

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

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Abstract

Race, gender, and class have historically shaped the lived experiences of African American women including their career goals. The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of five African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White institution (PWI) on the impact that race, gender, and class have on their career preparation. Using narrative research, data was collected from participants, whose voices led to four emerging themes related to college preparation, helping others, campus experiences, and support systems. Findings suggest that African American women are in need of career development that recognizes the dynamics of race, gender, and class; transcends conventional strategies; and adopts culturally relevant initiatives.

Keywords: African American women, intersectionality, undergraduate career development, higher education strategies.

Introduction

The 21st century employment market has been highly competitive, with employees required to perform at high levels (Schulz, 2008). A skilled workforce must be technical, innovative, and human relations oriented (Dixon et al., 2010; Overtoom, 2000). As undergraduate students plan to enter this competitive market, career development is essential. During his administration, President Obama acknowledged the importance of academic and career readiness skills among all college students. In 2009, he declared a national goal that by 2020 the United States would have the highest number of graduates attaining associates and baccalaureates degrees in the world (United States Department of Education, 2011). The Obama Administration charged higher education to accomplish this goal through increasing college access, improving student readiness for college, ensuring excellence, and accelerating college completion (United States Department of Education, 2011). With a focus on added work-study positions, student loan debt reform, and additional needs-based grants, President Obama increased educational attainment and career advancement, as well as increased healthier economic prospects (Dervarics, 2012; Holland, 2015).

In 2016 as the country shifted to the Trump Administration, many college students and their families held their breath about the affordability and accessibility for students to attend institutions of higher education (IHE). Among its immediate changes, the Trump Administration proposed to dismantle the policies created by the Obama Administration that focused on the abovementioned areas. Specific emphasis was placed on demolishing programs that aimed at student loan forgiveness and the federal work-study program (Murakami, 2020; Bombardieri et al., 2020). Subsequently students had no protection as borrowers, and the hope of gainful employment diminished (Murakami, 2020). These changes impacted all college students but

most significantly impacted students of color, of low-income, and first-generation. Such threats to accessibility and affordability to IHE impacted the spirit of equity (Bombardieri et al., 2020). By 2021-2022, the Biden Administration began attempts to enact a program for student loan forgiveness, although there have been multiple challenges threatening the administration's initiative (Minsky, 2022).

In an ideal educational environment, equal opportunities exist for all undergraduate students to become career ready with the goal of gainful employment. Success from a college education equates to economic security and the opportunity for future socioeconomic growth that translates into upward mobility (Brown & Jones, 2004; Hotchkiss & Borow, 1990; Johnson, 2015; Okech & Chambers, 2012). However, it is unrealistic to believe that all college students have the same opportunities to cultivate the knowledge, skill sets, and work history necessary to enter the workforce and attain occupational advancement.

Today's African American undergraduate women, specifically, face the challenges of their predecessors regarding career opportunities due to societal isms of race, sex, and class (Williams & Nichols, 2012). Thus, there is a unique need for career development that transcends conventional academic and career readiness skills, and that incorporates the dynamics of race, gender, and class as a three-way intersection of factors traditionally not acknowledged by researchers (Schiller, 2000). Assisting African American women with career development can be accomplished by having a firm understanding of this group's interests, aspirations, and the factors that impact their persistence. Equally important is the ability to understand the worldview of African American women which has been crafted by experiences drawn from their race, gender, and class (Collins, 1989, 1990; Schiller, 2000; Williams & Nichols, 2012). It is particularly arduous to unravel the tie connecting racism, sexism, and classism (Shorter-Gooden,

2004), and the connection between career development and strategies that reflect an understanding of the history and experiences of African American women with the hopes of increasing their persistence as college students and preparedness as future job candidates. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of five African American undergraduate women, who attend a predominantly White institution (PWI) of higher education, regarding their career aspirations, and the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations.

