic capabilities.

Sharon: We were both willing to take some risks and to learn from each other throughout the process. We strengthened our own sense of self-efficacy with each new situation we faced. We trusted each other and understood that our needs were essentially the same and if we supported each other we could make it through the process. I can think of many times when your support is what helped me make it through. On a personal level I felt the most vulnerable when I was going through my daughter's liver transplant. Here I was a new professor; I had just accepted a visiting professorship at a prestigious university and went there to teach 7 months pregnant. In that third year on the tenure-track, my daughter was born and we faced a medical crisis that resulted in her needing to have a liver transplant. I felt blessed to be in a position to donate a part of my liver and to have my own mother quit her job for several years (risking her economic solvency) to care for my daughter so that I could pursue my career. Quite frankly my daughter's transplant was the best thing that could have happened to take my mind off the tenure process. It was a gift! The reality of having my daughter's life on the line made all of the requirements around tenure pale in comparison to the task of keeping her alive. My own spiritual beliefs and values certainly sustained me through this period. Yet I was keenly aware that I needed to somehow work through this period and "produce," but in my own way and in my own time. Honestly I was not sure if we would complete our work. I had been away for a year and then dealing with my daughter's pre and post transplant health issues. There were certainly very real reasons why we could have abandoned the research. Rather what seemed to happen was a deepening of our relationship and trust. It amazes me to this day that we were able to resume our writing.

Bridget: What amazes me is not that we were able to continue our writing and research, but the strength and support we were able to draw on from each other. When you told me you were taking a position to teach at such a prestigious university I was so proud of you. I knew that others had seen what I saw in you. Then when I found out you were expecting a baby I was overjoyed that some fortunate child would be able to have you teach and

guide them on this Earth. At the same time I was at a vulnerable time in my life. Having ended a three-year relationship that was quite unhealthy for me and at the same time going through a painful racial identity development process, I knew I needed mentoring and direction and I wasn't sure where I would get it if you were miles away at another university. It was difficult to come to the realization that I was in a relationship with a White male who felt very comfortable with an African American woman who was articulate, educated, well-groomed, and upper middle-class, but did not feel comfortable when I began to wear my hair in a natural style, use Black vernacular speech, develop friendships with other African American students, and question the role of racism in society. I needed to talk to you. I needed to ask why I had unconsciously hated my Black self for so many years. Why did I think my Blackness was something I had to hide in the academy? How is it that you could be African American and be a college professor in a White institution? Thankfully you answered my questions by inviting me over when you were in town, by inviting me to meet your daughter soon after she was born, by introducing me to your partner, your mom, and your life outside of the academy. I saw more by your actions than by anything you said how you balanced life in all its complexity. I began to realize what led us together went beyond mentoring around writing, research and teaching, and delved into the bigger picture of being an African American woman, mother, partner, and friend.

Maintaining Motivation and Momentum

Sharon: Establishing our relationship and supporting each other was by far the easy part. Connecting and supporting each other seemed to come so naturally. What was really difficult and sometimes tedious was staying motivated when it came to the hard work of writing and learning how to prepare a manuscript for publication. I can remember there were times when it was very difficult to remain motivated and to work through our learning process. In fact our very first piece was probably the most painful for us to complete. We made some major errors but I also think we learned a lot from those errors. Do you remember when we were in the middle of one of our writing sessions, which always seemed to be punctuated by laughter, high fives, cups of tea and good food? We were feeling good about our writing and thought we had captured the essence of our work well. We came up with this colorful fun title for our paper something like "checking in with Black students." We really thought we had done something. I remember our excitement at finding the title. I know now that we were probably excited about the title because it captured our energy but it didn't necessarily capture our work. I remember when we received the letters of rejection and

one reviewer in particular honed in on the title and found it very misleading. And it was! In retrospect it is much easier to admit that. We learned a valuable lesson. Staying motivated to write that first piece together despite the rejection was hard work, but it paid off.

