Full Length Research Paper

In Our Own Words: African American Women Student Affairs Professionals Define their Experiences in the Academy

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The present study was conducted to explore the self-conceptualizations of terms that describe the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs. The participants in the study noted both the physical and psychological representations of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized in the context of their lives in the academy. Further, they noted the often intangible and intrinsic factors that contributed to their sense of personal well-being and professional success. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: African American women, student affairs, professional success, personal well-being

Introduction

Although African American women have been participating in American higher education for more than a century and have made significant strides in occupying their place within academe, they continue to be severely underrepresented among students, faculty, staff, and campus administrators (Gregory, 2001; Howard-Hamilton, 2003a; Zamani, 2003). It is important to note that while underrepresentation is a measure of the negligible *quantity* of African American women in higher education, there are other issues, which result from their underrepresented status, that affect the *quality* of their experiences in the academy; some researchers contend this is an even more critical issue (Mabokela, 2001). A synthesis of existing research literature revealed that marginalization and isolation appear repeatedly as issues that affect the professional realities of African American women who work in higher education.

Several commentaries designed to elucidate the African American woman's experience of being marginalized and isolated within the context of higher education have been offered in the literature. In her seminal treatise, Black feminist thought scholar, Patricia Hill Collins (1986), described the marginalized and isolated status of African American women in various professional and academic settings as the "outsider within" (p. S14). Howard-Hamilton (2003b) relied on the phraseology coined by Collins and noted that African American women in higher education:

> have been invited into places where the dominant group has assembled, but they remain outsiders because they are still invisible and have no voice when dialogue commences. A sense of belonging can never exist because there is no personal or cultural fit between the experiences of African American women and the dominant group. (p. 21)

As suggested by Black feminist thought scholars (Collins, 1986, 1990, 2000, 2002, 2004; Guy-Sheftall, 1995), it is important to consider variations in perception among African American women, as opposed to assuming that what is true for one is true for all. Due to their respective positionality in a variety of distinct professional roles, African American women employed in higher education may experience and describe underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization differently. As it relates to African American women student affairs professionals, it is critical to identify indicators that may be used to identify the normative practices and behaviors that perpetuate oppressive experiences in the lives of these women. Further, if institutional leaders are genuinely invested in taking action to dismantle the systemic racist and sexist oppression suffered by many African American women, then deeper and more authentic conceptualizations are needed regarding what it means for African American women to achieve personal well-being and professional success. It is expected that this line of inquiry will simultaneously serve to fortify an alliance, strengthen the resolve and validate the efforts of individuals who are committed to and capable of decomposing and destroying the vicious cycle of detriment (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization) that impedes the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs administrators.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how African American women student affairs professionals experience and define underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization in their careers in the academy and more specifically at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Further, this study sought to provide a platform for African American women student affairs administrators to share their own conceptualizations regarding personal well-being and professional success.

Literature Review

The following review of literature explores the concepts of underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization in relation to the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. In addition, literature is presented that attempts to contextualize the issues of personal well-being and professional success among African American women employed at PWIs.

Underrepresentation has been defined as the experience of being a member of a specific cultural group whose numerical distribution is significantly less than that of other cultural groups present in the same environment (Viernes Turner, 2002). Another way the underrepresentation of African American women in higher education can be conceptualized is by understanding the idea of critical mass. Miller (2003) argues that critical mass "exists whenever, within a given group [of individuals], there are enough members from a particular group such that they feel comfortable participating in the conversation and that [others] see them as individuals rather than as spokespersons for their race" (para. 18). Using Miller's (2003) definition, underrepresentation may be defined as a lack of critical mass. In other words, the underrepresentation of African American women in postsecondary education exists when there is a noticeably smaller number of these women present in institutions of higher education as compared to the number of members of other cultural groups present.

The same type of isolated and marginalized existence described by Collins (1986) in her foundational work has been echoed by scholars who explored the experiences of African American women in a variety of higher education settings. According to earlier scholars, isolation referred to "feelings of loneliness, to the persistent awareness of 'not fitting in,' to always being on guard, and/or to the fatigue that comes from always having to be one's own support system" (Daniel, 1997). Although dated, McKay's (1997) description of the isolation Black women suffer in academy is certainly apropos:

> In White universities and colleges, these women experience the workplace as one of society's exclusive clubs to which, even though they have as much right as everyone else to be there, they will never gain full membership—at least, not in the lifetime of this generation of scholars. (p. 21)

More contemporary scholars have described isolation as a by-product of underrepresentation that leaves many African American women with a persistent sense that they do not belong (Clayborne, 2006).

