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# AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S JOURNEY TO ACADEMIA AND THEIR EXPERIENCES AS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PROFESSORS

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## INTRODUCTION

The 2004 *National Study of Post Secondary Faculty* reported that in the fall of 2003 African-American female faculty made up only 6.4% of full time faculty at colleges and universities offering doctoral degrees and 7.4% at non-doctoral four-year institutions (Zimbler, 2004). These figures indicated that African-American female faculty composed significantly less than half of the fulltime faculty population at all four-year institutions in the US. This percentage reflects the situation that African-American women faculty members find themselves in at predominately white universities: a minority culture in the academic world. It is no surprise then that women faculty of color experience cultural issues when working in predominately white institutions (Turner, 2002). The cultural issues that may arise due to being a minority faculty member in a predominately white institution can be experienced in combination with the traditional pressures of being a professor in academia, which can lead to a triad of stress and pressures: balancing work demands and long work weeks, social issues, and cultural matters specific to being an African-American female professor.

## The Nature of The Job of an Academician

When working in academic institutions there are stressors and work demands that all faculty must face. These stressors transcend gender and race. According to Johnsrud and Atwater (1993) and Sorcinelli (1994) (as cited in Smith, Whitman, Grant, Stanutz, Russet, et al., 2001) professors may experience a variety of individual stressors including: “social and professional isolation, restricted information regarding cri-

teria for promotion and tenure, limited recognition for work completed, insufficient resources for conducting research and difficulty with time management” (p. 197).

Academia is a world consisting of teaching, service, and research. Faculty who want to be successful have to learn how to master these three demands. Toews and Yazedijan have described these three components of academic work as a three-ring circus (2007, p. 113). These requirements often result in faculty working over fifty hours per week. Jacobs, when analyzing the data from the 1998 *National Study of Postsecondary Faculty*, found that fifty-hour work weeks were common among full-time faculty, with a significant amount of faculty working sixty hours per week (2004, p. 9).

There is a growing body of literature examining the experience of faculty of color working in predominately white institutions, particularly African-American women. This literature shows that African-American women working as professors in academia often experience the traditional academic pressure and stress caused by the work demands of academia along with the cultural stressors of working in predominately white institutions.

### **African -American Women Professors in Predominately White Institutions (PWIs)**

The literature about African-American women faculty working in predominately white institutions finds that these women experience challenges specific to being a member of the minority culture at their respective institutions. Chelser and Young (2007) found that students may assume that African-American female professors are “mamas,” and will do everything for them without questioning (p. 15). In addition, these same authors found that female minority faculty experienced “authority” issues in which their expertise was often challenged by students (Chelser & Young, 2007, p. 13). As a result, female minority faculty felt the need to explain to students that they were, in fact, qualified to teach their subject matter.

Carter-Black (2008) referred to negative stereotypes that exist within academia, in which minorities’ intelligence and skills are challenged when in predominately white institutions (p. 118). She reflected on her experiences in these institutions and outlined a multitude of occasions when she had been faced with negative stereotypes in her academic career (Carter-Black, 2008). Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison explored the stereotypical images that African-American women have to battle

against in the work place (2008). They remarked that African-American women are often referred to as “mammies” if they display nurturing characteristics and as “crazy black bitches” when displaying aggressiveness (Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrion, 2008, p. 137–138). Bell and Nkomo, two African-American female professors at PWIs, stated “one of us was once referred to as the Mammy of the faculty” (1999, p. 82).

They further stated that “ours was the challenge of breaking tired old stereotypical images of Black women while establishing our credibility, intelligence, and performance as academics” (Bell & Nkomo, 1999, p. 82).

Stereotypes are a burden to deal with, and can be internalized by the individual experiencing negative stereotypes, resulting in a form of “race fatigue” (Harley, 2008, p. 21). Harley stated that “African-American women at PWIs suffer from a form of race fatigue—the syndrome of being over extended, undervalued, unappreciated, and just knowing that because you are the ‘negro in residence’ that you will be asked to serve and represent the ‘color factor’ in yet another capacity” (2007, p. 21).