Bridget: Hard work was not something we shied away from. Perhaps more than anything we share in common (race, gender, educational background, and career); we first share a strong work ethic. Do you think that was instilled in us from our family, the belief of never giving up and never giving in? I remember us being so proud of our first article submission to a top-tier journal and the reviewer's negative reaction to the piece was difficult to hear. It certainly could have stopped us before we even began. Yet, again you modeled drive and commitment to me when instead of giving up on the idea of getting our work published, we regrouped. I know you were a competitive athlete in school and I saw you put on your game face and create a new game plan for us to get published. First we met with a tenured professor who sat with our manuscript, the reviewer's comments, and us and assisted us in reformatting the article in a way that would increase its chances of getting published. Though we did not receive a "revise and re-submit" from the journal, we treated the feedback that way. After meeting with the professor who had more experience getting published than we did we utilized that information to go back to our data. I remember sitting in your living room listening to the tapes of interviews, creating new themes and pulling out quotes that we had previously overlooked. We then realized what the story was we wanted to tell and how we needed to conform to the "box" that a journal editor wanted manuscripts in (Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, Discussion and Conclusion). Gone was our joy at using catchy quotes to begin a section or beginning the article with the narrative of our Black student participants. Once we got the box formula down it was actually easier to complete the articles, but the creative part, the parts where we connected with these students' struggles as African American women in the academy was a hard thing to sacrifice in order to get published.

Sharon: You are right we are willing to work very hard and we are the type of individuals who like a challenge and won't quit at the first sign of trouble. I think my competitive spirit really does come from my former life as an athlete and the high expectations that were set by my parents. The challenge for me in trying to understand the tenure process is that I did not know many of the rules nor did I really understand the "culture" of faculty life and the academy. It is interesting; as I understand more about the academy I am not sure I like a lot of what I see. Perhaps it does not make a difference because I am still finding that I need to find a path and carve my journey as a scholar and teacher in a way that reflects my values and

principles. Recently I sat with two senior African American women scholars on the campus and their insights were very useful. Essentially their advice was consistent with how I had been thinking. They both emphasized the importance of doing what mattered to me and to understand that the challenges in the academy do not end with tenure they continue to unfold so it is important to keep centered and balanced.

Before we turn away from the writing I think it is worth sharing in this context that even the physical task of writing seemed nearly impossible at times. I remember on occasions when we scheduled a writing day and one or both of us would be physically too tired to write. Who ever had the most energy would just begin to move us through the process. We would trade off tasks of writing, reading and synthesizing our work. Somehow through this process our batteries would get recharged. The process of collaborating and working together made the work at times more appealing because we could work off each other's strengths and each other's energy.

Bridget: Definitely, working in collaboration is what kept me motivated all those years of writing and rewriting. I knew when we did get together great work would result. Very rarely did we work on the manuscript when we were by ourselves. We actually would write together at the computer. While one of us was at the computer in your office the other would be on the couch combing literature to enhance a section, or checking references to be included. The person on the computer would get excited about a particular word-choice or phrase and read it out loud to the other person who would increase that person's energy as they thought of more precise words or transitions to insert into the manuscript. The manuscript was very literally written by both of us such that when we look at the two articles we have published we cannot point to a large section of text and see only one person's writing. It is this true collaborative writing process that resulted out of our growing friendship over the years and it is one thing that gives me great excitement and energy around current manuscripts I am writing with other authors. I've since found that one way to support myself as an African American woman faculty member in a program of which I am the only one, in a department and college, of which I am one of two Black women, is to find other women of color and White women to write with. The process of writing with other women who share similar struggles with me around racism or sexism sustains and supports me.