Marginalization has been defined as the unrelenting experience of being covertly or overtly relegated to a peripheral position within the context of one's professional environment (Wolfman, 1997). Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) described marginalization as "a feeling of invisibleness" (p. 166), and added that African American women are often asked to "compromise their gender and/or racial/ethnic identities" (p. 167). Even as a contemporary commentary, Thomas and Hollensheads' depiction hauntingly echoes the pioneering work of W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) who first described "double-consciousness—this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"—as a consequence of the marginalized experience of Blacks in America (p. 12). Patitu and Hinton (2003) defined marginalization as "any issue, situation, or circumstance that has placed [African American] women outside of the flow of power and influence within their institutions" (p. 83).

Literature regarding the experiences of African American women in higher education is replete with subtle references to the consequences of working (and learning) in settings where these women are underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized (West, 2011). According to Cole (2001), "It is critically important to acknowledge the obvious: that being present in a college or university does not mean that one is welcomed, given the support needed to gain tenure, or paid equally for equal work' (p. 231). There are few studies that actually document and define the specific personal and professional consequences that are the result of African American women's compromised status in the academy. Even fewer studies directly explore African American women's conceptualizations of personal well-being and professional success. As a result of this gap in the literature, it is difficult to identify specific factors that may be used to indicate that African American women student affairs professionals are leading lives, which are both personally enriching and professionally successful.

One study that did seek to give African American women employed in the academy a voice to express their own perceptions of personal and professional success was conducted by Miller and Vaughn (1997). This modest qualitative study of African American women executives in higher education sought to determine the participants' perceptions regarding their freedom to achieve personally and professionally, and to solicit their definitions of success. The women in this study used the following indicators to define personal and professional success: "freedom to grow and develop, the quality of time they spent with family and friends, participation in community service, the ability to balance work and other dimensions of their lives, enjoying their employment positions, and faith and adherence to personal standards" (Miller & Vaughn, 1997, p. 186). It is

interesting to note that the respondents did not include career mobility as an indicator of success although they all had achieved positions of leadership in higher education. An implication derived from the findings of this study is that it is important to provide African American women student affairs professionals with the opportunity to explore and define their own ideas related to personal well-being and professional success. Jackson (2001) supported this assertion and noted:

> PWIs should provide the opportunity to African Americans to personally and/or professionally define "quality of life." Sometimes it is assumed that African-American administrators [only] need larger salaries, or need to be at large or prestigious universities, or in close proximity to urban centers. Allowing administrators the opportunity to define their own quality of life gives them the opportunity to share what they value and how their values relate to the institution. (p. 106)

As it relates to the experiences of African American women at work, there is limited research that conceptualizes the terms that ground this study, especially from the perspective of African American women themselves. Unfortunately, mainstream definitions of these terms are often too narrow and intellectualize and marginalize the emotional distress, psychological disruption, and physical dysfunction that ensues when African American women regularly contend with microaggressions in the context of their professional lives at PWIs. The dearth of research related to the aforementioned concepts (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional success) signals the need for multiple investigations regarding what it means to be an African American woman who is navigating the complex and often tumultuous terrain of professional life in the academy. Within the context of the present study, African American women student affairs professionals were asked to consider and describe their own conceptualizations of these terms, a strategy advanced by Black feminist thought.

Theoretical Framework

The primary theory that undergirds the focus of inquiry of the current study is Black feminist thought (BFT; Collins, 1986, 1990, 2000, 2002, 2004; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). This theoretical model provides useful cues for conceptualizing the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization that African American women student affairs professionals continue to experience in PWIs (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b), as well as their own definitions of personal well-being and professional success. Black feminists simultaneously validate the intersection of African American women's collective common experiences, as well as the distinctness of their individual unique experiences; they assert that both are central to the development and conceptualization of African American women's unique worldview, or standpoint. In addition, according to BFT, it is essential to provide a platform upon which self-defined thoughts about and actions of African American women can be presented. Taken together, the dimensions espoused in BFT suggest that

there are valuable insights to be gained by exploring the self-conceptualizations of African American women regarding their experiences in the academy. Examining the perceptions of African American women student affairs professionals from a Black feminist perspective may serve to elucidate certain critical nuances of experience that would be obfuscated by majority monocultural human development theories. Insights gained from this theoretical vantage may be used to construct a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the issues that continue to plague African American women in the academy, and in leadership roles in general.

Although extant literature is replete with references to factors that impede or enhance the professional success and personal well-being of African American women higher education administrators, there is scant evidence that definitions of these relatively nebulous terms have been clearly defined by the women who experience them in a unique way. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to explore and give voice to African American women student affairs professionals' experiences relative to their position in the academy. Specifically, these women were asked to consider and offer insight into their own definitions of underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization in the context of their work at PWIs. Further, they were asked to define professional success and personal well-being from their own perspectives.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the inquiry of the following study, which aimed to provide personal narratives from the perspective of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs.