Other authors have examined the tensions caused by trying to maintain one’s own cultural identity. Allison analyzed the “negotiation of identity” that can occur when working in academia as a minority (2007, p. 654). A participant in her focus group study confessed to “altering her personality and her style for the sake of successful interactions with whites” (Allison, 2007, p. 654). Bell and Nkomo described being between two different cultures as being on the “borderlands” (p. 71). They discussed the perpetual conflict of maintaining a balance between embracing the cultural practices of white academia without letting go of their own African-American culture (p.70–71). These authors further explained that, “status as academics makes us at times strangers in our own ethnic community” (1999, p. 71). Thomas, Mack, Williams, and Perkins suggested that “the black female’s lack of assimilation may be further perceived as militant or radical by those who do not appreciate her perspective” making the individual isolated and an outsider within her academic environment (1999, p. 66). Patitu, citing her raw data from an unpublished study completed in 2002, discussed the institutional climate that minority professors experience within predominately white academic institutions:

The climate at an institution can affect a faculty member’s satisfaction; climate is a particular concern for a faculty member of color at a predominately white institution.

When describing the climate for faculty of color at their institutions, respondents noted a lack of commitment to affirmative action, the presence of very few African Americans, and conservative attitudes and beliefs. (2003, p. 87)

Calafell (2007) explored her own experience of being a minority faculty member in a predominantly white university environment. She described feelings of loneliness and anger as she went through every day being an outsider. Calafell stated:

I have a PhD, the degree to validate my presence in this space, but in so many ways I lack the cultural capital. In this class-conscious space, I am so obviously an outsider. My social inadequacies, all my faux pas, my lack of common identification with many of the cultural signs of my colleagues mark me as Other. (2007, p. 427)

### **Strategies Used by African-American Women in Academia**

There are a multiple strategies that are used by African-American women faculty to navigate their career in predominately white institutions. Calafell discussed finding a “home-place” to combat feelings of isolation and loneliness (Calafell, 2007, p. 426). Hooks (as cited in Calafell) defined this home-place as a “community of resistance” often created by African-American women, in which “black people” can find a “safe place” to “affirm one another” in a nurturing atmosphere of growth and healing (2007, p. 426).

Likewise, Alfred (2001) found through interviews of five tenured African-American female faculty working at a predominately white institution that they made a “safe space” for themselves that consisted of going to a place where they culturally belonged and were not seen as the minorities (2001, p. 118). Alfred described a safe space as:

a method of resistance that Black women embrace to escape forces of oppression prevalent in the dominant society. The immediate and extended family, churches, African American community organizations, and even the individual psyche have been found to be important locations where African Americans retreat to safety. This safe place becomes a house of refuge where Black women can resist objectification as the Other. In this safe place, the Black woman can reconstruct any im-

age of herself that has been threatened as a result of her interactions within White-dominated institutions. (2001, p. 119)

Going to this safe space allowed the women to protect their sense of self when faced with challenges in their work environments.

Britt described a similar phenomenon related to the creation of relationships with others. She discussed having “circles of support” inside and outside of academia consisting of African-American men and women (2005, p. 235). Britt stated that a particular group of African-American women provided “a refuge away from the pressures in the academy and an opportunity to connect with African-American women who face similar challenges personally and professionally” (2005, p. 235).

Calafell also discussed how minority faculty often identify with their minority students as a result of being the only minority faculty member on staff and the struggle to maintain distance from students so as not to appear unprofessional (2007, p. 429, 434).

Through “scholarly personal narrative” Britt and Kelly explored their own mentoring experiences as African-American women (2005, p. 224). Britt, a graduate student, examined the challenge of finding a mentor that understood her need for a familiar cultural connection in a predominately white institution (PWI) and Kelly explored the challenges of being a new African-American faculty member in a PWI. Both Britt and Kelly concluded that the mentoring relationship they forged as a black faculty member and black student provided a needed cultural connection within the isolating atmosphere of academia. Through the mentoring relationship, they shared experiences and developed trust from their time spent together working on research and collaborating as colleagues and friends. The mentoring relationship acted as a source of support for the student and the professor.

