

grapple with the ways that identity intersects with research on political institutions.

Renita Miller describes how her training in REP and legislative studies has allowed her to thrive as an administrator in the realm of higher education, showing that a PhD in political science does not have to circumscribe our career choices. In doing so, she explains how findings from legislative studies and REP research inform her approach to her job.

By hearing directly from scholars about their research and research experiences, we can better understand their experience working in this area so that the APSA LSS will benefit from useful insight on how to improve the diversity among scholars and scholarship in the section. ■

#### NOTE

1. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf19301/data>, table 22. Accessed August 26, 2020.

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#### ALL THE FEELINGS: DOING RESEARCH AS A BLACK WOMAN ON BLACK WOMEN POLITICAL ELITES

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As a flood of emotions washed over me, I first drew shallow breaths that later quickened. I fought the urge to cry. Instead, I took deep and intentional breaths in an attempt to center myself. "I'm a researcher, this is my job" was the calming refrain I repeated to my inner self. "Nadia, please get yourself together" was my last internal dialogue before I welcomed a group of

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15 Black women candidates and elected officials to participate in a focus group. My coauthor, Danielle Lemi, and I had the fortunate opportunity to partner with the [Black Women's Political Action Committee \(PAC\)](#), a group whose mission is to increase Black women's political representation in Texas. To our knowledge, this was the first-ever focus group of its kind. The scholarly significance of this study led me to have an unexpected visceral reaction.

I was overcome with emotions for several reasons. First, I was overjoyed by the larger-than-anticipated group of participants for our study. Danielle and I had worked with the Black Women's PAC before but we had yet to conduct research with group members. We honestly did not know what to expect. We prepared

for an estimated six to eight participants. When more women entered the room and we struggled to make space around the table, gathering additional chairs to squeeze them into the room, Danielle and I quickly realized that our focus group would not be as effective. Focus groups that have 10 or more participants are not ideal for robust conversations. Nevertheless, we welcomed the women because they *wanted* to be there. They desired to participate in our research study because they felt that their experiences are ignored. These political elites needed an opportunity to speak with their peers about the challenges, opportunities, hopes, and pitfalls as candidates seeking elected office and as Black women governing. Danielle and I were the conduit for this cathartic exchange.

Second, I was painfully aware that Black women's narratives are not centered in political science research (Brown 2014). In the subfield of legislative studies, we most often rely on sophisticated statistical analysis to examine the political behavior of political elites. Rarely are our research participants given the opportunity to narrate their experiences to researchers. As a qualitative researcher and an interpretivist scholar, my scholarship prioritizes the voices of Black women political elites, using their experiences as the starting point for my studies. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to talk with so many Black women and to include their narrative in academic scholarship. For me, this focus group signaled an opportunity to radically transform how Black women political elites are studied in political science.

Third, and for the most part, I was moved by the willingness of the participants to share their experiences with us. These women noted that they wanted scholarship to reflect their understanding of the historical and current political landscape. They also were painfully aware of how their political calculations often were misunderstood and that they were stereotyped by both voters and other political elites. I was in awe of their courage to openly discuss political challenges that often did not paint flattering portrayals of their political party, other Black elites, their opponents, and their constituents and/or voters. The women also

shared unique political opportunities and displayed a sense of sisterhood that was refreshingly unexpected.

My heart was full at the onset of the focus group. Although I anticipated the collection of rich and dynamic data, I was pleasantly surprised at the conversations that we facilitated. The focus group caused me to experience a series of unforeseen emotions; however, as a Black woman researching other Black women, I was prepared to do this research.

