
Implications of Race and Gender in Higher Education Administration: An African American Woman's Perspective

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Abstract

A qualitative single-case-study approach is used in this study to examine the lived experiences of an African American woman senior-level administrator in a predominantly White research university. The everyday, lived experience of the participant challenges the ideology that education and hard work are combinations that equal success. The findings in the study indicate that despite achieving advanced levels of education and holding high-ranking positions within academia, many African American women in administrative positions encounter social inequity emerging from intersectionality. The dichotomous tension between achievement ideologies, as “the great equalizer,” and the organizational structure as a form of resistance to social equity are continuous threads throughout this article.

Keywords

African American women, intersectionality, social equity, leadership, higher education

That they develop a satisfying and productive life despite the persistence of racism and sexism as givens in their lives is a part of the story about African American women that is too rarely heard.

(Gostnell, 1996).

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Inherent in our nation's social fabric is the widely held belief that anyone can attain success through education and hard work, also known as the achievement ideology. Although our American society believes that education, coupled with hard work, is the panacea for all individuals (Hattery & Smith, 2007), social inequity emerging from intersectionality challenges this ideology. The contradiction between the achievement ideology and the social inequities created by race, gender, and social class is a critical issue confronting African American women administrators at predominantly White colleges and universities in the United States.

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of an African American woman administrator at a predominantly White university to discover how the realities of race, gender, and social class are in contradiction to her perception of the achievement ideology. Throughout this study, the terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably. In addition, the phrase "predominantly White institutions" is synonymous with the terms *dominant-culture colleges and universities* and *institutions of higher learning*.

Related Literature

A burgeoning body of research on the experiences of African American women administrators and faculty members at predominantly White colleges and universities in the United States is emerging (Stanley, 2006). Researchers have underscored significant concerns that are specific to these academics at dominant-culture institutions of higher learning. Such findings reveal that African American women administrators encounter significant barriers within academia itself that discourage them from becoming "productive and satisfied members" (Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999, p. 28). Some researchers identify racism, sexism, isolation, loneliness, and lack of trust as barriers that interfere with African American women's full participation in academia (Edwards & Camblin, 1998; Moses, 1989; Mosely, 1980; Sandler & Hall, 1991).

Singh, Robinson, and Williams-Green (1995) provide evidence that Black women's experiences at dominant-culture campuses are less satisfying than that of Black men at similar institutions. In a study examining gender differences in the perceptions of 413 African American women and male college faculty members and administrators, findings suggest that African American women noted lower satisfaction with their professional lives, a greater sense of isolation on campus, and more negative treatment by colleagues as compared to male study participants.

Some researchers provide explanations for the difficulties that African Americans, in general, have at institutions of higher learning. Turner et al.'s (1999) study concluded that "a pervasive racial and ethnic bias contributes to unwelcoming and unsupportive work environments for faculty of color" (p. 28). This analysis is particularly pervasive to African American women administrators on predominantly White campuses who may experience multiple systems of bias stemming from intersectionality. Studies that examine the experiences of African American women administrators on predominantly White campuses are limited, and the literature reviewed illustrates that Black

professionals working at institutions of higher education encounter significant challenges that affect their job satisfaction, productivity, and retention.

Achievement Ideology From an African American Perspective

Although many high-ranking Black university administrators attribute much of their success to academic preparation and hard work (Crawford & Smith, 2005), little attention has been paid to the achievement ideology and African American women administrators' attachment to or interpretation of this theory. The achievement ideology is the broadly held principle that anyone can attain success through education and diligent work regardless of social factors such as race, class, age, sexual orientation, or gender (MacLeod, 1995). Accordingly, the success of a person is based on her or his capabilities, merits, and commitment. Critics state that the achievement ideology fails to account for social conditions such as poverty, joblessness, or homelessness that might restrict people from attaining their goals in life. Nonetheless, historically, a conviction that the inseparable pair—education and hard work—will lead to a life of social equity and greater career opportunities has provided marginalized groups, such as African Americans, with serious incentives to pursue education.