Alfred also noted that having knowledge of the academic culture and expectations allowed the participants’ in her study to successfully “meet cultural expectations” (2001, p. 119). The women’s possession of tacit knowledge was partly due to the women’s mentoring relationships formed before they became faculty.

The study found that mentoring relationships developed during graduate school experiences contributed significantly to academic cultural socialization. Such relationships not only facilitated cultural knowledge and role

expectations, they also contributed to the women's professional visibility within the academy. (2001, p. 124)

The women in Alfred's study believed that it behooved scholars to be visible in their respective career fields in order to be considered for academic positions and promotions (2001, p. 121). Visibility allowed the women to become powerful within their academic niches (Alfred, 2001). Alfred stated "for women to become powerful in the academy, they have to be known, and to be known, they must be visible within their professional community" (p. 121).

In Alfred's study, the women's ability to flow simultaneously between different "sociocultural groups"—the predominately white academic world and their own personal worlds—allowed them to achieve success in their predominately white work environments and dodge the sense of isolation that can occur when working as a minority in a PWI (2001, p. 121).

In another study Butner et al. explored the sense of isolation and frustration that can occur after unexpected racial incidents (Butner, Burley, & Marbley, 2000). They developed three strategies for black faculty to deal with stressors and burdens related to academia, called "the three C's": collaboration, collegiality, and community (2000, p. 456). These professors found themselves without mentors at their respective institutions to support them in their research interest (p. 457). As a result, the professors decided to mentor each other through collaboration on research projects. They found that through collaboration they could get more articles published on the research they were interested in. By scheduling regular meetings with one another they could hold each other accountable and further their research goals; the meetings also helped to reduce feelings of isolation (Butner, Burley, & Marbley, 2000, p. 457).

The authors encouraged collegiality through interaction with white colleagues in formal and informal gatherings. Formal meetings allowed the black scholars to be conversant with their required responsibilities as faculty members. Informal meetings familiarized the African-American women academics with the unwritten rules governing a successful career in academia (Butner, Burley, & Marbley, 2000, p. 458). The authors remarked that participation in the formal and informal meetings, such as university-wide faculty mentoring groups, allowed African-American faculty to be visible within their institution, which they noted was "important for the collegial well-being of the African-American scholar" (p. 459). They also encouraged black faculty to be

connected to their community through spiritual and professional organizations and reaching out to African-American youth through community mentoring programs (p. 459–460).

It is evident that mentoring plays a significant role in the success of African-American female faculty throughout their careers. Gibson states that “mentoring should be considered in academia as a means to contribute to the career success of women faculty” (2004, p. 184). However, it is important to note that in the study by Thomas and Hollenshead “women of color respondents were least likely to report having a mentor” (2001, p. 173). When conducting interviews with seven African-American female administrators in higher education, Crawford and Smith found that none of the women had received mentoring in their academic careers; none of the women in the study had the opportunity to participate in a traditional mentoring relationship, and as a result all women felt that they were lacking in “job satisfaction” (Crawford & Smith, 2005, p. 65). Although participants in Crawford and Smith’s study did not enjoy traditional mentoring relationships, it is important to note that many African-American women faculty do not engage in traditional hierarchical mentoring relationships. Thomas and Hollenshead found that women faculty of color often used a “collectivist peer approach as opposed to the one-on-one mentor/younger protégé model” (2001, p. 174). The mentoring approaches and other strategies used by African-American women when working in academia are not unique to African-American women. However, what is unique is the cultural context in which the strategies and approaches are employed. The need for women faculty of color to find a “safe space,” “home place,” or “circles of support” in order to stay connected with their own culture is important to know when trying to understand the challenges and experiences that African-American women may face when working in academia (Alfred, 2001, p. 118; Calafell, 2007, p. 426; Britt & Kelly, 2005, p. 235). My study will explore a unique group of women faculty of color and their experiences and strategies used through out their careers. Specifically, this study seeks to describe the experiences of African-American female occupational therapy professors by exploring their everyday lives as academics.