1. How do African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs define their own experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization in the context of their position in the academy?

2. How do African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs define for themselves the concepts of personal well-being and professional success?

Method

Data related to the purpose of this study was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews and an open-ended survey instrument designed to solicit definitions of the terms central to the study. Ten African American women student affairs professionals, who were actively involved in the African American Women's Summit (AAWS) participated in the study. The AAWS is a professional development program designed specifically by and for African American women student affairs professionals. The AAWS has been offered as a full-day, pre-conference workshop at the NASPA Annual Conference since 2004. In line with principles espoused in Black feminist thought, the AAWS provided an appropriate pool of participants who

could serve as information-rich sources of data central to the purpose of the present study.

Participants

The final sample size (n= 10) represents the number of women who met the initial delimiting criterion (i.e., had attended at least three African American Women's Summits), were eligible to participate in the study based on their identification with the sampling frame criteria, and who agreed to participate in the study. The final sampling frame criteria that was used to select participants for inclusion in the study included the following: African American women student affairs professionals who had the majority of their professional experience at a PWI; who identified with the experience of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized within the context of their professional lives, due to their identification as an African American woman; who had participated in at least three African American Women's Summits; and who had been continuously employed as student affairs professionals prior to and following their participation in the AAWS.

Data Collection

Data collection in this study included the use of a semi-structured interview format (Merriam, 2009), as well as a 16-item, open-ended survey instrument. The survey instrument consisted of two sections. The first section was designed to collect demographic data related to the participants' age, marital and parental status, educational attainment and status, employment status and history, and institutional characteristics. The final 5 survey items were open-ended questions that asked participants to define the terms central to the study (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional success). Participants were provided with the following prompt: "Please provide a personal definition of each of the following terms. In constructing your definition, please consider and include ideas that are central to your own unique experiences as an African American woman student affairs professional." Participants received and returned the survey electronically approximately 3 months prior to the semi-structured interviews.

The interview guide that was utilized in this study consisted of four sections. The first section included questions designed to obtain personal, professional, and educational background information from the participants, while the second section contained questions related to the nature of the participants' AAWS involvement. Interview questions in the third section of the interview guide were designed to elicit participants' definitions of the terms that were the focus of the study (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional success). In addition, participants were asked about their pre- and post-AAWS experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization as African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs, as well as their perceptions regarding the impact of the AAWS on their personal well-being and professional success. The fourth section

of the interview guide was used to provide participants with the opportunity to contribute any additional insights related to the purpose of the study.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher introduced herself and reminded the participants of the purpose of the study. The participants were asked for permission to audio-record the interview and were ensured of the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were also asked for permission to contact them for a brief follow-up interview if it was deemed necessary by the researcher. In addition, the participants were asked if they would be willing to review their individual interview transcript for accuracy once it had been produced.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed as immediately following the interview as was feasible. In an attempt to verify the accuracy of the verbatim interview transcripts, each participant was asked to review their individual interview transcript and to notify the researcher of any discrepancies and/or missing information. This process of member checking resulted in minor changes related to the spelling of proper nouns and the clarification of inaudible portions of the audio files.

Once the final verified interview transcripts had been produced, the researcher began the process of condensing the data into manageable units of analysis. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to identify the smallest meaningful units of data that were relevant to the purpose of the present study, which emerged from a line-by-line review of the interview transcripts. Following the identification and labeling of the open codes that emerged in the interview transcript data, axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Creswell, 2007), or analytical coding (Merriam, 2002), was used to group the initial set of open codes into larger units, or categories, that reflected more abstract concepts. During this phase of data analysis, in vivo codes (descriptors that are derived directly from the language of the participants; Creswell, 2007) were used to retain the integrity of the participants' responses and to capture certain cultural nuances related to the participants' identification as African American women student affairs professionals. This process was repeated for each of the interview transcripts and was used to sort recurring, or new codes that emerged into the broader categories that had emerged. Finally, the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to identify larger themes that emerged from the categories extrapolated from the data. This procedure was used to reduce the number categories into a manageable number of themes related to the research questions that were the focus this study.

The survey results were analyzed and used to construct a demographic profile of the participants related to their personal, educational, and professional backgrounds. Responses to the open-ended survey items were complied and sorted into codes, categories, and themes independently of the interview data. Once themes from the survey data had been identified, they were compared with themes from the interview data. Themes from

both data sources that were similar were combined and condensed, while different themes that emerged from the survey data were added as new themes.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into African American women student affairs professionals' self-conceptualizations of underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization in the context of their work at PWIs. Further, this study aimed to explore how these women employed at PWIs defined professional success and personal well-being from their own perspectives. The presentation of findings related to the two research questions that guided the study is preceded by a descriptive demographic profile of the African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the study.