Review of Literature

The economic growth of African Americans is linked to the unemployment rate, which has consistently remained higher among African Americans than most racial and ethnic groups (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Pinkney, 1989; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020). Other factors include the types of occupations and sectors where groups are employed and the degree to which discrimination (race, gender, and class) exists in work settings (BLS, 2020). Moreover, prolonged unemployment makes securing a new job more difficult; particularly for individuals without a network of family members, friends, and acquaintances who can be utilized for job leads or recommendations (DOL, 2012).

In 2019, African American women, alongside Latina women, had the higher unemployment rate with 5.6% and 4.7% (respectively) compared to White women at 3.2% followed by Asian women at 2.7% (BLS, 2020). The median earnings during the same year, has Asian women with the highest earnings, followed by White women, with African American women and then Latina women trailing behind. Earnings varied based on high educational completion, which often led to occupations such as chief executives, veterinarians, computer and

information systems managers, physicians and surgeons, architects, engineers, pharmacist, and attorneys (BLS, 2020).

Such occupations often lead to a higher socio-economic status. As important social relations, race and gender are closely linked with class (Collins, 2009). However, race and gender have also been used as diversions from necessary discussions about the cruel realism surrounding class (hooks, 2000). Class takes on the meaning of “relational positioning” of groups of individuals (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995, p. 34). It is based on access to power and resources, as well as ownership and control of capital; all of which determine social status. Social capital is connected to the social position and mobility of families (Bourdieu, 1977). Researchers have theorized a relationship between the academic success of children and social capital of their parents (Bourdieu, 1977).

Educational attainment is a strong indicator of employability and the types of occupational positions held by individuals. While employment and economic gaps have existed between African Americans and Whites, an educational gap has also developed over history. “The term ‘achievement gap’ has been used to capture the academic underachievement of African American and Hispanic/Latino students when compared to their White American counterparts” (Caldwell & Obasi, 2010, p. 349). As it pertains to African Americans, the start of the educational gap is marked by a history of laws that prohibited any slave from learning how to read or write. Later, segregation laws forced freed African American children, who were believed to be intellectually inferior, to attend poor schools (Takaki, 2008). A lifetime of laws and preconceived notions has worked to the detriment of African Americans and their education. This inequity holds true for students in higher education as well (Bensimon, 2005). How college faculty teach, think, and connect with students can produce unequal outcomes. Moreover, the

assumptions and preconceived notions educators possess about the race and ethnicity of their students can also produce negative outcomes.

Fortunately, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), recognized by the Higher Education Act of 1964, have played an integral part in the education of African Americans (United States Department of Education, 2016). In the 1940s, African American women attended colleges at higher rates compared to both White women and African American men (Blalock & Sharpe, 2012; Giddings, 1984; McDaniel et al., 2011). Researchers offer multiple reasons for this accomplishment. Compared to White women, more African American women participated in the workforce and perhaps believed that a higher education led to occupational advancement (McDaniel et al., 2011). Compared to African American men, more African American women completed their high school education (McDaniel et al., 2011) and more received their bachelor degrees from HBCUs (Giddings, 1984). Subsequently in the 1940s and 1950s, African American women made up the larger fraction of first-generation graduates (Giddings, 1984). College enrollments and educational attainments of African American women continued to increase well into the current era, with more African American students enrolled in PWIs today than in HBCUs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, the educational achievements of African American women have not alleviated them of the struggles produced from race, gender, and class (Chambers et al., 2009). African American women have persisted and attained college degrees in spite of racism, sexism, and classism (Chambers et al., 2009).

The individual terms of race, gender, and class were an integral part of this study. These terms are defined as individual strands, but are acknowledged as social constructs fused and tightly woven to form an intersectionality unique to African American women. In the 1980s, the term intersectionality was coined by Crenshaw (2015), who wanted to create a title for a concept

that represented the realities and experiences of African American women. Intersectionality described how different types of forces intermingled and how they connected to power (Crenshaw, 2015). As forces pertain to race, gender, and class, intersectionality was Crenshaw's effort to bring awareness to the invisibilities that occurred within feminism, anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and class politics (Adewunmi, 2014; Crenshaw, 2015).