The Research Study

Despite heightened interest in the field of higher education concerning race and gender equity, a paucity of literature and research has focused on the complexity of African American women administrators' experiences. The intersection of their race and gender places African American women in a unique category and positions them to experience, in tandem, the effects associated with being African American and women (Collins, 1990). Houston (2004) elaborates on the intersection of race and gender:

While Black women's experiences of womanhood may overlap with those of both White women and other women of color, they will also differ from them in important ways; and their experience of Blackness may overlap with those of African American men, but will significantly differ from them as well. (p. 157)

Accordingly, there is a need to strengthen our understanding of what African American women in senior-level administrative positions experience at predominantly White universities. An in-depth qualitative case study examining unique experiences can illuminate such social and cultural understandings (Merriam, 1998). To this end, the following research question is explored:

How does an African American woman administrator at a predominantly White university pursue the achievement ideology despite experiences and challenges that emerge from her race and gender?

Frameworks for Studying African American Women Administrators

Black feminist theory (Collins, 1990) provides a framework for this study. Black feminist theory has contributed significantly to contemporary and critical thinking about the social condition of African American women in the United States. Linked to Black feminist theory is the concept of intersectionality, which examines the notion that race, gender, and social class intersect to produce a system granting African American women with unequal levels of power and privilege (bell hooks, 1990; Collins, 1990).

Intersectionality advocates the view that African American women's experiences are inextricably coupled with their race and gender. According to Collins (1990), it is impossible for Black women to separate their twin identities—race and gender. African American women are referred to as “both/and” because this identity places her in two oppressed groups, Black and female (Beale, 1970).

Double jeopardy is another term associated with Black feminist theory and is used to describe the disadvantaged status of people suffering from the compounding effects of race and gender in the United States (Beale, 1970). The expression also characterizes the experience of many African American women administrators employed by dominant-culture institutions of higher education and suggests that simultaneous identities of being an African American and a woman tends to increase racial discrimination and the hostilities that are experienced in these type of environments. Moreover, the concept of double jeopardy can be extended to other characteristics of Black women's identity (e.g., gender and social class) and therefore result in “multiple jeopardy” (King, 1999).

Critical race theory (CRT) provides another framework for this study. CRT speaks from a critical race-gendered epistemology and focuses theoretical attention to issues of social inequity and social injustice (Crenshaw, 1995). According to Parker and Lynn (2002), CRT is concerned with other areas of difference, such as social class, sexual orientation, and any inequities that individuals experience. CRT advances an approach that allows researchers to use counter-stories, narratives and autobiographies to unveil unique experiences that are not typically described or disclosed from commonly viewed perspectives (Bernal, 2002).

Study Design and Method

This study used a single-case-study qualitative approach as the methodological framework to describe and interpret the lived experiences of an African American woman, senior-level administrator at a predominantly White university in the Southwest United States. The case study presents a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon embedded in real-life situations and offers significant insight (Merriam, 1998). According to Patton (1990), rich data can be collected from case studies, providing a deeper understanding of individuals, groups, problems, or situations. Yin (2003) argued that a single-case design is best when there is a need to study a critical case or unique situation. An African American woman, senior-level administrator at a predominantly White university in the United States, is a rare and unique occurrence—an

appointment in this type of environment in the Southwest is even more unique. Most African Americans in high-level administrative roles at predominantly White universities are single persons working in academic departments (McKay, 1983). Because such an employment arrangement reflects an uncommon situation, it is appropriate to apply a case-study design (Stake, 1995).

Study Participant

The administrator in this study is referred to as Dr. Harris to maintain anonymity. At the time of this study, Dr. Harris was one of the highest-ranking African American women administrators employed at a predominantly White research university in the Southwest United States. Dr. Harris met the criteria for this research in that she (a) self-identified as an African American woman; (b) was employed full-time at a predominantly White institution of higher education at the time of the study; (c) was a senior-level administrator in a university; (d) had management responsibilities for university departments; (e) agreed to at least two interviews, each lasting 2 hr; and (f) was willing to provide feedback. These criteria are consistent with those used by other researchers interested in studying high-ranking female administrators at colleges and universities (Allen, 2005; Delgado-Romero, Howard-Hamilton, & Vandiver, 2003; Jackson, 1998).