Sharon: Bridget I think that a part of why we are able to bring each other energy is that we each have multiple circles of support that we maintain in and outside of the academy. I know for me there are three distinct circles of support that are critical to my sense of balance and motivation as an African American woman. The most intimate of these is my relationship with my husband, daughter and family. These are the individuals who on a daily

basis bring me joy, motivate me and keep me centered. I have also been blessed to have two strong circles of support, one in the academy and the other outside. The circle in the academy affectionately referred to as the “stars” represent a group of colleagues (African American men and women) who are essential to my mental health. Some of these colleagues I have known for over 20 years and we come together at least four times a year to celebrate our accomplishments, vent about race and racism, discuss issues impacting the African American community and solve problems facing higher education. While each member of the group is very accomplished they are also very “real” about what it means to survive in a dominant cultural context and to work in an oppressive society. My final circle of support is my investment club, Ujamaa, a group of 13 African American women who have been investing for 13 years. I went to undergrad with the majority of the women in the group and I have known one member of Ujamaa for over 30 years. Like the “stars” these women are highly accomplished and successful. What they provide is a refuge away from the pressures in the academy and an opportunity to connect with African American women who face similar challenges personally and professionally. Only recently am I beginning to find a group of African American women scholars to connect with and I can see how this group will be very important to my sense of validation in the academy.

Bridget: Yes, I think because of the working and personal relationship that we share I sought this out when I arrived in my tenure-track position. In addition to African American women scholars, internal and external supports have also saved my life as I journey through the academy. My partner is my rock. I thank God that I was surrounded by you and other strong African American role-models during graduate school which enabled me to go through my racial identity development and come out feeling proud and accepting of myself as an African American woman. I’m quite sure if I had not I would have missed the opportunity to have this African American partner in my life who understands and can relate to my stories of coping with racism on a daily basis. In addition, together we have imported our own “family” of support through recruiting other African American and other people of color staff and students to our dominant White university. We sustain each other, inspire each other and rejuvenate each other when the cumulative effect of racial microaggressions become too much to bear alone.

Sharon: Bridget I do not know if I ever told you how proud I am of your work to recover your sense of self and identity, especially your racial sense of self. Let me say that I think your choice of partner is your own to make although I had always hoped that you would come to know Black love. In a society that undervalues and denigrates the African American family I

believe that it is very important to invest in, and restore, the African American community. Central to this effort of restoration are the relationships of love and friendship in the African American community. I think we have to be willing to work with each other as much as we are willing to work with others. We must be committed to our own growth and development and invested in our success as couples. I remember your struggles and the deep conversations we shared around your pain. I always found it odd that you felt that African American men were not attracted to you because I have witnessed a number of brothers over the years send signals that they were interested in you. I am so happy for you that your life partner expresses the kind of love and friendship that allows you to feel whole and valued as an African American woman. As you know we cannot look to systems outside of ourselves to affirm who we are. Even in the best of relationships we must always nurture ourselves and love ourselves no matter who becomes our partner.

DISCUSSION

The need to connect as African American women is important, in part because of the historical ways that we have been devalued and denied access to the economic rewards in society and also because of how we have been silenced in a larger social system that continues to use our labor without recognition of our contributions. Collins (1991) expressed it well:

Taken together, the seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite white male interests and worldviews. Denying African-American women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African-American women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics. (p. 7)

Despite efforts to oppress and suppress African American women, we continue to emerge and find ways to have our thoughts recognized. Some of the mechanisms we have used to survive are through webs of personal and professional connection. African American women have always found ways to bond in sister circles (Ross, 2003). We have connected informally and formally in communities and in the workplace. Our stories and strategies for success are rarely chronicled and when they are they are not always told by us or valued for what they reveal about Black women (Harley, 2002; Myers, 2002) and our habit of surviving. Harley (2002) noted that:

Too often, stereotypes and misinformation—images, stories, and historical records presented to others—obscure exciting representation of black women. The storyteller's identity and history often interfere with his or her willingness and ability to tell the story of black working women. Work brings pain as well as joy, personal satisfaction as well as anguish, economic success as well as continued poverty, and sometimes all at the same time. (p. xvi)

