

**Empowerment Agents in the Development  
of Adult, Working-Class, and Black Female Scholars**  
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**Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to enhance understanding of how Black female working class adult scholars cultivated support and advancement in the academy with the goal of entering the professoriate. In this critical ethnography, the authors elaborate on the concept of empowerment agent to detail how professionals within the academy created pathways to the professoriate for marginalized doctoral students. Drawing from the work of Pendakur's empowerment agent to respond to the troubling data indicating a decrease in faculty diversification, the authors propose approaches that college and university faculty, staff, and administrators can utilize to act as empowerment agents in support of marginalized adult learners.

Keywords: *Autoethnography, Black Female, Empowerment Agent*

**Introduction**

The National Science Foundation (2017) reports that more than 50,000 students were recipients of doctoral degrees. While the aforementioned collected data shows an increasing rate at which terminal degrees are granted in the United States, a greater challenge exists. The fundamental concern is whether or not minoritized doctoral degree holders have access to diversifying the academy by becoming members of the faculty. By several accounts, the concern is serious—the reality is that the percentage of faculty diversification is static (NCES, 2018). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2018) confirmed underrepresentation among African American, Latino, Asian Pacific, and Native Americans, who in total account for fewer than 12% of the entire professoriate population serving at degree granting postsecondary institutions. This data point illustrates that parity is seemingly challenged with respect to the recruitment and retention of faculty of color. Such grave conditions have many different contributing factors that also pose as possible opportunities to change or challenge the damning diversity reality. Nevertheless, there are endemic threats.

For instance, scholars of color are considerably underrepresented within the academy as faculty. Some might argue that recruitment practices as well as wholesale adoptions of diversity and inclusion, clarify the problem, yet these programs have yet to influence a change in the diversification of faculty (Roberson, 2006). A meta-analysis of literature examining diversity hiring in the academy points to various factors that contribute to the aforementioned condition. Among the documented consequences are work culture and conditions (Thompson & Louque, 2005), diminished disregard (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001), and academic hierarchy (Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000). However, there is a context by which such dehumanizing data can be contrasted. In particular, while certain literature critically examines empirical scholarship that applies to system faculty diversification concerns, this study identifies individual pathways and processes towards the professoriate as well as a critical framework that will undoubtedly provoke an awareness of alternative support, particularly of adult working class scholars' road to the professoriate. Our aim is to provide an analysis that highlights our collective

journeys. We will do so by first discussing Empowerment Agent Theory, the lens through which we analyze our narratives. Then we briefly highlight the tenets of autoethnography as the methodological framework utilized for this paper. Finally, we will conclude the discussion of our narratives by sharing opportunities and challenges future working class scholars of color might consider as they pursue pathways to the professoriate. The research question that drove our explanatory work was this: How has mentoring impacted Black working-class women's role in diversifying higher education faculty after pursuing doctoral degrees?

### ***Empowerment***

Empowerment Agent Theory is grounded in a critical asset-based framework that considers how one empowers individuals whose social and or cultural capital are diabolically under accumulated (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). The theoretical conditions for this frame was developed by Morrow (1999), who as a trained psychologist sought to understand the sociological aspects of minority children's development. Many scholars have advanced Morrow's seminal work to explore the concept of empowerment agent within the prism of education research, ethnic studies, and social work (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Further work in education has been done to understand the perpetuation of systemic inequalities. For instance, Stanton Salazar (2001) has documented which discourses hinder or help students. He developed a scale to characterize pivotal aspects—help and or hindrance—ranging from gatekeeper agent to social agent, institutional agent, and empowerment agent.

Among the four scales, we use empowerment agent theory to conceptualize and structure our experiences as working-class, adult scholars navigating pathways to the professoriate. In particular we utilized Pendakur's (2016) frame as an exemplar to trace the role of empowerment agents within our narratives. Pendakur contended empowerment agent theory as an intersecting critical identity-conscious discourse that denounces inequalities while simultaneously challenging the system's current state of affairs. It is a process for which an embodiment of two actions occurs: First, there is an empowering act to build and bridge knowledge from the agent to marginalized student. In the series of building and bridging knowledge and/or support, social and cultural capital are concurrently constructed. Secondly, the empowerment agent challenges the systems status quo to change the persistence of inequalities for future students.