Since Crenshaw coined the term, other scholars have researched its meaning and rendered their own interpretations. For example, Brah and Phoenix (2004) explain intersectionality "as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts" (p. 76). Nonetheless, it is agreed that the individual strands that comprise intersectionality cannot be separated as these strands work concurrently (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015). Therefore, the experiences of African American women have been remarkably different than the experiences of the dominant group (Collins, 1989). As it pertains to employment, historically, the work experiences of African American women have been dictated by oppression based on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Limited to positions that were labor-intensive, domestic, and other service-oriented work, African American women have experienced minimal opportunities in other areas of employment compared to the dominant group (Collins, 1990).

To explore the perceptions of five African American undergraduate women, who attend a PWI, regarding their career aspirations as well as the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations, the following two research questions were proposed as part of this study:

RQ1: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution develop career aspirations?

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

Conceptual Framework and Ideological Lens

The conceptual framework appropriate for this qualitative study was comprised of two career theories, Social Learning Theory of Career Decision-Making as well as Social Cognitive Career Theory. Both theories support the concept that multiple factors are the basis of individual career choices. Career development theories are often limited in their scope when considering the intersection of multiple factors, such as race, gender, and class. For example, traditional career development theories were based on White middle-class men, whose experiences, compared to the experiences of African American women, were at the opposite end of the spectrum (Kerka, 1998; Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993; McCollum, 1998).

To capture the socio-political constructs of race, gender, and class as factors in career choices and goals among African American women, Black Feminist Thought served as the ideological lens for the study. Black Feminist Thought understands that race, gender, and class are “simultaneous forces” (Brewer, 1999, p. 32), which have created a history of oppression and invisibility for African American women (Collins, 1990). It also recognizes that as a three-way intersection, race, gender, and class impact groups of individuals differently. Those dynamics can either promote advancement or thwart progress for certain individuals. As a lens, the use of Black Feminist Thought in relaying the reality of the study’s participants was significant, as traditional scholarship has relied on White women for the feminist perspective, and Black men for political and social perspectives (Collins, 1990).

Methodology

Method and Strategy of Narrative Inquiry

To answer the proposed research questions, a qualitative research design was adopted. More specifically narrative research was used to garner the descriptive information needed (Creswell, 2014). Clandinin (2013) defines narrative inquiry as “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 17). It represents an understanding of the past, present, and future through storytelling to capture the context in which each participant has lived (Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Similar to narrative inquiry and the connection to its participants, Black Feminist Thought embodies the stories and experiences of African American women regarding the world in which they live and what that means for their future (Collins, 1990).

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Before any inquiry commenced, an IRB application was submitted that detailed the study, the administered assessment tool, and the target group recruited as participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The application emphasized the use of participant consent, the use of pseudonyms in place of participant names to ensure anonymity, and the removal of the institution’s name to ensure the protection and confidentiality of the study's five women. Once the researcher completed the appropriate CITI training, approval was granted by IRB and the methods component of the study commenced.

Participants

In the summer of 2017, five African American undergraduate women attending the same PWI served as the study’s sample. Four of the five participants were rising seniors and one

participant was a recent graduate. Participants, diverse in majors, were identified with the assistance of both faculty and staff, who served as mentors to African American students and/or advisors to student subsets like African American undergraduate women. Prior to its commencement, full disclosure about the study was shared with each prospective participant. At the time of this study, the institution employed approximately 1,150 individuals with Whites representing close to 75%, Blacks/African Americans 11%, and Hispanics/Latinos 7%. In addition, approximately 7,700 students were enrolled as fulltime undergraduates with Whites representing 70%, Hispanics/Latinos 12%, and Blacks/African Americans 7%.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions were administered to collect data. This instrumentation allowed participants to respond in their own voices, with the prospect of elaborating on or raising new ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview protocol consisted of six questions. Questions pertained to background, including family and upbringing; childhood aspirations; declared major; future occupation or career aspirations; perception of preparedness from a PWI. See Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Interviews were in-person, audio recorded, and then transcribed. More specifically, data analysis for the interview findings consisted of an eight-step process that included: organizing, familiarizing, identifying, coding, generating themes, interpreting, searching, and writing (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The audio recording of each interview was repeatedly listened to and then transcribed. The transcripts were compared to the audio recordings for accuracy. Transcriptions were used for the purpose of organization and familiarization of participants' responses. These two steps were followed by identifying and coding key words and phrases from

