Black Professional Women in Predominately White Universities

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Many Black women who choose to pursue advanced degrees and work in predominately White settings find themselves alone. As more minority women enter a workplace, minority group cohesiveness does not heighten; rather there is a growing sense of isolation, suspiciousness, tension and stress in relationships among the minorities (Cox, 1965; Fleming, 1981; Gibbs, 1973; Westbrooke, Miyares, and Roberts, 1978; Wirth, 1951). This stress—and the potential for the development of an interpersonal rift—is most likely exacerbated in professional settings by the tendency of majority colleagues to compare minority women personally as well as professionally. The groundwork for increased feelings of competitiveness among the few is laid.

In addition, Black women often are caught in a continual struggle against preconceived notions held by majority group colleagues. White colleagues, looking through the singular Black female before them, maintain perceptions based on stereotypes or past dealings with other Black women. They respond to those perceptions rather than the person before them.

For example, White colleagues sometimes express surprise when Black women present fresh ideas. The more sensitive ones acknowledge the ideas and the presenter; the less sensitive do not hear the comments at all unless a White staff member repeats the statement. Recognition for the contribution then goes to the White colleague.

The cumulative stresses of interacting with majority and minority colleagues, as well as the normal strains associated with being a service-oriented professional, have potential to overwhelm. Nevertheless, Black professional women have survived, thrived and achieved success. This study addresses how Black female psychologists (who share a workplace with relatively few Black colleagues and relatively many White ones) have done this. It examines the subjects' interpersonal style with colleagues in the workplace; the colleagues' reactions to that style; feelings of alienation; and levels of job satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Thirty Black Ph.D. female psychologists working in predominantly White university settings were sent copies of the questionnaire packet. It included a letter of introduction; four Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation—Behavior Scale (FIRO-B) (Schutz, 1967); Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation—Feelings Scale (FIRO-F) (Schutz, 1967); the Occupational Environment Scale (OES); the Personal Strain Questionnaire (PSQ); the Personal Resources Questionnaire (PRQ) (Osipow and Spokane, 1983); and the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) (Weiss, Dawis, England, and Lofquist, 1967).

In addition to completing the above instruments, participants were requested to ask three majority member colleagues within their work environment to complete the other FIRO-B instruments with responses that they supposed she would give.

Results

Of the 30 packets distributed, 15 were returned. Five major universities were represented in the sample. Years spent in present position ranged from 1 to 15. Ages ranged from 30 to 48.

Mean Scores

	FIRO-F	FIRO-B1	FIRO-B2
Ie	5.7	3.0	4.0
Iw	4.1	1.4	3.5
Ce	2.1	4.1	3.1
Cw	5.3	2.0	3.2
Ae	4.3	3.7	4.1
Aw	3.6	5.0	5.5

FIRO-B1 = participants' mean scores
FIRO-B2 = mean scores of colleagues perceptions

	Raw Scores	Percentile
OES:†		
I. Role Overload	27.0	69
II. Role Insufficiency	19.8	30
III. Role Ambiguity	19.6	60
IV. Role Boundary	18.1	36
V. Responsibility	22.8	44
VI. Physical Environment	13.7	41
PSQ:		
VII. Vocational Strain	18.6	50
VIII. Psychological Strain	19.4	38
IX. Interpersonal Strain	21.0	59
X. Physical Strain	23.1	65
PRQ:		
XI. Recreation	28.3	56
XII. Physical Coping	29.3	67
XIII. Social Support	42.2	54
XIV. Rational/Cognitive Coping	39.6	69

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High scores on OES and PSQ indicate levels of discomfort and less of a personal fit to the work environment, while high scores on the PRQ indicate more of a tendency to use several coping strategies to overcome stress.

	Mean Raw Scores	Percentile
MSQ:†		
Ability Utilization	21.0	75
Achievement	22.8	90
Activity	22.4	90
Advancement	15.4	30
Authority	17.3	55
Company Policies	17.4	30
Compensation	13.6	12
Co-Workers	17.1	15
Creativity	21.1	85
Independence	20.7	90
Moral Values	23.4	80
Recognition	17.7	35
Responsibility	20.6	85

High scores on OES and PSQ indicate levels of discomfort and less of a personal fit to the work environment, while high scores on the PRQ indicate more of a tendency to use several coping strategies to overcome stress.

