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Banks, Cerri A. (2009). *Black Women Undergraduates, Cultural Capital, and College Success*. New York: Peter Lang.

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Reviewed by Ezella McPherson
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In *Black women undergraduates, cultural capital, and college success*, Cerri Banks conducts a qualitative research study to examine the strategies that 19 Black women use to become successful in college (community college or four-year institutions) in New York, Texas, and California. The data collection method in the study is in-depth interviews and the data are analyzed through coding. The study uses the qualitative inquiry method of phenomenology to explore “the everyday meanings and experiences with a goal of explaining how people make sense of objects, interactions, and episodes of everyday life” (p. 150). By means of this method, the researcher focuses on “black women undergraduates in one of their natural settings, that is, on their community college and university campuses, in an attempt to make sense of and interpret their schooling lives and the meanings they bring to them” (p. 150). The study also utilizes the traditions of

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symbolic interactionism, feminist theory, and Black feminist thought within qualitative inquiry. Symbolic interactionism centers on how the “people interact with each other” (p. 151). Feminism focuses on the equality of women, whereas Black feminism allows researchers to examine the interlocking systems of oppression faced by Black women, due to their race, gender, and social class. Using these frameworks, the study makes clear that Black women’s experiences navigating through the university are different, but they all have “a desire to succeed” (p. 8). It also seeks to “expand the idea of cultural capital as it relates to black women undergraduates as a social group in a particular social context, namely, higher education” (p. 16).

As a scholar, Cerri Banks is personally committed to the study as “an African American woman from a working class-family who returned to school after 10 years in the workforce” (p. 4). She attended a community college prior to entering a four-year, predominantly white, private college. In the college classroom, she realized the inequalities in education, due to social class and race. She found the academic curriculum to be racist, sexist, and even classist; inside the classroom she became a victim of racist, classist, and sexist remarks from her peers. Despite these obstacles, she continued her education, and received a Ph.D. from Syracuse University. Currently, she is a Dean and Assistant Professor at William Smith Colleges.

The book is well organized beginning with the research design and methods, situating the concept of cultural capital Black women’s quest for education in past and in the contemporary era; to showing how undergraduate Black women use strategies to overcoming obstacles by way of cultural capital to be successful inside and outside of the classroom; and ending with a discussion on how undergraduate Black women’s experiences can be utilized in discussions of and implementations of policies and practices to recruit and retain marginalized students at predominantly white institutions.

The first chapter, *The Complex Terrain of Black and Woman in Undergraduate Education*, introduces the concept of social

location. Banks notes that the “social locations of privilege and power (e.g., whiteness, maleness, able-bodied state, middle-class or wealthy status) can work simultaneously to make the specific educational work of those holding all or many of these locations fairly smooth” (p. 9). She acknowledges that peoples’ social locations in the U.S. are unequal, which in turn allows some people to have “more power and privilege than others” (p. 9). Black women’s social locations are very complex in that they can be of the middle-class (a privileged identity), but their race can be an impediment. Black women who are poor or working class have less privilege than their middle-class, Black women peers. Undergraduate Black women from working class backgrounds have harder time navigating through the university than their affluent peers, due to the fact that they have challenges financing the degree, paying for books, transportation, and personal expenses. More importantly, as a collective group, “Black women undergraduates are often deemed to be deficient and ill-equipped with traditional academic capital (e.g., skills, intellect, practice), [so,] there is a need to understand their particular strategies for academic success” (p. 10).

Another concept, cultural capital is of importance to understanding the experiences of the undergraduate Black women in the study. She acknowledges that “for Black undergraduate women, the dominant view of cultural capital as a combination of educational resources, skills, intellect, and practice often highlights what Black women are lacking in these areas” (p. 15). She continues: “some of them are often underprepared (in the classic sense) for college, that is, for example, they have attended under-funded public schools with limited resources, or had parents or guardians who worked in multiple jobs leaving little time for trips to a museum or library” (p. 15). So, she calls for an expanded definition of cultural capital that “relates to Black women undergraduates as a social group in a particular context, namely higher education” (p. 16). The theoretical framework, black feminist thought guides the study as well. Since the study focuses on the experiences of undergraduate Black women, the use of the black feminist thought as a framework is appropriate to examine how their identities

(e.g. race, class, gender) create intersecting locks of oppression on college campuses.

The chapter ends with a brief discussion of the setting and the 19 Black women participants in the study. Three participants (e.g. Alex, Kayla, and Lisa) attended International Community College; twelve participants (e.g., Alana, Blue, Cheryl, Kimberly, Leviticus, Malukah, Nadia, Nicole, RGB, Roe, Shonte, and Teena) matriculated at Central University; Amari, Cherry, and Jessica enrolled at Sunshine State University, and Jamie attended the University of Borders and Crossings.

