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Recommended Citation

Cornileus, Tonya Harris (2011). "“I'm a Black man and I'm doing this job very well”: A Critical Examination of the Impact of Racism on the Career Development of African American Professional Men in Corporate America," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/21>

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“I’m a Black man and I’m doing this job very well”: A Critical Examination of the Impact of Racism on the Career Development of African American Professional Men in Corporate America

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Keywords: Adult Learning; African American Professional Men; Critical Race Theory; Culturally Relevant Career Development; Gendered Racism

Abstract: This is a critical qualitative study grounded in the tripartite frame of Black masculinity, critical race theory and career development theory. The study revealed that African American professional men experience repressive and facilitative structures due to gendered racism, which impacts their careers in ways that are different from their White male counterparts and African American professional women. The study adds to the small body of literature in adult education on career development and race and responds to the call for more culturally relevant career development.

Background

United States companies (corporate America) are far more diverse today than at any other time in the nation’s history. African American professionals’ participation in corporate America, like the participation of other professionals of color and women, increased tremendously as a result of the civil rights movement and ensuing legislation. By 2050, African Americans are projected to make up 14 percent of the U.S. workforce, albeit due largely to the growth of African American women’s participation (Toossi, 2006). Even with increased access and representation, African Americans continue to encounter racism and disparate treatment, which impedes their career development (Barrett, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; James, 2000; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999). African American men appear to be especially vulnerable, but their experiences are not well delineated in career development literature. When researchers have focused on African Americans, they have tended to treat African Americans as a monolithic group or delve more specifically into how the intersection of race and gender impacts the career development of African American women. Many of the issues facing African American men are different from those faced by African American women (Bingham & Ward, 2001). The universal approach to understanding African Americans’ career development experiences is problematic because it has rendered invisible the range of experiences germane to African American professional men in corporate America.

African American professional men’s career development deserves attention for three reasons. First, the numbers indicate they are in trouble. Not only do they lag behind their White counterparts in workforce participation, promotions and pay, they also trail African American women in many of the same measures with one exception – median earnings. Second, African American men encounter gendered racism, meaning they are subjects of prejudice, negative stereotypes and oppression because they are both Black and men – “blackmen” – a multidimensional understanding of their single social position (Mutua, 2006, p. 18). They experience covert gendered racism in the hiring process. As “soft skills” – defined broadly as interaction skills and motivation skills – have become increasingly more important to employers, these elusive criteria have proven detrimental to African American men in gaining access to jobs

(Fugiero, 2006; Moss & Tilly, 1996; 2001). Fugiero's conclusion that African American men have less of a chance of getting into occupations requiring higher levels of soft skills signals trouble for their ongoing career development.

The third reason is because there is a dearth of research focusing exclusively on them and their career development. Studies exist that focus on both African American men and women collectively (e.g., Cobbs & Turnock, 2003). However, those studies do not distill the distinct career development experiences of African American men. More is available on African American women's career experiences in part because feminist scholars (e.g., Alfred, 2001; Bierema, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998) have led the way in critiquing dominant career development theories and positing new ways of theorizing career development to reflect the experiences of women. There is no comparable body of literature that relates to the unique career development experiences of African American professional men. At the time this study was conducted, a search of the literature yielded only three other studies (Goodly, 2007; Humphrey, 2007; Taylor, 2004) that focused on some aspect of African American professional men's career development experiences – and these are recent, which indicates this is a phenomenon of study that is just beginning to command the attention of researchers.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. Four research questions guided the study:

- 1) How do African American professional men describe their career development?
- 2) How has racism shaped the career development of African American professional men?
- 3) What factors influence the career development of African American professional men?
- 4) What strategies do African American professional men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development?

Theoretical Framework

The tripartite frame of Black masculinity, critical race theory (CRT), and career development theory was used for this study. I could not discuss credibly the present-day experiences Black men encounter with gendered racism without knowing how Black masculinity was conceptualized and changed over time. Masculinity is a socially constructed rather than biologically determined phenomenon (Andersen & Collins, 2004; Bederman, 1996; Bush, 1999; Mutua, 2006). Bound up in definitions of manhood are the interlocking positional characteristics of race, gender, class and other socially significant dimensions that have the cumulative effect of describing a man's hierarchical standing and experiences in America. Specifically, the construction of White men's masculinity is different from the racialized and marginalized masculinity of African American men in the United States. Furthermore, there is some evidence that African American men hold distinct definitions of manhood than what is propagated by the hegemonic White masculinity model. The gap in how manhood is conceptualized can produce internal conflict and problematic behaviors and outcomes for African American men.