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from interviews and archival records. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol based on topics related to the research question and allowed probing for facts, opinions, insights, and expanded answers (Yin, 2003). The in-depth interviews were held over 2 consecutive days and were conducted at Dr. Harris's university office suite.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis involves "bringing meaning and insight to the words and acts of the participants in the study" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 72). Hence, each interview was tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were proof-read against the audiotape and corrected. Archival data were collected from the senior-level administrator and included samples of her publications, university memos she had written and received, and formal evaluations of her performance.

Data for analysis were derived from the interview transcripts and summaries of archival data. A thematic analysis was used to uncover three distinct and dominant themes. Transcripts were coded using constant comparative analysis in which data were assigned to an emergent open-coding scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As an internal validity check, summaries of the archival material were compared with the administrator's transcript. As an additional cross-check, feedback was received from the participant to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed data.

Discussion of the Findings

To aid in understanding the analysis, findings are displayed along with relevant research in this article. Therefore, they are presented in tandem. Themes that emerged from the data analysis are facing dichotomous experiences, overcoming occupational segregation stigmas, and recognizing a lack of decision-making power. These themes provide insight on the choices African American women administrators must make when confronting organizational dilemmas that emerge from intersectionality.

Facing Dichotomous Experiences: Achievements and Challenges

The data suggest that Dr. Harris's lived experiences are consistent with other African American women administrators in predominantly White campuses as reported throughout the literature. Specifically, Dr. Harris's experiences include both achievements and challenges, which suggest a dichotomous experience in this type of setting. Although Dr. Harris related numerous experiences that described her achievements in higher education, she spent considerably more time recounting ones depicting the challenges she faced in a predominantly White academic environment. She described extremely biased reactions based on her race and gender as a challenge she continued to confront in academia. Dr. Harris commented:

I was aware that this [southwestern] state was considered to be very conservative and that the people here held narrow views. I lived in a state that also held similar views. . . . [Nonetheless,] I felt unprepared for the amount of [negative] attention attributed to my Blackness.

Dr. Harris provided other examples of the resistance she received. For instance, some of her subordinates implied that they could never comfortably accept a Black person as their superior. Subsequently, they went around her to obtain clearance for assignments. Men in administration gave information to their administrative assistants to pass on to her rather than meeting with her personally. Dr. Harris thinks that her White male coworkers, in particular, had an extremely difficult time working with and for her.

Dr. Harris stated that because she is a woman, she is "under a microscope" at all times. She considers herself extremely visible and in a position to be scrutinized by everyone. She explained that she thinks other administrators see her as Black first and a female second. On the other hand, female students and faculty members on campus view her as a Black female. Dr. Harris's experience is consistent with Black feminist theory, which uses the concept of intersectionality (Collins, 1990).

Intersectionality, which refers to the ways in which social and cultural constructs interact (i.e., race and gender), may be useful in better understanding the complexities of the dual status that Dr. Harris expressed when she indicated the challenges she attributes to her race and gender. For example, in further addressing the complications that surfaced because she is female and Black, Dr. Harris asserted:

I feel, rightly or wrongly, that being a female in a male-dominated area and being Black in a White-dominated area, I also carry the responsibility to be “super good.” This may be something that I impose upon myself, but I honestly believe this to be true.

Dr. Harris does not see herself being afforded the luxury of making an error. Kanter (1993) identifies this phenomenon as performance pressures and posits that administrators of color in the numerical minority do not have to work arduously to have their presence noticed but they do have to work diligently to have their achievements recognized. Furthermore, African American women administrators at predominantly White universities reported that being successful often means playing by the rules of traditional patriarchy (Taylor, 2004). For instance, Dr. Harris pointed out:

It is often necessary for women to work extra hard to overcome the stereotypes perceived by men. This means that I must have all my Is dotted and my Ts crossed. I must be overly prepared in order to gain the respect and credibility of my male counterparts.

Dr. Harris’s narrative confirms the findings of researchers who have stated that “Black women have to meet higher demands than any other group. Compared with Black and White men, Black women have to be better qualified, more articulate . . . and they have fewer opportunities than men and White women.” (Essed, 1991, pp. 35-36)

Dr. Harris also perceived that much of the resistance she experienced is because she is one of the few women in this environment and the first African American in this particular position. Although she has experienced successes throughout her career, her experiences appear to embody the dynamics of race, gender, and social class as explicated in the framework of Black feminist theory in general and the theory of intersectionality in particular.

