Grown Black Woman Voice: A Framework for Existence, Persistence, Resistance in Higher Education and Beyond

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Abstract

Black women in higher education are situated in a hegemonic White patriarchal context of academia. As a result, Black women are (re)subjugated to a tumultuous existence in the academy as "others." This is why the theory of grown Black woman voice was developed. Grounded in Black feminist theory, misogynoir, and the theory of adultification, this framework emphasizes the importance of Black women's development of voice to ultimately construct their own existence in academia. This framework centers Black women as the authors of their experience and empowers Black women to be authentic, possess authority, and enact autonomy. Additionally, it emphasizes a theoretical explanation beyond concepts like "resistance" and "support" to complicate the ways Black women in higher education settings are positioned.

Keywords: Black women, graduate students, White femininity, adultification, invisibility, silence, voice, resistance

Introduction

Black women are situated in the dominant White patriarchal context of society and are often not considered to belong in academia (Collins, 2002; Perdomo, 2018). Consequently, Black women experience the disproportionate brunt of exclusionary practices in (higher) education, in part due to the intersectionality and manifestations of invisibilization, tokenism, gaslighting, microaggressions, and violence (Blackshear & Hollis, 2021; Bowers, 2021; Conner et al., 2022). Regardless, Black women continue to succeed *despite and in spite* of their campus experiences.

Traditionally, when Black women's existence in educational spaces is conceptualized, the deficit, or what is lacking (Patton & Croom, 2017), is often highlighted. While this research is important, very seldomly has this scholarship illuminated the "how" of Black women's persistence in academia. Doing so is necessary for improving the condition of educational

settings for Black women's success. Theories and frameworks that do not center Black women's narratives are antiquated and are built on the experiences of cisgender, White, upper-middle-class, heterosexual men (Jones & Stewart, 2016). While the field has expanded to consider more diverse intersections (e.g., Abes et al., 2019), it still renders Black women invisible due to the inherent nature of research that often compares Black women's experiences to those of Black men or White women. Furthermore, it conceptualizes theories about Black women without factoring in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1993). Black women continue to face challenges that are systemic and require a reimagined theoretical understanding because of their intersectional positioning within the academy.

The grown Black woman voice (GBWV) is both a concept and an action to be repeated. It is and has been in practice and enacted by many Black women. As Black women we exercise our VOICE, a vocal or other intentional critical expression. We share our stories, name our harm, and advocate continuously for ourselves and others. We also intentionally enact silence as a form of resistance to protect our peace, energy, and time. Lastly, we critically express through art, fashion, and our everyday actions. This framework centers Black women as the authors of their experience regardless of race, age, ability, hierarchical position, and status. In doing so we define and establish our grown-ness through honoring, validating, and contextualizing our authenticity, authority, and autonomy. The GBWV framework promotes the advancement and empowerment of Black women to be confident, audacious, and bold. Additionally, it is a theoretical explanation beyond concepts like "resistance" and "support" to complicate the ways Black women in higher education settings are *positioned*.

Background

Historically, colleges and universities in the United States of America have been founded under the context of exclusion (Allen & Jewell, 2002). This perpetuated and served as a clear demonstration of societal values—White, upper-middle class, cis-hetero males in a capitalistic economy. Non-White people, women, and people of the lower class were excluded from attending colleges and universities (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Hakkola & Roppers-Huilman, 2018; Ogren, 2003). According to Libassi (2018), this resulted in marginalized folx having starkly different educational experiences just to attend institutions with limited resources for an education comparable with that of their White counterparts (Libassi, 2018). Disparities in education continue throughout higher education practices, policies, and costs. Black graduates are the highest percentage of student loan borrowers and remain underrepresented in their degree attainments (Mustafa, 2017).

At the same time, the history of education in the Black community is one of liberation (Breeden, 2021) and it is seen in the ways that Black students thrive despite experiences of microaggression and inequitable, racist policies. Of the total degrees conferred in the 2019/2020 academic year, Black women received less than 1% of associate degrees (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021a), 6% of bachelor's degrees (NCES, 2021b), 7% of master's degrees (NCES, 2021c), and 5% of doctoral degrees in the United States (NCES, 2021d). Despite Black women's attainment of master's and doctoral degrees, Black women, out of the

1.5 million faculty, make up 3%, with just 2% being full faculty (NCES, 2021). Additionally, as of 2018, Black women made up 13% of student and academic affairs personnel at degree-granting institutions (NCES, 2019). What is clear from these statistics, is how higher education's pipeline remains leaky, with racial and gendered differences that impact Black women.