Profile of Participants

Data related to the personal, professional, and educational background of each participant was obtained from the demographic questions on the survey instrument, as well as during each participant's semi-structured interview (see Table 1). In terms of the participants' ages, there was one participant (10%) in each of the following age categories: 31-34, 40-44, and 60+. However, 40% of the participants were between the ages of 26-30, while 30% were between the ages of 50-59. Further, among the 10 African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the study, only one (10%) indicated that she was married and had more than 3 children; 90% indicated that they were single and had no children.

The participants in the study were employed in a wide range of positions. More specifically, 30% of the participants were employed as doctoral graduate assistants and 30% were employed as directors. In addition, 1 participant (10%) was employed in each of the following roles: Vice President, Assistant Vice-President, Full Professor, and Coordinator. When asked to specify the type of institution at which they were currently employed, approximately 70% of the respondents indicated that they worked at public institutions versus 30%, who reported working at private institutions; all of the participants were employed at 4-year institutions. Related to their level of educational attainment, 40% of the participants indicated that they had earned doctoral degrees, while another 40% of the participants reported that they were currently pursuing a Ph.D.; among these women 75% were enrolled full-time.

Findings Related to Research Question 1

The first research question addressed in this study was, "How do African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs define their own experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization in the context of their position in academy?" Participants' responses to the series of questions related to this broader research question yielded an important finding. Each of the women discussed the concepts in terms of the physical experience of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized, but they majority of them also discussed in great detail the

psychological experience associated with each of the terms. Thus, themes related to each of the terms below will be presented along these two dimensions.

Participants' definitions of underrepresentation. The first term that interviewees were asked to define was underrepresentation. Related to the physical experience of being underrepresented, women in the study noted the unequal numerical proportion of individuals from various cultural groups who share a common physical and/or structural environment (i.e. an actual office location or committee meeting vs. a department, unit, or division). Several participants recounted experiences of being "the only" African American woman, or "the only one of a few" African American women, employed in their department, building, or institution. Interestingly, some participants also defined underrepresentation in terms of how closely the presence of a specific cultural group in a micro setting (i.e., a college campus) resembles that same group's presence in the larger macro setting (i.e., American society). One interviewee noted, "for example, African Americans represent 10% on my campus, but are 12.7 % of the overall population. Therefore, they are underrepresented on my campus."

The interviewees also noted the following psychological consequences of being underrepresented, which included the pressure of always being expected to speak on behalf of all African Americans, the self-inflicted stress to perform at a level of perfection to prevent judgment and devaluation of the underrepresented group to which they belonged, and feelings of depreciation associated with the underrepresented group's lack of presence and power. Participants also described the effects of being underrepresented, such as having limited access to the decision-making table and not having their perspective represented within the larger group. One interviewee offered the following perspective: "I would describe underrepresentation as a minority status in a majority setting."

Participants' definitions of isolation. Each interviewee was also asked to discuss her personal definition of isolation related to her experience as an African American woman student affairs professional at a PWI. In describing their experiences with isolation, some of the participants discussed the physical seclusion they had endured within the context of various professional settings. Several participants made reference to the physical reality of being separated from other African American women and men on their respective campuses. In addition, one participant described her experience of being physically segregated from the rest of the staff in her department: "It was a point of angst for me because I thought, 'you put me on the second floor. Nobody even knows I'm here.'" (After a conversation with a trusted mentor on another campus, this participant was able to reframe her relocation to an isolated office and used her relatively uninterrupted time to work on and complete her dissertation, which was nearing completion when the relocation occurred.)

In addition to physical isolation, some participants also noted their inability to connect with non-African American colleagues

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS			PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS				EDUCATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS		
	Age	Marital Status	Parental Status	Current Position	Length of Service in Current Position	Type of Institution/ Student Enrollment	Number of Institutions Employed at During Career	Degrees Attained	Current Enrollment Status	Current Degree Program
#1	31-34	Single	No children	Graduate Assistant	0-2 years	4-year Public 20,000+	0-2	B.A., M.Ed.	Full-time	Ph.D.
#2	26-30	Single	No children	Graduate Assistant	0-2 years	4-year Public 20,000+	3-5	B.S., M.A.	Full-time	Ph.D.
#3	26-30	Single	No children	Coordinator	0-2 years	4-year Private 2,500-4,999	3-5	B.S., M.Ed.	Not enrolled	N/A
#4	40-44	Single	No children	Director	6-10 years	4-year Private 10,000-19,999	3-5	B.A., M.S.P.H.	Part-time	Ph.D.
#5	26-30	Single	No children	Director	3-5 years	4-year Public 20,000+	3-5	B.S., M.Ed.	Not enrolled	N/A
#6	60+	Married	3+ children	Director	3-5 years	4-year Public 20,000+	0-2	B.S., M.S., M.Ed., Ph.D.	Not enrolled	N/A
#7	26-30	Single	No children	Graduate Assistant	0-2 years	4-year Public 5,000-9,999	6-7	B.A., M.Ed.	Full-time	Ph.D.
#8	50-59	Single	No children	Assistant Vice-President	6-10 years	4-year Public 10,000-19,999	0-2	B.A., M.Ed., Ph.D.	Not enrolled	N/A
#9	50-59	Single	No children	Full Professor	3-5 years	4-year Public 10,000-19,999	3-5	B.A., M.A., Ed.D.	Not enrolled	N/A
#10	50-59	Single	No children	Vice President	0-2 years	4-year Private 1,000-2,499	3-5	B.A., M.B.A., Ed.D.	Not enrolled	N/A

