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The Black Ceiling: Barriers to Career Advancement for African American Women in the US

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**THE BLACK CEILING:
BARRIERS TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT FOR
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE US**

by

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<u>Abstract</u>

Black women in America do not deal exclusively with race or gender discrimination, but many times a combination of the two. This qualitative study seeks to address how black women experience this double discrimination within their organizations' cultures, policies, and practices. In addition, the career journeys and experiences of the participants interviewed will be analyzed in comparison to the current literature, which states mentoring, training and networking, and women-friendliness are the most effective methods to advancing women and women of color in the workplace. Ultimately, this study discovers that for those methods to work, there needs to be more structure around them and an understanding of race and gender biases on behalf of the organization and its most privileges employees.

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Introduction

Women make up 50.8 percent of the US population, and are 52 percent of the US professional workforce (Census 2014, Catalyst 2014). The equal representation ends at leadership positions since women consist of only "14.6 percent of executive officers, 8.1 percent of top earners, and 4.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs" (Catalyst 2013). While women are clearly gaining more undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees, there is a serious problem when trying to reach the C-suite level (Warner 2014). Researchers have been studying how this issue manifests and different ways to address it in corporate America. Women of color are in a worse position than white women when looking at senior management level position statistics. While women of color make up 18 percent of the US population, they are one-third of the female workforce (Warner 2014). Women of color consist of only "11.9 percent of managerial and professional positions" and of those women, "5.3 percent are African American" (Warner 2014). Black women are struggling to reach the top levels of their organizations, and some of the reasons for this are reflections of societal issues.

The statistics show that access to jobs and promotions in corporate America remains a significant problem for women of color. In a larger content, race and gender issues in America still remain a large problem and topic of discussion. One example of how these matters function in both the workplace and society is the conversation that developed around Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In.* The book gained significant popularity in 2013 and 2014 and sat on the New York Times Bestseller List for 71 weeks (New York Times 2014). In her book, Sandberg "uses research to shine a light on gender

differences, and offers practical advice to help women achieve their goals" and "challenges us to change the conversation from what women can't do to what we can do, and serves as a rallying cry for us to work together to create a more equal world" (Lean In). The iconic black feminist scholar, bell hooks, criticizes Sandberg in her own article, "Dig Deep, Beyond Lean In" and challenges Sandberg's notions of gender inequality. Hooks writes, "at no point in *Lean In* does she let readers know what would motivate patriarchal white males in a corporate environment to change their belief system or the structures that support gender inequality." (hooks, 2013). Hooks' point is that Sandberg uses her "race and class power and privilege" to make suggestions to women about how they can advance their careers, but in no way challenges the current structures of those organizations and the white men who run them. "The reality is that privileged white women often experience a greater sense of solidarity with men of their same class than with poor white women or women of color" (hooks 2013). Essentially hooks believes, "it is more than obvious that without a call to challenge and change racism as an integral part of class mobility [Sandberg] is really investing in top level success for highly educated women from privileged classes" (hooks 2013). Women of color are in some ways excluded from Sandberg's advice because she focuses mainly on gender inequality, rather than incorporating other issues of marginalization such as race, which women of color must also address both in and out of the workplace.

Kimberle Crenshaw's article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," looks at how Black women are not discriminated against along a single axis, but instead they face challenges for being both black and a female. Crenshaw suggests that, "this single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification

and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group" (Crenshaw 1989). By only focusing on the experiences of black men or white women, black women's issues are excluded from feminist and antiracist policy discussions. Therefore, black women's matters of discrimination both in and out of the workplace are not seen as legitimate. To fully address the challenges black women face, "the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or 'the Black experience' into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast" (Crenshaw 1989). Crenshaw is explaining that black women do not fit solely into one box of discrimination or another, because they "often experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex" (Crenshaw 1989). By looking at "the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit" (Crenshaw 1989).

In their book, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*, Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden found that black women speak of always having to be on guard around coworkers and customers and needing to shift who they are depending on with whom they are interacting. There was a sense that at home, the women could act as themselves, while at work they became different versions of themselves to survive and succeed (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2004). These varying issues complicate and add to the challenges black women already have to advance their careers since they must balance all of these problems at once. Jones and Shorter-Gooden show how the feminist

and antiracist policy exclusion black women must deal with translates into daily lived experiences.

