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African American Women in the Workplace: Models of Career Development

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Abstract: Research and literature addressing the career development of African American women in the workplace are scant, relative to the dominant group whose patterns of work and living are generalized to those of Black women. This session will discuss and critique traditional theories of career development and their relevance to our understanding of Black women's career development in White dominated organizations. Current emerging and more appropriate models will also be discussed.

African American Women in the Workplace: Models of Career Development

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006), Black women are projected to increase participation in the labor force by 16.5% between 2006 and 2016. However, an increase in their presence does not minimize the barriers for success. The Fact Finding Report of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) noted disparities in pay scale, significant underrepresentation in senior level management positions, and a disproportionate number of Black women connected to jobs with no career path, to name a few of the challenges Black women face in the workplace. Research and literature addressing the career development of Black women in the workplace is scant, relative to the dominant discourse. Additionally, traditional career development theorists are critiqued because their research largely focused on the career development of white male populations. This research roundtable will discuss and critique theories of career development and models for Black women.

Themes

One theme presented in the research addressing Black women's career development is the role of biculturalism. Alfred (2001) examined the experiences of Black women in predominantly white institutions and particularly the factors attributed to success. Her research found that success for these women was accomplished by the participants creating a personal definition of self and discarding stereotypical images, creating a safe environment for affirmation, knowing the implied and explicit rules of the academic organization, maintaining a presence in their specific area and institution, and preserving systems that refuel and energize as they navigate their careers in white dominated institutions. Bell's (1990) research paralleled the framework of bicultural identity as a lens to examine Black women's career development. However, Bell found that Black career women used compartmentalization to maneuver their bicultural identity which allowed them to maintain a work identity at work and their home identity at home. Johnson-Bailey and Tisdell (1998) used Farmer and associates (1997) social cognitive theoretical underpinnings as a framework for examining their personal career development narratives. They found three areas that present possible challenges for women of color: structured inequalities, stereotypical images of women of color, and psychological barriers. These themes offer pertinent areas of consideration when addressing Black women's career development.

Theoretical Frameworks

There are two theoretical models presented for their relevance to Black women's career development. Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002), propose the ecological framework for counseling women of color on career related topics. Elements of this framework include being client-centered and understanding the importance of the client's interaction with the environment. Specifically, this framework includes being individually focused, the *microsystem* level, and understanding the importance of the client's interaction with the environment, the *macrosystem* level. Congruent with the environmental interaction component from the ecological model, Alfred (2001) proposed an internal/external framework to explore Black women's career development. The framework consists of three circles with the core representing the person's bicultural life structure. Moving from the center outward, the next category is labeled the internal career or psychological dimension. This space identifies the personal resources gained or inherent by the person of color to fuel individual power, initiation, and motivation when addressing the external system. The last segment, identified as the external career, or structural dimensions, is embedded in the organization of affiliation which dictates expectations and defines the norms. These two models provide a fluid combination for examining career development for Black women.

Significance

This research roundtable will discuss these models of career development for women of color, specifically for African American women and additional models for consideration. As moderator, I seek to gain additional perspectives on theoretical frameworks and empirical research on this topic. Researchers (e.g. Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005; Thomas & Alderfer, 1989) made a call to include more voices of women and women of color, in career development research and literature in the field. This roundtable seeks to answer the call and reenergize the dialogue on this timely and relevant topic for adult educators and researchers.

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