

21st Annual Day of Scholarship

The Impact of Race, Gender, and Class on Career Development: Perceptions of Five African American Women

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Presentation Agenda

- Why African American Women?
- Purpose Statement
- Research Questions
- Conceptual Framework
- Ideological Lens
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- Participants
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African American Women

- **Unique circumstances and lived experiences**
 - Based from centuries of oppression, subjugation, and segregation.
 - Confronted by matters of invisibility, sexual harassment, racial slurs, discriminatory practices, and stereotypes (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).
- **Employment**
 - Dictated by oppression based on race, gender, and class.
 - Limited to positions that were labor-intensive, domestic, and other service-oriented work.
 - Had minimal experience in other areas of employment (Collins, 1990).
- **Employment and Economic Disparities**
 - White women continue to hold the lowest unemployment rate followed by women of Hispanic/Latina ethnicity, and then Black women; White women continue to experience the shortest duration of unemployment, whereas Black women experience the longest duration (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) .
 - Among employed women with a college degree, the median weekly earnings have been higher for White women, with Black women earning the least amount (Beal, 2008; Higginbotham, 1994; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

African American Women and Career Development

- **Traditional Career Development Theories**
 - Grounded in research based on the personality, behavior, and habits of White middle class males (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996).
 - Failed to consider race, gender, and class as factors in career choices (Jackson & Neville, 1998).
- **Predominantly White Institutions**
 - Established on European American standards (Chambers, Bush, & Walpole, 2009).
 - Produced mainstream outer demands on African American students (Alfred, 2001).
 - Created a challenge for African American women as campus climates may not be welcoming because of their race, gender, and class (Chambers, Bush, & Walpole, 2009).
- **Career Development**
 - Comprised of conventional academic and career readiness skills, and has not transcended traditional approaches (Schiller, 2000; Schulz, 2008).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of five African American undergraduate women regarding their career aspirations, and the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations.

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution develop career aspirations?
- **RQ2:** How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution understand issues of race, gender, and class as pertaining to career goals?

Conceptual Framework
Social Learning Theory
of Career Decision Making

- Considers the combination and relationship of multiple factors including socially constructed identities, environmental conditions, and learning experiences (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990).

Conceptual Framework
Social Cognitive
Career Theory

- Considers multiple influences that impact career goals and self-efficacy; Characterizes certain activities as helping to develop skills, work ethic, goals, and career interests; Believes that key persons act as guides and influence these activities in a young person's life (Lent & Brown, 1996).

Ideological Lens
Black Feminist Thought

- Understands the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, which has created a history of oppression and invisibility for African American women (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2015). Contends that African American women experience a reality different than the dominant group, and the interpretation of that reality differs between the two groups (Collins, 1989, 1990).

African American
Women



Methodology

Qualitative Approach – Narrative Research

“An approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17).

Reflective of Black feminist thought which embodies the stories and experiences of African American women regarding the world in which they live and what that means for their future (Collins, 1990).

Methodology

(continued)

- Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).
- Six open-ended questions which pertained to:
 - Background, including family and upbringing, and childhood aspirations.
 - Declared major and future occupation or career aspirations.
 - Perception of preparedness from a predominantly White institution.
 - Probing questions, when needed.

Participants

Five African American undergraduate women from the same predominantly White liberal arts institution were purposefully chosen to participate in the study (Patton, 1990).

- ▶ Four participants with two African American parents and one participant with one African American parent.
- ▶ Four were rising seniors and one was a recent graduate.
- ▶ Participants represented diverse majors and activities.
- ▶ Two participants were first generation college students.
- ▶ Two participants were EOF students.
- ▶ One participant was a commuter student.



Four Major Themes

- Theme 1: Lack of College Preparation
- Theme 2: Commitment to Helping Others
- Theme 3: Campus Experiences as African American Women
- Theme 4: Significance of a Support System

(Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Saldana, 2013)

“

There were people that their parents set them up with hospitals, and they would shadow physicians or anyone really...they already would have a leg up. There were a lot of kids who actually came in with college credits. I don't know if it was just the group I was with...A lot of people just seem to know what classes they had to take to get to where they were going.

”

Kimberly

Theme 1: Lack of College Preparation



Theme 1

Lack of College Preparation

- In sharing their declared majors and career choices, four of the five women spoke either to the advantages they believed other students had upon entering the institution or about their lack of awareness upon entering the institution.
- The following represented their concerns:
 - No presentation on possible career options.
 - No instruction on how to pick classes.
 - No previous knowledge of different majors.
 - Did not think beyond their majors.
 - Not finding a job or career in their majors following graduation.
 - Acknowledged that parents' lacked a college education.
 - Realized other students (White) entered college better prepared due to the personal contacts of parents or structure of school districts (Walpole, 2003, 2007, 2008).