   This thesis seeks to understand how black women have experienced discrimination and what tools they have utilized themselves or have been provided by their organizations to combat it and advance their careers. By examining the research that has been completed and interviewing black women who are currently in senior-level positions, it is argued that black women benefit from having mentors to help them move up in their organizations because they are still facing many barriers to entry including race and gender discrimination. It is also beneficial for organizations to address inherent biases within their cultures.

Literature Review

There is limited research focusing on Black women and the impact organizations' policies and practices have on their careers. The present study attempts to pull the findings from the research that has been published and use it to assess the detailed experiences of women of color in management-level positions in companies that have and have not provided minority focused resources. While some critics believe networking, training, and mentoring are not as effective as they could be, the dominant arguments in related literature believe that those three tools can have a significant effect on the career advancement opportunities for black women.

Organizational culture can play a big role in the opportunities presented to women to move into management positions. Marcia Wilkoff and Joy Schneer interviewed four companies deemed women-friendly in the cosmetics industry, two in office equipment industry, and telecommunications industry for their study, "Is Your Company and Its Culture Women Friendly?" (Wilkoff and Schneer 1995). Wilkoff and Schneer believe a women-friendly organization pays attention to its strategic diversity agenda, uses inclusive language, has benefits and policies that help women balance their home and work responsibilities, and their managerial composition is diverse in terms of gender and race. The researchers pull from Taylor Cox and Stacy Blake's study which found that when companies open to diversity they "have lower absenteeism and turnover rates, are able to recruit the best personnel from a more diverse workforce, can increase sales to select markets, benefit from enhanced creativity, [and] can improve decision making" (Taylor Cox and Stacy Blake 1991). Wilkoff and Schneer found meeting the legal requirements of affirmative action as a critical reason for women-friendliness as one of

those themes. The researchers also discovered that women could more easily handle

challenging situations for their organizations, such as economic downturns or difficult

customers. They also discovered that CEOs believed that it just made "good business

sense" to be a women-friendly organization. The researchers moved on to provide

questions companies could use to evaluate their women-friendliness. Some of those

questions included, "is inclusiveness a key aspect of your company's strategy," "are there

formal or informal systems for mentoring all employees," and "how many women are in

line for management positions?" While the Wilkoff and Schneer study does touch on

many aspects of this present study, it lacks an in depth look at how women of color are

affected by a company's investment in or lack of women-friendliness.

  Forbes magazine and *Working Mother* magazine have listed the best companies

for women and minorities for the past few years, highlighting the companies that serve

these two groups the best. *Forbes* discusses surveys by Calvert Investments and the

National Association for Female Executives, which is a division of Working Mother

Media. Calvert Investments uses a 100 point scale to assess how many women and

minorities are in senior level positions, the amount of flexibility given to working

parents, family benefits, and companies' specific language about their diversity

initiatives. While the article highlights the number of women and minorities in their

senior level and board member positions, it doesn't focus on the experiences of these

women and minorities in those roles. The *Working Mother* survey also pays close

attention to the total percentage of employees who are multicultural women, multicultural

women in senior management positions, percentages of multicultural women promoted to

manager-level positions, and how valued networking is for the company and their

minority employees. The numbers ranged from as low as two percent for multicultural women senior managers to twenty-five percent for the total number of multicultural women in an organization. These quantitative surveys are meant to track overall diversity performances for these companies, but do not get into the details of issues multicultural women might still be facing in these organizations even with mentoring opportunities and large numbers of minority women employees. However, the fact that these surveys are being shared on popular and respected forums reveals that these considerations are becoming more and more important to not only the women who live these experiences, but also the organizations creating positive or negative work environments.

While each of those recent surveys argues that mentoring, company policies, and networking are crucial for women in their organizations, one study argues that those factors are not as effective without an organization taking explicit responsibility for improving diversity efforts. Alexandra Kalev, Frank Dobbin, and Erin Kelly's article from 2006, "Best Practices or Best Guesses; Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Practices" question the ideas that they believe are "loosely based on academic theories" and the efficacy of the efforts have not been fully researched (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). The researchers looked at reports produced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which assesses the private sector's employment data based on race, ethnicity, and gender. From their results, this study argues that, "structures establishing responsibility (affirmative action plans, diversity committees, and diversity staff positions) are followed by significant increases in managerial diversity" (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). They also found that "responsibility structures make training, performance evaluations, networking, and

mentoring programs more effective." They use the Princeton Human Resources Survey from 2002, which shows the number of companies utilizing affirmative action plans went from a little above 20 percent in 1971 to over 60 percent in 2002. Using the EEOC data, Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly found organizational responsibility most effective, "attempts to reduce social isolation among women and African Americans through networking and mentoring programs are less promising, [and] least effective are the programs for taming managerial bias through education and feedback" (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). The study's authors believe that mentoring and networking are more effective when working alongside the organization's diversity responsibility efforts. This present study will look into whether these findings held value for the women interviewed.