participant interviews for the purpose of developing categories and generating themes that emerged from the interview findings. Emerging themes, which is a result of coding, assisted in the substance and analysis of data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Saldana, 2013).

Data analysis and interpretation of field notes was also conducted. Field notes, also transcribed, were repeatedly read to determine what information was collected. The exercise of repeated reading assisted in building accounts that were chronicled and summarized (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). This information collected from field notes was coded to identify emerging topics and themes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Saldana, 2013). Themes from both audio recordings and field notes were then further reviewed for interpreting, searching, and writing the results of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Results

The five women presented in this study developed their career aspirations through: parental/childhood influences; a need to help others; and a combination of both. In addition, participants understood how race, gender, and class pertained to career goals as they:

- Acknowledged how these factors shaped their pre-college and college experiences, which they believed differed from the experiences of their White peers.
- Viewed the institution as a reflection of the professional world and opted to use their experiences as practice for life beyond the institution.
- Instinctively adopted a bicultural approach to balance outer demands and inner qualities.
- Understood the importance of remaining involved with campus activities.
- Found it invaluable to connect with faculty and staff who served as mentors concerned with their challenges and persistence as African American undergraduate women.

Participants shared their narratives, which were comprised of detailed information about their backgrounds, childhood dreams, declared majors, and career aspirations. See Table 1. As participants relayed their journeys, four themes emerged from their narratives. Those themes were: Lack of College Preparation; Commitment to Helping Others; Campus Experiences as African American Women; and the Significance of a Support System.

Discussion

Theme One: Lack of College Preparation

In sharing their declared majors and career choices, four of the five women spoke either about the advantages they believed other students (White) had upon first entering the institution or about their own lack of awareness in choosing a major and career. Lisa and Kimberly, both first generation college students, conveyed their thoughts on the differences between those students who were and were not prepared. Their discussions implied that socioeconomic status, particularly that of parents (Bourdieu, 1977), might have impacted the level of preparedness of other students. This echoes the literature's discussion on the relationship between race, gender, and class; specifically, how class links to power, resources, ownership, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Lisa spoke to the belief that other students were prepared because of the school districts they attended prior to entering college. Kimberly, a Health Science major, spoke to her lack of preparedness compared to the preparedness of White students whose pre-college experiences were the result of parents linking their children with opportunities to assist them with their career aspirations. Kimberly shared the following:

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

with...A lot of people just seem to know what classes they had to take to get to where they were going.

Kimberly also made inference to her parents' lack of college experience as the reason she lacked knowledge in selecting classes, all consistent with previous research on college students from low socioeconomic status families, and who are first generation students (Walpole, 2003, 2007, 2008). In addition, Vivian and April discussed their own lack of awareness as they entered college. April was uncertain about her choice of major and her ability to secure a job, while Vivian reported not thinking beyond her major into a career. Kimberly and April shared that the institution had not properly identified career options, which is where they needed assistance.

Theme Two: Commitment to Helping Others

Between childhood dreams and undergraduate career aspirations, participants discussed the importance of helping others through their chosen careers, consistent with the literature on African American women (Hamilton, 1996; Pattillo, 2013; Sampson & Milam, 1975). While each participant focused on a different career goal, helping others was the motivating factor in their career choice. From Vivian as a future educational leader to Shawna as a future probation officer, and from April as a future family therapist to Kimberly as a future physical or occupational therapist, these four participants were motivated by assisting others.