## **METHODS**

This study used ethnographic approaches to examine the everyday lives of African-American female professors in the field of occupational therapy. The research took place over a two month period and grew out of a pilot study that explored the experiences of women faculty

members in the urban planning and allied health professions who had less than three years of experience. The current study was completed for the Eastern Michigan University McNair Summer Research Institute. The proposal was approved by the College of Health and Human Services Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee.

Three women participated in the study. Inclusion criteria required that participants be African American and female, professors at a college or university, and practicing occupational therapists. The participants in my study were all assistant professors. They also held the role of program directors within their respective occupational therapy departments. Two participants had doctoral degrees and one was in the process of completing her doctoral dissertation. All participants were the first-generation in their families to receive doctoral degrees. One participant had ten-plus years of experience in academia, another had fifteen-plus years and the last participant studied had twenty-plus years of experience. One participant was employed at a predominately white Research I (one) institution in the Midwest. The other two participants worked at predominately minority institutions; one at a historical black college in the south, and the other at a university in an urban setting in the Midwest. Two individuals were recruited through contacts via my academic advisor and one participant was recruited through a posting on the doctoral network of the "OT Connections" website, a social networking component of [www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org).

Prior to involvement in the study, individuals were emailed information about the project, so that they might assess their interest in participating. Upon confirmation of interest, phone calls were made to introduce the study concept, answer questions, and confirm participation. Before the interview the study procedures and risks were explained and each individual gave written informed consent.

This study took place on college/university campuses in the Midwest and the South. Interviews occurred at the location of the participants choosing, which in each case was the participant's office located on the college/university grounds where the individual was employed. Observations were completed in the participant's immediate work area as well as on the campus of the college/university.

## **Data Collection**

As previously stated, in this study I used ethnographic approaches to study the everyday lives of African-American women working as occupational therapy professors in academia. Ethnographic research ex-

plores different aspects of culture through examining the environments, activities, and interactions of participants. Schwandt defines ethnography as “the process and product of describing and interpreting culture” (2007, p. 96). Due to my interest in understanding the everyday culture of my participants, I used the following ethnographic approaches: Participant observation, interviewing, and archival research, which allowed me to gain an in-depth look into their daily lives as female African-American occupational therapy professors.

Participant observation is used as a primary research tool in ethnography to understand a particular group’s culture. Schwandt states that “as an ethnographic method participant observation is a procedure for generating understanding of the life of others” (2007, p. 219). In this study, participant observation was a primary research tool I used to garner a more complete and comprehensive picture of the daily activities of the participants. Descriptions of the way participants did “things” in their world (academia) were examined through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Their pattern of behavior and culture was interpreted through data analysis

### **In-Depth Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews to understand each participant’s unique perspective on everyday life in academia. Participants were encouraged to share their personal stories related to their experiences as African-American female academics working as occupational therapy professors. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours. Questions focused on the significant events in participants’ lives that led them to academia, strategies used to manage the demands of academia, professional and personal support systems, descriptions of their daily routines, and diversity issues in both academia and health care. I transcribed each of the interviews, which allowed me to immerse myself more fully in the data.

### **Participant Observation**

Participant observation took place over a series of days, with four to eight hours in each setting. I observed people interacting within their daily environments and sought to understand the cultural context of their surroundings. Anything I could see and hear to help me better understand the academic life of participants I recorded in field notes. Field notes completed after each observation consisted of “concrete sensory details,” interactions, physical contexts, and experiences in the social

setting (Emerson, 1995, p. 32).

## **Data Analysis**

Interviews and field notes were read multiple times to help me to immerse myself in the data and form initial impressions of what working in academia was like for the participants. After reading and coding the first interview, I developed a color-coded code book of working categories. I used this process of color-coding categories as I reviewed each transcript. The working categories from the first interview were used to examine the second interview. As new ideas arose in the data, I coded these and added them to my code book. I used this same process with the third interview. This allowed me to compare findings across interviews and to identify themes.

Field notes were also coded using the working categories identified in the interviews. I found the same categories as were seen in my interviews, and subsequently did not develop any new working categories for the field notes.

The use of multiple methods to collect and analyze the data assures trustworthiness and credibility of findings (Wolcott, 2008).

