

Black Women Overcome white supremacy culture to thrive in computer science

SUMMARY

Investments in initiatives to broaden Black women's access and participation in computer science (CS) have been made by the public and private sectors in recent years. Yet, Black women are still severely underrepresented in CS, receiving just 3% of all bachelor's degrees awarded in the discipline. Underrepresentation is a result of both push and pull factors, the conditions that discourage and attract Black women to the field. An effort to understand these conditions more precisely has resulted in emerging research by Auburn University professor, Jakita O. Thomas, that details the experiences of Black women who have persisted in CS majors and careers, despite encountering elements of White Supremacy Culture that attempt to subjugate their participation in the field. Black women have found success in CS by setting and believing in their own goals, securing mentors, and spending time with their fathers, who were acknowledged for originally sparking their interest in computing.

Through the narratives of the study participants, the author reminds us that:

- 1) Computer Science is not a colorblind meritocracy
- 2) Addressing issues of access to computing alone will not broaden and sustain Black women's participation in the field
- 3) Those with power must do the work to transform the field
- 4) Building coalitions and maintaining relationships with Black women is necessary for transformation

"I was at a PWI and there were **very few African-American women** in PhD programs period and my particular engineering and computing program, I was the only African-American at that time...I felt that **isolation** and I had to learn to deal with it and just always **keep in mind what my goals were.**"

"I was at a large tech company [and] would watch my counterparts, my **White male peers, get promoted** over me. I always wondered why they were **promoted with less qualifications than I.** I had my masters in computer science and I was not promoted."

CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE (WSC) EXPERIENCED BY BLACK WOMEN IN COMPUTER SCIENCE

Perfectionism

To point out either how the person or work is inadequate

Paternalism

Those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power. Those without power understand they do not have it and understand who does

Power Hoarding

Power seen as limited, only so much to go around. Those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done in the organization, feel suggestions for change are a reflection on their leadership.

Individualism

Competition more highly valued than cooperation and where cooperation is valued, little time or resources devoted to developing skills in how to cooperate

Knighting/Blessing

The words, ideas, and work of outside viewpoints is not acknowledges, endorsed, championed, etc. until someone White (preferably a White male) champions it, acknowledges it, endorses it, etc. Person in power has to bless or endorse capability and knowledge, and endorsement / blessing / knighting may have to be given multiple times before it is accepted.

University computing departments and tech employers must commit to identifying how these WSC characteristics are embedded in their *environmental norms, practices, and incentives* and *create anti-racist, inclusive policies* so that Black women's participation and opportunities are not unintentionally or systematically delimited.