Our story began in the domain of work through our formal connection as advisor and advisee but progressed over the years into a deeper relationship and level of trust as we shared our personal lives and experiences. The need that we both had to accomplish our work in the academy was central to why we established our initial relationship. However, the fact that our connection continues to expand is largely due to the fact that we relate well as individuals and that we have been willing to allow our “formal” roles to evolve into a reciprocal relationship that respects and values what we both contribute as equal partners. Our identities as African American women enhanced our ability to relate to each other, and it added to the soulfulness and nature of our collaboration. Put differently we have a rhythm between us that is an unspoken way of working together that truly makes the writing a joy. The collaboration is productive because the bonding is so rewarding. Our shared characteristics of race and gender did not necessarily mean that we would automatically enjoy a deeper connection. Rather we had to be willing to make a commitment to each other over an extended period. The space and opportunity to work together deepened as we both demonstrated a willingness to work through some of the challenges (in and outside of the academy) that came our way. These challenges made our personal lives vulnerable but they also provided opportunities for us to establish significant trust and connectedness.

The theme of vulnerability and trust emerged as we began to examine various incidents, behaviors and actions that occurred over the course of our working together. The commitment that we made to pursue an understanding of how to write for publication and to conduct research meant that we had to be willing to learn together and to release ourselves from the expectations we had in our formal roles as student and teacher. Quite literally we realized as we examined the data on our timeline that we were always living in a space of vulnerability around our intellectual thoughts, behaviors/actions and critical life incidents. Intellectually we had to give each other permission to think out loud and to make mistakes without editing our comments and more importantly to admit when we didn't have the slightest idea of how to do something. Over time we found this process not only freeing and liberating but it moved us along in the writing process because we could identify where and when we needed help.

Faculty often think that they must be in control (hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998) when they are teaching and working with students. These thoughts can limit and constrain the teaching and learning process. Palmer (1998) described the act of teaching as a space where risk and vulnerability must take place if the teacher takes heart in teaching and if it comes from a place within the soul. He observed that:

...teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability...unlike many professions teaching is always done at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life...to reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves. We build a wall between inner truth and outer performance, and we play-act the teacher's part. (p. 17)

Our willingness to remove the walls early in our relationship and to genuinely work together without pretense of "play acting" our role as student and teacher was important because it removed the limitations that often accompany these formal roles.

The freedom that we gave each other to "think out loud" extended to our use of language. We used a process of communicating that was essentially bi-cultural. Rather than being compelled to sound like we knew what we were talking about by using the jargon of the field we were most productive in our writing and generation of ideas when we communicated in the vernacular and then revised and edited our communication for refereed journal consumption. hooks (1994) argued that African Americans may use the vernacular as a form of speech to resist White supremacy but also because it, "...forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies—different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview" (p. 171). Furthermore, hooks submitted that, "...It is absolutely essential that the revolutionary power of black vernacular speech not be lost in contemporary culture. That power resides in the capacity of black vernacular to intervene on the boundaries and limitations of standard English" (p. 171). Once we expressed our thoughts in a language that described what we were truly feeling we could then evaluate it relative to the standard usage and meaning of language applied in a professional context. We are both very familiar and comfortable with the use of Standard English and traditional academic prose, however as we were learning how to conceptualize our own thoughts and feelings they were captured best by a use of language that reflected our lived experiences and cultural context. This process enabled us to write with our hearts and edit with our minds. The heart symbolically became the expression of authentic voice we wanted in our writing as African

American women and the mind would be our cue to edit and critique our work so that it would “fit” the format, language and expectations of traditional journals so that our work would be published. Admittedly there were times when we were frustrated by this process and felt like we were giving up an authentic expression. Yet, at the same time this strategy became an effective way for us to resist the dominant culture while still learning how to develop our ideas and write for publication.