Janice Smith and Stephanie Joseph's study, "Workplace Challenges in Corporate America," focuses on the equal employment opportunities women of color struggle to gain in the workplace. The study examines organizational culture, experiences of discrimination, and human capital investments as important factors of workplace experiences. Taking these factors into consideration, Smith and Joseph seek to find how race and gender create different occurrences for Black women and other minorities versus White men and women. The study uses previous research to explain how race and gender linked together can create different outcomes for employees depending on how they identify and how they are identified by their peers (Amott and Matthaei 1991). The article argues that organizations are racialized based on Acker's conclusion that organizational structures are gendered because they reproduce gender inequalities (Acker 1998). Acker's idea of gender biases in the workplace is also shared by Britton and Logan who argue that, "organizations and occupations are gendered at the level of

culture, which also reflect and reproduce gender through their policies and practices"
(Britton and Logan 2008). From this belief, Smith and Joseph seek to find out "how
organizational culture was perceived by members and whether it impacted work
experiences that positively or negatively impacted perceptions of valuing diversity,
equality, and organization commitment."

Smith and Joseph move on to discuss how the experiences of discrimination and a
lack of human capital investment have negatively impacted some groups. The research
showed that the black women interviewed experienced the incompetence bias more often
than their male counterparts. The intersection of race and gender created difficult barriers
that organizations do not always provide the resources to combat. When interviewing
White men and women, the respondents felt it was their hard work that helped them
achieve the career success they had. However, the black men and women interviewed
consistently believed race was the reason they did or did not get hired. Most black men
and women felt they had been hired because their companies wanted to increase their
diversity numbers rather than because they were fully qualified for the job. Smith and
Joseph found that these hiring reasons later led to white colleagues perceiving employees
of color as incompetent. Human capital investments become critical to giving women of
color the necessary skills and training they need to succeed in their companies. Smith and
Joseph looked at both the investments individuals made to create their own success as
well as what organizations provide in terms of training, education, and experience. Their
interviews revealed that organizations would use missing qualities as a reason for why a
certain employee of color did not get hired. However, when those employees go out and
gain those skills, they are still looked over for promotions. One interviewee mentioned

that she attended every training, workshop, and earned every certificate she could so that she would not be told she was missing skills. Smith and Joseph's research displays the lengths women of color must go through to even be considered for promotions and the efforts they must put in to be seen as competitive candidates and intelligent colleagues.

The study opens a larger discussion about what women of color, and in particular, black women need in order to achieve career success in their organizations. Taking Smith and Joseph's findings, this current study seeks to follow up on the impact organizational culture, experiences of discrimination, and individual and company offered human capital investments have had on management-level black career women. One of those investments is mentoring, which has gained popularity in organizations as a way to help women get through the pipeline to senior management positions. The increase in formal mentoring programs at corporations shows an investment in trying to help young, new, or underrepresented employees gain the skills and relationships necessary to advance their careers. A formal mentoring program has two major distinctions to informal mentoring relationships. First, a formal mentoring program is constrained by a specific period of time and the program recruits mentors and assigns them to protégés (Weinberg and Lankau 2011). As of 2009, about 70% of Fortune 500 companies have implemented formal mentoring programs (Jedd 2009). In 2013, 83 of the S&P 100 companies offered mentoring programs (Calvert Investments 2013). Carvin, CEO and president of Nobscot Corp., a retention-management consulting firm in Honolulu, says that mentoring provides "a more strategic avenue for career development" (Gutner 2009). Daun Anderson researched the need for mentoring programs in biotechnology to help women advance their careers and found that, "women's exclusion from informal networks may limit their

visibility and, in turn, their chances of finding a mentor, 'one important benefit of formal mentoring programs may be to affect how actively individuals seek out and cultivate multiple developmental relationships'" (Anderson 2005). The "multiple development relationships" Anderson is referencing is research done by Kram, which explained that mentors serve two functions, career development and psychosocial. Career development provides assistance with career advancement, while psychosocial attempts to boost confidence (Anderson 2005). Even though Anderson's work focuses on the biotech industry, her comments are relevant to corporate America as well. Mentoring programs give women and people of color access to senior-level executives and those executives get a chance to see the potential in lower-level employees. Formal mentoring programs also help to ensure that there are cross-cultural mentoring relationships being made. IBM recognizes that cross-cultural mentoring is important to make sure that employees are developing and have a fair shot of advancing within the organization (Divserity.Inc 2012).

