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Cultural Capital and its Impact on the Career Experiences of African American Managers

Trammell L. Bristol

Abstract: This paper summarizes the result of a qualitative study where the purpose was to explore the factors which facilitated the career development of African American managers. Based on these findings, recommendations for practice are suggested in HRD and adult education.

Introduction

There has been discussion on race and gender in the field of adult education (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Guy, 1999; Hayes and Colin, 1994; Sheared & Sissel, 2001), and the workplace (Barrett, Cervero & Johnson-Bailey, 2003; Bierema, 1998; Bristol, 2005; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2005). This body of literature on race and gender in the workplace has similar findings. Bierema's (1998) edited work on women's career development highlights the discrepancies for women within the traditional career development models. More recently, Alfred (2001) examined the career development of African-American female faculty members in white universities. She found that these women develop strategies to navigate within the dominant culture. As a result, this body of literature highlights the exclusion of women's experiences, as well as African-American women, from the mainstream career development literature.

Similarly, the small body of literature on the career development of blacks in the workplace highlights that their experiences are different from the dominant culture. The literature reveals that there are barriers that hinder the career progression of blacks based on racism and factors that ultimately result in power differentials (Barrett, Cervero and Johnson-Bailey, 2003; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2005). While there are some minorities who have achieved success in the workplace, a power discrepancy still remains. This alludes to the underlying question, for those who have made it: what factors contributed to their success in the workplace? This paper is the result of a prior research study where the purpose was to explore the experiences of black managers, including career development, in the learning organization (Bristol, 2005). The purpose of this paper, however, is to focus more specifically on the factors which facilitated the career experiences of these black managers.¹

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Bourdieu's construct of capital. These two theories complement one another because each explores dimensions of power and how it impacts those outside the realm of the dominant culture. First, CRT, as a theoretical framework, incorporates the historical and social implications of race, and critiques power relations in society based on structural factors of race (Carbado & Gulati, 2003; Guy, 1999; Ladson-Billing, 1999; Peterson,

¹ In this research study the terms "black" and "African-American" will be used interchangeably, because throughout the literature some authors and different participants in this study used the term "black" whereas others used "African American".

1999). There are several central tenets to CRT which include: (a) race is a social construction that has been invented by the dominant culture to categorize and subjugate individuals who are not part of the dominant culture; (b) whiteness functions as a system of privilege and (c) race impacts and determines how marginalized individuals will fare in society.

Second, French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of "cultural capital" is useful in understanding how people from marginalized groups based on factors such as race, social class, or gender, make it into professional classes, through the process of having access to what he refers to as cultural capital. Cultural capital is comprised of the attributes an individual possesses based on the constructs of power. These attributes are valued by the dominant culture and help marginalized individuals navigate within the environment. Bourdieu would explain that those who have been elevated into positions of power (i.e., the ranks of management) have had the cultural capital to do so.

These theories converge because Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital enhances the framework of CRT. While CRT delineates why racial equality has not resulted in the U.S.; our understanding needs to be furthered whereby we explore why certain individuals have made it within corporate America. As a result, since the managers who participated in this study have had some measure of success, understanding why this has resulted is important to analyzing the findings of this research study.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study informed by the basic interpretive approach. According to Merriam (2002), a basic interpretive approach is an interactive process examining how people interacting with the world on a daily basis create meaning (Merriam, 2001). A purposeful sample was used and thirteen black managers agreed to participate. Within these face-to-face interviews the following was explored: a) the managers' career entry experience; and b) factors that prepared them for careers in corporate America

After the interview, the data were transcribed to uncover emerging themes. In addition, information was collected on the participant's employer such as, their diversity plan and career development programs; this information was integrated into the data collection.

Findings

The findings in this section will be presented in three main themes. The level of cultural capital among these managers varied, but each possessed a prominent level of cultural capital. The findings revealed that: a) these managers gained cultural capital through their prior educational experiences; b) utilized observation within the workplace as means to gain informal learning and c) utilized mentors to increase their cultural capital.