Overcoming Occupational Segregation Stigmas

In the United States, occupations are highly segregated by race and gender (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). According to Hattery and Smith (2007), “the history of slavery set the stage for distinct employment niches for African American women and men” (p. 184). Slave women were responsible for cooking, cleaning, and caring for children in White households. Job patterns that emphasize “service to others” have persisted beyond slavery, and Black women, in particular, congregate in occupations that require nurturing, teaching, cooking, and domestic work, which are professionalized versions of housework (Hattery & Smith, 2007). Consequently, owing to racial barriers, African American women’s occupational choices were limited to specific professions. Therefore, to overcome occupational stigmas, when educational and occupational opportunities broadened, African American women took advantage of these opportunities by preparing themselves for more professional and academically focused careers.

Dr. Harris credits her senior-level administrative appointment to education, preparation, hard work, and sacrifice. These components reflect the ideology of achievement—the belief that anyone can attain success through education and hard work despite social constructs such as race, gender, and social class. She pointed out that her advancement in higher education could be attributed to achieving a high level of education and having a strong work ethic, as well as to developing an ability to read the culture of a given organization. She believes education is critical to “attracting opportunity” and commented:

Before you can accept a job opportunity, for example, you must first receive an invitation requesting your consideration of the opportunity. However, your name will not appear on the invitation list without your having the relevant critical credentials and qualifications.

In explaining what she meant by “reading the organizational culture,” Dr. Harris stated, “Success is a lot about timing—knowing when to stay and when to leave a position or an institution.” Before resigning one position to accept another one, Dr. Harris evaluated her strengths and weaknesses in relation to her academic background, professional experience and development, and overall career goals. She also assessed her personal needs and desires. Tinsley, Secor, and Kaplan (1984) refer to the practice of reading the organizational culture as the ability to align one’s career aspirations with the goals of the organization. This ability is especially critical to African American women, who are often isolated and placed in positions that are on the margins of the organization and as a result they are unable to distinguish between the espoused theory of an organization and its theory-in-practice (Schon, 1983).

Critical race theorists argue that racism is a common and ordinary practice that African American people experience (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). African American women aspiring to advance within their professional fields have learned to overcome experiences stemming from racism by identifying and confronting the situation, then accepting the reality of the consequences (Mattis, 2002). Dr. Harris was able to recognize unfavorable and biased situations within organizations where she was employed that were not favorable to her career aspirations. Her ability to move on is indicative that she had learned to read the organizational culture but at the same time stay focused on her professional goals.

Recognizing a Lack of Decision-Making Power

Although Dr. Harris embraced the philosophy of the achievement ideology as the formula for professional success in higher education, when applied to her career trajectory, this ideology appeared to be contradictory—particularly in terms of her lack of administrative decision-making power. Although she had demonstrated notable competence in her position, had implemented successful programs, had been appointed to prominent committees because of her reputation as an “effective leader,” and had

been recognized for exemplary university performance, she still has not achieved the right to autonomous decisions. She related the following incident:

My job responsibility required me to select a qualified person for a particular position. I narrowed my choices to one final candidate. My superior—a White male—then visited with him. After the interview, my boss informed me that he felt one of the other applicants, who was not even one of the finalists, was the man for the job. His choice—a White male—was appointed to the position.

When recalling this scenario wherein her boss denied her power in the hiring process, Dr. Harris appeared most agitated by the male administrator's lack of openness and his decision not to collaborate with her in the decision-making process. Dr. Harris's lack of power in this encounter with her boss is consistent with an *outsider within* (Collins, 1998) status, a concept that refers to the disempowerment of African American women within interactive systems of race, gender, and/or social class. Therefore, in order for African American women to be empowered, identifying the power structures that constrain her power and how those structures can be resisted or eliminated is critical for successful leadership (Collins, 1990).

