

**“Structural Barriers and the Career Progression of Black Women  
compared to Asian, Latin, and White Women”**

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## **Introduction**

Women across the board, in the workplace, face issues of sexism and gender bias irrespective of industry (Weber & Higginbotham, 1997). Women continue to prove they are not only capable of working, but also excelling in male dominated industries. White women have not reached the level of being equal to their White male counterparts in higher level positions, but the gap is closer for them than it is for Black, Asian, and/or Latin women (Hite, 2007). A factor many do not consider are the structural barriers Black women endure. Simms et al. (2015) define structural barriers are obstacles that collectively affect a group disproportionately and perpetuate or maintain stark disparities in outcomes.

Black women not only face inequality in the workplace, but issues of workplace diversity or lack thereof. Supphellen et al. (1997) state ethnic discrimination is a sensitive issue. The purpose of this study was to explore structural barriers in the career progression that Black women faced compared to their Asian, Latin, and White female counter parts and to seek out similarities and/or differences for possible solutions. Work is demanding regardless of one's racial or gender background, but exposure to racial bias and discrimination is especially stressful for those who face racism and sexism everyday (St. Jean & Feagin, 1998).

## **Literature Review**

### **Structural Barriers**

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), Black women experience occupational disadvantages based on gender and race. The stress of the job at hand is enough to deal, but to add the stress of being a Black female on the job and the daily micro and macro-aggressions is a different level of stress (Holder, Jackson, & Ponteretto, 2012).

Hall et al. (2012) state discrimination in the workplace on the basis of race and gender is a chronic stressor for Black women. Black women must learn how to balance these stressors at home and work (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013).

Managing the interlocking effects of racism and sexism is a core theme in Black women's daily life experiences (Hall et al., 2012). Asian, Latin, and White women experience situations in their career progression in which they could stall the forward movement of their career, but not like that discrimination and gender bias barriers Black women face (Wernick, 1994). According to Hall et al. (2012), discrimination in the workplace against Black, female workers come in the form of stereotypes, excessive demands, an absence of mentoring, exclusions from work [office] cliques, being ignored and/or harassed, and assumptions that they are incompetent. Through these stereotypes and biases in the workplace, corporate diversity is essentially undermined, ultimately serving as barriers to minority groups' attainment of career progression (Fiske & Lee 2008).

### **Asian and Latin Women**

Asian and Latin women at times run into the same stressors of structural barriers of their Black female counterparts. The gender biases and stereotypes plague Asian and Latin women in the workplace, from the hiring process to being promoted (Krivkovich, Robinson, Starikova, Valentin, & Yee, 2017). Supphellen et al. (1997) states, accordingly, work and hiring processes are important to the understanding of attitudes toward ethnic minorities and the phenomenon of ethnic discrimination. Asian and Latin women are both stereotyped as industrious, persistent, and hardworking (Lai and Babcock, 2013 and Hite, 2007), Perception is a term used around many work environments that can have either a positive or negative connotation depending on with

whom you are speaking (Banerjee, 2008). In the career progression process, the employee seeks to be seen in a positive light to those in power positions to fluidly move up levels (Sicola, 2014).

According to Lai and Babcock (2013), perceivers' beliefs of candidates' skills are based not only on an objective evaluation of the skills but also on a subjective interpretation of them. The Asian and Latin women can have the skills needed for the job, but the lack of mentorship and/or networking the perception is they lack the skills to move forward in their career (O'Brien, Franco, & Dunn, 2014).

### **Diverse Working Climate**

Where many organizations seem to miss the mark is identifying the diversity makeup of America is increasing which means the workforce will have more diverse candidates as well as the work environment (Morgan & Vardy, 2009). For to change to happen, many will have to deal with the sensitive topic of discrimination to move their organizations in a way that represents the diversity of the American society (Martin, 2014). According to Buttner et al. (2010), a critical organizational dimension for many employees of color is the diversity climate. Many employees of color seek to know how diverse their working environment as soon as they start on the first day. According to Fine (1996), the key to managing a diverse workforce is increasing individual awareness of and sensitivity to differences of race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, physical ability, and age. Organizations need trainings on diversifying their gender roles through the different management levels as well as through different ethnicities.