Researcher reflexivity is undertheorized in legislative studies. The gold standard of qualitative methods in our subfield is perhaps Fenno's canonical *Home Style* (1978). His "soak-and-poke" method is an exemplar in how to learn about legislative behavior outside of formalized structures. Fenno's *Going Home*

(2003) fully centers identity politics as he followed four Black Congress members to explore the relational aspects of political representation. Fenno noted that his findings and understanding of Black lawmakers' behavior are filtered through the lens of his identity as a white (cis)male researcher. Yet, Fenno mentions this and then quickly proceeds without systematically acknowledging how this racial-outsider status informs his data collection, analysis, and—ultimately—the final conclusions that he draws. Fenno's work was my model and however problematic, his studies were those that I attempted to replicate. I have written elsewhere that it took me some time to grapple with my identity as a researcher who shares the same raced/gendered group status of my participants (Brown 2012). This was due in large part to my positivist training and limited exposure to both qualitative research (of any type) and interpretivist methods early in my career.

When I finally realized that I could best present the narratives of Black women through qualitative research (primarily due to their small numbers in state legislatures), I was drawn to texts outside of political science that examined how our identity informs the research process. I looked to work by Smith (1976), Ritchie (1996), Collins (1986), Beoku-Betts (1994), and Zinn (1979). More recent scholarship, including Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003), Harris-Perry (2011), and Jordan-Zachery (2007), oriented my positionality as a Black woman researching Black women. Also helpful was Wendy Smooth's sage advice (given in passing during the 2010 Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists, in a sisterly tone) that "You know you can't publish these women's names in your dissertation, right?" This alerted me to the type of privileged status that I had in interviewing Black women political elites who likely told me things that they would not have shared with a raced/gendered outsider. As such, I needed to practice a Black feminist ethos of care and refer to them only by pseudonyms in published work.

My past experiences interviewing Black women state legislators coupled with Black feminist scholarship and conducting focus groups with Black women citizens prepared me for our November 2019 data collection with members of the Black Women's PAC. Danielle (a Mexican American and Filipina) and I agreed that I would ask the questions and serve as the facilitator for the focus group; she would take notes. We were prepared and I was ready. Yet, I did not anticipate that moment. As a scholar of gender and politics and racial and ethnic politics within legislative studies, I was aware of the scholarly underrepresentation of marginalized groups in research. As a Black woman, I focused my career on opening up the discipline to perspective by groups at the margins—most notably, Black women political elites. However, I was not then and probably will not ever be fully disentangled from how my own identity translates into the emotive research experience. ■

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## WRITING FOR MY LIFE

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In many ways, I do not see myself as a legislative-studies scholar. Although I have conducted research in the area, and my next project is largely about legislation, I still do not see myself as part of the field. This is because I entered this area through racial and ethnic politics (REP). As a "race-first" scholar, I consider REP as my research touchstone and conduit to other fields, including legislative studies. It is difficult to state why, but I have always felt like a visitor in this field. Perhaps it is because the issues, legislators, and legislation that I care about have always featured race. I could never rattle off members of Congress or congressional bills and their sponsors and cosponsors with the near-encyclopedic precision as some of our colleagues. As a result, I often felt off-kilter and deeply insecure about my knowledge and ability to contribute to the area.

This was not the result of any individual actors but rather because of the way I thought of the field. Because I am a minoritized person in this discipline, I did not always see myself reflected in the field. As a result of what I was taught, the canonical works of white men became the primary yardsticks for how I measured my suitability for the field. I thought because I did not fully understand Poole–Rosenthal scores that I somehow was perpetrating a fraud by being in this field. Often times, the questions I was interested in were not reflected in the syllabi of my courses. In the words of the late scholar Ronald W. Walters, "What has this got to do with the liberation of Black people?" was neither asked nor answered in the texts I encountered (Smith, Johnson, and Newby 2014). To do this work, I surmised that I would need to find myself in a different intellectual kinship group.

Fast-forward a decade and my next work focuses on the legislative efforts of the Congressional Black Caucus. This body of legislators has been the "conscience of the Congress" since its formation in 1971. Under the leadership of Representative Shirley Chisholm (D-NY), the Congressional Black Caucus became a robust force in the international arena, particularly on issues relevant to the broader African diaspora (Tillery 2011). However, I did not learn much about the Congressional Black Caucus when I was in graduate school, and my only classroom encounter with it and its efforts was in a course on race and ethnic politics in