Literature Review

Black scholars, such as students, faculty, and staff, have a history of retaining one another in higher education (Baldwin & Johnson, 2018; Domingue, 2015; Green et al., 2018; Porter & Byrd, 2021). Despite the efforts to exclude, belittle, and question their existence in the academic community, they continue to rise above obstacles encountered and persist for themselves and for their communities (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). To conceptualize the ways that Black women navigate their educational development in higher education, I discuss how stereotypes are centered in Black women's experiences in the academy and the relationship of these stereotypes to invisibility and silencing experienced by (1) faculty and staff, (2) graduate students, and (3) undergraduate students.

In the literature, there are three central stereotypes about Black women's experiences in academia, including the angry Black woman (also known as the sapphire stereotype), mammy stereotype (or othermothering), and the strong Black woman stereotype (or superwoman schema) (Domingue, 2015; Mawhinney, 2011; Patton et al., 2016). Although these central stereotypes are neither an inclusive list of stereotypes about Black women or exclusive to higher education, they reveal how Black women must consistently and strategically perform to navigate the academy and combat disruptive stereotypes (Calafell, 2012; Pitcan, 2018). Adding to these stereotypes are the continuous scrutiny or hyper-surveillance of Black women and the policing of their hair, bodies, attitudes, and behavior (Rollock, 2021). This results in additional stressors and negatively impacts the overall mental health of Black women (Neal-Barnett, 2018). As Black women combat these stereotypes each day, they also are invisibilized and silenced at all levels within higher education.

Black Women Faculty and Staff

Stereotypes manifest in the ways in which the academy overlooks Black women as valuable contributors (Domingue, 2015). Black women faculty, especially contingent faculty, are expected to withhold their voices from contributing to governance decisions in the academy (Boss et al., 2021). Other experiences of silencing involve the questioning of their knowledge, experiences, and authority, whether that be in the classroom or even in the development of research articles (Boss et al., 2021; Collins, 2002; Stanley, 2007).

Likewise for staff, Black women are often pouring themselves into the academy only to receive little in return (Buckingham, 2018). For example, their emotional labor is often minimized and disregarded, thereby rendering their contributions invisible (Boss et al., 2021; Tuitt, 2010). This emotional labor includes supporting and retaining their fellow Black women staff, faculty, and students (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005), and expands to serving as the

spokesperson for issues of racial justice and engaging in solidarity with other marginalized groups (Cho, 2020).

Graduate Student Experiences

If "graduate students of color are in the periphery of the academy" (Gay, 2004, p. 266), Black women graduate students (BWGSs) are out of sight because they are often not the focal point for the academy (Gildersleeve & Croom, 2017). They teach but are not faculty. They have administrative duties but are not administrators. Additionally, unlike White counterparts, BWGSs often receive disproportionately fewer resources while being burdened with more administrative and emotional labor (Spraggins, 1998). BWGSs are more likely to be placed in teaching assistantships or given administrative duties and are given fewer research and funding opportunities to propel their scholarship and prepare them for academic advancement (Moses, 1989).

Like Black women faculty and staff, BWGSs are often taxed with the expectation that they should embody the mammy stereotype for the benefit of others (Walkington, 2017). Graduate school as an experience is both psychologically and emotionally challenging for all graduate students due to its academic rigor and requirement for self-driven work (Cross, 1981; Green et al., 2018; Johnson-Bailey, 2007; Williams et al., 2005). For Black women, they not only encounter these stressors, but do so while navigating the challenges academically, as well as facing systemic, sexist, anti-Black racism (Williams, 2005).

Undergraduate Student Experiences

Black women undergraduates face race-related stress and feel like outsiders in their academic community (Cardemil et al., 2018). Many have expressed fears about their competence due to the lack of validation of their intelligence. In addition, they are often overlooked or dismissed in classes (Cardemil et al., 2018; Domingue, 2015; Porter et al., 2020). Consequently, Black undergraduate students at predominantly White institutions have protested and demanded that their administrations increase the hiring and retention of faculty of color (Kelly et al., 2020). Increased representation assists with the mentorship of students and the success of Black students. Yet, even with the increased representation of Black undergraduate and graduate students, or even Black faculty and staff, their experiences are still under the larger umbrella of systemic, gendered racism that cannot be solved just by increasing the pipeline.

Positionality

I was born and raised in a town where racial divide, patriarchy, and respectability politics are persistent in our Black community. With empathy and understanding, I watched my mother navigate the pressures as a young divorcee and single mother, and one of few Black employees at her job. As a Black girl, I learned early that the freedom of childhood looked different. I knew that my behavior was an extension of my mother, the Black community, my school, my church, and family. This performance was never just about race, but about proving that I too was a nondeviant, deserving Black girl within our small community. *My autonomy was impeded.*

Other lessons I learned as a child included staying out of grown folks' business, often preceded by "Don't you see grown folks talking?" and an all-time favorite in many Black communities, "What happens in my house, stays in my house." As children, we were not grown enough to be entering adult conversation, and nor were we to share information about what was happening at home, no matter the danger, conflict, or needs that impeded our own well-being. *I had no authority.*