The second chapter, *Historical and Modern-Day Contexts: Black woman undergraduates and the Discourse of Cultural Capital*, discusses how Black women have historically and continued to utilize cultural capital by way of education. In slavery, the majority of Blacks lacked access to an education and cultural capital. After slavery, Blacks utilized cultural capital to build schools to educate Blacks taught by Black teachers. In the case of Black women undergraduates, “resources they create including social networks, families, and cultural institutions (i.e., their social capital), and the ways in which they negotiate these resources—all of which make up cultural capital—are influenced by the intersection of race, class, and gender” (p. 26). Despite acquiring cultural capital, some Black women worked as domestics instead of pursuing a higher education in the early 20th Century.

On the other hand, a few Black women (e.g. Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Jane Patterson, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Copper) obtained an education at Oberlin College in Ohio. She acknowledged that Black women had to negotiate their identities of race, class, and gender on predominantly white campuses in an effort to socially adjust and be successful in college. The social and academic adjustments began in K-12 schools in which Black women encountered oppression due to race, class, and gender by way of teachers’ lowered academic expectations. In some cases, Black women received a different educational preparation than their white peers, due to the high school attended prior to entering college. In the past and in the

contemporary era, education for undergraduate Black women became a source of self-fulfillment for financial independence in addition to uplifting the Black community. Education also enabled undergraduate Black women to debunk the stereotypes or rather identities given to Black women in the media, such as welfare queen and promiscuous, sexual beings by showing their resilience by way of using cultural capital, which contributed to their academic success and social immersion into the academy.

In the third chapter, *Black undergraduate women utilizing the sociological imagination for college success*, Charles Wright Mills' concept of sociological imagination is connected to Black women's success in college. Banks writes "some Black women undergraduates in this study would be considered extraordinary in their knowledge of the existence of this intersection of biography, history, and society as they repeatedly named the connection when they defined and described black culture" (p. 42). She points out that "knowledge of the intersection of history, biography, and society and how these interactions inform institutions such as education today is a form of cultural capital that black women undergraduates utilize to navigate success in higher education" (p. 43).

For instance, *being prepared* for college is of importance, but is not always the case for Blacks. So, in an effort to succeed, it is crucial for some undergraduate Black women to acquire academic capital by working hard to overcome barriers to college access such as prior academic preparation in high school and preparation for the college entrance exams (e.g. SAT, ACT).

Undergraduate Black women can obtain academic capital by participating in summer enrichment programs, research projects at universities, engaging in hands-on projects at zoos or museums, internships, and/or taking college courses prior to entering college to be socialized into institutions of higher learning. Another form of cultural capital, "the concept of doing what one has to do," (p. 50) is a strategy utilized by undergraduate black women, especially RGB to navigate the university classrooms and even the financial aid

office. Undergraduate black women like RGB also learned how to cope with racist comments by white peers in class by being realistic, which included “being outraged, saddened or hurt” (p. 51). Thus, by “understanding that the reasons for being underprepared for college are facets of history, biography, and society is a form of cultural capital that helps black women undergraduates find academic success” (p. 52).

Acting white is another factor into understanding Black women’s academic success before and during college. Some scholars report that *acting white* “is what drives achievement or lack of performance on the part of black kids in school” (p. 52). It puts forth the notion that “academic excellence is owned by whites and that black students are selling out or abandoning a black culture that has not claims to academic rigor or distinction” (p. 53). Some of the Black women participants claimed that their peers called them “white,” due to performing well in high school. In the realm of higher education, in order to be successful, some undergraduate Black women learn to assimilate and adapt to the viewpoints of whites in an effort to “offset the power and privilege of whiteness in education” and network within the academy (p. 55). By understanding the idea of *acting white* and accepting the idea that “black people come from greatness,” Black women participants continue to be successful academically in the academy and they thought about ways to change the system or idea of Blacks’ success in schools (p. 56). The chapter ends by showing how undergraduate black women overcome obstacles (e.g. transportation, financial aid) due to their oppressions (e.g. race, social class, gender) in an effort to be successful in school by acknowledging their biographies, history of Blacks, and society. This knowledge in turn provided them with a source of cultural capital.

Continuing the discussion of differences by social locations, the next chapter, *Cultures clash: Black women undergraduates negotiate oppression* discusses how Black women undergraduates navigate through the university inside and outside of the classroom with people from different cultures. Undergraduate Black women participated in black student organizations in an effort to be surrounded by people like themselves and so that they can *speak freely* and *be heard*.

Knowing when to *speak up* (e.g., regarding classroom curriculum, contributing to class discussion as the speaker for the race) and *be heard* became a form of cultural capital, which enabled undergraduate Black women to be successful when their culture clashed with the privileged dominant culture inside the classroom and outside of the classroom (e.g. interactions with police officers, bookstore purchases). By speaking up, “the women recognized that there were risks involved in doing so, including, being invisible or labeled as a big mouth, being ignored, and being hurt” (p. 75). On the other hand, “they also recognized the benefits of having each other as a support system to teach the skills involved in speaking up” (p. 75).