Yolanda White writes about the obstacles and opportunities for Black women in her article, "Understanding the Black Woman Manager's Interaction with the Corporate Culture." White focuses on learning the tools for Black female middle managers to break the "glass ceiling" and reach senior management positions. Using interviews, the study looks at the lives of Black woman managers in a range of industries. The research finds that regardless of the industry these women are in, they need to be risk takers, have people willing to campaign for them, and have access to strong networks and mentors. White explains that these results can be achieved with both technical and social skills.

Technical skills will show good judgment and knowledge in the area, while social skills express the ability to work well with others and lead a team.

White's research presents tools black women can use to be noticed by senior management and hopefully get promoted, but these tools are taxing as they require a lot of time and create no room for error. For example, when discussing the importance of risk taking by making suggestions and taking on a challenge, White claims that, "a Black female manager must know that she is one hundred percent correct and operate in a 'zero defects' environment." While this approach can get a middle manager noticed, it can also create a lot of stress because should something go wrong, the black woman manager is at fault and will be noticed for it. The article also highlights the challenges of professional and personal barriers for black women managers because White employees can form cliques and exclude minorities. This exclusion makes it more difficult for minorities to network outside of their own identity groups and form relationships with their white colleagues and senior managers. The article acknowledges the positive impact black association groups can have on the careers of black women, but those groups can only do so much. The limited effectiveness of the affinity groups ties into the practices of organizations and company culture Smith and Joseph discussed because it creates difficulties for minority women to be seen as equal members of the company. The goal of this present study is to find what opportunities and challenges have formed from the recommendations Smith and Joseph, and White make for both organizations and black women managers.

Supporting Yolanda White's finding about the importance of mentoring, Brenda McGlowan-Fellows and Claudewell Thomas further explore the affects of this approach.

The researchers look to finding from a Catalyst 2004 article about advancing African American women in the workplace, the study found that "after being mentored, some 70% of women advanced in their careers. Importantly, the "mentoring of Black women is generally correlated with improved psychosocial development, increased motivation, increased optimism about achieving career goals, and an abatement of hopelessness and despair associated with their career outlooks" (Godshalk and Sosik 2000). The added theme none of the others articles have touched on is a Black women's mental health due to the effects of racism and sexism. The "abatement of hopelessness and despair" regarding their careers is a factor that needs to be taken into account. Understandably, mental health might have a serious effect on the passion for advancing one's career. McGlowan-Fellows and Thomas see mentoring as an opportunity to level the "playing field," since "the legacy of race and sex discrimination has left its mark on women and people of color in general. We…have to face the probability that women generally and black women particularly may be unprepared to take advantage of opportunities that may be opening in corporate America" (McGlowan-Fellows and Thomas 2005). The researchers then move on to discuss the need for creating a strategic and visible plan for improving diversity mentoring. The researchers look to Proctor and Gamble, the mega products and retail company, who created a Global Diversity and Human Resources Center to focus more on their efforts. The endeavors flowing from Proctor and Gamble's diversity center relate to Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly's article because the company has created a source of responsibility for their diversity work and while mentoring programs come out of that center, the company has assigned responsibility. Their work has been acknowledged numerous times by the NAACP, the National Council of Negro Women,

and many others. McGlowan-Fellows and Thomas support this present study by adding the component of mental health, which can have an effect on Black women's career progress.

Each of these articles has studied different components regarding the importance of diversity initiatives for women of color. The research has revealed what is necessary to start helping women of color break the barriers to their career success. There is a need for more information regarding the effectiveness of these suggestions by women who are already in management positions. These articles have focused on the numbers or what companies do or do not have, but this present study seeks to focus on women who have already reached management positions and the tools they have used to get there. This present study also seeks to better understand the emotional and mental strains black women might endure when advancing into leadership and senior management positions.