If organizations want to keep up with societal trends in the diverse population and mirror their business the same way, they will need to not only hire female and people of diverse backgrounds, but they will need to train, mentor, and retain. Bottom line is they will need to

speak with their employees, find root causes, and partner with HR to build a better diverse environment. Buttner et al. (2010) states, thus understanding what drives employee outcomes, both desirable (organizational commitment) and undesirable (e.g., turnover) among professionals of color, an especially scarce resource in the US workforce, is a particularly important issue for their managers and for human resource professionals.

The women need to feel like they belong within the organization and are of value to not only their managers, but the organization itself. Team building exercises are great ways to break barriers and build relationships. According to Dunphy (2004) further, an appreciation of differing cultures, ages, genders, nationalities, and lifestyles creates a more supportive work environment. Having a work environment that provides support and appreciation of all your differences provides a person a sense of peace and security with their work environment. After the George Floyd murder in 2020, many companies wanted to confirm with their diverse employees that their work environment is not only safe, but it was diverse. According to Williams and Cox (2020) one common step that leaders take is to invest in diversity programs. A huge push was made to increase awareness for diversity, equity, and inclusion and/or reinforce programs that were always in place. Fine (1996) states, cultural diversity in the workplace is currently a hot topic.

Black women seek to make a difference in their work environment and a more culturally diverse workplace is a high priority topic in corporate America. Women, especially women of color factor in the diversity of an organization and how it can affect their career. In the current racial climate of America, it is seen and understood America is a melting pot of diverse ethnicities and racial backgrounds, more so now than ever before. According to Witherspoon and Wohlert (1996), diversity in the workplace is not a new phenomenon; individual differences

always have existed, even among groups identified as homogeneous. Organizations might treat diversity as if it is new because it is new to them, but it is not a new phenomenon in America as a whole.

### **Acknowledge, Develop, Retain**

Organizations must be willing to do the work from the upper management level to understand that change is to identify the structural barriers that are in place and change them (Huang, Kirvovich, Starikova, Yee, & Zanoschi, 2019). Witherspoon and Wohler (1996) state whether it is slow and incremental or rapid and transformational, any process designed to “value,” “manage,” or “increase” diversity is fundamentally a change effort. For organizations to move forward with the diverse backgrounds of the nation they will need to make a real effort to change. While the organization is making the change to increase their diversity efforts, the structural barriers that they are removing will help Black women move up in their career at a better rate. According to Michener and Brower (2020), in the United States economic inequality is both racialized and gendered, with Black and Latina women consistently at the bottom of the economic hierarchy.

To move women up the economic ladder companies can add mentoring programs into their diversity portfolios. Mentoring programs allows for women to network across departments and gain knowledge and experience otherwise not provided in their career portfolio. Wanguri (1996) states contemporary organizations are increasingly turning to mentoring programs as a vehicle for creating opportunities for open communication between employees and for assimilating newcomers into the institutional culture. When an employee is being developed and made to feel as if their presence matters and adds value to the company, they are more likely to stay with the company.

According to Wilson et al. (1999), significantly, the process of attaining the most privileged positions may constitute a crucial aspect of racial inequality. The career progression for Black women is at a different rate compared to Asian, Latin, and White women.

Accountability is what women are asking companies to be keep their promises made. Yeunaje et al. (2021) states, being accountable thus means that the organization is open to criticisms and admitting its problems and weaknesses, including issues related to fairness, inclusiveness, and diversity. Black women seek to progress in their career at a better rate by the removal of the structural barriers by companies acknowledging the barriers exist, creating diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, developing mentoring programs, and being held accountable for what they say they will do for inclusivity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The literature on structural barriers in the workplace regarding women suggest Black women are affected in different ways compared to Asian, Latin, and White women. Based on the review of the literature the following questions were proposed to gain insight into the specific area. What this study seeks to understand is how individual factors play a role in organizational factors in diversity, equity, and inclusion within the organization.

### **Cognitive Dissonance Theory**

The theory used to drive the study was cognitive dissonance theory. Cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) as explained by Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019) that dissonance is aroused when people are exposed to information that is inconsistent with their beliefs. There are a few variables within CDT such as perceived choice, public/private, self-theories, and consequences everyone portrays when dissonance is aroused (Kenworthy, Miller, Collins, Read,

& Earleywine, 2011). The variables help understand the characteristics and motivations of why certain companies/employees treat women; especially Black women in the manner they do.

### **Dissonance Variables**

**Perceived choice:** In either a low or high choice situation, a person perceived choice was imperative to the arousal of dissonance and how committed to that choice they hold firm to in the short or long-term (Kenworthy, Miller, Collins, Read, & Earleywine, 2011).