Beyond speaking up in the academy, the idea of multiculturalism is important to understanding undergraduate Black women’s experiences in the academy. The participants in the study acknowledged that multiculturalism tries to blend cultures and thus erasing the unique culture, like that of Black culture. A diversity initiative (e.g., Multicultural Weekend) on the predominantly white campus, Central University, did not fully address the racial incident on campus, which left some of the Black women participants critiquing the disconnect between the written policy and actual practice on campus. By acknowledging and critiquing the disconnection between policy and practice of diversity on campus, undergraduate black women acquired cultural capital, which contributes to their success on campus. Thus, the chapter concludes by stating that negotiating “oppressions and the growth associated with challenging cultural clashes are forms of cultural capital that the black women undergraduates identified as necessary for their success in higher education” (p. 93).

As the title of the fifth chapter suggests, *Black women undergraduates navigate complex alliances* describes how Black women face challenges forming networks to navigate through the university. Beginning in high school, Black women have challenges building relationships with the high school guidance counselors to learn more about the college application process and the steps to take after being

admitted to college. For instance, some guidance counselors' racist and classist stereotypes of the participants discourage the women from applying to the college of their choice. Despite these challenges, the participants in the study applied to and attended the college of their choice. They also debunked the myths and stereotypes of the academic success of Black women in college.

Unlike with their guidance counselors, undergraduate Black women built alliances with family members to apply to college and succeed by way of navigating inside and outside of the university classroom. While first generation, undergraduate Black women students received limited support from their parents in applying to college due to their parents' lack of knowledge of the college application process, their parents served as allies in the process by way of their parents' encouragement. Black women's relationships with their mothers and professors were important to their success in college, because they served as mentors and allies.

In the sixth chapter, *Black women undergraduate shape campus policy and practice*, Banks discusses how Black women's university experiences can be utilized in an effort to modify current campus policies and practices. In classrooms, it is important for instructors to get to know their students, the ways that students' learn; be clear about course expectations, allow students to provide feedback on the course; be mindful of the mix of students in groups during group work; acknowledge that the voices and experiences of students may be different. In terms of institutional practices, staff and student leaders should receive training on how to engage in inclusiveness on campus in order to better understand how students' experiences differ due to race, gender, and social class. Besides this, "faculty advisors can help student leaders understand the need for diverse representations on their boards, understand the ways their experiences inform how they make decisions, and understand the importance of valuing all members of their campus" (p. 136). In an effort to build alliances, faculty, administrators, and staff members must "adopt practices, behavior, language, and thought that allow us to access our deeply held beliefs about students and

their ability and capacity to learn” (p. 136). Banks argues that “to become allies to black women, faculty, administrators, and staff need to face and address their own racism, classism, and sexism and the ways these problems play out in campus interactions and practice” (p. 139). She advocates for “inclusiveness excellence models” which promotes the preparation of students for the real world and enables them to utilize cultural capital in the process (p. 140) to ultimately move towards social justice.

In the final chapter, *Cultural capital and college success*, Banks expands the concept of cultural capital to include undergraduate Black women’s experiences of social and academic success by acquiring knowledge and using specific strategies to navigate through the academy. For instance, understanding that *being unprepared* for college is “connected to societal issues of race and class helped Nicole and Cheryl recognize that a lack of preparation is not synonymous with failure” (p. 143). This in turn enables them to “develop strategies to overcome a lack of knowledge about school policies and to overcome obstacles such as poor performance on standardized tests” (p. 143). Other strategies include “seeking help from other black students, educating themselves about campus policies and practices, dismissing talk that revealed others’ low expectations” (p. 144). They are successful by building relationships with professors, family members and managing racial confrontations inside and outside the classroom. The chapter ends by reiterating that in the academy, undergraduate Black women and other overlooked groups voices should be utilized in order to “develop curricula, classroom practice, institutional policy, and programming for change” in an effort to move towards equity in the academy (p. 147).

Black Women Undergraduates, Cultural Capital, and College Success contributes to the field of education by showing how undergraduate Black women hold cultural capital and how it enables them to successfully navigate through college. So, this book can be of use to undergraduate Black women and first generation college students who are navigating through college. This text can be useful for university professors,

students, and staff who want to learn more about undergraduate Black women's experiences in the academy. More importantly, educational policy makers and institutional policymakers can use this book to devise better ways to recruit and retain students of color, especially at predominantly white institutions.

About the Reviewer

Ezella McPherson is a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She holds an Ed.M. in Educational Policy Studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests center on college access and success.

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Editors
Gene V Glass
Gustavo Fischman
Melissa Cast-Brede