Lisa, who declared business as her major, was interested in making money after watching her family struggle as she grew up.

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

Like the other participants, Lisa was interested in using her education and position as a future businessperson to better the conditions in the city where she was born and raised. This too is consistent with the literature that discusses that African American women are socialized to give back to their communities, and often determine that the needs of their community outweigh their personal aspirations (Hamilton, 1996).

Theme Three: Campus Experiences as African American Women

Participants discussed how the following impacted their lives on campus: 1) the low number of Black students, 2) debates over national political events, and 3) their awareness of intragroup dynamics. As a result, participants grappled with the idea of adopting a bicultural approach, which has “double consciousness” as its foundation (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903; Parham & Austin, 1994). DuBois (1903) identifies the term double consciousness, which is often used to understand the bicultural experience of African American individuals. It is believed that double consciousness is a means by which African Americans shed the inner self to develop another self that would be more accepted by mainstream America.

Regarding African American professional women, Bell (1990) notes that double consciousness requires an awareness of both worlds that have been created on socio-political issues of race, gender, and class. However, African American women are challenged by the orderliness and balance of developing careers in one world and maintaining a connection to their personal lives in the other world (Bell, 1990). For example, Vivian shared:

I think as a Black woman on this campus, I have to pick and choose very carefully what I say to people because I don't want to come off as the angry Black girl... There's always that balance that I have to make sure I keep ... I made sure I always put my best foot forward in terms of whenever I meet someone new whether they were Black, White,

Hispanic... I was going to present myself in the best light because I'm a Black female. I always made sure I was very well spoken.

Kimberly's perspective on the idea of biculturalism and specifically on having to embrace what was not her cultural norms.

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

Four of the five participants spoke to their reality of being the only African American or Black student and/or woman in their classes. April found it most discouraging as represented by her following thoughts:

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

Lisa, Kimberly, and Vivian saw the low number of African American or Black students as preparation for their lives beyond the institution. For example, although Vivian admitted she was surprised at the low number of Black students on campus given the marketing materials to prospective students showed otherwise, she found the experience as a groundwork to her future.

It prepared me to the extent of knowing that you're going to be told "no" all the time, and you just need to try really really hard. People are going to say crazy things and

sometimes you are going to have to smile and nod. You have to know how to pick your battles.

The reality experienced by participants was further reinforced by national events, which impacted the campus climate (Chambers et al., 2009). Campus conversations centered on socio-political issues that stemmed from the 2016 presidential election and topics such as immigration. Campus conversations also included incidents of police brutality that occurred throughout the United States. More specifically, participants shared what they believed to be the views of other students (White) on whether racism still exists and who has power in America (Calvert & Ramsey, 1996; Collins, 1989, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 2015; Jeffries & Ransford, 1980; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Rothenberg, 2000). Lisa and Vivian conveyed the need to incorporate approaches on how they handled sensitive discussions to avoid the misinterpretation of their responses, an example of bicultural approach (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903; Parham & Austin, 1994). Shawna also struggled with managing her view of the world as it pertained to current events. Compared to a year before, Shawna's described her view as "totally different now". Shawna, who wanted to pursue a career in law enforcement as a probation officer, was now doubtful and questioned her trust in White people. This was the same career choice that other people of color questioned her about, and this included her father. At one time she defended her choice but found it challenging considering the image held by many people of color regarding White police officers. Shawna shared "last year I was ecstatic to be a cop." She recalled saying to herself that she was "going to be one of the best officers". However, reflecting on the current climate of the country, Shawna shared:

"Cops are horrible nowadays... [Cops] are just shooting people for nothing... it's scary to think about. You want to go and change something but it's so big that you're only one

person and you've got everybody looking at your career like why are going into this field. It's such a horrendous field but this is something you love, so it's definitely hard.

