



Does race still matter in nursing? The narratives of African-American nursing faculty members

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rise in undergraduate enrollment of African-American students has not translated into more African-American faculty members, although they could mentor minority students and promote an ethos that encourages their academic success. Discrimination against African-American faculty members continues, which could lessen their presence.

Purpose: This study explored the narratives of 23 African-American faculty members to determine if race still matters in nursing.

Methods: A narrative approach grounded in social constructionism and critical race theory was used to illustrate the journey of African-American faculty into and throughout academia and to reveal factors related to decisions to enter and remain in academia.

Discussion: Most of the participants stated that they faced racial discrimination that tested their resilience and reinforced their commitment to the academy.

Conclusion: Intentional actions and open discourse could strengthen institutional commitments to racial diversity and facilitate the recruitment and retention of racially diverse nursing faculties.

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Introduction

The continued dearth of African-American faculty representation in academia remains a concern. Although undergraduate enrollment of African-American students recently rose from 10% to 14%, African-American faculty representation in higher education lagged behind at 6% in 2013 ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2016](#)). The 2009 *Faculty Census* ([National League for Nursing, 2010](#)) revealed that nursing faculty is still predominantly Caucasians, and

African-Americans comprise just 7% of full-time nursing educators. The lack of diversity in academia has overarching implications.

For nearly two decades, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has prioritized improving faculty diversity ([AACN, 2015](#)). AACN posited that the lack of racial diversity among faculty could suggest to students that nursing does not value diversity, which could hinder the integration of junior faculty in academia. The AACN added that the presence of minority faculty members could influence curricular design and strengthen the nursing profession's role in

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providing culturally competent care. A diverse faculty could attract a more diverse student body, mentor underrepresented minority students, and promote an ethos that encourages academic success (National Advisory Council on Nursing Education and Practice, 2013; Zajac, 2011). Diversity is also critical to the future of health care. Although it is not a panacea for all that ails health care, it is key to patient-centered care and vital to assuaging health care disparities (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2014; Institute of Medicine, 2004; National League for Nursing, 2009; Sullivan Commission, 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

The Institute of Medicine's report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health* (2011), underscored the need for greater racial and ethnic diversity. However, the National Advisory Council on Nursing Education and Practice (2013) pointed out that the momentum to recruit diverse faculties has not produced a workforce that mirrors the population it serves. The Council stated that, despite workforce diversity goals to increase the diversity of nursing faculties and the availability of best practices, minority faculty representation remains weak.

Minority faculty includes people of African-American, Asian, Hispanics/Latino, and Native American backgrounds. These faculty members have stated their strong desires to make a difference and serve as role models as significant reasons for entering academia (Zajac, 2011). However, compensation inequities, role strain, and disinterest in the educator role have undermined the academy's efforts to increase their numbers (Evans, 2013; National Advisory Council on Nursing Education and Practice, 2010). Historical barriers have posed unique challenges to African-American faculty members and limited their presence. Institutionalized racism, intentional exclusion, and misguided beliefs about intellectual inferiority are well-documented historical barriers that overtly excluded African-Americans from university and college faculties before the 1960s (Altbach & Lomotey, 1991).

Although discrimination could be directed at any social group, the ways that group members understand their experiences are influenced by their racial backgrounds and social environments, which yields a variety of interpretations (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). Overt racial discrimination is illegal in the United States, but some studies suggest that African-Americans experience "microaggressions," which are less overt acts of discrimination (such as slights and insults) that threaten these individuals' presence and persistence in higher education (Beard & Volcy, 2013; Hassouneh, 2013; Tuitt, Hanna, Martinez, Salazar, & Griffin, 2009; Vereen & Hill, 2008). Despite the previously described racial challenges in academia, African-American faculty representation in nursing greatly exceeds that of other minority groups (National League for Nursing, 2010).

Thus, the question is: Does race still matter in nursing? The literature is replete with accounts of

racial challenges faced by African-American faculty members in higher education (Boutte & Jackson, 2014; Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014; Edwards, Beverly, & Alexander-Snow 2011; Mkandawire-Valhmu, Kako, & Stevens, 2010; Orelus, 2013; Stanley, 2006; Tuitt et al, 2009; Turner, Gonzalez & Wood, 2008; Zambrana, Ray, Espino, Castro, Cohen & Eliason, 2015). However, there is a paucity of current research that has specifically elicited the voices of African-American faculty members in the discipline of nursing or explored the lived experiences unique to African-Americans in academia (Hassouneh, Akeroyd, Lutz, & Beckett, 2012; Hassouneh & Lutz, 2013). It is unclear whether the historical challenges faced by African-American nursing faculty members are still relevant in the 21st century.

Research that deeply explores the experiences of African-American nursing faculty members could provide critical insights into the contexts through which they navigate and inform academia's general efforts to strengthen minority faculty representation. Findings from this study could identify factors that impede or strengthen institutional efforts to increase the numbers of African-American nursing faculty members and inform the development of best practices for creating cultures of inclusivity and establishing centers of excellence in nursing education. Therefore, African-American faculty members were intentionally selected for this study.

The specific aim of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding and share the experiences of African-American nursing faculty members' journeys in and through academia by exploring whether race still matters in nursing. The narratives of African-American faculty members could deepen our insight about their sense of the reality of academia and generate knowledge that might help bolster their representation in academic settings. Narrative is an important research tool that furthers our understanding of relationships between individuals and their environments (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). In addition, narratives communicate a sense of hope for a better society in a way that adds credibility to the possibility (Godsil & Goodale, 2013). Faculty members' narratives could affirm or challenge old beliefs, create new truths, and engender academic environments that support greater diversity, which could support the development of increased diversity in nursing faculties.

Literature Review

Facilitators of African-American Faculty Representation

Diversity initiatives seek to use best practices to strengthen recruitment and retention of minority faculty members. The literature suggests that institutions that offer formal mentoring programs have improved

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