

Methods Beyond Methods: A Model for Africana Graduate Methods Training

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Abstract

A holistic graduate education can impart not just tools and knowledge, but critical positioning to fulfill many of the original missions of Africana Studies programs set forth in the 1960s and 1970s. As an interdisciplinary field with many approaches to examining the African Diaspora, the methodological training of graduate students can vary across graduate programs. Although taking qualitative methods courses are often required of graduate students in Africana Studies programs, and these programs offer such courses, rarely if ever are graduate students in these programs required to take quantitative methods courses, let alone have these courses offered in-house. These courses can offer Africana Studies graduate students new tools for their own research, but more importantly, improve their knowledge of quantitative research of diasporic communities. These tools and knowledge can assist with identifying flawed arguments about African-descended communities and their members. This article explores the importance of requiring and offering critical quantitative methods courses in graduate programs in Africana Studies, and discusses the methods requirements of one graduate program in the field as an example of more rigorous training that other programs could offer graduate students.

Introduction

As with any field of study, Black Studies has grappled with its overall mission. However, unlike perceived mainstream disciplines, Black Studies arose out of the 1960's fight for social justice, thus providing the field with a unique foundation built on activism as well as interdisciplinary perspectives. The extent to which the discipline is integrated with other areas remains highly contested. On one hand, some Africana scholars embrace and support the discipline's interdisciplinary nature and view Black Studies as an extension of other fields. With this philosophy, specific topics within Africana Studies are studied within the realm of other disciplines' research methodology (Rojas, 2011), and in some cases, theoretical frameworks. Historical (Dagbovie, 2005, 2007; Daniel, 1980) and sociological (Carroll, 2014; Daniel, 1980, 1981; Rojas and Byrd, 2012) theory and methods are evident in work done by Black Studies scholars. On the other hand, a contrasting opinion on the mission of Black Studies contends that the discipline is completely distinct from other areas of study, with divergent theoretical and methodological assumptions (Alex-Assensoh, 2003; Asante, 2003, 2006, 2010). By not recognizing and employing African-centered theory and methodology, according to this point-of-view, researchers are simply taking Eurocentric beliefs and practices to study disparate diasporic issues (Alkalimat, 1986; Asante, 2003).

Viewpoints aside, the very structure of many Black Studies departments are often interdisciplinary in nature. This aspect can be seen in the large share of faculty who are affiliated with other departments, and the field's faculty are trained in. In some cases, affiliated faculty outnumber core faculty (Kershaw, 2010), which can impact various aspect of departmental life such as fully embracing the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Whether departments embrace an interdisciplinary climate or establish itself as a distinct intellectual entity depends largely on the curriculum offered to its students. In particular, the methodological training received at the graduate level plays an important role in not only the department's intellectual identity but also the future identity of Black Studies. Through this methodological training, graduate students are not only taught how to conduct research, but more importantly, how to understand the assumptions and interpretations that frames their research projects and discussions of diasporic communities.

Research methods are vital to the growth and sustainability of Black Studies, as they provide a manner in which to create and test theory as well as allow for comparisons and complexities of people within and outside of the Diaspora. Research methodology, as discussed in Africana-focused publications as well as in course offerings (from what we garnered through departments' websites) are often skewed toward qualitative-based techniques. While this line of research remains a crucial component of research on the Diaspora, embracing quantitative techniques, particularly within our Black Studies graduate curricula, provides students with more tools for examining their research.

Improving students' knowledge of quantitative-based research can assist with identifying flawed arguments about African-descended communities. Accurate and thoughtful data and research techniques are sorely needed, as much of the public and privately funded grants and policy-driven agendas rely overwhelmingly on quantitative data that, at times, improperly depict the lived experiences in diasporic communities.

The recent increase of doctoral-granting programs in Black Studies signals a commitment of both departments and universities in cultivating knowledge "in house." As with many doctoral programs, particularly in the social sciences, doctoral students often are required to take some variation of core courses in the theory and research methodology of that particular discipline. Depending on the orientation of both the discipline and the specific department, the methodology requirements consist of qualitative methods, quantitative methods, or some variation of both orientations. Depending on the expertise and size of the department, among other factors, some doctoral programs may outsource required courses to other departments. Given this recent rise of doctoral programs in Black Studies, a discussion as to who is teaching methodology to graduate students is warranted. More specifically, this article explores the importance of requiring and offering critical quantitative methods courses in graduate programs in Black Studies, and discusses the methods requirement of doctoral students in Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville.