Theme 1

Lack of College Preparation

(continued)

- Their declared majors were influenced by the following:

Participant	Major	Influence
April	Psychology/Education	High School/Parents
Kimberly	Health Sciences	High School/Mother
Vivian	Biology	High School/Parents
Shawna	Criminal Justice	Childhood
Lisa	Business	Childhood

“

Money is definitely a factor but I just felt like being a role model and when you see a Black woman in a position of power, because you don't see it often, it just ignites something in you. You never know who you can reach or who you can touch.

”

Lisa

Theme 2: Commitment to Helping Others

Theme 2

Commitment to Helping Others

- Between childhood dreams and career aspirations, all participants discussed the importance of helping others through their future professions.
- The aim to assist others motivated their career choices, which speaks to the socialization of African American women and career choices (Hamilton, 1996; Pattillo, 2013; Sampson & Milam, 1975).

Participant	Major	Career Aspirations
April	Psychology/Education	Family Therapist or Teacher
Kimberly	Health Sciences	Physical or Occupational Therapist
Vivian	Biology	Educational Leader in Student Affairs
Shawna	Criminal Justice	Probation Officer
Lisa	Business	Chief Operation Officer



Theme 2

Commitment to Helping Others

(continued)

- The following were examples of their enthusiasm for helping others.
 - Kimberly as a CNA with patients, “So I’m helping them when they get dressed in the morning they’re telling me how wonderful it is to go see their therapists and that’s what I wanted to do.”
 - Vivian’s assistance with students and parents, “I finally felt like I had a purpose in helping someone.”
 - Shawna about the police officers in her life, “It’s just each year I would get closer and closer to each of the officers, and it just impacted me more to do and be what I want to be.”
 - Lisa as a future COO who wants to return home, “I think going back and rebuilding...is like my purpose.”
 - April as a future family therapist, “This would be a good career because I am actually helping somebody and I can see their progress.”

“

It prepared me to the extent of knowing that you're going to be told “no” all the time, and you just need to try really really hard. People are going to say crazy things and sometimes you are going to have to smile and nod. You have to know how to pick your battles.

”

Vivian

Theme 3: Campus Experiences as African American Women
-- Too Few Blacks Students --

Theme 3

Campus Experiences as African American Women

- When asked how well did the institution prepare them, participants responded with descriptions about the campus and its climate (Chambers, Bush, & Walpole, 2009), and the idea of having to adopt a bicultural approach (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903; Parham & Austin, 1994).

Low number of Black students

- April spoke about being the only African American student and/or woman in her classes. She also discussed that there were few races other than White people, and even mentioned the idea of attending an HBCU.
- Lisa shared that the majority of her business classes consisted of White male students.
- Vivian spoke to the overall campus and the low number of Black students though the institution's public relations showed otherwise.

“

Again with me be the only Black person in the class, and I usually don't even talk in class that much, it was just I don't know some of the other students are just oblivious to the fact that there's still racism and all that other stuff. I remember this one girl had said "I don't even get it, racism doesn't even exist anymore." I really think they just don't know and some of them do know. It's a lot different even though it's not blatant it's still there and just the fact that you haven't seen it or don't recognize it, it's just crazy to me.

”

April

Theme 3: Campus Experiences as African American Women **--National Political Events--**

Theme 3

Campus Experiences as African American Women

(continued)

National political events

- Peer and class discussions focused on the recent presidential election, immigration, and policy brutality.
- Four of the five participants raised the following issues:
 - Institutional power
 - Exposed privilege
 - Trust questions
 - Personal responses
 - Real world preparation

“

The thing I just don't want is for people to feel like I have to assimilate to it. My culture, I like hip-hop music. That shouldn't determine my intelligence or my work ethic, and here [on campus] it did, I should say

”

Kimberly

**Theme 3: Campus Experiences as African American Women
-- Awareness of Intragroup Dynamics --**


Theme 3

Campus Experiences as African American Women

(continued)

Awareness of intragroup dynamics

- Participants understood the importance of bonding with other African American students on campus, and were disappointed when these bonds were not formed and their Blackness was called into question (Walpole, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).
 - Vivian noted that on campus people of color did not stick together.
 - Kimberly discussed losing friends because of her balance between the demands of academia and expectation of friends.
 - Shawna was challenged as her career goal of becoming a probation officer was questioned by African American peers and family.