Prior Educational Grooming and its Influence on Cultural Capital

Each possessed at least an undergraduate degree and prior to gaining entry into the workplace interacted in higher education settings with members of the dominant

culture. They discussed that this experience helped them gain a better understanding of the dominant culture.

However, there was a striking theme which emerged among the participants. There were seven younger managers who had fewer than 18 years of work experience and entered the workforce in the late 1980s and 1990s. This younger group learned how to navigate the dominant culture from their early experiences in school (i.e., kindergarten through 12th grade). These managers reported this as an advantage which prepared them to interact comfortably within corporate America. For example, Clarice stated that her parents stressed the importance of getting a good education. While she grew up in an urban area, her parents sent her to an affluent private school with members of the dominant culture. She stated:

I started at a rather exclusive school, in the District of Columbia, where they sent all the politicians' kids in Georgetown. It was a good experience for me . . . What it gave me access to was that I was just as smart as anybody else.

Clarice's early educational experience was positive for her career, because she learned skills that helped her interact more readily with the dominant culture. Charles was another participant who had been educated with members of the dominant culture. His parents moved to a suburban area that was predominately white because the school district was rated better than the surrounding urban district. His parent's motive was to provide Charles with a top-notch education. He stated:

I went to an all white high school, an all white college, and work for an all white company. So I've sort of been trained, through high school to deal in that type of society. So it wasn't a big switch for me going into corporate America . . . So I think that had a positive impact on me as far as being able to perform in corporate America because I was use to it.

Charles felt that his educational experiences had given him a distinct advantage. This advantage enabled him to interact comfortably with the dominant culture, thus facilitating his ability to function in corporate America. In fact, the managers who were unable to have early educational experiences with members of the dominant culture, now stressed the significance of this with their children. As a parent, Barry (one of the older managers) felt that a quality education was needed in order to compete in this society. He based his rationale on his experience in the workplace. He stated:

I would never recommend for my child to go to a black school throughout his entire life. I think that's a fatal mistake. He needs to understand white people . . . It's going to be white people around you, and you need to understand how they think, and how they act.

In conclusion, all of the managers stressed the importance of having prior experience with the dominant culture. This experience enabled them to interact more effectively within the workplace. In addition, they reported that this experience facilitated their careers because the dominant culture controls the workplace.

Informal Learning and its Significance to Gaining Cultural Capital

In order for the managers to gain the knowledge needed to succeed in the workplace, they participated in various forms of informal learning. According to Watkins and Marsick (1997), informal learning takes place in one's everyday experience (including the workplace) and it is unique to the individual. Two forms of informal

learning that these managers valued were observing the culture within the workplace and participating in mentorships.

Observation as integral to gaining cultural capital. All of the managers engaged in informal learning as a means to understand the workings of corporate America. This ultimately facilitated their career development because they became astute in observing their environment. All of the managers reported that observing the workings of the environment was integral to uncovering the unspoken norms. In fact, the managers expressed the importance of understanding these norms in order to operate effectively in the workplace. For instance, informal learning was integral to Denver's understanding of the unspoken rules of career development in corporate America, such as how individuals actually progress in their careers. By observing the careers of those within the organization, Denver found that job performance was not the only factor in career progression; there was a networking aspect that he needed to foster. He reported:

Human Resource people know a lot of stuff, they know who's retiring, they know about the organizational changes that's coming in six months. They know a lot of the information that's critical to you making the next move, or making an adjustment in your current role

Denver uncovered an unspoken career development component that facilitated his understanding of how to manage his career with his present employer. In addition, other managers discussed the importance of observing incumbent senior managers (to facilitate their ascent or progression in management). For example, Debra reported that her initial mission when she entered any organization was to understand what was valued in a senior manager. This understanding was integral to her strategy of progressing further in management. She observed various senior managers who were held in high regard, in the organization, in an attempt to discover their key to success. She stated:

I do this mental game when I'm in a room with executives . . . I sit and think, "what is it about this person that the company thought to make that person an executive?" Is this a behavior that I want to try and adopt? So I've been very purposeful with what I embody.

Since Debra knew that her goal was to progress higher in the management ranks, she observed senior managers. In summary, these managers reported that observation was an important learning activity; specifically, they learned how to be effective managers by incorporating some of the observed strengths of other successful managers.

