



Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

On Monday evening, we gathered in our Zoom meeting room to meet Dr. Amina Gilyard James, a Federal Government special assistant in DC whose 2018 doctoral dissertation caught my eye on LinkedIn recently. To my delight, a fellow ASPA member, Dr. Amanda Olejarski of West Chester University's public administration faculty, was interested in joining us so that this could be an "academic-practitioner dialogue," in which research and practice could be mutually reinforcing.

The title of Amina's dissertation is *Voices Rising: A Narrative Inquiry into Black Women U.S. Government Senior Service Members' Professional Identity Construction at the Intersection of Race and Gender* – very interesting, given that her earlier degrees are in health education and she is a Gallup-certified strengths coach. I discovered it via her LinkedIn article at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/becoming-black-woman-leader-dr-amina-gilyard-james/>. Unlike many dissertations that can be dull and not seem very useful, this one is full of narrative from interviews whose underlying methodology Amina successfully convinced her committee to allow. We could all relate to it, and clearly it breaks new ground and is useful.

Amina's answer to Amanda's question about why she chose this topic was that she didn't see many women of color above the GS-13 grade level and that 90% of black women seemed to be in HR. A guy in the office where she entered government service as an ORISE (Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education) Fellow just assumed that she was in HR, too – after not having conversed with her for the first 7 months they worked together. By the way, the drop-off at higher grade levels is stark, as shown by the Partnership for Public Service's *Fed Figures 2019* under the understated headline, "While about 37% of the federal workforce is comprised of individuals who identify as part of a racial or ethnic minority group, this number diminishes significantly at higher levels on the GS-scale."

The methodology used in the dissertation is known as Narrative Inquiry. Amina chose it after she encountered an abundance of generalization and a lack of nuance during her literature review. It is a story-telling methodology, and so her committee required her to include an autobiography as a result. Six of thirteen black women Senior Executive Service members she discovered via "snowball sampling" were willing to be interviewed twice each by Amina in neutral locations. One of the things that Amina kept hearing was that getting into the SES didn't feel like they'd "arrived" because they were still struggling to construct their professional identities and have a voice. Achieving SES rank was described as a labyrinth or maze.

Amina invoked her Excellence in Government (EIG) Fellows coach's, John Riordan's, language about people seeing their possible selves: "Not seeing people like me (at higher GS levels and in the SES) affects my identity construction." Finding sponsorship came up, and I mentioned the Senior Executives Association's work on supporting new SES members, its expansion of membership options, and the establishment of internal communities for members, as explained by Bill Valdez last month.

One thing I heard Amina say Monday was that we're more alike than different and that numbers can't express qualitative experience. Amina told us a story that explained the concept of "intersectional invisibility," and as my mother used to say, it held water. What really struck me was the fact that, when leaders at that level feel invisible, their talents are not being leveraged to move the mission and the organization forward. This has to change. To Amanda's question about what she was doing with her research now, Amina replied that she was taking it on the road. Indeed, a couple of hours after our session, a member of FEW (Federally Employed Women) who missed the call was in touch with her by email about presenting to the group.

Afterward, participant Connie Berhane sent me the following note:

"What an awesome topic for research! As Amina spoke passionately about her research, it made me feel as if I was actually sitting in on the discussion with her interviewees. I could easily envision the two-way conversation. Although I am not where the interviewees are now, I can definitely relate to their challenges and understand that getting there will not be enough! It's about staying power and not being intimidated or pushed out when we have so much to offer. We need a seat at the table "With" a voice! Again, thank you and I truly enjoyed the conversation."

Participants joined from West Chester, PA, Charlestown, RI, Colorado Springs, CO, and the DC-MD-VA area. As often happens, connections were discovered during introductions, including that someone else had also graduated from the same doctoral program at George Washington University. Almost half of us were EIG senior fellows, including a retired board chair from the early 2000s. (What does that make the other half? Friends!) Positions varied from assistant general counsel at EPA to organizational development specialist at FDA to force management support specialist at U.S. Army. The resulting cross-fertilization began generating new conversational spinoffs immediately after the session.

Please consider joining us in the future.

Regards,

Kitty Wooley

