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**The Unique Career Development Experiences of African American Professional Men in Corporate America: The Structures that Repress and Facilitate their Career Development**

**Abstract:** This is a critical qualitative study grounded in the tripartite frame of Black masculinity theory, critical race theory and career development theory. The study examines the impact of racism on the career development of African American Professional men in corporate America. Fourteen African American men who held positions at mid-management or higher in their respective companies were interviewed for this study. Participants’ responses were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The study revealed that African American professional men experience repressive 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 facilitative structures these men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development are described and discussed. Four conclusions are drawn and implications for practice and future research are offered.

**Keywords:** African American Professional Men; Career Development; Facilitative Structures; Gendered Racism; Repressive Structures

**Background**

United States companies (corporate America) are far more diverse today than at any other time in the nation’s history. The participation of women and people of color in corporate America increased in large part due to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent affirmative action policies. African Americans occupy positions within corporate America that were unimaginable 50 years ago. In 2005, African Americans comprised 12 percent of the U.S. workforce. By 2050, they are projected to increase participation to 14 percent, with African American women accounting for most of the gain (Toossi, 2006). The increased access and participation of African Americans in corporate America have brought both a sense of accomplishment and concern. Since the doors to corporate America opened to African Americans, there have been a few who have risen to become chief executive officers of Fortune 500 companies. In 2009, Ursula Burns became the first African American woman CEO of a Fortune 500 company when she took the helm at Xerox Corporation. Paving the way for Burns and others was Franklin Raines, the nation‘s first racial or ethnic minority CEO of a major corporation. Raines, an African American, became the CEO of Fannie Mae in 1998. Since then, another seven African American men have also made it to that level. While these achievements are impressive and reflect progress over time, the likelihood of an African American man holding this position is still extremely small. For the majority of African American men, the picture is far less appealing and possibly becoming bleaker. Of those employed, only 22 percent are represented in management, professional and related jobs compared to 31 percent of African American women and 33 percent of White men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). On the other side of progress, studies show that African Americans still encounter racism and disparate treatment, which impedes their career development (Barrett et al., 2004; Greenhaus et al., 1990; James, 2000; Thomas and Gabarro, 1999). African American men appear to be especially vulnerable, yet 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 an indistinguishable group or delve more specifically into how the intersection of race and gender impacts the career development experiences of African American women. Many of the issues facing African American men are different from those faced by African American women (Bingham and Ward, 2001). The universal approach to understanding African Americans’ career development is problematic because it has rendered invisible the range of experiences germane to African American professional men in corporate America.

African American professional men deserve attention for three reasons. First, the numbers indicate they are in trouble. Not only do they lag behind their White male counterparts in workforce participation, promotions and pay, they also trail African American women in many of the same measures with one exception – median earnings. Of the African American men employed, only 22 percent are represented in management, professional and related jobs compared to 31 percent of African American women and 33 percent of White men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). African American professional men are twice as likely to be unemployed as their White counterparts. They also earn 20 percent less, with the greatest disparity occurring at the higher echelons of corporate America (Current Population Survey, 2008; Grodsky and Pager, 2001; Taylor, 2004). Second, African American professional 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 and Tilly, 1996; 2001). Those researchers found African American men suffered most from employers’ perceptions of their soft skills compared to Whites and African American women. In turn, these perceptions based largely on employers’ stereotypes of African American men, negatively impacted hiring and promotions of African American men.

Discrimination against African American men in career development is not new. A Harvard Law Review (1991) found that Black men, like Black women experience discrimination that is peculiar to their history and social position. However, unlike Black women, many employers refuse to extend to Black men the same equal employment opportunities they extend to Black women. Moreover, the law does not extend the same protections for race and gender discrimination to Black men that they provide to Black women. That same article points out that while White men are incumbents in upper and mid-level White-collar fields, African American men are the least represented overall compared to Whites and African American women. Employer discrimination against African American men was cited as a factor contributing to the finding. The writers found that workplace tensions and discriminatory practices are grounded in cultural differences. They stated:

There are several possible ways to explain the discrimination against black men. Differences in cultural styles often lead employers to conclude that black men have attitudes and personal characteristics that conflict with a predominantly white social atmosphere. Many black men – although certainly not all – are more verbally direct, expressive, and assertive than white men, who provide the standard against which black male behavior is measured. (pp. 756-757)