For this study, we will adopt the empowerment agent frame in order to discuss how social and cultural capital empowers the subjects of this study. Furthermore, we sharply critique the system in order to provide recommendations that highlight opportunities for change to more broadly assist working-class scholars of color who might pursue entering the professoriate. As such, the empowerment agent theoretical frame will allow us to actively consider the status of our own narratives and how aspects of those experiences might be codified to assist and empower similar populations.

### **Method**

To provide an answer to the question previously articulated, we co-constructed a reflexive autoethnography—a research design that is autobiographical in nature and one we contend allows users to introspectively look at a phenomenon through the lens of personal experience

(Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Borchers, 2000). Autoethnography allows authors to share narratives layered with the realities of their experience. The utility of this type of research design is its incorporation of multiple academic disciplines, including education, anthropology, and sociology (Skyles, 2014). An autoethnography can be shared as poetry, essay, narrative, or pictorial rendering (Hayano, 1982). As a part of the process for grasping information for this study, each participant individually situated meaningful experiences in written narrative form. The significance of the autoethnographic approach lies within its ability to transform both the researcher and the reader through work that is interconnected with human experience and its meaning (Ellis & Borchers, 2000). Our experiences, once described autoethnographically, will then be analyzed through cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2003).

### *Amanda's Story*

I didn't realize that I wanted to be a faculty member until it was time to complete my dissertation. I began my doctoral journey with the idea that I would become a university administrator. Moreover, I spent the better part of my postgraduate studies grappling with how I would make the logical leap from student to administrator. I had not conceptualized what path I would take to lead me to a career as a faculty member. In this narrative, I will share my pathway to the professoriate by discussing my transition from student to scholar, including the steps to and through that journey. As such, parts of my story will discuss my postdoctoral position and the process of socialization I underwent to gain the confidence to apply for academic positions. Furthermore, I will detail the intense mentoring I received throughout these processes. Finally, this section will conclude with key beliefs and values that were adopted as result of the collective experiences detailed in both narratives.

### *Credentialed with no career*

I was in my mid-thirties when I graduated with a terminal degree in education. I distinctly remember walking across the stage to be hooded. I was torn between many emotions. First, I was excited to have completed my degree. I was joined that day by my parents—two working-class professionals—as well as my grandparents—retired shift service workers—and my sisters; I knew I had made my family proud, and I also had a feeling of relief. Graduation day was the first time since the beginning of my first year in the doctoral program that I did not have to spend weekends deeply engrossed in academic work. However, I felt enormously guilty: I did not have a job, nor did I have a road map for my next steps. I did not know how I would transition from being a recipient of knowledge to being a facilitator of learning. I was credentialed, but I had no career plans. I began the next year not as a faculty member, but as a full-time postdoctoral associate.

### *Postgraduate mentoring*

Through my work as a postdoctoral associate, I gained an opportunity to work closely with the Dean of Urban Education at my college—a petite, energetic woman with the strength of a titan and the wisdom of a philosopher. I tried my best to hide from her my insecurities surrounding my writing. I never knew if she sensed my fear, and I wondered if she realized that this “hood girl” from Miami had a bad case of imposter syndrome. Did she know that the seemingly shy

woman who would show up in her office was really a know-it-all and practical joker? I felt like I did not belong in academia, but her support cut through my fear. “You want to write together?” She sent those words as an email subject line. The enthusiasm that prompted my initial reaction— “YES!” —slowly devolved into self-doubt. I wondered if she would find out that she hired a subpar writer with lousy research skills. My fears tried to get the best of me, yet Dean Carroll’s expectations challenged me to push through self-inflicted doubt. She taught me, through her actions, that writing is a process.

As I read her work in our shared writing documents, I noticed a few things and learned from her actions. Her writing approach showed me that perfection was not instantaneous—it was a process. My vulnerabilities were gradually eroded by this tailored learning exchange. Her guidance made me feel capable. With practice, along with her patience, I was socialized to scholarly work. As a budding academic, I learned much under the tutelage of this wise woman; her support was particularly helpful regarding producing and disseminating publications. She worked with me to develop ideas of interest into areas of empirical inquiry, and she encouraged me to practice ways of finding my voice through sharpening my writing. I did not have to develop these skills alone, though. She would block out time from her schedule to assist me. Over time, she would reverse our roles, and I would take the lead on writing projects.