The vulnerability that we experienced in our personal lives around health issues and racial identity development were significant times of challenge and growth. During much of this time, we were not in close proximity to each other and in fact the actual writing process had essentially stopped. For nearly 18 months we did little to no actual writing. The traditional advising responsibilities continued and we often met informally when we were both in town. It was during this time that we took greater risks to share in the joys and pains of each other’s lives. These were the times when our identities as women, particularly African American women mattered. How we cared for each other and came to each other’s aid was seamless. We believe that our experiences reflect how women establish meaning in relationships (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Collins, 1998; Gilligan, 1982). The value we placed on relational knowing rather than the abstract, objectivist style we encounter with many male colleagues (and some women) is consistent with how research characterizes females as valuing relationships, care, duty and love (Baxter-Magolda, 1992). These values coupled with our situated standpoints (Collins, 1998) as African American women in multiple hierarchies created ways of knowing which fortified our relationship and eliminated unnecessary explanation between us. Ross (2003) captured the nature of this relating well when she wrote, “Black women’s strength derives from each other: women nurturing women...and women collaborating in women’s organizations. These supportive agencies become significant for building extended kinship relationships, self-esteem, unified principles and resilience” (p. 29).

For almost 10 years we have been able to sustain a very productive professional relationship and invaluable personal friendship. Our ability to motivate each other and to serve as a source of support for each other was significant in our success. We also recognized that our lives were complex and richly textured and sometimes we would not be able to meet our obligations. What became important was being honest in our communication and revisiting our expectation of one another. During some of the most challenging times in our personal lives we were blessed to have a number of support systems to turn to for energy and renewal.

IMPLICATIONS

As we think about the lessons that we have been able to learn from our work we realize that they are perhaps not unique but certainly reinforce the need for several continued and new initiatives in the academy. First, we think that it is important to support the networking and connection of African American scholars. Increasingly there is a call for more innovative approaches to mentoring scholars of color. Holmes and Rivera (2004) offered:

Another less traditional approach of mentoring gaining popularity in higher education among feminist scholars, scholars of color, and others is peer mentoring. This form of mentoring fosters a more egalitarian approach to academic relationships and is void of hierarchy...emphasis is placed on mutual empowerment and learning. (p. 16)

As universities seek to support faculty of color they should encourage the informal networking that occurs between colleagues. College and universities can provide small grants and monetary awards to support conference attendance, books and technology support for colleagues who have established small communities of support. Secondly, we believe that it is important for universities to reward and recognize the contributions that are made by faculty who mentor students and colleagues. The year that I, Sharon went up for tenure, my university had just included mentorship activities as one of the criteria for tenure. Needless to say this was a welcomed addition to the tenure process. More importantly it acknowledged the significant contributions that many faculty, particularly faculty of color and women faculty, contribute to the academy. Finally we think that it is important for campuses to make the resources on the campuses accessible for faculty of color. It is important for faculty to know where they can find fiscal support and collegial support on a campus. We know from the literature that it is important for faculty of color to network and support each other. Campuses need to continue to provide opportunities for faculty to meet and connect as a first step to establishing collaborative relationships. This may sound obvious. Nevertheless campuses take for granted that faculty of color will find one another.

The same must be true for faculty of color and students of color to meet. This year, I, Bridget was fortunate to have graduate students of color set-up a program whereby undergraduate students of color who were eligible for work-study, were paired up with faculty and staff of color who needed work-study. In addition to regular work-study duties, I met with my student and mentored him on how to successfully navigate our predominately White

research university. This program, similarly to Sharon's institution adding mentoring in its tenure process, is of little to no cost to the university and yet it increases the retention of people of color in the academy.

We are in support of these creative avenues for people of color to mentor each other and for the university to formally reward those relationships. As we worked together our collaboration provided an opportunity for us to feel valued and whole. We were able to learn in powerful ways from each other and to collaborate in ways that were mutually beneficial. As universities learn more from the experiences of African American women, feminist scholars and other scholars of color, they can be strategic in their efforts to retain them. Our experiences suggest that it would be important for universities to demonstrate a commitment to supporting the soul and intellectual interests of African American faculty.

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