in supportive, collegial relationships. Each woman alluded to the tremendous sense of having to serve as one's own support system. Some of the women noted that the challenges they contended with seemed to be compounded when they were situated in environments "without a support system to hear, respond [to], and empathize with the trauma" they experienced as a result of being underrepresented and marginalized.

Participants' definitions of marginalization. Participants were next asked to define the term marginalization. The primary description that emerged among participants' definitions of the term marginalization was related to their struggle to gain full access to the culture of their respective work environments. Most of the women discussed the limited ways in which they were able to participate in the life of the departments, offices, and/or institutions at which they were employed. One participant described this experience as being "stuck in a corner." Participants also noted the subtle, yet intentional nuances of exclusive behavior exhibited by their colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates, which relegated them to the figurative, and sometimes literally, periphery of their respective work settings. When asked to describe her experiences with being marginalized, one of the interviewees provided the following analogy:

> When we were taught how to write in elementary and secondary school, they told you to stay within the margins. And there was always this red border running down the side of the paper. That's marginalization. It's a very thin strip and there's only so much room in the margin. And then on top of that, when you use that visual, there was this red border. And red means stop—don't go any further than this. And then on the inside of the margin is all this space, and all this room for you to move around, be creative, do what you want to do. That's marginalization. You're told and you're being dictated to by teachers for years and years and years, "Stay within the margins, stay within this boundary. If you go outside of the margin your grade will be lowered, you will be penalized for that." So no one wants to be on the margin. Nobody wants to be in that little thin strip, but that's where we are. That's where people who are disenfranchised are.

This visualization presented a clear picture of the status and position of many African American women student affairs professionals, who live their professional lives on the fringes of the academy. This analogy also echoed the sentiments of the other interviewees, who discussed their experiences being "out of the mainstream," and "not [being] included in the inner circle." In addition to being relegated to less prominent physical and social spaces in their work environments, participants discussed how the cultural norms of many African American women (i.e., negotiation and communication patterns, spirituality, etc.) are also deemed inferior and are rarely integrated into the mainstream functioning of groups in which they participate. The interviewees also discussed the position of marginality that many African American women student affairs professionals occupy within PWIs and the resulting lack of access to resources,

individuals, and information that would empower them to achieve professional success (i.e., making a real impact, upward mobility, career satisfaction, etc.).

Findings Related to Research Question 2

The second research question that guided the development of this study was, "How do African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs define for themselves the concepts of personal well-being and professional success?" Two broad findings emerged related to this research question. In terms of personal well-being, almost all of the women in the study noted the holistic nature of personal well-being and made specific reference to physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Further, several of the participants cited a direct correlation between professional success and their need to make a difference (or an impact) in the lives of others. More specific themes related to these two terms are presented below.

Participants' definitions of personal well-being. Participants' definitions of personal well-being included the critical importance of monitoring and attending to their own physical, spiritual, and emotional health. In addition, participants mentioned the importance of engaging in activities that promote inner peace, happiness, and overall contentment with life in maintaining a sense of personal well-being. The vast majority of participants also discussed how their faith had played an integral role in helping them to maintain personal well-being. When participants were asked what strategies they used to maintain a sense of personal well-being, one participant commented:

> One of the biggest things I do is pray. I literally will just— wherever I am, if I'm feeling some kind of way, I'm like, "Please, Lord, help me," or I'll say, "the blood of Jesus." Because I feel like when I tap into my source, I feel more at peace with myself.

Interviewees also cited the connection between maintaining a sense of personal well-being and remaining connected with family, friends, and other forms of social support. The women discussed how their various interpersonal relationships had served as a mechanism, which helped them to both monitor and enhance their personal well-being. One participant noted:

> [I] spend time with people I care about, like my nieces, for example. I find that when I'm out of balance, I don't spend as much time with them as I would normally. When I'm out of balance, once again, I retreat. I go into myself to get back to me. And so my way of, like, ensuring that I'm not spending too much time in the retreat process is me going and taking my nieces to a basketball game to do something that they enjoy.

