To Code-Switch or Not to Code-Switch: The Psycho-Social Ramifications of Being a Resilient Black Female Engineering & Computing Doctoral Student

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The Prejudicial Plight of the Black Female Scientist

Black women enrolled in STEM-related disciplines experience a disparaging collection of systematic challenges that includes race and gender biases, a lack of adequate mentorship and support, and they experience negative interactions with their faculty and peer groups (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Patton & Harper, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2007; Love, 2017; Robinson, 2013; Schwartz, Bower, Rice, & Washington, 2003).

Indeed, because Black women exist a backdrop of myth and stereotype, their voices are often distorted and misunderstood. If she is opinionated, she is difficult. If she speaks with passion, she is volatile. If she explodes with laughter, she is unrefined. If she pitches her neck as she makes a point, she is streetwise and coarse. So much of what Black women say, and how they say it, pushes other people to buy into the myth that Black women are inferior, harsh, and less feminine that other women (p. 102).


In order to cope with the unfair and inhumane treatment in collegial settings, Black undergraduate and graduate students have embraced “Code-Switching” in order to navigate and negotiate racial stereotypes held against their groups’ membership (Boulton, 2016).
To oppose the institutional and systematic oppression that has historically been shaped at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, as well as other social identities in which Black women self-identify; BFT is an appropriate theoretical framework for this qualitative investigation because it integrates, validates, centers, and gives voice to the unique experiences of Black women altogether (Collins, 2000).
Guiding Research Questions

1) How would you describe the “Public You” that present in academic settings versus the “Private You” in personal settings?

2) What “Coping Strategies” have you used to overcome any challenges or barriers in your doctoral program?
Research Methodology & Data Analysis

- N=23 semi-structured interviews were collected over the phone to examine the educational experiences of domestic Black women enrolled in engineering and computing doctoral programs across the country.

- 87% of the student participants were code-switchers and the remaining 13% were not code-switchers.

- Recruitment Efforts: Email Listservs, National Conferences & Conventions, Snowball Sampling, etc.
Research Methodology & Data Analysis

• To identify major themes and patterns from the interview transcripts, Grounded Theory was utilized throughout the process of data collection and analysis which involves reading and re-reading the transcript data multiple times over to “understand the phenomenon that is being researched” (Bluff, 2005; p. 154).

• Codes were then created from analyzing the interview data, reading previous literature or scholarship on the experiences of Black women in graduate school, and writing up memos after each interview to identify key themes (Saldana, 2013).

• After the newly generated codes had been reviewed by the research team, the newly generated codes had been reviewed a second time and then condensed to more closely acquire the main themes and patterns that had been captured from the data, which resulted in a codebook that was co-developed to further analyze the interview data transcripts.
The “Public Me” vs. The “Private Me”: Changing The Way “I” Talk In Academia

My speech definitely changes depending on my level of comfort with whomever I’m talking with. I feel as if you have to be careful about who you’re around and who that person might know. Even if you don’t necessarily agree with their views, you’re not really allowed to be outspoken and express yourself. I tend to be very neutral, I guess you can say [that’s the case] when it comes to certain topics and conversations.

—Niela 4
The “Public Me” vs. The “Private Me”: Changing The Way “I” Dress In Academia

So, for **Black History Month**, I said I am going to wear four of my Blackest shirts every week. So I have a shirt that says “**Melanin**” in the middle of the African continent. I have a “**Black Girls Rock**” tee shirt. I have a “**Black by Popular Demand**” shirt. Things like that. I’ll wear them to campus. I’ll wear them to class. I have a shirt that was like, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, all the way down to Assata Shakur. I was a little bit leery about wearing them, but then I was like, “I don’t care.” People can say whatever.

**Why should I hide who I am [and] not express myself in order to blend in?**

When I present, of course, then I pull it together a little bit. I probably over dress…I want to look like what people think a scholar looks like. So, I always overdress at conferences and things. Even if its business casual, I am going to wear a suit.