Methods

To obtain the information needed to accomplish this study, a set of individuals were interviewed to answer questions regarding the impact of an organization's polices, practices, and culture on a person's career advancement. The study focuses specifically on black women, from different industries and demographics. Interviewing black women from various fields provided analysis regarding organizational culture and practices across a range of career paths.

The individuals interviewed were young and middle aged black women who all currently have management or senior-level positions in their various industries. Their ages ranged from mid-thirties to early sixties. The five women interviewed included: Andrea, who has been in the non-profit sector for fifteen years and is currently CEO of a non-profit in Los Angeles, CA. Before entering the non-profit sector, Andrea worked for two different large American corporations. Gwen is a lawyer for a firm in Los Angeles, CA and has been practicing since 1981. Kimberly is the executive director of a Los Angeles regional office for a national non-profit and has been with her organization for over 15 years. Michelle has been in the banking and financial services sector for fourteen years and is a vice president at a large bank in Los Angeles, CA. Rose is corporate partner at a law firm in Los Angeles, CA and has been practicing since 1996.

Emails were sent to a black female manager at a financial organization known to the researcher. Connections through family friends and Scripps alumnae were also contacted. When reaching out to the interviewees, the purpose of the study and the process of anonymity were explained. They were contacted in January and February 2015 and the interviews took place during February and March 2015.

All five interviews were performed over the phone. Consent forms were emailed before the interviews for participants to sign if they agreed to continue with the study. The interviews followed a structured set of questions, but left an opening for interviewees to expand on their answers (see appendix). The questions sought out information about discrimination in the workplace and if tools were provided to help the women thrive in their organizations. They were also asked questions about how women-friendly their firms were in terms of culture, policies, and practices. These questions related directly back to previous literature and research, which named those themes as important to achieve success for black women. There was no audio or visual recording during the sessions, but notes were taken. Their names have been changed for anonymity and confidentiality.

Discussion and Analysis

The interviews with the five women revealed examples of experiences mentioned in previous research. Too much cannot be raised from the interviews since the sample size is small, but important themes revealed themselves through the conversations. Mentoring, training and networking opportunities, attitudes and discrimination towards black women, and women-friendliness in the workplace were the most prevalent themes during the interviews. Some women shared similar experiences, while some opportunities and incidents were entirely different. The interviews provided real life experiences that can speak to the statistics on the disadvantages women of color face. As previously mentioned, the women's names have been changed and any other identifying information has been removed for confidentiality.

Mentoring

Four of the women had been involved in either a formal or informal mentor relationship. Three of the participants stated that their organizations provided formal mentoring programs and some had issues with them.

Michelle, a vice president at a large national bank, stated that while her company offers a formal mentoring program, she felt that the organic relationships she built with her mentors had been most effective. In her experience, the formal mentoring relationships felt strained and unnatural and were not as successful as the relationships she created on her own. The programs were helpful for understanding policies, structures, and procedures of the firms, but Michelle believed her organically built mentor relationships have had a bigger effect on getting her to the next step. Michelle expressed

the importance of finding mentors both inside and outside of her firm, which has helped her analyze situations from multiple viewpoints.

Gwen is a lawyer at a firm and she has been in her industry for over 30 years. She felt that mentors were necessary to find because "people tend to mentor people who are similar to them." Gwen had to find her own mentors because she knew she needed "someone to champion for her when she wasn't in the room." One of the firms she worked for offered a mentoring program geared specifically towards increasing the number of African Americans in the firm. She was also a part of a mentoring program at one of the firms she worked at. The mentor provided effective advice regarding job priorities and how to juggle the demands of clients and partners in the firm. Gwen felt that as a young lawyer, she did not really take advantage of the mentoring relationship because she did not know how to effectively manage it. Mentors tended to create the nature of the relationship instead of the mentor program providing the structure. For example, some mentors might have developed framework and guide their mentees, while others made themselves available to answer questions, but did not seek out their mentees.

Rose, a partner at another large law firm, says mentoring has been helpful, but not career changing. She expressed that her mentors helped her improve her skills, but none of them had provided career impacting or advancing results. The formal mentoring program her firm offered was meant to specifically match minorities with executives and provide them access to relationships they might not have had. This program eventually fizzled away, but during its existence Rose found it ineffective for a multitude of reasons. She felt the program forced relationships and did not have enough structure around it to ensure that people would follow up or follow through on the relationships that were

supposed to be built. Rose believed that those who were in charge of creating and running the program needed to provide a better understanding of how the relationship would work so that new employees could get the most out of their relationships with the executives.