One interviewee also believed that another aspect of personal well-being for African American women is "getting away and finding space between [themselves] and others who do not look like [them]." Another salient feature of personal well-being expressed by the interviewees was related to the need for African American women to connect with one another in

emotionally supportive relationships. These strategies (i.e., spending time apart from non-African American others and developing meaningful relationships with other African American women) were mentioned as critical factors, which may determine the degree to which African American women are able to maintain their own personal well-being.

Participants' definitions of professional success. The majority of participants described professional success in terms of intrinsic motivators like being able to affect change in their respective work settings, feeling content and happy with the work they were doing, and fulfilling their calling and/or purpose. Several women noted the importance of "being able to make a difference where [they] worked" and "feeling self-fulfilled" in their positions. For example, one participant commented, "I think the success piece comes when what you're doing is making an impact and it shows that people are changing, lives are changing, and policies are changing because of the work that you do." Another participant noted a specific emphasis on "creating opportunities for or making positive institutional change for marginalized or underrepresented populations."

Further, participants also noted the importance of mentoring other African Americans in the profession, as well as African American college students, as an indicator of their own professional success. Interviewees discussed the various roles they played in helping other African American women and cited this type of interpersonal interaction as a key factor in defining their own professional success. One participant captured the essence of this sentiment and commented on her commitment to "helping others who look like you succeed and aspire to higher ranks." In other words, the interviewees believed that their own professional success was directly related to the degree of effort they expended in promoting the success of other African American women.

Other participants cited more tangible indicators of professional success such as obtaining a terminal degree (i.e., Ph.D., Ed.D., etc.), earning a salary that allows them to live comfortably, taking advantage of various professional development opportunities, and achieving notoriety in their professional field. Interestingly, participants also alluded to the struggle to remain true to themselves in the midst of work environments that were sometimes in direct conflict with their personal values and beliefs. One participant described the struggle as such:

> I think you have to really figure out how to navigate that…And that's part of that process of leadership, growth, and development…Say what you mean, mean what you say, but at the same time you need to make sure that you are authentic and true to yourself, and to your beliefs and your core values.

Several participants also commented on their desire to work in cities that had a vibrant African American community. As one participant explained, "For me, that's a church, that's a place to have my hair done, and a radio station. Now, me and my friends call it the Holy Trinity."

Discussion

The following discussion includes a disclosure of the researcher's background, which influenced the design of the study, the data collection and analysis processes, and the interpretation of the findings. In addition, conclusions related to the findings are presented. The article concludes with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Researcher's Disclosure

In conducting qualitative research, it is important for the researcher, who is often the sole instrument of data collection and analysis, to disclose relevant information and experiences that are likely to influence the collection and interpretation of the data, and even the conceptualization and design of a study. The following is my opportunity to unearth, reflect upon, and bring to conscious consideration the meaning behind some of the experiences in my life related to the topic being studied. The author of this article is an African American woman who has worked as student affairs professional and adjunct faculty member at the same predominately White institution in the South for more than 15 years. It is relevant to point out the probability that my experience of being at the same PWI as long as I have, has served to soften (although definitely not eliminate) the effects of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized—a unique and fortunate consequence of my own individual experience, which I suspect is *not* the case for many of my sister-colleagues.

Conclusions Related to Findings

From the participants' descriptions of their experiences as African American women employed at PWIs, underrepresentation can be conceptualized as both the physical experience of existing within a group where members of your cultural group are disproportionately fewer in number than individuals from the other cultural groups present, *and* the psychological strain that is a consequence of this disproportion. During the completion of my M.Ed. program, I can recall sitting in a meeting where the professional and graduate student staff were discussing a highly charged, racially sensitive issue. Although I was certainly underrepresented in number (I was one of two African Americans in that meeting), what I remember most is the tremendous anxiety, fear, and anger I experienced before, during, and after the meeting. In other words, underrepresentation is both a description of a physical reality—which is usually immediately visible—and a psychological consequences of that physical reality, which is typically invisible especially to individuals who are members of groups that are overrepresented.