The second underpinning of the study was CRT. Race and racism are inextricably woven into the fabric of American life. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) found, "race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States – [and this fact] is easily

documented in the statistical and demographic data” (2006, p. 12). The core tenets of CRT affirm: 1) racism is rife in America; 2) people of color have a voice shaped by their distinct experiences with racism; 3) certain civil rights concepts, such as color blindness, meritocracy, and objectivity, are ideologies that have contributed to the backlash against race-conscious redress by camouflaging and justifying the exclusion of people of color to positions of power; and Whites, even the well-intentioned, support racial equality except when as Taylor (1998, p. 124) put it, “black progress exacts or imposes a personal cost to their position of power and privilege” (Shuford, 2001; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 1998).

The third theoretical cornerstone of this study was career development theories. Understanding career development theories and their usefulness to African Americans is central to this study. The problem is that there is a paucity of research on career development and race. Regarding the attention paid to gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, Leong and Hartung (2000) state, “career psychology pays little, if any, attention to cultural factors and career development theories have traditionally held relevance for only a small segment of the population, namely, white middle-class, heterosexual men” (p. 214).

Research Design

A critical qualitative research design was chosen for three reasons: (1) it builds on the basic interpretive model of qualitative research by raising questions about the influence of race and gender; (2) it keeps the spotlight on power relationships and how those relationships advance the interests of one group while oppressing others; and (3) it seeks to give voice to those who have been silenced or marginalized (Merriam, 2002). Semi-structured interviewing was the primary data collection method and included both individual interviews and focus group interviews. Purposeful sampling yielded 14 African American men who held positions in mid-management or higher in their respective companies, representing various disciplines and industries. Participants ranged in age from 35 to 55; all had a minimum of a four-year college degree, with the majority also having attained graduate degrees; and all had at least 10 years experience in corporate America, the average being approximately 25 years experience. Data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method.

An important note in the research design is the acknowledgement of my positionality and subjectivities as an African American professional woman working in corporate America, a feminist, and an adult educator. Alridge (2003), an African American historian of education whose research focuses on the education of Black people, finds it unnecessary to detach himself from the community he studies. He finds that rigorous scholarship includes not only an acknowledgement of subjectivities, but it also includes consistent methodological approaches such as triangulation of sources and careful explanation of arguments supported by data.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings revealed that African American professional men experience both repressive structures and facilitative structures as they negotiate the impact of racism on their career development.

Repressive Structures

The four repressive structures found to constrain the career development of African American professional men included: 1) stereotypes attributed to African American men; 2) subjective and disparate career development practices; 3) differentiated opportunities for the

acquisition of socio-political capital; and 4) changing priorities in workplace diversity. First, one of the most prominent repressive structures cited among participants was the stereotypes attributed to African American men, which served as the basis for discrimination in their career development. The overwhelmingly negative categorizations of Black men led to behaviors and actions by the participants, their White counterparts, and those in superior positions who had position power to effect their career development. Participants' stories about stereotypes and the impact on career development reflect the men's conscious realization of their positionality as Black males in corporate America, the responsibility they have to "represent" other African Americans, particularly African American men, and the sense of isolation they feel often being the only one in the room. Ten of the fourteen participants shared at least one experience of being denied employment, promotions, or inclusion into social networks because of stereotypes attributed to Black men.

The second repressive structure was subjective and disparate career development practices, which include a company's policies or practices governing performance and succession management; hiring, promotion and termination; and selection for key assignments and developmental experiences. The findings revealed companies' policies and practices were not systemized and lacked objectivity, transparency and accountability. White males were consistently top choices for strategic assignments, leadership development, and promotions.

The ability of African American professional men to make their White counterparts comfortable with them was an important factor in the third repressive structure of differentiated acquisition of socio-political capital. Participants admitted that as first-generation corporate executives, they often learned about informal social networks and the unwritten rules through trial and error while many of their White counterparts had fathers or other family members as early role models who taught them about corporate America and how to acquire socio-political capital. Participants also shared stories of the evidence of the good-old-boy network, tangible examples of when their White peers gained access to information that was unavailable to them or were invited to after work social events that they were not invited to attend. These represented African American men's experiences of being in the out-group. Parks-Yancy (2006) found that Black men were the least advantaged from access to social capital resources.