Assessing Quantitative Methods in Black Studies

To get a rough sense of whether Black Studies programs are offering quantitative research methodology courses within departments, we explored the doctoral-granting departments and their course offerings online. For the purpose of this article, we refer to doctoral programs in Black Studies that, for the most part¹, are doctoral programs granted within stand-alone Black Studies departments. Doctoral granting programs in Black Studies departments now total 13, spanning across nearly each region of the United States: Howard University, Harvard University, Indiana University-Bloomington, Michigan State University, Northwestern University, Ohio State University, Temple University, University of California-Berkeley, University of Louisville, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, University of Texas-Austin, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Yale University. We examined the departments' websites and, when actual course numbers were provided, the university registrars' websites in order to obtain further information on whether quantitative methods were taught within the departments. We recognize this is a crude measure for examining a department's doctoral requirements; however, this quick survey of course offerings are adequate in framing our discussion on quantitative methodology within Black Studies.

The doctoral programs did not mention explicitly a quantitative methods course as a requirement except for two, the University of Wisconsin's Africology doctoral program and the University of Louisville's Pan-African Studies program. Combining both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches in Africology 701, entitled Theories and Methods in Empirical Research in Africology, Wisconsin-Milwaukee provides a course that is described as covering the "applicability of particular empirical theories and qualitative/quantitative methods to a range of substantive problems and issues pertaining to peoples of African descent" (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Department of Africology, 2014). The University of California-Berkeley's African-American Studies and African Diaspora Studies doctoral program offers two research methods courses, Interdisciplinary Research Methods and Qualitative Research Methods, for their doctoral program. The former course could possibly cover quantitative research methodology. According to the course's description, the seminar provides "a detailed introduction and working knowledge of the various methodological techniques appropriate for interdisciplinary research on the African Diaspora" (University of California, Department of African American Studies, 2014). The remaining doctoral programs listed methodological courses but did not specify as to what methods are actually covered.

There could be various reasons as to why specific courses on quantitative methods are not listed or are not offered in these doctoral programs. The strength and specialties offered by each program are obvious factors in whether statistically driven courses are incorporated into the program. In regards to sub-specialties, history remains an integral component and popular specialty within Black Studies (Rojas, 2011). Thus, if a department is filled with a large proportion of Black Studies historians, for instance, doctoral training in methods may focus more on historiographical methods. From this standpoint, the benefits of offering courses in quantitative methodology within a department may appear quite low. Ideologically speaking, some departments may steer away from statistically driven required courses because of the historical role of statistics in erroneously depicting African-descended people in an unfavorable fashion (Nelson, 2011; Walters, 1973). That is to say, quantitative methods may be seen as less effective tools to examine diasporic communities and issues given the historic misuse of these methods, and the assumptions and interpretations often used to conduct quantitative research. With this in mind, we provide a brief discussion of the efforts to combat flawed uses of quantitative methods to reify race and racial inequality, and the importance of training graduate students in quantitative methods, particularly when focusing on how race and numbers are intertwined in the academic and public consciousness.

Why Care about Race and Numbers?

A long legacy of quantifying race and racializing experiences exists in academic research. This legacy shaped not only how people were grouped, but also importantly how academics and the general public alike made sense of racial inequality. Although race developed and is modified by human interaction and ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2013, 1997; Feagin, 2010; Omi and Winant, 1994), it is through scholarly research and quantification that supposed legitimacy and objectivity were instilled into discussions of race and racial inequality. That is, race and inequality were maneuvered away from the public to the domain of science and research (Graves, 2001; Smedley and Smedley, 2011; Wilder, 2013; Zuberi, 2001). A consistent misuse of research, particularly quantitative studies, reified racial groups and perspectives of racism and racial inequality that continue to pose as obstacles for scholars of the Diaspora to contend with in their research and teaching today. However, scholars have worked for well over a century to combat these flawed perspectives of race in research.

Beginning with the efforts of Du Bois' ground-breaking study *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), scholars of the Diaspora have worked to combat the flawed quantitative approaches. In Ladner's *The Death of White Sociology* (1973), scholars discussed such areas as the assumptions and methods of inquiry focused on agency, structure, and culture in research on black communities. Ladner and her colleagues not only critiqued the field of sociology, but social science research as a whole to pull away the veil of mythical objectivity of race-related research. This volume provides the first holistic approach to analyzing the analyses, so to speak. Ladner and her colleagues point out the flawed logic behind social science research, particularly quantitative methods, and how this logic also influences the interpretations of and the theories developed from this research to frame black communities as deficient, deviant, and a detriment to the well-being of the nation. Importantly, this volume ends not on a dismissal of social science research of the Diaspora, but with messages of liberation and empowerment to object to the flawed logic and reorient scholarly research for betterment not detriment of communities across the Diaspora.

