

THE SISTA' NETWORK

AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN
FACULTY SUCCESSFULLY
NEGOTIATING THE ROAD TO TENURE

TUESDAY L. COOPER

The Sista' Network

*African-American Women Faculty
Successfully Negotiating the Road
to Tenure*

Tuesday L. Cooper

Eastern Connecticut State University



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The Sista' Network

To my parents, Joseph and Victoria Hill.

About the Author

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Preface

I am a black woman who once had the desire to become a full-time faculty member. It was this desire that lead me to embark on this study—a qualitative inquiry into the lives and experiences of nine African-American women faculty during various stages of the tenure process. Audre Lorde (1984) suggests that if we do not define ourselves, we will be defined by others. Conducting this project provided me with an opportunity to take part in defining myself and what I had hoped to become. As well, the study allowed me to help define a “new” and more fully developed truth about black women in the academy (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1989).

I conducted this study to examine my past and define my future. In my former career, I was a lawyer. As a new attorney who happened to be a black woman, I was constantly reminded that I was in fact the reverse: a black woman who happened to be a new attorney. I was subjected to searches each and every time I entered a particular courthouse in the city where I practiced law. This would not have been a problem except that attorneys were normally exempt from being searched. I was often given the same response, “Well you don’t look like a lawyer!” In addition, I was frequently in the company of other lawyers who referred to our black and Latino clients as “those people” who were in their stations in life because they simply could not do better. To them, however, I was an exception to the “those people” rule.

These could be racial incidents particular to the legal field, but I don’t think so. It is my opinion that this behavior is indicative of behavior that plays out in the larger society. Since the academy is part of the larger society, I *expected* the same behaviors to be displayed within the boundaries of the hallowed halls of ivy. I was not wrong. I was curious about the degree and extent to which racism, classism, and sexism are played out in the academy, especially when race, gender,

and class were wrapped up into a package: the black woman faculty member. I was also interested in the extent to which the combination of "isms" had created barriers to achieving the gold coin in a faculty member's career: tenure.

In addition to my personal biases, there are other limitations to this study. Since there are only a small number of black women faculty in American academe, I chose to send out a limited number of invitations to participate. I selected institutions that had more than one black female faculty member on the tenure track because I wanted to avoid making the institution, and therefore the participant, more identifiable than any other institution in the study. I also determined that from 20 letters I could anticipate roughly a 50% response rate. (I received a 70% response rate; however, some responses were received after my interviews were completed.) This would give me eight to ten women to interview, a manageable number to collect sufficient data to describe the phenomenon of black women faculty in the tenure process.

Qualitative research attends to social, historical, and temporal context. Findings of these studies are tentatively applied, that is, they may be applicable in diverse situations based on the comparability of other contexts. (Mariano, 1995, p. 464)

A word about the sample group being representative of the overall population of black faculty is necessary at this point. It was never my intention to select a participant group that is representative of all black women faculty members. Qualitative research methodology does not require that a participant group, or sample, be representative. It merely requires that the group is large enough that data collection can continue until the data repeats itself (Mariano, 1995).

I did not include first-year faculty members in the study because frequently they have not had enough experience with the process. In general, much of their time is spent getting acclimated to the campus and the institutional climate.

I did not include faculty in community colleges because these institutions have a shorter tenure process. A faculty

member can apply after only two to three years, compared to the six- to seven-year process in four-year institutions. The process is also less involved and does not place a great emphasis, if any, on research and publications.

I did not ask questions or focus on data related to balancing life outside of the academy—family, friends, and community—because research already exists that examines those areas. My intent in this work was not to duplicate previously conducted studies. As a result, traditional mechanisms for data collection and reporting were not used for this study. These alternative processes and the rationale behind their use are described in the book's appendixes.

The nine African-American women who consented to participate in this study are the rungs in the ladder upon which I once set out to climb to be a full-fledged faculty member. With all of its promises and perils, the gold coin of tenure is something most academic scholars desire. The Sista' Network—the relationships between and among professional African-American women faculty—is the way to make the process less difficult and less painful. Introduce yourself to black women on campus, who no longer have to go into the kitchen of the ivory tower to talk to one another. We now have a seat at the table, the conference table that is. It is up to us, and only us, to make sure we occupy our seats with confidence.

I have learned many things as a result of this study, and I am indebted to the women who participated. Because of their courage, I will not enter into the tenure process blind and unaware. I am not disillusioned with the tenure process. I merely recognize it for what it is: a game. It is an arbitrary process that leaves its players at the mercy of the whimsical moods of its former winners. The story would be different if the process was less arbitrary, more open, and did not rely on unwritten rules. But the nature of the game had its roots in an exclusionary foundation.

At times, this exclusion is based on traditional notions of who is perceived as qualified. As this book will show, *qualified* can be another amorphous, subjective, qualitative

word that can be reshaped and further defined on a per candidate basis. Other times the exclusion is based on race and gender. Although most of the women I interviewed had earned tenure, they fought for it every step of the way. They had to fight their department colleagues, their schools, and the process. They had to fight to maintain their integrity, their honor, and their dignity. They had to fight (and some are still fighting) to be seen as professors and scholars. Most of all they had to fight themselves. They had to fight the urges to leave and abandon their calling. And each of these women has been called to the academy.

I left one profession because I had to fight arbitrary and unwritten rules, attacks on my qualifications to do the job, sexism, and racism. Regardless of the differing arenas, one thing remains constant—I am a black women. I can change professions. I can change location. I cannot change my race or my gender, nor do I wish to. Thus the burdens experienced by black women are mine to bear.