## **RESULTS**

Setting a goal to understand the everyday life of an academic involves studying the routine and mundane happenings that occur on a daily basis at a person's place of employment. The observations I completed in the field allowed me to see these everyday routines and the interviews gave me a rich picture of the experiences, duties, tasks, and beliefs of the three women with whom I spoke. As I analyzed the data, I identified three key themes. The following findings are organized according to these themes.

### **Mentoring: Receiving and Giving:**

Evident in each interview was the power of mentoring in the participants' lives. Mentoring facilitated the women's journey into academia and helped them as they developed their academic careers. Each participant had her own unique story of the mentoring experiences she had received, as well as the mentoring that she provided to others.

Each of the women in my study was encouraged by occupational therapy professors to go into academia. One participant knew that she wanted to become a teacher before she pursued her PhD. She described it as "a calling." Other participants became interested in pursuing a career

in academia after giving guest lectures at the institutions where they are currently employed. The participants' interests in academia were validated by their previous instructors, who served as mentors for each of the three women. Mentoring was fundamental in each woman's decision to pursue an academic career. The interviews suggest that mentoring served as a catalyst to entering academia.

*The woman that recruited me to come here, she was actually my professor in OT school, and I used to come and do lectures for her and when I was exploring academia she really, you know, encouraged me...as an African-American female to come...and the person who founded this program was also African-American and so when I started exploring research interests that I had she was supportive to me...they kinda reinforced for me that...I was unique and could offer a lot and, you know, if people encourage you that way you kind of keep going and keep pushing...*

Throughout their academic careers the participants actively sought out advice and help from their mentors when working through challenges. One participant described a situation when she was in graduate school and her future as an occupational therapist was in jeopardy due to receiving low grades in graduate classes. She described this time as a "rough patch." During this time she sought the help of a mentor and worked her way through this challenge with the assistance of her mentor. When reflecting on the assistance her former instructor gave her, this participant stated that "If it wasn't for her then I probably wouldn't be where I am today."

This story of going through a challenging time, but in the end being given a second chance due to a mentor's efforts demonstrates the power of a mentoring relationship in the early phases of one's academic career.

Mentoring was not only important in the initial phases of these women's academic careers, but also in later periods when they transitioned from professorial to administrative roles. One participant described watching the previous program director at her institution and how the woman taught her how to be an effective program director. This person is now a life-long friend that the participant talks to when she needs advice or to talk about a difficult day at work.

In addition, participants had multiple mentors in their academic careers that were African-American women, as well as men and people

of different ethnicities. Participants expressed that having African-American female mentors allowed them to see people from their same gender and cultural backgrounds doing well in the field, which gave them another source of encouragement and support.

*There's a lot of people who were around at other institutions, prominent African Americans who've always been very supportive.... They're encouraging you to not give up, 'cause you get frustrated, and then they're saying "No, keep going," and you can see them doing good things, you see them moving and doing good things and making an impact.*

During interviews the participants also spoke of the importance of mentoring others. One individual commented that because of the positive mentoring experiences that she had at her respective institution, she wanted to give this same experience to other new faculty members through her own mentoring efforts. All of the women remarked on the significance of giving back to their students through mentoring. Mentoring students gave the women pride, as they saw their students move on in their careers and lives. The stories of past students doing well in the profession validated for the women that they were giving back, in a positive way, to their students through their mentoring relationships.

This commitment to mentoring was also evident during field observations. I saw one of the women take time to advise a pre-occupational therapy student on the classes that she should take. She helped the student with a caring attitude and paid particular attention to the student's life circumstances.

### **Not Enough Time in the Day**

All of the participants in my study were program directors, which meant that they had administrative tasks superimposed over traditional teaching, research, and service duties. Each participant described an exhaustive list of responsibilities that were completed on a daily basis. Furthermore, the women described the work of a program director and a professor as a job that never ends: *"It's busy on my full class days. See, administration never stops, demands from the dean or the provost never stops, and so they roll twenty-four/seven."*

Participants talked about how e-mail and helping students took a lot of time out of their day, on top of teaching and class preparation time. Participants also described in detail the specific administrative du-

ties they were required to perform. All participants commented about duties that must be completed in order to keep their program accredited, such as self-studies and annual reports.