Several books since Ladner's (1973) volume have tackled the ever-evolving issues of research on race and racism. These volumes include Stanfield II and Dennis' *Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods* (1993), Twine and Warren's *Racing Research, Researching Race: Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies* (2000), Zuberi's *Thicker than Blood: How Racial Statistics Lie* (2001), Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva's *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology* (2008), and Stanfield II's *Rethinking Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods* (2011). Each of these volumes cover many issues, and while summarizing all of these issues would provide more information on the methodological issues covered by the authors, we briefly discuss two quantitative issues that can inform the current discussion of why graduate students in Black Studies must receive training in quantitative methods in addition to the traditionally offered historical and qualitative methods.

In addition to sociohistorical discussions of how race developed in global society, these discussions are assisted by incorporating how research was used to support racial ideology and solidify different aspects of racism. One specific issue that can be discussed in quantitative courses for graduate students in Black Studies is how quantitative research was used to solidify and define racial and ethnic groups for political purposes. These discussions can use controversial quantitative studies of the not-so-distant past to serve as examples for how the basic techniques such as means and standard deviations can lead to reification of race and inequality. Additionally, incorporating readings such as Zuberi's (2001) volume on the history of racial statistics can allow faculty to emphasize the importance for graduate students to consider the context and the assumptions of particular quantitative techniques to avoid misinterpretation and misuse of such approaches in their own research. As the era of genetics and genomics increases in importance for discussions in Black Studies (see Best and Chenault in this volume as well as Bliss (2012) and Wailoo, Nelson, and Lee (2012)), discussions of how racial classifications in these areas are reified and modified as different quantitative techniques are used can only better inform and prepare graduate students to extend diasporic discussions into these realms of research.

A second issue that is of importance in graduate training is the conceptualization-operationalization approach to research. In particular, how certain ideas are conceptualized and then operationalized in quantitative research can present learning opportunities for students of how research can lead to misinterpretations of importance aspects of life. For example, throughout the critical methodology volumes mentioned above, these scholars continually assert the importance of discerning individual and societal perspectives of inequality and racism; to point out that racism is a societal reality, not an individual affliction or disease (see Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2013; Byrd, 2011; Thomas, 2014; Thomas & Brunsmma, 2014) as the latter can establish prejudice as the definition of racism, which most scholars in the field of Black Studies would find inaccurate and uncharacteristic of many of the fields' perspectives. Discussing such readings and approaches to quantitative research can assist students with understanding how operationalizing particular concepts using certain quantitative techniques is not only theoretically flawed, but also methodologically careless as proxy measures in datasets cannot always be used for certain concepts in diasporic research.

Each of the above-mentioned volumes assert liberation and agency for scholars of the Diaspora to correctly examine and propose solutions to issues that affect various communities across the globe. These volumes do not dismiss quantitative methods, but embrace them as part of a needed critical approach to diasporic experiences and issues. However, this embrace of critical quantitative approaches cannot simply be the responsibility of established scholars, but also imparted on the budding scholars of the future working to complete their graduate studies in the field. Below, we describe how the University of Louisville's Department of Pan-African Studies incorporates critical approaches to research methods, particularly quantitative methods, to train graduate students to be integral parts of discussions in the field.

Quantitative Methods for Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville

Teaching quantitative methods courses within Black Studies can have its benefits. Perhaps one of the most important benefits, as expounded upon in the previous section, is the ability to make a more relatable link between statistical concepts and issues of the African Diaspora. As professors who have both taken a variety of graduate-level quantitative methods courses and taught graduate-level courses, we have found that relevant examples using statistics to discuss issues and experiences in the diaspora are a key component of quantitative methods that assists in capturing students' interests and providing a clearer understanding of the material. Taking one or more quantitative methods courses in other disciplines does not ensure that Black Studies students gain hands-on experience and meaningful discussions on statistics and, say race or gender that could occur within a Black Studies department. That is, the critical perspectives housed in an interdisciplinary field such as Black Studies can arguably provide a firmer foundation for students to relate quantitative research to the diaspora and the context that is needed for such critical and informed analyses.

By providing quantitative methods courses within the department, we can formulate such examples on the Diaspora. We can also highlight the importance of quantitative literacy, which, according to economic demographer Jane Miller, "involve concepts and skills from English composition and substantive disciplines" (Miller, 2010, p. 334). Most math and statistics courses, particularly at the basic level in both secondary and post-secondary education, are concerned primarily with teaching computational skills and less with actual applications to other fields (Miller, 2010; Steen, 1987, 1990, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2004). Thus, whether a student becomes quantitatively literate is often placed on those who teach more advanced courses within one's field of study. The hallmark of quantitative research methodology for most researchers concerned with African-descended people is its ability to establish meaningful statistical relationships between social and behavioral phenomena. As such, it is imperative that Africana Studies as a discipline ensures the quantitative literacy of its young scholars.