Using mentors to gain cultural capital. Learning through mentors was the most integral career development component for these managers. Mentors are important for individuals who are charting their way into unknown territory. Since the participants had aspirations to enter management, it was more arduous because their parents did not possess the cultural capital to transfer to them. As a result, once they entered corporate America they had to locate individuals who would be willing to assist them with their career development.

While, these managers had more than one informal mentor, they used these mentors to help them develop a better understanding of the organization. One major theme that emerged was the importance of having mentors from the dominant culture, specifically white male mentors. These mentorships are called cross cultural mentors because they occur between people from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. Geri

credits her career development to being mentored by a white male. She felt that the knowledge that he imparted to her was valuable to her career development. She reported:

[This white male mentor] would teach me how to maneuver the organization from a white perspective, which was quite helpful...I think it's as important to have somebody that's not the same race or a white male if you can that supports you. Because they can maneuver you through the organization quicker than somebody of color can.

Geri credits this mentorship, with a white male, as integral to her career; this mentor's position within the dominant culture provided her with more cultural capital. Similarly, Anna conceptualized the significance of having cross-cultural mentors within corporate America. She stressed:

I think that you do need them (a mentor from the dominant culture) as an employee in an environment where you are a minority. You need to find people who will support you. Not just other minorities, but people [from the dominant culture] who respect you and your skills and you as an individual. Someone who will give you information they may have.

Anna felt that it was important as a minority to have members of the dominant culture who would support a minority person. In conclusion, informal learning was a process that allowed these managers to become socialized into corporate America. They were able to obtain the unspoken norms and rules of corporate America through other means (i.e., mentors and observation). This enabled them to gain the cultural capital they needed because these managers were not privileged to be a part of the in-group (i.e., the dominant culture). Thus, informal learning served as a means which facilitated the career development of these managers.

Discussion and Implications for Adult Education

In order to be successful in corporate America, there is a "code" that these managers had to decipher; this code refers to the unstated, preferred conduct and rules for working in this environment. Twelve of the thirteen participants did not have parents who were employed in corporate America. Thus the majority of the participants did not have a parent who could inform them concerning the rules for corporate America. Even though Denver reported that his father worked in corporate America, he too expressed difficulty with the unstated rules.

Therefore, to become a contender for a professional position in corporate America, they had to possess some level of cultural capital. Cultural capital is important when a person from a marginalized group needs to gain access to the realms of the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1986; Carbado & Gulati, 2003). First, each of the managers possessed some level of cultural capital; however, it appears that the parents of the younger managers groomed them to gain more cultural capital with their early educational experiences. As other researchers have discussed, many parents, like the parents of the younger managers in this study felt their children would indeed become better prepared by attending school with the dominant culture (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1999; Peterson, 1999). Their rationale was that there were generally more educational resources made available in such schools. Thus, early educational experiences enable a child to learn more readily and gain knowledge about the dominant culture that will help them compete in later life pursuits.

Second, informal learning was significant to these participants and enabled them to gain more cultural capital. Therefore, since the role of informal learning was integral to the career development of these participants, this needs to be an emphasis of adult educators. Mentorships are integral to the career development of any individual (Barrett et al., 2003; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2005) and mentors need to be educated on how this process works best. Cross-cultural mentorships are very often integral when marginalized individuals are trying to participate in a setting that is unfamiliar to them (Barrett, et al., 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998). Therefore, members of the dominant culture must be educated on how to mentor African Americans and other people of color.

Therefore, mentors need to be open to sharing their knowledge with someone who possesses less cultural capital, especially since they are from a different cultural background. What remains true is that mentors transfer cultural capital to outsiders; this is one way that the structures can be softened which hinder the career progression of African Americans. Furthermore, as Lisa Delpit (1996) argues explicitly teaching people the rules of the culture of power helps people navigate systems better and increases cultural capital. This is as true in corporate America as it is in educational systems, and explicitly teaching this as part of career development is crucial, so aspiring African Americans are not left to figure out the rules alone.

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