The third reason African American professional men deserve attention is because there is a small body of research focusing exclusively on them and their career development. The studies that focus on both African American men and women collectively are helpful, but they fall short in distilling 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 and 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. Studies by Goodly (2007), Humphrey (2007), and Taylor (2004) signal an increase in attention being given to African American professional men’s career development experiences. Each of those three studies elucidate problems African American professional men encounter in their careers, however none of them center racism as a structural system of oppression affecting the career development of African American professional men. None of the three studies are from a critical qualitative approach and none delve into Black masculinity as an essential frame for understanding the experiences of African American professional men. Thus, in the current study, I extend existing research by inquiring into the unique career development experiences of African American professional men, examining how the intersection of their race and gender impacts their experiences, the structures that repress and facilitate their career development, and the strategies they employ to enable their career success. I hope to expand the body of knowledge on career development and race and support the growing call for more culturally relevant and inclusive career development to address the needs of an increasingly diverse workplace.

**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).

**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 professional 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 a human resource development practitioner. 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.

**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 are those recursive social rules and practices which constrain the career development of African American men. Facilitative structures are those rules and practices which enable African American men to circumvent the force of racism, advance their careers, and achieve career satisfaction. Both repressive and facilitative structures include personal as well as contextual factors.

*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 characterizations 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. During one interview, I probed a participant about the stereotypes. He listed the stereotypes often attributed to African American men as, “The thug, pimp, womanizer, lazy.” When I asked him if he thought these stereotypes impacted his experiences in corporate America, he replied: “Without a doubt. Sure. You’re not given the opportunities.” Another participant explained it this way, “I think the negative impact [of being Black and male in corporate America] has been constantly battling the myths, the stereotypes that exist for African American males…not smart enough to handle responsibility, not able to manage people well, not able to handle anger…just not qualified for executive material.” Several of the participants felt the stereotype of the angry Black man is common in corporate America and can spell career suicide for African American men. The men explained that even positive attributes can have a backlash on African American men. One participant stated, “If a Black male speaks in a manner that suggests he is smarter or more educated than his White counterparts, I can see that being a source of problem.” To avoid such backlash participants stated they often had to downplay their credentials because if they surpassed their White counterparts, the additional education or experiences brought envy and increased scrutiny. 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. From the lines of inquiry, participants revealed practices that constrain positive career development for African American men. What often emerged was that 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. As one participant noted, his company’s succession practice was one of identification, not development. He believed the process of determining participants for leadership development is arbitrary and concealed. He stated, “They go behind a black curtain and decide who is going to go where.” When I asked who he was referring to, he stated, “human resources and senior management.” One participant admitted that the processes “impact Whites as well as Blacks; they just impact Black males more disproportionately.” Most of the participants believed African Americans still experience the glass ceiling. A few of the participants found their careers progressed similarly to their White counterparts until they reached a certain level. One participant stated, “What’s different is that once you achieve a certain level, or at least once I achieved a certain level, I found I lost my sponsorship.” He reflected that his White counterparts were able to gain more exposure to senior executives at the highest levels in the organization and, as a result, their career development extended beyond his achievement. He said that at a certain level, career development was not based on objective performance results, but by factors other than results, such as relationships, which can create inherent inequities in career development for African American professional men.

Organizations are social and political arenas. For executives to be successful, they must become adept at using their socio-political capital to navigate the corporate arena. The different opportunity structure that exists for African American professional men to access and leverage their socio-political capital compared to Whites, particularly White men is the third repressive structure. The differentiated acquisition of social-political capital is repressive because of the informal and unwritten rules and mores that govern social and political interactions, which serve to disadvantage African American professional men‘s career development. Capital is gained when a person has something of value (e.g., information, influence, and opportunity) to exchange. Additionally, empirical evidence has consistently shown that individuals tend to interact with members of their own social group (race, gender, status, organizational affiliation, etc.) than they do with members belonging to other social groups and these interactions form the basis of organizational consequences (James, 2000). Relevant to this study, social group members are most likely to be racially homogenous. Since Whites tend to have larger networks and longer ties to corporate America, African American men must gain access to White networks in order to develop socio-political capital that will lead to desired career development. The ability of African American professional men to make their White counterparts comfortable with them was viewed as an important factor in lessening the negative impact of this structure on the participants’ career development. 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. Several participants stated that as the workplace has become more diverse, African American men appear to be on the losing side of a zero sum game where the progress of one group is achieved at the expense of another (Stewart, 2007). One participant found that in the 12 years he has been with his company, the number of African American men in the executive ranks has continued to decrease, not due to flatter organizational structure, but to a lack of interest in African American men. Some participants noted, it is just a sign of the times. One participant described it as, “It’s not a Black thing. It’s not a White thing.” He dismissed it as a lack of intentionality to hire and retain African American men because there are so many other diverse populations in the workplace to satisfy company diversity goals. Another participant said the written documents would declare a lack of qualified African American candidates. However, after years of that excuse the participant found it implausible, and stated, “If you can’t find them, then grow them.”