One of the most common negative byproducts of being a member of an underrepresented group is the experience of being isolated. As expressed by the participants, isolation was described as the persistent sense of being physically present in a specific group, but being forced to function in the group as an individual entity, with little to no support or genuine

camaraderie. This lack of collegial fellowship may be the result of simply not having a critical mass of culturally similar peers with whom to connect, or it may be due to some African American women's struggle to force entry into already established, culturally homogenous groups that do not embrace the perspectives, interests, and/or values of the outsider—an example of Collins' (1986) "outsider within" phenomenon. Many of the participants in this study commented on the unique and refreshing experience of participating in the African American Women's Summit and "being in a room full of people who look like, think like, and speak like me." Another consequence related to the isolation that African American women face is the tendency of some of these women to self-isolate in professional settings where there are other African American women with whom they could connect. It could be that the persistent experience of being isolated may lead some African American women to fear appearing cliquish and cause them to avoid connecting with other African American women, even when doing so would be entirely appropriate.

According to the participants in this study, marginalization was defined as the experience of having your ideas, experiences, beliefs, and contributions devalued, dismissed, and relegated to the periphery of the group's conversations, decisions, and actions. The real tragedy of this experience is the self-doubt that can arise when African American women begin to question the validity of their contributions and worldviews because they are unable to discern the underlying racist ideologies that fuel the devaluing of their perspectives. This consequence of second-guessing oneself has the potential to ensnare African American women in an exhausting cycle of negative thinking that can become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The experiences of being isolated and marginalized are usually an unavoidable by-product of being underrepresented in a particular setting. In addition, due to the nebulousness of these terms it may be particularly difficult to conceptualize and recognize them, especially for individuals who have had limited personal exposure to these types of experiences. Adding to the complexity of these terms is the plethora of subjective, unquantifiable experiences that comprise many African American women's encounters with isolation and marginalization. An assertion which is certainly apropos regarding the participants' conceptualizations of these terms, is that although they may have difficulty defining the terms, they certainly knew when they are being subjected to or experiencing them.

In their definitions of the terms central to the study (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization), participants focused on the psychological effects of the oppressions they had endured, as opposed to the actual oppressive behaviors exhibited by their colleagues and/or supervisors. One interpretation of this finding is that the African American women student affairs professionals in this study were more focused on how to move forward and repair the psychological damage they had suffered as a result of working in oppressive environments. What plagues African American women's cogitations about the terms central to this study is the lack of definitive validation regarding their experiences with these terms from the individuals who possess the power and privilege to dismantle the contemporary systems and practices that isolate and marginalize underrepresented individuals and groups. In other words, unlike blatant racist atrocities suffered by Black women and men during earlier eras, it is the subtlety of the modern expressions of isolation and marginalization encountered by African American women that makes these terms most difficult to define.

An observation related to the participants' definitions of personal well-being and professional success is that they seemed to define these concepts mostly in terms of intangible indicators (i.e., inner peace and spiritual and interpersonal wellness) and intrinsic motivators (i.e., feeling fulfilled, staying true to oneself, and mentoring other African American colleagues and students). Further, the participants suggested that externally-defined notions of balance may or may not be appropriate, or even attainable, for African American women student affairs professionals. As the women in this study noted, one of the goals of the AAWS is to present participants with a wide array of real-life archetypes who, look like themselves, and who define (and experience) personal well-being and professional success in many different ways. Programs like the AAWS that provide a platform for the exploration of culturally relevant life paradigms, chip away at, and ultimately dismantle, the dominant and prevailing ideology that there is a single formula (based on Eurocentric values), which will guarantee personal well-being and professional success in the lives of African American women student affairs professionals.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the current study suggest that African American women student affairs professionals continue to face a myriad of issues related to being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized in their lives in the academy. Thus, the importance of connecting with other African American women in collegial and supportive relationships cannot be overstated (Cole, 2001). This recommendation certainly may be easier said than done for many African American women student affairs professionals who do not have access to other African American women in their immediate professional settings. However, there are several ways these women may be able to connect with one another.

African American women student affairs professionals who find themselves culturally isolated on campus may do well to reach beyond their immediate professional context and identify other African American women with whom they can connect. Intentionally cultivating relationships with African American women faculty on campus, who are likely experiencing different manifestations of the same type of underrepresented existence, may provide a much needed network of mutual support and collegiality. An added benefit of establishing these informal networks is that they may flourish into more formal, culturally homogenous programs that can positively impact the personal

well-being and professional success of the African American women who establish and participate in these programs.

Another strategy African American women student affairs professionals can use to combat the marginalization and isolation that results from being underrepresented is to participate in national professional development opportunities, like the AAWS, that are designed specifically by and for these women themselves. The NASPA Annual Conference, during which the AAWS occurs, is a national gathering that draws a large number of African American women student affairs professionals and thus serves as a mechanism to convene a critical mass of these women during the Summit. Although many of the women who participate in the AAWS are underrepresented and physically isolated on their respective campuses throughout the year, from their perspective, "coming to the Summit is like a shot in the arm; it's like a vitamin."