The fourth repressive structure was the changing priorities in workplace diversity. Approximately 40 years ago, workplace recruiters aggressively sought African American men to fill their corporate rolls, often enticing them with elevated titles and attractive salaries (Collins, 1997). Today, African American men are the least likely hired or promoted (Parks-Yancy, 2006). Participants said companies needed to have an authentic interest and commitment to a diverse workforce, and the general consensus was that their companies did not have any plausible strategies in place to attract, hire and retain African American men.

Facilitative Structures

Despite the challenges participants' faced in their career development, each has been able to advance to mid-management or higher in their companies. Many enjoy a great deal of autonomy, are responsible for other employees and budgets, and are expected to develop and execute strategy that has impact to their companies' bottom lines. Practically, these 14 participants have learned to employ strategies that allow them to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development and achieve career mobility and satisfaction. Through their stories, five facilitative structures emerged explicitly or implicitly: 1) the ability to build and leverage

key relationships; 2) bicultural strategies; 3) self-efficacy and personal agency; 4) education and continuous learning; and 5) spirituality and purpose.

The ability to build and leverage key relationships was cited more often than any other structure as a method for navigating around the destructive impact of racism to achieve positive career development. The relationships mentioned most often were family, mentors/sponsors, and other African American role models – several of whom were Black male role models. Through these relationships, the men established their identities, developed their agency and work ethic, learned about corporate culture, defined their value systems, and garnered support and guidance to navigate their careers.

Second, bicultural strategies help African American men to deal with the double consciousness of living in two life worlds – one centered in the Black culture and the other the White male dominated culture of corporate America. Finding those safe spaces internal and external to their organizations where they could express their cultural identity and receive affirmation proved to be helpful to participants.

The third facilitative structure was self-efficacy and personal agency. This structure reflects the men's belief in their capabilities and in their self-determinism to be the masters of their own destinies. From the findings, the attributes associated with self-efficacy and personal agency included: 1) ambitious; 2) competitive; 3) strategic; and 4) adaptable/resilient. Fourth, many of the participants described their career development as iterative and education and continuous learning as essential. The findings revealed that participants engaged in formal and informal learning throughout their careers. Lastly, the fifth facilitative structure revealed the altruistic motivators and rewards the participants attributed to their career satisfaction. Spirituality and purpose is about how the men make meaning of their lives – and in this case their time spent in developing their careers. This structure included: 1) staying true to self/authenticity; 2) developing others; 3) making a difference and leaving a legacy; and 4) giving back to the community, which reflects the Africentric value of collectivism.

Conclusion

From the findings, I concluded four things: (1) personal identity and cultural identity influence the career development of African American professional men; (2) gendered racism constrains the career development of African American professional men in ways not experienced by White men or African American women; (3) African American professional men's careers develop through internal and external organizational resources and through formal and informal learning; and (4) African American professional men learn to employ a range of strategies to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. This study confirmed that race still matters and racism is more than perception. African American men encounter racism and disparate treatment in corporate America because of the cumulative effect of being Black and male.

Implications for Adult Education

This study has practical and theoretical implications for adult education. Practically, the findings from this study tell us much about how we should approach career development in a multicultural workforce. The study confirms that without intervention corporate America is not an inherently inclusive environment. Rather, the structural ideologies and practices promulgate White male privilege and cultural assimilation. Trying to apply the traditional career development theories universally across all audiences is not only outdated, it is insensitive. This

study reiterates the need for culturally relevant career development – career development that takes into account unique social positions and cultural values of African American professional men and other women and minorities. From this study, practitioners gain a better understanding of the repressive structures on African American professional men’s careers in corporate America and the facilitative structures of African American men’s careers. The findings suggest there is much work to do in examining current career development practices and designing new strategies to ensure they are objective and transparent and that managers have accountability for implementing them equitably and ethically.

Theoretically, this study adds to the small body of literature on career development and race. I recommend more critical research on the repressive structures identified in this study and on generational differences that may exist between first-generation African American executives and the generations who have entered since then.

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