*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. The five facilitative structures that figured prominently included: 1) 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 first facilitative structure, 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. The participants remarked how it has become increasingly more difficult to find African American mentors in the senior ranks at their companies. Only a few of the participants had ever had an African American as a direct manager. Most participants were grateful to have African American male mentors and believed that all African American men should have at least one African American male mentor who can relate to their experiences.

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. One of the ways in which corporate America is maintained is by rewarding conformity to the values, practices and behaviors of the dominant group – White males. White women professionals and professionals of color are complicit in sustaining the corporate culture because conformity brings reward. Affirming terms such as “organizational fit,” “team player,” and “politically correct” all signify a person’s adherence to cultural norms and serve to facilitate assimilation within corporate America. The participants’ consciousness of their Black male identity in corporate America is an indicator that their cultural identity is often in contrast to the corporate culture in which they work. Ogbor (2001) stated, “Participation in a corporation in effect entails the replacement of one‘s identity with that of the organization. In the process, individuals encounter an identity problem – how to reconcile individual identity with that sanctioned by the organization” (p. 597). The individuals within corporate systems in effect reconstruct their corporate identities to fit into the norms and values of the system. However, this reconstruction or denial of identity is not required of White males. Why would a person straddle two distinct life structures – structures that can often be at odds in terms of value systems and behavioral expectations? The answer lies in the competing interests of cultural identity and professional identity. In American society, a person’s status is often defined by his or her career. 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.

One of the bicultural strategies that emerged in the study was the use of an underground Black network. In principle, the underground Black network is akin to the good-old-boy network associated with White males in that the purpose is to exchange information and to assist the career development of fellow African Americans. Invitation into the underground Black network is usually initiated through social meetings, where the bond is formed and trustworthiness is tested. The difference between the underground Black network and the good-old-boy network is that with the former, hierarchical positions are irrelevant. Information is the preeminent commodity and that information can be gained from secretaries, custodial workers, and other hourly employees, just as it can be exchanged between peers and those in superior positions. Company sanctioned affinity groups are another structure that helps to facilitate the career development of African American professional men because it is through these groups that the men can establish stronger networks, build socio-political capital, gain access to information and resources, and participate in leadership development initiatives.

The third facilitative structure was self-efficacy and personal agency. Self-efficacy, the belief in one‘s capabilities, is one of the building blocks of career development and the fuel that enables a person to exercise agency (Alfred, 2001; Lent et al., 2002). In turn, personal agency is the notion that people are active agents in shaping their career development. I found that the participants, above all, believe in themselves, refuse to be defined or limited by the negative stereotypes attributed to Black men, and who understand their capacity to act to change their circumstances and achieve the career development they desire – despite racism. As one participant explained, “I came from a culture of people who took action.” Another participant said, “I have an internal battery that will not allow another man to determine my fate. I determine my fate.” 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. Most of the participants had achieved graduate degrees and two achieved doctorates. When asked what advice they would give to other African American professional men to help them achieve success in their career development, participants highly encouraged continuously learning through company educational and training programs, including tuition reimbursement, learning through professional associations, and through selecting key experiences, such as international assignments and job rotations. Participants voiced their concerns about the early education of African American boys. With education being such a strong facilitative structure, discriminatory and disparate early education experiences are a direct threat to developing the next generation of African American professionals.

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. In sharing the degree to which they were satisfied with their careers, participants shared sparingly about the extrinsic accomplishments (promotions, financial status, etc.). However, most of their conversations centered on intrinsic values, which included such things as staying true to themselves or being authentic, being able to develop others, making a difference or leaving a legacy, paving the way for the next generation of African American executives, and giving back to their communities. These responses represent traditional, Africentric values of collectivism – a high value placed on community. Most often, the participants’ responses included references to spirituality, church, or faith. One or more of these were also discussed as central to career decisions.

**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. Participants said they looked forward to the day when race is not so salient in the career development of African American men. One participant stated, “I‘m a Black man and I‘m doing this job and I‘m doing it very, very well.” However, as the youngest of all the participants, he hoped for the day of a color-blind workplace, where opportunities are provided equitably without regard to race.

**Implications**

This study has practical and theoretical implications for human resource development. 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, women and other 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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