Although the role and impact of technology and social media on the personal well-being and professional success of African American women employed in higher education has not been studied, it has been suggested that these tools could be used by Black women in the academy to ameliorate challenges related to their underrepresentation (Henry & Glenn, 2009). The advent and growing memberships of online communities created by and for Blacks in higher education signals that social media sites may be a significant resource for African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs who remain underrepresented on their respective campuses. Facebook groups like BlkSAP, with almost 5,000 members, is an example of a social media outlet that encourages culturally responsive dialogue among Black student affairs professionals.

In addition to identifying culturally homogenous professional development settings, African American women student affairs professionals may also enhance their personal well-being by seeking out and engaging themselves in spiritual communities, social and civic organizations, and formal and informal athletic groups. Based upon the findings of this study, African American women student affairs professionals may reap multiple benefits from connecting with other African American women in the academy, as well as with other African American women in general.

The women in this study indicated that from their perspective, one aspect of professional success was directly related to them having the sense that they were making an impact in their places of employment. These same women commented that one of the consequences of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized is being relegated to positions and work that kept them out of the flow of power and influence, where they felt the real impact was being made. This finding suggests that African American women student affairs professionals may thrive in higher education professional settings that are sensitive to their definitions of these terms and intentionally create opportunities for African American women to engage in activities that elicit these types of internal responses. More specifically, it is critical that individuals in positions of authority and influence

intentionally identify and create spaces for African American women student affairs professionals to contribute in meaningful ways to the missions of the department, unit, division, or institution.

The responsibility for fostering professional environments and campus cultures where African American women student affairs professionals can thrive personally and professionally, cannot be placed on the shoulders of these women alone. As higher education institutions seek to enhance the academic success of their matriculating students, particularly African American students, they must not neglect policies and procedures that will assist African American women student affairs professionals in resisting challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators (Jackson, 2003). According to Howard-Hamilton (2003b):

> The university community should be prepared to support African American women when they seek a safe haven within predominantly black student associations, black sororities, and black female support groups. Faculty and administrators must be comfortable with black women establishing these spaces. (p. 25)

In other words, campus administrators at postsecondary institutions should be aware of and support the need of African American women student affairs professionals to connect with one another in meaningful and sustainable ways (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Ultimately, executive leaders at higher education institutions should be committed to increasing the critical mass of African American women student affairs professionals on their respective campuses. Supporting this assertion, Patitu and Hinton (2003) asserted that "institutions should avoid having only one African American faculty member or administrator in a department" (pg. 90). Flowers (2003) extended this recommendation and encouraged an aggressive recruitment and promotion process for African American student affairs professionals and suggested that:

> Individual colleges and universities should compute representation ratios for African American student affairs administrators (using African American students on their campus as the reference group) to measure the degree and extent of their representation on campus. Senior-level university administrators should then use this information to aid in hiring and promotion decisions. (p. 39)

Based on the findings of this study, student affairs professional associations, such as NASPA and ACPA, should continue supporting programs like the AAWS and be receptive to expansions of these programs. In addition, each of these organizations should solicit input from their respective internal cultural affinity groups (i.e., NASPA's Knowledge Communities ACPA's Standing Committees) to assess the specific needs of their various constituencies. A tangible recommendation that may be implemented to attract a broader audience for the AAWS is for student affairs professional associations such as NASPA and ACPA to supply dedicated web space that can be used to

advertise the AAWS, store archival presentation information, and feature biographical information of African American women student affairs professionals who are making a difference on their respective campuses and in the field at large.

One of the most significant ways that higher education institutions and student affairs professional associations can assist African American women student affairs professionals to resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, is to allow these women to define for themselves the types of support they need (Jackson, 2001). It is then critical that higher education institutions and student affairs professional associations direct the necessary fiscal resources towards helping these women develop programs and services designed specifically by and for themselves.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study sought to give voice to African American women student affairs administrators regarding their experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization at PWIs, as well as their definitions of personal well-being and professional success. To add to this relatively scant body of knowledge, further research could be conducted to explore how African American women faculty define the terms central to this study and to observe if there are notable differences in the self-conceptualizations of these two distinct cohorts of women in the academy. It is notable that quantitative data related to the current status of African American women student affairs professionals was also unavailable in the literature. Thus, further research is needed to determine the actual number of African American women student affairs professionals, the types of institutions and positions in which they are employed, their personal and educational backgrounds, as well as data related to their salaries in comparison to student affairs professionals from other cultural ethnic groups (i.e., African American men, White women, Latino men, etc.). With the proliferation of culturally homogenous online communities, further research is needed to explore the role and impact of social media on the personal well-being and academic and professional success of African American women enrolled and employed in higher education. In addition, an investigation related to the self-conceptualizations of the experiences of African American men student affairs professionals is warranted and could provide meaningful comparative data related to the focus of the present study.

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