— **Niela 7**
I’m meeting them right where they are at. It’s not like I’m reaching too far from where I was before, but it was kind of like, “Oh, this is what ya’ll do?” I’ve read the situation and I was like, “All right, let me meet them right where they’re at and be able to adapt.” That was as far as apparel [in which she now wears dark sweaters and flats that she considers to be a more simplified and refined look].”

— Niela 6
Part 1: The Various Forms of Being Stereotyped & Misunderstood

What’s in a Black Sounding Name?

*Niela 1* has been stigmatized because her name “*is not Sarah*” and she is oftentimes judged for her Black-sounding name in which people always ask her how to speak and pronounce her name “*because I have such a unique name* [that] i’m always trying to make sure that I carry myself in a way that is very presentable whether it’s at a symposium, or even just in a research group.”
“I typically keep a level head. I actually always keep a level head. Even if something causes that large emotion on me. I don’t just fly off the handle at all. I will make a statement if I feel the statement needs to be made. I’ll just address it because I don’t want to ignore it. I don’t want to pretend like it’s not a problem. They usually get overwhelmed. People will usually understand why I’m saying what I’m saying. They don’t feel like I’m attacking them. I guess I try really hard, so that they don’t feel like I’m attacking them because I have this precursor with people where they think I’m attacking them. Personally, I’m friendly. I don’t present myself as a competitor because I don’t like competing with anybody. I present myself as someone willing to help. Yeah, that’s it.” — Niela 11
Part 2: The Various Forms of Being Stereotyped & Misunderstood

What Does The Black Hair Texture Aesthetic Have to Do With It?

“I definitely am conscious of my appearance at all times in academic settings. I guess one example of probably is that I was under a lot of stress. I think it was during my second year and my hair was thinning and it was not looking very healthy. People would continuously ask me if I was tired and making comments so I felt like it was a direct reflection. I pretty much have had short hair now for the past two years to avoid [comments] just because my appearance is important [in academia].”

— Niela13
As I've gone more into academic settings, I've realized that regardless of what I may choose, if I have sweatpants on one day or leggings another day, if I wear Uggs, or if I have a Dooney and Bourke bag, which I don't. But begin aware that I'm still going to be looked at as a Black student at the end of the day regardless of what I have behind me. I just have to keep moving forward….I guess now I'm just a lot more comfortable with who I am [and] I don't try to juggle the two.
God is My Foundation: A Spiritual Healer in My Time of Need

Niela 19 mentioned that when she needs to de-stress and center herself—she seeks out “a place of silence” to have “time with God to get clarity on certain things that I just need at that moment.

“I rely heavily on my spiritual discernment to guide me through. A lot of people that I am close with will support me and either pray with me or encourage me and remind me [that] my worth is not dependent on the number of papers or whether this experiment is going well or this presentation is going bad. They will remind me at the end of the day [that] I’m more than my identity or my work. That’s the biggest thing I use.” —Niela 17

“I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me.” —Niela 19
The Essence of a Profoundly Strong Black Woman

Being a Black woman in computer science makes me smile. I’m cheesing from ear to ear right now. I don’t know if you can hear my whole tone change from what I was talking about before. But when I see someone else, I’m like, “Yes, let’s deal with this. You know representation and being physical means so much. It means so much. You never know whose watching...like another Black girl who just need to see you to know there are [Black women in this field and] that there is a bigger goal.

— Niela 16
• Given the race and gender oppression that Black women have encountered in the academy, many of them feel compelled to code-switch because they do not want to face or experience bias from faculty members and their colleagues because they do not want to be perceived as incompetent or unintelligent scientists.

• May suffer from Sojourner Syndrome “an illustrative and symbolic representation of the social identity of African American women [that is used to] discuss how race, gender, class, and age are characterized in contemporary society and simultaneously intersect to influence health and disease risk” (Lekan, 2009; p. 309).
Conclusion

• Because so many of the Back women in our study did not yet have coping strategies or tools in place to navigate and negotiate these racial and gender assaults, they devised a place they strongly believed would retain them, which is to code-switch.

• Daily, these Black female doctoral students have to play this never ending game of ‘hide and seek’ because they have to hide or conceal their full selves all while trying to seek the approval of their faculty advisors and peers because they have not fully accepted and acknowledged that it is okay for them to be themselves.