Participants were also involved in different service activities and groups at their respective institutions. One participant was on the academic advising committee and academic appeals committee. Another participant was involved in a leadership fellowship program. And one individual served on the faculty senate and was chair of several committees. The women talked about how professorial and administrative responsibilities often began to coagulate into an unending list of tasks that occurred on a daily basis:

*Well I'm a teacher, then I have to do my research, I have to do my service, and I have to do administration—I guess I have four jobs...yeah so it's a little different I have administrative things that I have to do which then, that's where that balance comes in, 'cause I have reports and things that other people don't have to do...that I have to build in between everything, and I also, last semester, I had a full teaching load, so, it becomes a major balancing act and that's why my office looks like this.*

During my observations I saw that my participants attended meetings, prepped for classes and meetings, and met with students and fellow faculty members throughout their day. Each woman believed that she had not successfully achieved a balance between all of her daily tasks. However, each woman did employ strategies to successfully meet her goals. For example, one participant noted how aspects of research, teaching, and service must relate to one another. If a service activity did not relate to her research then she would choose not to do the service activity. Another individual spoke about the importance of time management and keeping a daily schedule to complete tasks. One participant made it a habit to complete work in her office and not to take work home. She decided later in her academic career to employ this strategy in order to get more work completed.

## **Diversity is Everything**

A common theme seen through out the interviews, related to the participant's views of diversity. One participant spoke about her frustrations that some people only view diversity in terms of people from places other than the US. She wanted to help expand people's understanding of

diversity. She wanted to explain to people that diversity does not mean that one has to come from a foreign country, but diversity could also mean people from different backgrounds other than one's own. All of the women believed that diversity was broader than ethnicity and had more to do with a person's cultural background than racial differences:

*I get very frustrated with academia and health care when they talk about diversity as racial, and so I work very hard to get my students to understand that's not what diversity means, because then it becomes, I think that's where that divisive and segregation kinda stuff comes from if we look at it bigger culturally then its everybody's diverse and lets work together.*

Participants also felt that teaching students to understand different cultural backgrounds was imperative due to the nature of the interaction that occupational therapy practitioners have with people from all walks of life. Two individuals incorporated lessons about diversity into their program curriculum. One participant incorporated lectures about different cultures into her classes. Another participant commented that she taught her students to embrace diversity through celebrating the commonalities that people share in the self-care activities that they do on a daily basis. She spoke about how students are surprised that people from different cultures may have the same hair routines and how in discussing these commonalities students begin to understand and embrace cultural differences. She also encouraged students to ask questions when they didn't understand a cultural difference in order to gain understanding. This participant described just how critical it is to ask questions about people's cultural practices when in a clinical situation:

*I do like to talk about culture and ask questions, and don't be afraid, because, you know, doing self-care a man, a person of a certain religion, might want a man there or a man might not want a women to, to take her to the bathroom or whatever. I was just in the hospital visiting my dad the other day and a woman urinated on the floor, the tech who [was] supposed to be taking her to the bathroom was a guy and she didn't want this guy taking her to the bathroom and she couldn't hold it, so she wound up going in the hall because...they didn't understand, and later on the nurses found out because he was a man, you know, but they didn't ask...so those kinda things you need to understand*

*so it's important to teach our students those kinda things.*

The participants also commented about diversity in relation to the occupational therapy profession. One individual spoke about comments that she heard from others in the profession that did not promote diversity, “*occupational therapy is the profession of doctor’s daughters*” and “*well, you know, when you diversify the group the scores [on the national boards] go down.*” She felt that comments like these perpetuated stereotypes and were not conducive to working together and identifying different methods to incorporate all students’ learning styles.

Another participant spoke about how the national certification exam does not take into account different learning styles. She commented that measuring only linguistics and logic can discriminate against students whose first language is not English and can impede students who use different strategies other than logic to solve difficult questions. This participant felt that the National Board for Certification of Occupational Therapists (NBOCT) should develop a test that measured a student’s ability across the board, regardless of a student’s background or origin.