Furthermore, participants discussed the importance of connecting with other African American students. These connections were significant to participants as the low number of Black students and conversations of controversial national events sharpened their awareness of the differences between their realities and the realities of their White peers. Another example of biculturalism was demonstrated by Kimberly, who relayed her difficulty in trying to maintain a balance between the White world and her African American culture (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903; Parham & Austin, 1994). She found this challenging as other African American students questioned her Blackness (Walpole, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). She was concerned about the need to give up her African American culture to demonstrate her intelligence and work ethic. Both Shawna and Vivian shared similar sentiments as Kimberly. Family and peers questioned Shawna's career decision to become part of law enforcement as an African American woman, particularly in the midst of current events surrounding the police brutality of other African Americans. Vivian, whose Blackness was already called into question by a childhood peer, discussed her perception that students of color failed to support one another on campus.

Theme Four: Significance of a Support System

Participants relied on the support of family and friends who recognized the pressures experienced by participants (Bell, 1990; Chambers, 2009; Chambers et al., 2009; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Four of the five participants discussed how their parents, to some extent, influenced their decision to attend college. Shawna was the only participant who did not discuss a parental impact on her educational decision. In fact, she credited a high school teacher in prompting and supporting her as a future college student. All five women, as college students,

relied on the relationships they had built through campus involvement. That involvement included student organizations, sororities, athletics, and other supportive programs, such as the EOF program. A strong support system for the majority of participants also included relationships with professors and advisors who acknowledged the challenges that participants experienced as African American women at a PWI. Kimberly highlighted the importance of one professor who was part of her support system.

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

As participants described those professors and advisors, they used key words such as "following me throughout my entire college career," "they took me in," and "treated me like an individual". As part of her support, Kimberly shared the importance of her spirituality (Collins, 1986, 1989, 1990), while Shawna had recently adopted a personal mantra to approach her daily life.

Limitations

The study was not without its limitations. First, this research focused on African American undergraduate women at one PWI only. It was not a comparative study. It did not compare African American undergraduate women at a PWI with African American

undergraduate women at a historically Black college or university. Second, although there are no requirements for a sample size within qualitative (narrative) inquiry as a small number can offer a wealth of detailed and valuable information (Patton, 1990), a small sample size like the one presented in this study cannot be seen as representative. In addition, general limitations inherent within a narrative design related to the analysis, which was dependent on criteria not connected to validity, reliability, and generalization (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). However, since there are no standardized criteria within narrative design, the researcher defined and supported the criteria most applicable for this study. In other words, the researcher identified accounts and details garnered from each participant's narrative; and then retold and analyzed each narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Implications

Future Research

In order to transcend traditional research that focused on middle-class White males, future research must include African American women as the focal point. Research should consider the commonalities discovered among the perceptions and experiences of African American women. It must also consider that African American women assimilate due to their upbringing or the need to balance two worlds; therefore, perceptions and experiences among groups of African American women may differ. With sufficient rigor, quality, and detail, this current study can serve other researchers who may want to expand on the findings.

Moreover, future studies may yield information if it compares African American undergraduate women from more than one PWI or from a PWI and a historically Black institution. Comparative studies can also be conducted with African American and White undergraduate women from the same institution. When conducting, research should examine

pre-college experiences as the lack of college preparation emerged as a theme from the data. To participants, race and class determined which students were afforded pre-college experiences that prepared them both academically and occupationally with White students benefiting from these factors. Future research should examine the pre-college experiences of African American high school females in comparison to those experiences of White high school females with an additional emphasis on gender and class.