Kimberly, the executive director for a regional office of a large non-profit, has never participated in a formal mentoring program, but did ask a supervisor to be her mentor at a previous job. The supervisor was able to give Kimberly guidance and direction and encouraged her to continue her education. Kimberly instituted a mentoring program at her current organization that is open to everyone. She mentioned that the effectiveness of the mentoring relationships depends on the mentor, which is similar to Michelle, Gwen, and Rose's thoughts.

Brenda McGlowan-Fellows and Claudewell Thomas' article, "Changing Roles: Corporate Mentoring of Black Women," concludes that mentoring is a way to level "the playing field" (McGlowan-Fellows and Thomas 2005). Our participants' experiences show that in order to take advantage of opportunities a mentor can provide, some structure must be built in around that relationship. It is important to also establish who is responsible for creating that structure, the mentoring program directors or the mentor. Gwen and Rose highlighted challenges of not knowing how to fully take advantage of their mentor relationships. Determining the minimum amount of times a mentor pair should be meeting or encouraging the pair to establish goals could help curb some of these issues. There are also benefits to having mentor relationships that were established organically or through a program. There are also benefits to having mentors inside and outside of one's organization. These relationships provide different perspectives and can achieve similar or different goals. Having mentor relationships built into a company

through a program helps ensure that everyone, especially women of color, are getting access to senior-level employees in the organization. Organic relationships can be really beneficial, but they can also exclude people. As Gwen said, "people tend to mentor people who look like them," and having a formal mentoring program can assist in combating those biases.

Training/Networking

Training and networking opportunities were encouraged by both Gwen and Rose's law firms because they were seen as avenues to increase business prospects. Gwen said that her firm encourages initiative and any opportunity to spend more time with groups that might need legal services through volunteer work that benefits the local communities. Gwen's firm also supported her creation of seminars for women in business, which both increased her opportunity to meet new clients and benefited the women she was serving. Rose's firm also encouraged networking by providing her with a budget to take clients out to lunch or to contribute to different boards she served on. These networking opportunities increased her chances of creating new business. Michelle also stated that she had gained her promotions from gaining certifications and furthering her education. At Michelle's large financial institution, many of those opportunities exist internally. The size, financial success, and values of a firm could determine if training and development opportunities are provided or encouraged. Interestingly, none of the large organizations Andrea has worked for offered training, mentoring, or networking opportunities.

Yolanda White's research article, "Understanding Black Woman Manager's Interaction with Corporate Culture," highlights attending trainings and acquiring technical skills as an important tool to tackle discrimination based on race or gender. None of the women, except for Michelle, highlighted trainings as being incredibly beneficial to their careers even though it was encouraged by a few of the women's organizations. White's research shows that it is a combination of technical and social skills that will help Black women achieve success. Training and connections across one's industry can give women access to networks and mentors. White believes these tools will help women feel more comfortable taking risks that could advance their careers. For some of the participants of this study, training did not seem to do that as much as networking has been able to. It's unclear whether that is because they found another method more successful or because their firms did not offer training opportunities. Networking proved to be more fruitful for mentor relationships and business for Gwen and Rose. On the other hand, Kimberly certainly benefitted from continuing her education, which helped her have access to senior roles.

Attitudes/Discrimination Towards Black Women from Coworkers

All of the women mentioned the idea that people tend to work with or mentor people who look like them. In their cases, white male executives would reach out to young white males to give them challenging projects or to mentor them. While this might occur consciously or subconsciously, it creates a challenge for black women because they must work harder to be recognized for those opportunities. Discrimination manifested in different ways for the women, but it certainly did exist.

Rose described one example of being new and young in a law firm and seeing young lawyers receiving challenging assignments and getting personal attention from executives. She shared that she has also been thought to be a secretary instead of a lawyer because she carried a tray of food into a lunch meeting when going into meetings with clients. Rose has found ways to try and combat any prejudgments a client might make. One method is to speak to all clients and anyone else over the phone first before meeting them in person. Rose "is concerned that people prejudge the quality of [her] work by the fact that [she is] black." It is her belief that people are most going to remember that she is black above anything else, including the quality of the work she produces.

In one case, Andrea shared an experience when she was laid off, while a white woman with less experience was kept on at a large aeronautics firm. Andrea shared the idea that, "if there is more than one African American in a management position, that's enough…they do not count whites or females, but once they get one African American [they] have enough." Andrea recognized when she was not going to be promoted at a firm quickly enough and would find higher positions elsewhere. Whenever she changed companies, it was for a higher position.