Tuesday L. Cooper

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Introduction: The Challenges of African-American Women Faculty



"The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. . . . She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both" (Cooper, 1892/1995, p. 45). This statement highlights the intricacies of being an African-American woman in late 19th-century America, and it continues to reflect the status of African-American women in the early 21st century. African-American women still struggle with the "woman question" as it relates to traditional roles: women, feminism, and sisterhood. They also confront the "race problem." Issues such as tokenism, being representatives of the race, and whether to be called African American or black remain prevalent.

African-American women faculty are overworked and serve on a multitude of committees. They do more than their share of mentoring and mothering minority and majority (white) students. Yet there is still the expectation that they will conduct research and publish at the same rate as their white colleagues, both male and female, who don't have the same hypervisibility due to race and gender.

But even with this visibility, African-American women are still invisible in the academy. They are frequently mistaken for students, glossed over for promotion, and go unrecognized as intellectuals or scholars within their departments. They are kept out of the formal and informal networks, the primary information loops, especially when it comes to the information needed for the tenure process.

I was confident that we could collectively find a solution to some of the problems of race, class, and sex in the academy; today I am doubtful that we will ever achieve that goal . . . the state of black women in the white university admits to grave disappointment, unfilled dreams, and deep frustrations on the part of most of the women I know. . . . After almost two decades of service in white colleges and universities, by dint of race, class, and sex, at best, black women and minority group others now experience themselves in the peculiar situation of outsiders within the white academy. (McKay, 1997, p. 17)

The dilemmas faced by African-American women in the professoriate are not new. Although African-American women faculty are few and far between in predominately white colleges and universities, their problems are not. Issues of divided loyalties, isolation, and other stresses confront these professors more frequently than their white counterparts (Benjamin, 1997; Fields, 1996; Graves, 1990).

Until recently, the literature concerning minority women faculty in predominately white institutions treated race and gender as separate and distinct issues (Graves, 1990). The literature that existed referred to minority faculty in terms of their racial or gender group, but rarely in terms of both. Most mainstream faculty literature treated all racial minority groups as one, without recognizing the different experiences among and between the groups.

The 1980s brought a small increase in the amount of literature written about minority and women faculty. However, in comparison to other groups (women and faculty in general), there remained a limited amount of literature on African-American faculty and even less research on African-American women faculty. A researcher had to piece together information in articles about women and minority faculty in order to get even a limited view of the issues faced by the African-American female professoriate. The literature provided an incomplete view of African-American women professors and was, more often than not, written by white women

(Johnsrud, 1993; Johnsrud & Des Jarlais, 1994; Olsen, Maple, & Stage, 1995).

In the 1990s there was an increase in the literature written by African-American women about issues they face in academe. This literature reflected the satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their research, scholarship, teaching, and their relationships with students, colleagues, and institutions. Fields (1996)¹ summarized the "morale boosters" and "morale busters" for African-American professors in predominately white institutions, stating that the academy provides African-American faculty with a sense of purpose, adequate financial compensation, opportunities for research and peer mentoring, and access to up-to-date campus facilities. Conversely and simultaneously, academe also leaves them with feelings of isolation and marginalization, threats to their tenure and financial security, disparate workloads, tension over affirmative action issues, and limited access to resources for research (Benjamin, 1997; Fields, 1996). This juxtaposition continues today.

Still, there is relatively little literature on black women faculty. Most of what was written prior to the early 1990s was done by white researchers and lumped black women into one of two categories: minority faculty or women faculty. However, what has been written by black women weaves in African-American feminist thought in some fashion. All of the books and articles found are consistent. Each finds that black women faculty are the most stressed, the least satisfied, almost the least represented, possibly the least supported, and the most overworked of all faculty in academe (Alexander, 1972/1995; Benjamin, 1997; Graves, 1990; Gregory, 1995; Malveaux, 1998; Peterson, 1990). What is not found is literature on satisfied, well-respected, and widely published black women faculty.

Benjamin (1997), Gregory (1995), and Moses (1989) write about the experiences of black women in the academy as students (undergraduate and graduate), administrators, and faculty. With the exception of these works and a few others written by black women (Cole, 1993; Fields, 1996;

Graves, 1990), the majority of literature about black women faculty does not use their own words or their own narratives to interpret their experiences. None of the works describe in depth the experiences of black women faculty during the tenure process. And what has been reported has mostly focused on the negative.

This book is different from the existing literature in that it is qualitative and proposes suggestions for success. It documents the continued existence of the unique struggle of African-American women in the academy. By merging three distinct areas of literature—tenure, the experiences of black women faculty in the academy, and African-American feminist thought—this book explores the phenomenon of black women faculty experiences in the academic tenure process as seen through the eyes of nine black women faculty at different stages of the tenure process and at varying institution types.

A few words about the language used in this book. I deliberately chose the word *sista'* instead of *sister*. Sister is a formal term to describe a female sibling, biological or by circumstance (marriage, adoption). *Sista'* reflects upon an informal but intentional relationship formed between women for the purposes of sharing time and friendship, also known as a *sista* friend. Johnnetta B. Cole, president of Bennett College, was often called the Sister President² when she was president of Spelman College because of the familial relationship she established with the campus community and others off campus (Cole, 1993).

I created the term *Sista' Network* to describe the relationships between and among professional African-American women that enable them to assist one another in learning the unwritten rules and protocols of various professions. The network is a combination of networking and familial relationships.

I liken the *Sista' Network* to the relationship between and among African-American people who escaped slavery on the Underground Railroad in the late 18th and 19th centuries (Franklin, 1974). Like the Underground Railroad,