The policing of my voice, interactions, or other critical expressions like dress, behaviors, sexuality, and creativity in girlhood have influenced the Black woman I continue to be, personally and professionally. I often wonder if intentionally fostering authenticity, autonomy, and boundaries around authority for Black girls like myself would lead to a healthy sense of identity and a more established GBWV. *My authenticity was limited.*

My positionality as Black woman, student, and professional requires me to apply (White-centric) student development theories to my own development where I was first asked to conceptualize myself as a Black woman. In doing so, I understood that these theories were limited. They did not define me, nor did they support or provide guidance to my development against the multiple, intersectional oppressions that I faced in the academy and beyond. The impetus for which this framework started was based on not only my own experiences, but also the observations and sharing of stories within the relationships that I cultivated with other Black women both in and outside of higher education. It is for this reason that I present this framework as a tool not only for Black women now, but for champions of Black girls throughout the diaspora.

Grown Black Woman Voice: Theoretical Foundations

As Black women *show up* and *show out* in academia time and time again, they are often challenged to prove themselves by providing evidence of experience and authority (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012). In educational spaces, this language is often coded as the number of years of professional experience, degree attainment, and number of research and scholarly publications— all of which are created to gate keep, and make Black women feel othered in academia (Calafell, 2012). In education, Black women are expected to conform to Eurocentric epistemologies and Eurocentric practices. As with other Afrocentric scholarship, I align my research with theories that center on the experiences of Black women, including adultification (Black et al., 2017), misogynoir (Bailey, 2013, 2021), and Black feminism (Collins, 2002).

Adultification

Understanding Black girlhood contextualizes Black women's experiences. Adultification, or the expectation of children to assume adult-like roles and behaviors (Carter Andrews, 2020), is an important framework for studying the GBWV. Black women and girls share in the burden of marginalization and discrimination (Hardaway et al., 2019). While the stereotypes previously discussed are often aimed at Black women, scholars contributing to the canon of knowledge regarding Black girlhood acknowledge that derivatives of these harmful stereotypes also influence how Black girls move in academia (Carter Andrews, 2020; Hines & Wilmot, 2018;

Stith Gambles, 2020). The invisibility and silence that Black women face stem from messages taught in early childhood (Leath, 2021). Invisibility is "a psychological experience in which an individual may feel his or her personal identity and ability are undermined by prejudice and racism" (Franklin, 1999, as quoted in Tuitt, 2010, p. 247). For this reason, adultification bias (Brown et al., 2019) is situated in the framework of the GBWV. Adultification bias is the assumption and expectation of inappropriate childlike responsibility that subjects Black girls to policing, criminalization, and hyper-sexualization (Hardaway, 2019; Stith Gambles, 2020), therefore rendering their childhood nonexistent. The disregard and discounting of Black girls as children worthy of childhood and innocence is linked with misogynoir (Black et al., 2017).

Misogynoir

Moya Bailey coined the term *misogynoir* to describe the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience (Bailey, 2021). Drawn from media studies, misogynoir highlights the intersectional hatred of Black women (Bailey, 2021). Brown et al. (2019) described how "femininity is anchored by white supremacist ideologies that center on European standards of beauty as well as on attitudes and behaviors that appeal to patriarchal ideas of modesty, virtue, and fragility which are considered worth protecting" (p. 2533). Misogynoir is rooted in anti-Blackness, which stems from considering White femininity as a superior way of being (Hines & Wilmot, 2018). This type of anti-Blackness is embedded within the ideologies of school professionals and contributes to the experiences of mental and physical trauma that Black girls face (Stith Gambles, 2020). Collins (2009) explained how images of beauty aim to include White women and exclude Black women's hair texture, skin tones, and facial features. In this way, although Black women are resistant to being othered in the fashion and beauty industries, the relationships between Black women, Black men, and other racial groups are impacted (Collins, 2009). Therefore, this contributes to Black girls and women being viewed as others or outsiders, which leaves them feeling unseen (Gildersleeve & Croom, 2017). Thus, misogynoir and Whiteness go hand in hand with adultification.

Black Feminist Thought's Self-Definition

Black feminist thought is a critical social theory built by, with, and for the Black woman experience. Developed by Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Black feminist thought situates and problematizes the experiences of Black women in oppressive systems of society and understands how these multiple matrices and intersections impact Black women. In response, Collins (2009) illuminated the necessity for self-definition, where Black women reposition themselves within the community and resist oppressive images that define Black womanhood for them and against the forced conformity of White heteropatriarchy. Likewise, Griffin (2010) described it as "a means for Black women to be labeled, acknowledged, and remembered as they wish" (p. 143). Self-definition allows for Black women to position themselves, as opposed to being positioned to include and account for power relations and other systems of oppression (Okello, 2018; Yee, 2009). Black women scholars are told throughout the dominant narrative to ignore our lived

experiences, for our lived experiences are too inadequate to be a source of knowledge (Griffin, 2010).