### ***Shelly’s Story***

I am a Black woman, and I am strong. Women are often estimated to be inferior, yet without us, this world would be chaos and unrecognizable (Palmer, Cadet, LeNiles, & Hughes (2019). In this coming-of-age story of my transformation from a first generation college graduate to an educator, some experiences threatened to deter me but I persevered. The imposter syndrome was real for me as a doctoral candidate; I often doubted that I belonged in higher education (Bowman & Palmer, 2017). I recalled a professor in my first year saying that I was not going to be successful because I couldn’t write. In theory she was supposed to be nurturing and caring, as good teachers are (Croninger & Lee, 2001), yet this individual who seemed to lack any sense of equity and social justice. For example, she quite frequently stated to the class that she felt it was her responsibility to “weed out the bad apples,” those who in her eyes who were unfit for the program. What she invoked in us was utter fear—fear of being banished from the program, fear of being less-than. As a result, throughout my educational tenure I worked harder, studied more, and was more dedicated; I had to persevere no matter the obstacles.

### ***Credentialed with an alternate career***

After graduation from receiving my terminal degree I pursued an atypical path. While fellow colleagues were busy applying for faculty jobs in higher education, I prepared to re-enter the K-12 classroom system. My approach was deliberately different: I supplemented my knowledge with the support of a merit-based program. During my doctoral journey I was inducted into Holmes Scholars, an organization for students of color pursuing doctoral degrees in education. My involvement in Holmes Scholars helped me to navigate the unfamiliar process of pursuing the doctoral degree. However, when many of my doctoral counterparts transitioned into higher education jobs after graduation, I began to question my decision to return to the K-12 classroom. I considered the impact that path could have on my career once I decided to transition

to a full-time role in higher education from that of an adjunct professor, which I'd undertaken while continuing to work in a K-12 setting full time. Ultimately, I chose the alternate career path. I went where I thought my expertise was most needed.

### *An amplifying the voice in my own narrative*

Among my key beliefs is the idea that all students can succeed if given the opportunity to do so. This means higher education needs to talk less about social justice and equity and do more about them. Throughout my journey, I needed consistent mentorship and guidance in establishing myself as a scholar, as well as direction on standard processes to complete the program. My experience led me to the realization that universities should consider assigning a mentor upon the initial acceptance of the student into a doctoral program; as I later learned, it is the cornerstone of the student success (Cooper & Wheeler, 2010). Moreover, I found that communication was lacking with the administration—they could consider specific liaisons for working scholars. Additionally, the departments in the college need to be more cohesive, organized, communicative and aligned with one another. In contrast, I found that some departments were very well-organized, and that they mentored their students, exposed them to research and to writing for top-tiered journals and conference presentations in the first year. Upon graduation, those students were more equipped and prepared for the workforce compared to other programs. As I continue my journey as a high school teacher and adjunct college professor, I often lament about the mixed career success I have had but refuse to allow my failures to determine my future.

### **Implications for Adult Educators**

These shared narratives discuss how we both were in need of mentoring to help propel us to the next steps in our career. We might add that mentoring remains a salient ingredient for seeing the fruition of our professional goals. As evidenced by our stories, mentoring took on formal and informal roles. Examples of formal mentoring included research discussions focused on achievement (research dissemination) and collaboration. Whereas examples of informal mentoring focused on all aspects of our lives and not just our scholarly side.

#### **What we know:**

- Achievement is affected by a variety of social, psychological and environmental factors.
- As such, it would behoove mentors to provide working class scholars with support that is coordinated in a manner to counter effects of imposter syndrome.
- Moreover, changing outcomes for working class scholar imposter syndrome means a focus on the needs of the whole person.

### **Conclusion**

This autoethnographic study's findings suggest that working-class status is not a delimiting factor for access or success within the academy. It is critical to focus on the notion that each person has an individualized pathway. Within this paper we shared information that indicated similarities and differences in our stories. What has made the difference is having a base of support, through mentoring whereby our strengths were recognized and developed; our

assessment is that college and university administration, faculty, and staff must recognize and act upon the strengths, needs, and narratives of marginalized, working-class scholars; their ability to do so might empower both the student and the system.

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