“ When I graduated I was the only one and it was a shame...It seemed like if you didn't have the smarts for it or the background in it already you were kind of left in the dust. There was only one professor that I remember that was here...He taught differently and by differently I mean he singled out those kids that no one else really took any effort in. The ones that were maybe falling behind. The ones that were Black or Latino. The ones that still have the same goals as everybody else...He was the only professor that looked at them like “you guys can get to this point with everyone else,” but actually you know he was a Black professor. ”

Kimberly

Theme 4: Significance of a Support System

Theme 4

Significance of a Support System

- Four of the five participants relied on the support of either family and friends.
- Four of the five participants discussed the influence of their parents prior to them entering college. Shawna was the only participant who did not discuss a parental impact on her education, but credited her high school teacher as being an influence.
- All participants relied on campus relationships.
 - Faculty and staff members (mentors)
 - Like-minded peers
 - Sororities
 - Athletics
 - Supportive programs

(Bell, 1990; Chambers, 2009; Chambers, Bush, & Walpole, 2009; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2009)

Conceptual Framework
Social Learning Theory
of Career Decision Making

Conceptual Framework
Social Cognitive Career
Theory

Ideological Lens
Black Feminist Thought

African American
Women

- 
- Power, Privilege, and Resources
 - Responsibility
 - Socialization
 - Bicultural Approach
 - Coping Strategies

Research Questions

RQ1: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution develop career aspirations? The five women presented in this study developed their career aspirations through either:

- Parental/childhood influences
- A need to help others
- A combination of both

Research Questions

(continued)

RQ2: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution understand issues of race, gender, and class as pertaining to career goals?

Participants understood how race, gender, and class pertain to career goals as they:

- Acknowledged how these factors shaped their pre-college and college experiences, which differed from the experiences of their White peers.
- Viewed the institution as a reflection of the professional world, and opted to use their experiences as practice for life beyond the institution.
- Instinctively adopted a bicultural approach to balance outer demands and inner qualities.
- Understood the importance of remaining involved with campus activities, which one participant believed was not expected of African American students.
- Found it invaluable to actively connect with faculty and staff who served as mentors concerned with their challenges as African American women.

Limitations

- This study focused on African American undergraduate women at one predominantly White institution. It was not a comparative study.
- A comparative study may have yielded additional information if it had compared:
 - African American undergraduate women from more than one predominantly White institution.
 - African American undergraduate women from a predominantly White institution and a historically Black institution.
 - African American and White undergraduate women from the same institution.
 - The larger Black female undergraduate population who are African American, African, Caribbean, West Indian, and Afro-Latina at a predominantly White institution.

Implications - Practice

- ▶ Incorporate career development strategies that are culturally relevant and reflect the socio-political issues of race, gender, and class (McCollum, 1998; Perrone, Sedlacek, & Alexander, 2001).
 - Design and implement an initiative that discusses the history, practice, and management of biculturalism (Alfred, 2001; Bell 1990). Discussions will include the advantages/disadvantages of a bicultural approach.
 - Build a healthy support system that encompasses home, school, and professional contacts. When possible, systems should consist of African American women who have transitioned from students to professionals (Bell, 1990; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004).
- ▶ Intended strategies must create safe spaces where African American women can share their voices, create self-definitions, and build resistance (Collins, 1990).

Implications - Research

- Go beyond traditional career development theories that focused on White middle class males (Jackson & Neville, 1998; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996).
- Increase research efforts that explore career development models specific to African American women.
- Consider the similarities and differences in perceptions and experiences of individual African American women.
 - Childhoods
 - PWIs
 - HBCUs

Implications - Policy

- ▶ Transcend general statements of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- ▶ Speak specifically to its African American undergraduate women.
- ▶ Be written with a political consciousness of the impact of intersectionality (Beal, 2008; Theoharis, 2007).
- ▶ Require open conversations and collaborative projects to foster a supportive educational environment (Johnson, 2015).
- ▶ Require a reallocation of resources that address matters of inequities specific to African American women (Hyttten & Bettez, 2010).

Implications – Social Justice Leadership

- Aware of the historical eras that have defined and transformed the lives of African American women (Bankston, 2010; Barnett Brewer, & Kuumba, 1999; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 1990).
- Attentive to the residual effects of those historical eras.
- Acquainted with the needs of subsets of students in higher education.
- Willing to raise the consciousness of institutional actors – faculty, staff, students (Bensimon, 2005).
- Prepared to meet organizational defenses that are resistant to new information and overprotective of the current structure (Argyris, 1990).

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