Grown Black Woman Voice: A Framework

Through the application of this framework, Black women can establish an internal confidence and outward authority that gives us the audacity to challenge, speak up, and resist the dominant narrative. In doing so, Black women challenge dominant narratives and begin conversations about compassion and grace that are not often extended to them due to harmful stereotypes. This proposed theoretical framework, GBWV, promotes a symbiotic relationship between authenticity, authority, and autonomy.

Authenticity

Authenticity is relevant to defying the aims of oppressive forces in society that restrict Black women's voices and critical expressions of self. It allows Black women to exist inwardly and outwardly. Even in doing so, Black women can be penalized (Jones et al., 2021; Kupo & Oxendine, 2019). Prevalent in the media are stories about the policing of Black people's hair and attire (Harris, 2022). The policing of speech, dress, and behavior is synonymous with the adultification bias related to Black girls and misogynoir. As a result, authenticity aligns with self-definition (Jones et al., 2021) by stating that Black women should be confident in how we express ourselves. Yet, in finding and defining our voice we must develop autonomy to negate the external pressures of performing or behaving for others and our environments as we see fit (Davis, 2008). As described above, this authenticity includes the autonomy to *choose* how to define ourselves, build community, and even disengage in the ways that are needed for Black women to exercise our voice.

Authority

Black women are positioned by race, gender, class, and even the literal job position, such that other individuals make decisions about behavior, tone, and professionalism in White-centric norms (Ray, 2019) that impact our ability to be ourselves. Black women continue to change the narrative about what is possible for us to achieve despite what has always been done. Authorities are knowledge holders about the absolute truth and they received this truth based on knowledge, power, and experience (King, 1978). Black women are reclaiming our authority by defying historic narratives in industry (e.g., pilots Stephanie Johnson and Dawn Cook flying the first all-Black cockpit crew; Seelye, 2017), academic positions, and in government (e.g., Madam Vice President Kamala Harris; Porter et al., 2021), and more recently with the nomination of Kentanji Brown Jackson to the U.S. Supreme Court. These Black women, despite misogynoir, incorporate self-definition in their stride towards achievement. In the GBWV framework, authority means Black women can have the audacity to challenge, speak up, and resist the dominant narrative. For Black women to claim the authority to act boldly and take risks for the betterment of the self requires internal permission and deconstructing socialization and intergenerational messaging.

Autonomy

According to Chickering (1967), autonomy has three components: the development of emotional independence, the development of instrumental interdependence, and the recognition of interdependence. Yet within this construction and the limited scholarship on autonomy within student affairs, which at most centers' workplace labor, few explore the impact of autonomy and intersecting identities (Sheena & Winkle-Wagner, 2014).

Studies such as that of Petrie & Roman (2004) have acknowledged that within the workplace Black women are least likely to experience workplace autonomy, a form of disempowerment and labor market inequality (Petrie & Roman, 2004), in comparison with Black men and White women. With the impending invisibility and silencing Black women experience in the academy, learning to solve problems and independently locate networks of support is the reason why autonomy is necessary to the development of the GBWV.

Implications for Application and Research

Education, and specifically higher education, was not created in consideration of marginalized identities, especially regarding race and gender (Wilder, 2013). Black women are often challenged to prove themselves by providing evidence of experience and authority (Porter & Byrd, 2021). The GBWV framework centers voice, and even more so it regards context as an important factor in how Black women navigate and strategize our survival. For this reason, the GBWV must first manifest internally because the volume, tone, and pitch of the GBWV can be everchanging when navigating spaces where we are marginalized, yet are required to exist regardless of the circumstances. It is for these reasons that the reflection of our own girlhood is necessary to truly remember who we were before our socialization about Black women's worth and Black girls' capabilities ever became a part of our narrative: how we show up as Black women, and how we aspire to be seen and heard.

For many of us, the GBWV will be a beginning point for discovery during our adulthood and it is never too late. Additionally, I call to action a necessary recognition that Black girls can be incorporated into this framework to be encouraged to problem solve without the pressures of other's approval (autonomy), express themselves in ways that are both genuine and resistant to the misogynoir, and be protected from the expectations of performing adult-like tasks and behaviors. Lastly, I conclude by stating that the GBWV framework was created out of love. I was inspired by the Black women before me who showed me that the GBWV was possible. I created it for the Black girls whom I aim to inspire, but who inspire me each and every day with their tenacity. I modeled it after the Black women surrounding me, who, in solidarity, create a chorus of GBWVs to support one another. Lastly, I created the GBWV for the woman that I am continuously working to become in all aspects of my lived experiences.

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