All of the women described experiences of being seen as not worth working with or as incompetent individuals. Michelle mentioned that sometimes coworkers would not want to work with her or they did not see her as credible and competent. She shared that it can be a challenge to command a room, be seen as knowledgeable, or receive respect. Her methods for handling these barriers include working hard to know important information, building confidence to command a room, and forming alliances across races.

Age also played a factor for some of the women both currently and early in their careers. Kimberly told a story about an older employee of color once harassing her for being both young and light skinned. Kimberly was just starting in a new career in 1990s. Michelle believed that because she is young and is in the middle of her career, she has experienced a convergence of age, race, and gender discrimination. She felt that any discrimination she might receive is a combination of those three aspects rather than just one.

Surveys like those created by Calvert Investments or *Working Mother* seek to highlight the opportunities created within a firm for women of color, but they miss the discrimination and hurtful attitudes that black women experience on a regular basis. Janice Smith and Stephanie Joseph's study, "Workplace Challenges in Corporate America," found that Black women felt as though they had been hired to fulfill diversity quotas, which lead to their white coworkers perceiving them as incompetent. None of the participants of this study mentioned that they felt they were hired to meet diversity numbers, but some of the women expressed coworkers or clients projecting feelings of incompetence onto them. Rose's example of clients thinking she was the secretary rather than the lawyer merely due to the fact that she was carrying food into a meeting speaks volumes about people's unconscious biases. Michelle's struggle to get respect from her coworkers and be seen as an equally capable colleague highlights the fact that black women do not only need training or mentors, but that there needs to be more discussions about race and gender discrimination in the workplace. It is unclear whether the participants felt they were hired based on their ability rather than because their firms wanted to meet diversity needs. Nevertheless, Michelle and some of the other

participants' experiences show that regardless of why they were hired, their abilities will still be questioned.

Women-Friendliness in the Workplace

Gwen, Rose, and Michelle said that their organizations put policies and practices in place that made women-friendliness in the workplace a priority. All of them cited examples of flex-time, or having male and female managers that understood the important of work/life balance. Gwen's law firm offers flexible hours and has a great maternity leave policy. Rose explained that her firm does not require face-to-face communication at all times and has been very flexible. Some of Michelle's previous organizations have had child care centers on site and have had great women-friendly policies. Andrea, Gwen, and Michelle all cited have female managers as part of the reason why some of their organization's policies, practices, or culture have been supportive and inclusive. Gwen describes her female managing partner as an extraordinary leader and the firm's interest in women's issues is due in part to her. Andrea explained, "A female boss understands all of the demands you have in the work and home environment." She also noted that only men would ask her questions about having children or being married. Now in the non-profit sector, Andrea believes that the policies, practices, and culture in her current industry are more women-friendly because there are more women in the industry. While the policies and practices seem to be helpful, it is the culture aspect of women-friendliness that continues to be an issue.

When Gwen was once the only African American and the second woman at a law firm, one of the firm's partners said that he didn't like woman lawyers because he

believed they focused on theory rather than being able to think practically. Rather than letting that scare her off, Gwen worked hard to always provide practical solutions and that partner ultimately became a mentor for her. Gwen believes he liked that she was not scared off by his comments.

Michelle described experiencing a "mommy tax," where she feels that she has missed out on opportunities because she chooses to travel less to stay closer to her children. She also felt as though men would talk more about business issues with women who had no children. She said she routinely received the question, "how are the kids?" versus discussing business matters. While the company's policies were supportive of helpful in terms of Michelle wanting to raise her children, the cultural aspect and the underlying bias seems difficult to change or combat. Rose and Gwen both commented on the ability to raise children and have challenging careers at their firms because of policies in place that allow women to work part-time or less face-to-face interaction. However, they did not speak to the "mommy tax."