Participants did their part to increase diversity in the occupational therapy profession through supporting diversity in their occupational therapy student population. Two programs had a diverse student body consisting of students from different cultural backgrounds. One program had students from rural and urban communities. Another program had students ranging in age from the twenties to early fifties, all of varying ethnicities, backgrounds, and life experiences.

## **DISCUSSION**

All of the participants in my study had experienced positive mentoring relationships during their academic careers. This is not characteristic of the experiences of many African-American women working in academia (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). It is evident in the quotes from my study that mentoring helped the participant’s to have more successful academic careers. This is confirmed in the literature (Alfred, 2001). Mentoring in the form of encouragement was critical for the participants in my study. All of the participants felt that their mentors encouraged them to keep going when faced with difficult challenges. It is also important to note that all of the participants had more than one mentor and utilized a collectivist peer approach to mentoring.

Using a collectivist peer approach to mentoring was found in the literature to be a common characteristic of African-American female

faculty's mentoring relationships (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). A potential reason a collectivist peer approach may be used by African-American women professors may be due to the limited cultural representation in academia of African-American women. As a result many African-American women faculty may have to share mentoring relationships with their fellow female African-American colleagues.

Another important finding in my study were the volume of daily professorial and administrative demands made on the participants. The work demands experienced by the participants in my study were consistent with what was found in the literature. All faculty experience balance issues with research, teaching, and service (Toews & Yazedijan, 2007). However, for the participants in my study, these work demands were compounded by administrative tasks that often created long work weeks for the three women.

The concept of diversity being broader than race was another important finding. Participant's defined diversity as being related to a person's variety of experiences and cultural backgrounds. In the literature it was affirmed that diversity refers to cultural differences more so than racial differences (Jaipal, 2006, p. 186). The participants in my study expressed concerns about the importance of teaching students to understand diverse cultural differences due to the nature of interaction that practitioners have with people from all cultural backgrounds. The literature describes the importance of professors teaching students that we live in a "culturally pluralistic society" in order for students to be successful in their future professional roles (Judkins & Lahurd, 1999, p. 787).

## **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

All data collection and analysis had to be completed within a two-month period due to program constraints. Therefore, I had a limited amount of time to interact with participants and learn about their daily environments. As a result, I did not have prolonged engagement in the field. Member checks were not performed to confirm data findings with participants, again due to time constraints. In addition, the archival documents gathered to help me understand the requirements in the life of an academic at each institution were not used in this analysis of data. Another limitation was that I did not reach saturation; this was also due to the time factor. Although there were clear themes that emerged in the data, there was not the redundancy of information that would suggest saturation (and thus no further need to collect data).

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to present a glimpse into the everyday lives of three African-American women working as professors in the occupational therapy field. Through interviews and participant observation I wanted to look at the routine and mundane happenings in each participants work day in order to understand what it is like to be a professor. Upon completion of the study I understood that being a professor is less about balance and more about employing personal strategies that work for the individual.

The job of an academic is incredibly difficult and highly challenging; being a woman and a minority only added to these challenges. Success in academia for African-American female faculty appears to be dependent upon having at least one mentor who understands the cultural challenges one may face as a woman faculty of color.

Just as mentoring in my study served as a source of encouragement and support to the African-American women faculty members, mentoring can be the same positive experience for students, especially minority students. As found in my study, a collectivist approach can be used. Those students with have varying life circumstances may need multiple people to guide them and give them needed advice as they pursue their academic careers. These potential efforts in the mentoring and recruitment of minority students should not occur for the sole purpose of increasing diversity. These efforts should also be acted on because of the service commitment that the occupational therapy profession has to the diverse population of clients that practitioners serve.

There are not many African-American female occupational therapists working in academia. In order for diversity to increase in occupational therapy programs and the profession, research on the number of minorities in the profession needs to continue. Perhaps one day African-American females working as occupational therapy professors will not be a rare phenomena but a normal occurrence. Hopefully, my research study will contribute to this vision

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