The FIRO scales provided information about the interpersonal styles of the population and the perceptions of their colleagues. The participants were found to have much stronger concern for the well-being of others, as well as a greater desire to be seen as significant and to be cared for, than they reveal. Although participants were found to perceive themselves as infrequently expressing the desire for inclusion, their White colleagues perceived them as doing so more often. This also held true for the expression of intimacy.

Participants perceived themselves as somewhat comfortable taking on leadership roles when the need arises. They also expressed a desire to be more independent in decision-making. By contrast, White colleagues perceived participants as assuming leadership to a lesser extent than participants saw themselves doing. White colleagues also perceived participants as expressing a need for more structure and guidance than participants thought they were expressing.

In addition, participants' scores indicated a tendency to distrust the competency and guidance of others, but, somewhat paradoxically, a tendency to need confidence and respect from others relative to their abilities.

All percentile ranks resulting from the OES, PSQ, and PRQ fell within the average range. OES scores indicated that the biggest problems were role overload and role ambiguity.

High scorers on role overload tended to report a poor fit between their talents and their job. They also report a lack of progress or future in their career. For them, needs for recognition and success are not being met, and they report boredom and/or underutilization.

High scorers on role ambiguity report a poor sense of knowing what they are expected to do, how they should be spending their time and how they will be evaluated. They report not knowing where to begin on new projects, and sensing conflicting demands from supervisors. Role boundary was an issue that participants reported as precipitating less of a struggle. It has to do with conflicting role demands and loyalties.

PSQ scores showed the participants' primary struggle involved physical strain. There were reports of physical illness and poor self-care habits. High scorers frequently reported worries about health and physical symptoms: unplanned weight changes, overuse of alcohol, and disturbed sleep. They also reported fatigue. The psychological strain scale measured the extent of psychological adjustment and/or mood problems.

PRQ scores indicated that the most used means of coping was rational/cognitive. High scorers report a systematic approach to problem-solving: they think through the consequences of their choices and can identify important elements of problems they encounter.

The second most used coping mechanism was physical: regular exercise, eight hours of sleep a night, relaxing techniques, and the avoidance of harmful substances. The third ranked mechanism was recreation and the last, social support. However, it must be remembered that participants' percentile ranks did not fall outside the normal range found for a norm group representing a large number of professionals in various working environments.

MSQ results indicated that participants were most professionally satisfied in the areas of achievement, activity, independence, social status, creativity, responsibility, moral values, social services, ability utilization, and variety. They were least satisfied about compensation, co-workers, company policies, and advancement. The items are defined below:

1. Ability utilization. The chance to do something that makes use of my abilities.
2. Achievement. The feeling of accomplishment I get from the job.
3. Activity. Being able to keep busy all the time.
4. Advancement. The chances for advancement on this job.
5. Company policies and practices. The way company policies are put into practice.
6. Compensation. My pay and the amount of work I do.
7. Co-workers. The way my co-workers get along with each other.
8. Creativity. The chance to try my own methods of doing the job.
9. Independence. The chance to work alone on the job.
10. Moral Values. Being able to do things that don't go against my conscience.
11. Responsibility. The freedom to use my own judgment.
12. Social Service. The chance to do things for other people.
13. Social Status. The chance to be "somebody" in the community.
14. Variety. The chance to do different things from time to time.

The information obtained from this study should provide important information for Black professional women on university campuses, and to those in graduate programs as well as in working environments where there are only a few minorities. Information obtained could also be used to develop structured support groups and workshops in which Black professional women could begin to work together to share and generate alternatives to correct existing problems. This, in turn, should lead to less tension, higher productivity, and increased job satisfaction for professional Black women in predominately White universities.

Note: (Resulting trends do seem to indicate a need for further study with a larger sample size. Packets will continue to be distributed and if anyone has an interest in participating, please contact the authors.)

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