Four of the participants spoke to their current organizations exhibiting women-friendliness policies and practices, but there is still much work to be done regarding the overall cultural ways of some of their organizations. Marcia Wilkoff and Joy Schneer's study, "Is Your Company and Its Culture Women-Friendly?" found that it was important for organizations to have diverse managerial compositions, a strategic diversity agenda, and benefits that help women balance their home and work lives. The other factor, which seems to still be missing from some of the participants' organizations, is inclusive language (Wilkoff and Schneer 2005). Inclusive language is critical for women to feel respected at their firms and organizations' leadership teams need to take responsibility for

making this a priority. "Best Practices or Best Guesses; Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Practices," stressed the importance of assigning responsibility to a group within an organization to ensure that strategic goals around diversity and inclusion were met (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). Since some of the participants spoke to executives at their organizations saying incredibly marginalizing statements, those leaders could benefit from and model for other colleagues the importance of not excluding women of color through their language and everyday conversations. Michelle's experience with the "mommy tax" is an example of an organization having good policies in place that offer flexible hours or family benefits, but a culture where women without children will sometimes be more respected than those with children.

The women's experiences show that there is correlation between recent literature and the career related statistics on women and women of color. Aspects of the work of Smith and Joseph, White, and McGlowan-Fellows and Thomas rings true for these women in many different ways. Some participants, such as Gwen and Rose, experienced formal mentoring programs and they still raised issues with their structures or lack thereof. Michelle strongly utilized opportunities for further education, while Andrea and Kimberly had very different experiences from the other participants. Tying in these different approaches to advancement with the discrimination the participants experienced shows that all of these methods need to keep race and gender issues at the forefront during the planning stages.

Limitations

   This qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of a handful of senior-level black women and compare them to the challenges and opportunities found in the research that has already been done about the topic. However, there are some limitations to this study. First, there are only five black women's experiences included, which does not paint a broad picture of today's challenges in the workplace for women of color. Having so few women also means that there are not many industries represented either. Performing the interviews over the phone made it challenging for some of the women to feel comfortable sharing their journeys and larger challenges with the researcher. Finally, four of the women are similar in age, while only one participant was in her thirties. Moving forward, it would be helpful to have more women participate in the research who vary in age, position, and industry. Additionally, much more research should be done on understanding the experiences among women of color in the workplace. While this study only focused on black women, there might be shared experiences and challenges across race and ethnicity that can be explored.

Conclusion

Clearly there is work that still needs to be done as organizations try to diversify their workforce. Additionally, the statistics are showing that even though women are earning degrees and entering the workforce at a higher rate than men, there is a serious discrepancy regarding the number of women and women of color reaching the executive level. This study sought out to identify some possible conclusions for why this is occurring and what actions can be taken to start dealing with it.

Moving forward, this research shows that it is critical to include and center the experiences and challenges black women face when trying to tackle gender and workplace discrimination or provide career advancement opportunities. When companies are looking to implement formal mentoring programs, keeping black women's barriers to advancement in mind will help create the most effective programs. At the same time, addressing an organization's culture and looking for embedded discrimination will help alleviate some of the day-to-day bias related issues black women experience. Companies should simultaneously address advancement opportunities for black women and biases coming from race, class, and gender privileged individuals in the organization. In 2012 the Center for American Progress reported that, "workplace discrimination against employees based on race, gender or sexual orientation costs businesses an estimated $64 billion annually" (Bradford 2012). So not only do these issues matter from a moral or ethical position, but from a financial standpoint as well.

There are companies leading the way on issues of career advancement and discrimination. For organizations interested and invested in diversifying their senior level employees, looking to companies already doing it can help. Providing black women with

the opportunities to advance within the workplace will also help address many of the societal issues of race and gender that are still prevalent. These steps are all working in effort to "level the playing field" for women and minorities (McGlowan-Fellow and Thomas 2005).

As Kimberly Crenshaw wrote, "When they enter, we all enter" (Crenshaw 1989).

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What is your current position and how long have you been in your industry?
2. Could you tell me about your career journey? Where did you start and how did you get to where you are now?
3. Have you experienced discrimination in the workplace? Would you mind sharing a time when some form of discrimination really impacted the way you saw yourself in your career or at the organization?
   a. What was your strategy for dealing with this and other challenges you faced?
   b. What do you think the root of the discrimination was?
4. Have the organizations you've worked for offered internal/external training opportunities, mentoring programs, or identity network groups?
   a. How has this impacted your career path and advancement within the organizations?
5. How did you overcome roadblocks in your career? Do you think your organization has provided you the right tools to thrive? If so, what were the tools, and if not, what could have helped you?
6. Do you feel that all of the organizations you've worked for were friendly towards women and their needs in terms of benefits, company policies, and cultural values?
   a. If not, how did you deal with that?
7. Do you think your age has impacted the way you might or might not experience workplace discrimination, your current management position, or the way your colleagues view you?

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