The doctoral program in Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville recently completed its second year. In addition to a research methods course designed to orient graduate students to a variety of different historical and social science methods, the program requires a three-course sequence in research strategies: (1) a sub discipline-based research strategies course where students are required to complete a research course that is either historical, social, or cultural in nature; (2) a qualitative research strategies course; and (3) a quantitative research strategies course. This mixed-methods approach assists with the program's overall goal of training graduate students to work in an interdisciplinary field with multiple approaches to examining the diaspora, its issues, and its people. As graduate students begin to review journal articles as part of the peer-review system, this training will also assist with producing knowledgeable graduates who can actively provide feedback for colleagues in Black Studies and other fields given this mixed-methods training, which arguably improves the field's rigor and ability to examine multiple aspects of the Diaspora.

Given the focus on the incorporation of quantitative methods into graduate training, the overall goal of the quantitative methods course is to provide students with a basis of understanding of the tools needed to conduct introductory-level quantitative research. Importantly, the coursework is split between a two-hour seminar and a one-hour lab session on separate days. This approach allows for both in-depth discussion of the various quantitative approaches students are to grasp during the semester, but also provides a hands-on learning experience to work with quantitative datasets relating to different issues and groups in the Diaspora. Students become familiar with datasets, their codebooks, and other pertinent information by accessing data from the data repository of the University of Michigan's Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) (ICPSR, 2014). This repository contains a plethora of national and international publically available datasets. Assignments are designed for students to continue working with the same datasets throughout the semester to become familiar with the different techniques that can be used and questions that can or cannot be answered using quantitative approaches. Students are introduced to the type or types of questions that can be answered using each technique instead of simply teaching about the specific quantitative technique. This approach arguably assists with developing students' quantitative literacy by orienting students to not default to the most advanced quantitative methods, but to first solidify the questions they seek to answer and then identify the specific quantitative technique that is most appropriate to answer those questions. This approach also seeks to limit misuse of quantitative research on issues and people in the Diaspora that produced the critical responses by scholars mentioned above, but arguably is still in need of increased attention in graduate training to limit such misuse in the future. Lastly, students must complete a research project using one of the datasets from the course where they write a short article-length paper that carries out a full quantitative analysis and responds to a set research question or small group of related questions. These projects are oriented to an issue or group of people in the Diaspora, and give students the opportunity to independently work toward completing a small-scale quantitative research project.

Concluding Remarks

In summation, this article explores the importance of the inclusion of quantitative methodology in Black Studies' doctoral programs. This discussion is quite timely, as the discipline currently is seeing recent growth in programs granting doctoral degrees. Although a more in-depth examination of methodology curricula is needed, an initial analysis of methodology curricula offered by departments suggests that a detailed discussion of the importance of statistics in the discipline is long overdue not only within departments but also across the field. It is imperative that, as a discipline, we produce future scholars who are able to produce and comprehend statistical results for their own research agendas as well as for the purposes of combating any erroneous, statistically driven assumptions of African-descended people. Equipping our scholars with these tools will bolster the research on the African Diaspora.

Within this discussion exists a much larger question on the role other disciplines have in the knowledge dissemination within the discipline. As higher education institutions, grant-funding agencies, and policy-driven initiatives increasingly tout interdisciplinary research agendas, an honest assessment of the discipline and its preparation of scholars for this research climate are needed. What can Black Studies add to statistics and other fields, such as the “hard sciences”? Others have rightfully posed such questions, such as Akoma and Johnson (2010), who stated the following:

To our knowledge, Black Studies has not yet taken on the task to generate students with widely diverse skill sets related to fields like engineering, medicine, architecture, and so on. This bridging of disciplines can foster a sense of commitment to Black communities and create space for the skills to be used to empower Black communities directly (p. 285).

As a discipline created from activism, incorporating various methodological approaches and collaborating with other fields of study could have the potential to increase on-the-ground research and policy opportunities in a way that can greater impact the communities we serve while encompassing like-minded students in researchers in fields one may never conceive of collaboration.

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Endnote

¹ Two programs we refer to here, Yale and Harvard, grant doctoral degrees jointly. Programs where the doctoral degree is housed technically within another department, as in the case of Virginia Tech for example, were not explored for this article.