Practice

In response to research findings, practitioners of PWIs must be equipped to assist their African American undergraduate women (Falconer & Hays, 2006). One approach is to incorporate career development strategies that are culturally relevant and reflect the socio-political issues of race, gender, and class impacting African American undergraduate women as students and aspiring professionals (McCollum, 1998; Perrone et al., 2001). Another initiative includes assisting African American undergraduate women with a healthy support system that encompasses home, faculty and staff, and professional contacts. Support systems comprised of other African American women may prove beneficial for undergraduate African American women. These relationships aid in the empowerment of African American women as they navigate through a system that traditionally has not accepted or validated their realities (Bell, 1990; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). A third recommendation is to facilitate roundtable discussions with institutional actors who have face-to-face interactions with African American undergraduate women. Roundtable discussions must include actors from both the academic and student affairs sides. Faculty and staff members need to be apprised of the impact they have on African American undergraduate women as it pertains to retention and persistence. This is of

particular importance within a PWI where campus climates may not be as welcoming because of race, gender, and class (Chambers et al., 2009).

Policy

Implemented practices are often in response to policy. African American undergraduate women often find themselves lost among the different groups that fall under the new umbrella of diversity. Policy written with a political consciousness about the impact of intersectionality on African American women may influence institutional practices that foster a more supportive environment (Beal, 2008). Such policy reform would require educational leaders to adopt a more social justice approach in an effort to be “culturally responsive”, reallocate resources that address matters of inequities among students, and increase student achievement and empowerment (Hyttten & Bettez, 2011, p. 8). Empowerment is of particular importance for African American undergraduate women whose next step is to transition from college to a capitalist workforce recognized for its history of racial exploitation and male dominance (Beal, 2008; hooks, 2000).

Leadership

Practice, research, and policy cannot be impacted without the appropriate leadership. A leader with a social justice platform can impact both curricula and co-curricula activities. Social justice is appropriate as it is more attentive to issues of equity, and it raises the consciousness of the dominant culture by supporting the principle that all individuals are entitled to equal rights and participation in the same liberties and opportunities with fairness. This consciousness has been typically constructed on respect and care for individuals, and the recognition and advocacy of rights (Theoharis, 2007).

In addition to social justice, a profound impact by leadership requires change that shifts the cognitive frames of individual educators and the educational system from deficit and

diversity to a cognitive frame of equity (Bensimon, 2005). A deficit frame perpetuates stereotypes and preconceived notions (Bensimon, 2005). Educators with a deficit frame maintain beliefs that African American students are intellectually inferior compared to students of the dominant culture, who have been viewed as intellectually superior (Takaki, 2008). As a result, the expectations of these educators regarding their students of color are low compared to their expectations regarding students of the dominant culture. On the other hand, educators who are diversity minded celebrate differences among groups of students. However, equity-minded educators go beyond short-term remedies and examine the root causes of educational inequities (Bensimon, 2005). These educators participate in continuous self-reflection to assess their own personal attitudes and practices (Bensimon, 2005; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Ovando, 2003), and believe in both individual and institutional responsibility in response to inequities (Bensimon, 2005). The goal would be to foster that a culture that is healthy and advantageous to educational progress and the outcomes of students' learning, including the career development and readiness of African American undergraduate women.

Conclusion

It is unrealistic to believe that all college students have the same opportunities to cultivate the knowledge, skill-sets, and work history necessary to enter the workforce and attain occupational advancement. When we look at the historical landscape in which African American women have existed, problems and conflicts have been present for all facets of their lives, career aspirations and goals included. Compared to other groups, African American women have remained under-employed and under-compensated as well as underrepresented within the workforce. Despite their attainment of college degrees, these issues persist for African American

women, particularly as they enter non-traditional fields of employment where their numbers are low (Higginbotham, 1994).

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American women regarding their career aspirations, and the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations. To help accomplish this purpose, five African American women offered their narratives as undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). While their stories were shared individually, collectively their stories spoke to matters of college preparation, helping others, campus experiences, and support systems, with the intersectionality of race, gender, and class interwoven through each story. The literature characterizes these socio-political issues as distinctive and overlapping forces within the career development of African American women (Brewer, 1999; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Parham & Austin, 1994). The study's implications were offered based on the five narratives as well as the emerging themes and additional topics echoed throughout the literature.

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