If Dr. Harris's successful track record is any indication of her proficiency, then other underlying factors, such as race, gender, and social class may have contributed to her superior's reluctance to empower her. The idea that she was denied power and privilege because she is Black and female has disturbing implications, especially when both women and people of color are admonished to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to acquire administrator-level positions (Henderson, 1996). In Dr. Harris's case, it appears that her boss may be withholding power from persons who are "socially different" or whom he does not see as "his kind." In addition, Dr. Harris's boss seems to experience a higher level of comfort when he does not meet with her personally. Her dissimilarity influences her boss to remove her from certain operational activities (such as decision making) and instead delegate tasks that require her recommendations but not her final decisions.

Conclusion

This case study focused on the experiences of an African American woman in a senior-level administrative position at a predominantly White university in the Southwest United States. It explored intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and social class and analyzed their specific effects and consequences and also underscored the tension between the study participant's espousal of achievement ideology and her experiences of social inequity.

Emerging from this case study were challenges the participant faced that contradicted her belief in the achievement ideology. These challenges appeared to manifest themselves as issues related to race, gender, and social class, which could create a negative influence on a productive and satisfying work experience and ultimately career

experience. Consequently, the participant's experiences revealed a dichotomous tension between her belief in the achievement ideology and her lived experiences in a predominantly White university.

The participant's experiences in this study revealed that the type of challenges that African American women administrators encounter are often unexpected, especially in light of their stellar qualifications, which, according to the achievement ideology, their credentials and expertise would seem to guarantee. Furthermore, the disparaging treatment African American women confront, in some instances, could be detrimental to promotion, development, and persistence in their administrative careers.

African American women administrators in the academy exhibit a desire for greater responsibility that is commensurate with their abilities and which they have honed through diligent work. Unfortunately race, gender, and social class often restrict the rewards that African American women were taught as children to associate with hard work.

Although the initial inclination would be to suggest strategies at the organizational level to eliminate practices and policies that perpetuate social inequities, such as those stemming from race, gender, and social class, Bolman and Deal (2008) argue against making such a recommendation. Rather, they emphasize that "It is naïve and romantic to hope organizational politics can be eliminated. . . . political dynamics are everyday features of organizational life" (p. 194).

Therefore, based on the findings of this study, it would seem more suitable to address the tension between race, gender, social class, and the achievement ideology at the individual level. To this end, African American women administrators in predominantly White universities should be aware that organizational dilemmas stemming from intersectionality have the potential to impede job performance and negatively affect job satisfaction. On the other hand, learning strategies such as reading the organizational culture, as suggested by the participant in this study, and learning to navigate situations that are affective to job performance and job satisfaction could be significant to resolving the tension between race, gender, social class and belief in the achievement ideology.

Limitations of the Study

As with any qualitative case study, this study has limited generalizability (Merriam, 1998) for several reasons. First, thematic generalizability is certainly a possibility. Second, the information was self-reported. Finally, only one African American woman having this experience and working in higher education administration at a predominantly White university was interviewed. However, as Mintzberg (1970) pointed out, a sample of one has often proved superior and choosing this method depends on the situation being studied. Despite these limitations, existing research indicates that African American women administrators' lived experiences are inevitably linked to race, gender, and social class.

Implications for the Field of Human Resource Development

This study addresses the need for more research on the experiences of African American women administrators whose reflections on the ideology of achievement is often in contradiction with the lived experiences that emerge from the intersection of race, gender, and social class. Furthermore, this study incorporated Black feminist theory and critical race theory to understand and explain intersectionality in the lived experiences of the participant—frameworks not generally used by the field of human resource development (HRD). Encountering issues emerging from intersectionality could interfere with an African American woman's ability to feel empowered and therefore have the capacity to affect job satisfaction, productivity, and retention—areas that HRD's function focuses on individual development and achieving personal goals.

Success in one's career fulfills an innate drive for what has been called self-actualization, or the need for achievement (McClelland, 1965). According to McClelland, the need for empowerment and achievement are typical of individuals occupying leadership roles. From the findings in this study, issues emerging from intersectionality may present an obstacle to the self-actualization of African American women leaders. Because of the lack of literature and research focusing on the complexity of intersectionality and African American women administrators' experiences, the field of HRD has limited resources that inform practitioners in this respect on the professional development of African American women. Drawing from theoretical frameworks such as Black feminist theory and critical race theory offers a deeper understanding for empowering African American women in challenging situations that emerge from intersectionality. The goal is to reach fulfillment and self-actualization in the leadership experience.

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Bio

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