**Public/Private:** According to Kenworthy et al. (2011), Performing counter-attitudinal behaviors privately was expected to have weaker effects than similar behaviors performed in public, or when participants could be otherwise be identified. A person's behavior can significantly change depending on a public or private setting.

**Self-Theories:** One's self-integrity and awareness of who they are is of upmost importance to them. When a discrepancy of one's value system/identify and one's own behavior is made known a strong production of dissonance prevails ((Kenworthy, Miller, Collins, Read, & Earleywine, 2011).

**Consequences:** One major approach to the synthesis of the dissonance literature has focused on the importance of the consequences of a dissonance-arousing behavior—sometimes called the “new look” (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). The argument is that subjects are bothered—i.e., feel dissonance and inconsistency—to the extent their overt actions have aversive consequences for them or others (Hoyt, Henley, & Collins, 1972).

## **Connection**

Many employees, when faced with the information that Black women face daily racial insults and sexual remarks on the job more than their other female coworkers, much disbelief, and questions as to why that would happen today become rampant (Davis, 2019). People hold within themselves conscience and unconscious biases in which they carry into the workplace. The biases people have motivate them in how they manage their work life (Kenworthy, Miller, Collins, Read, & Earleywine, 2011). The dissonance variables connect to structural barriers in the workplace from an individual and organizational aspect. People are in positions and how they behave affects not only colleagues, but how departments intertwine, which essentially accounts for how the company functions. A company, to survive and thrive, with the diversity climate of the present and future will not only need to change the landscape of the diverse workforce, but make, sure to utilize the diverse population in decision making as well as eradicate biases/discriminations (Buttner, Lowe, & Billings-Harris, 2010). Uncomfortable interpersonal aspects are aroused, and the individual must make a conscience decision on their next steps to either have a workplace that is exclusive or inclusive. Kenworthy et. al. (2011) states that chief among those things is that there is a crucial dynamic between our beliefs and our actions, and that we strive for consistency between our internal and external lives.

## **Research Questions**

This study proposes to compare the structural barriers Black women face in career progression compared to Asian, Latin, and White women. The study proposes to locate an underlying correlation of the predominant ethnicity and time served in a position affect how women perform

their daily job duties. Based on the framework of the stereotypes and amplified scrutiny Black women face in the workplace the following questions are proposed:

RQ1: How is one's career trajectory affected by working in a predominately white dominated workplace?

RQ2: How does length of time in a workplace influence identify shifting more in Black women compared to Asian, Latin, and/or White women?"

Companies seek to change the landscape of diversity and to do so they are having to understand the attitudes and behaviors of their management teams (Hinojosa, Gardner, Walker, Cogliser, Gullifor, 2017). Management positions come with the responsibility of transparency as well as authority, so all employees are made to feel safe, included, and satisfied (Wanguri, 1996). Employees need to see their leaders working with and following guidelines in place and if the guidelines are in need of change, employees need to see leadership leading the way to make change happen.

## **Method**

This qualitative study used a questionnaire to perform interviews to collect data from Asian, Black, Latin, and White women about structural barriers in career progression. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for studies involving human subjects was received prior to the survey administration. Recruiting participants involved posting announcements on social media platforms, reaching out to family and friends via phone calls, email, and text message, as well as through work colleagues via Microsoft Teams. Additional participants were recruited by the snowball method with participants providing the names and contact information of others who might be willing to participate in the study.

The criteria for the study were to identify as female, be between the ages of 18 and 45, had a job or currently working, and identify as either Asian, Black/African American, Latin, and/or White. Once identified as meeting all criteria and agreeing to participate in the study, participants were provided the consent form to move forward with the interview. Thirty consent forms were emailed, 22 signed consent forms received, and 13 interviews were completed. Follow up emails were sent to non-respondents, to again invite them to schedule an interview.

A semi-structured interview guide was used during the interview sessions to allow the participants to elaborate with more detail. The data received from each participant was stored on a secure external hard drive. All identifying information of each participant was stripped before storage on the hard drive. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour depending on the participants length of answer. The interview guide consisted of 16 questions designed to elicit rich data. For example, questions included, “Have you ever been advised to dress or style your hair more Eurocentric to fit in at the workplace?” and “Does your organization make you feel like you belong?”

Thirteen women, 23-44 years old, participated in the study via interviews. Most of the participants (46%) were in their twenties. Exactly half (50%) of the participants identified as Hispanic, 33% identified as White and a quarter identified as Black/African American. More than half of the participants identified as single, 38% were married and 1 participant identified as divorced. Nearly 61.5% had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, with 2 participants holding doctorate degrees. Within the sample, incomes range from \$30,000- \$100,000. The participants had diverse occupations. Two of the participants were professors at a public and/or private university. Irrespective of industry, all participants in their thirties and forties (58.3%) advised moving into leadership roles based on merit and not the belief of receiving the position due to

their race/ethnicity. The majority (83.3%) had jobs with career paths (i.e., directors, trainers, teachers, marketing, sales, administration, etc.) in which career progression is easily trackable with an individual development plan.

All the participants were familiar with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Many of the participants (58.3%) had a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion program at their place of employment. Theme found amongst all the participants is the executive leadership and above are all white males. Across all participants, middle management was a mix of male and female with 2 participants identifying they had a female leader that was African American. Only 16.6% of participants felt valued and appreciated at their company and one participant left their company left due to the treatment of her male colleagues. Of the participants that felt valued and appreciated, they self-identified as Latin/Hispanic.

Data from each interview was analyzed in three phases. In the first stage, analyzed notes taken from the verbal (e.g., when a participant described their leadership gender and ethnicity) and nonverbal (how the women adjusted their bodies and speech style when sending verbal messages) behaviors when participants answered the interview questions. The second stage, initial themes were generated, grouped into broad categories, and compared/contrasted. In the final stage, data was reexamined to confirm supportive information was received for research question 1 (RQ1) and research question 2 (RQ2).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Based on the results, the participants who identified as White/Caucasian, did not believe working in a predominately white workplaces affected their career progression. Participants who identified as non-White, who described racism and sexism as factors that limited forward career progression, were based on stereotypes and biases received from their coworkers/leaders. The results also indicated that there was no correlation between time and identity shifting, shifting was based upon the leader and if they were on duty. Few of the women in the study acknowledged shifting speech patterns and behavior to make certain not to perpetuate stereotypes held by supervisors and department heads. The findings extend the literature regarding women enduring structural barriers in the workplace. An aspect to research in future studies is the coping mechanisms Asian, Latin, and other ethnicities of women use when faced with the structural barriers in the workplace.

None of the participants believed earning a higher degree would guarantee forward progress in their career; some indicated that they or someone they knew did not receive a promotion and left the company for that reason. A few of the participants advised levels of discomfort when in the presence of upper management, especially when they would speak a foreign language shared amongst themselves. None of the participants were outright advised they needed to either dress or style their hair more Eurocentric, but one participant did advise they were told by a White superior to address a Black female coworker about changing her hair and she refused the directive with a history lesson on Eurocentric standards, what is professional, and Human Resources (HR) protocol within the company.

Limitations include few resources of literature specifically discussing Asian women workplace experiences. Most of the articles located are regarding Asian men and women in the

workplace. Responses received from women who identify as Asian to complete the questionnaire interview were zero. A limitation of time to interview more participants to receive true saturation of data. Another limitation found were many studies typically only compared White women to Black and Latina women. Of those Latina women there was no indication of subgroups to confirm the Hispanic culture in which the participant identifies to have a thorough understanding of their responses. It is important for future research to examine structural barriers in career progression on Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern, biracial, and multiracial women. Conducting research with the experiences of other women in this culturally inclusive way will allow for a better understand of similarities and differences of career progression for all women.

While researching for this study there was little information on studies conducted on executive managers and above regarding their understanding of structural barriers in the workplace and how they train their staff. Much research is done from the bottom up, but not from the top-down perspective which could help with new training material and guides. Many organizations task the HR department in the trainings and policy changes, yet there was little information on how HR departments are utilized in effective policy change, nor the methods utilized to develop the material to enact policy change. The study touched on racism and sexism in the workplace, but future studies should consider and explore intersecting classism to grasp the bigger picture of what women live through on a regular basis.

Workplace discrimination continues to be a substantial challenge to overcome, this study informs all minority employees are right to believe what they see is happening in the workplace. For organizations to move forward with a competitive advantage, an honest attempt to reflect on the climate experienced by the diverse members of the workforce to drive change should start in

that area (Buttner, Lowe, & Billings-Harris, 2010). To enrich the findings, research on understanding and implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion is imperative in the workplace.

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