

**An Examination of the Concrete Ceiling:
Perspectives of Ten African American Women Managers and Leaders**

by

Nadine M. Johnson

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONCRETE CEILING: PERSPECTIVES OF TEN AFRICAN
AMERICAN WOMEN MANAGERS AND LEADERS IN CORPORATE AMERICA AND
NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

by

Nadine M. Johnson

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Abstract

Research indicates that although women have progressed in their representation in management positions in corporate organizations, they are still subject to gender inequality (Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Gazso, 2004; Karlin, England, & Richardson, 2002). For African American women, they are further subjected to race and class inequalities. The proposed research is intended to examine the unique personal and professional views and experiences of 10 African American women managers and leaders working in White, male-dominant cultures. It will further determine if these African American women working in such a culture agree in their perceptions of inequalities contributing to the low representation in managerial and leadership positions within their respective organizations.

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To the 10 participants involved in this study, your participation, forthrightness, and commitment to make a difference has contributed to a greater understanding of the challenges confronting you as African American women managers and leaders working in White male-dominant cultures. It has been both a privilege and an inspiration to become acquainted with you, and if there were any doubt of your leadership capability as an African American woman, each one of you would serve to silence all doubt. Your strength and endurance to persevere continues to pave the way for future generations of African American women to expand journeys to success even further.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Lockwood (2004) found that individual women have been breaking through the glass ceiling, described as a distinct insincere barrier and based on attitudinal or organizational unfairness that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into managerial and leadership-level positions. He identified several groundbreaking studies that have addressed the glass ceiling on the domestic front. These studies were conducted by organizations such as the Center for Creative Leadership, Catalyst, and the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia and Vanneman (2001) noted that according to Catalyst, an independent research group, the glass ceiling still exists, despite the increase of women in the workplace. These authors conducted research and defined four specific inequality criteria that must be met in order to conclude that a glass ceiling exists. These criteria are: (a) a gender or racial difference that is not elucidated by other job-related characteristics of the employee, (b) a gender or racial difference that is greater at higher levels of an outcome than at lower levels of an outcome, (c) a gender or racial inequality in higher level advancement opportunities, and (d) a gender or racial inequality that progresses along with an individual's career.

Cotter et al. (2001) suggested that not all gender or racial inequalities needed to be defined as glass ceilings. Before outlining the four criteria, they reviewed past research on levels of authority, positions within corporate hierarchies, earnings, and occupations. Cotter et al. (2001) noted that because each of these employment characteristics can be investigated as

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exhibiting glass-ceiling effects, the criteria were framed in terms of outcomes. These authors described the difference between experiencing gender inequality and the glass ceiling as follows:

If women in nonprofessional and non-managerial positions experience the same degree of gender inequality in their work lives as professional and managerial women, then the inequality we see among professionals and managers is not a glass ceiling but rather a common pattern of gender inequality (p. 258).

Career advancement for women of color, specifically, African American women, continues to be a strong area of focus for research in both the private and public sectors of the workforce (King, 2003). Mitra (2003) conducted a study analyzing the labor market status of black female supervisors and found an increase in the proportion of minority females in the workforce. She proposed that women typically face a glass ceiling in the workplace, and that African American women face an even greater obstacle, the concrete ceiling.

Mitra's (2003) research determined that gender inequality in access in management positions pertains to gender differences in human capital, job segregation, and discrimination, with job industries playing a significant role. However, in contrast to this determination, she also found that some empirical studies focusing on African American women managers have concluded quite the opposite. Mitra (2003) found that some authors contended that African American women actually face a double advantage of race and gender, a combination that leads to positive outcomes.

Mitra (2003) concluded that Black men and White women hold more meaningful supervisory positions than Black women do. She found that Black women did not experience any significant wage premiums associated with increased responsibilities. Mitra (2003) suggested

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that these findings possibly indicate that Black women are subject to both racial and gender discrimination in the workplace, and that they are merely being placed in these positions to satisfy affirmative action policies.

Thomas (2000) claimed that some of the factors for African American women to successfully get into managerial positions successfully included exceeding performance expectations beyond the given standard, demonstrating the ability to communicate effectively, connecting with mentors, and building positive relations with managers and colleagues. Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002) stated, "Given the existence of prejudice and discrimination, many people of color and White women may legitimately perceive institutional barriers impeding their career development and may settle for careers that underutilize their abilities" (p. 295).

Background of the Study

Women generally face the challenge of fitting in when they are climbing the corporate ladder (Jenkins, 2004). Scott (2001) suggested that the appearance of pushing diversity has not yet removed corporate America's glass ceiling. Wolgemuth, Kees, and Safarik (2003) stated, "Focusing on women as the problem rather than investigating the inequities that exist within institutions provides short term measures at best and helps maintain systemic issues of oppression at worst" (p. 763).

Some empirical studies focusing on African American women have found that the implementation of many mentoring, diversity, and affirmative action programs have failed to address the underlying problems dealing with subtle racism within the organization that promoted the need for such programs in the first place (Eagly & Karau, 2002, Gilbert &

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Ivancevich, 2000; King, 2003; Lockwood, 2005). Allen and Montgomery (2001) stated, “Organizations typically attempt to achieve diversity through a special program or a series of initiatives. These attempts at creating diversity are often poorly planned and disjointed in their implementation” (p.151).

In order to create organizations that are actively supportive of managing diversity, the more subtle forms of discrimination must be exposed (Gilbert & Ivancevich, 2000). Effective diversity management goes beyond providing awareness training and advances to the point of providing employees with the tools necessary to put the theory into practice (Allen & Montgomery, 2001). Because of the obstacles that Black women continue to encounter in corporate America, they can—and have no choice but to—play an active role in managing their own career development (Jenkins, 2004; Yoder, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

Leadership has been studied in several aspects ranging from emergence of styles to motivational factors (Bono & Judge, 2003; Chan, 2001). Feminist epistemology has been described as the examination of how gender manipulates ones perception of lived experiences (Anderson, 2004). The feminist standpoint theory emphasizes gender relations and the role of research as an influence for social change (Anderson, 2004). Womanism has been described as the integration of ethnic and feminist consciousness among women of color (King, 2003). Womanist theology has been described as the reflection upon the African American woman’s place in society (Thomas, 2000).

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Despite the research efforts of feminists, womanist theologians, and theorists and the fact that there is an increasingly more diverse workforce, there continues to be a problem with an under-representation of African American women in management positions in companies with White, male-dominated cultures. Even when African American women do acquire such positions, retention becomes a major issue because they continue to wrestle with inequalities such as gender variations in pay, job isolation, and discrimination (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Mitra, 2003).

After assessing the wages of men and women of all races and ethnicities across the country, the Bureau of Labor Statistics Census (2002), substantiated the inequality claim with its finding that African American women, with bachelor's degrees and/or advanced degrees, still earned less than White women. This same census also found that 26 percent of African American women were in managerial or professional positions compared to 37 percent of White women in those same positions. The researcher received approval to conduct the study within a manufacturing spice company in Maryland, a manufacturing and distribution company in Delaware, a University in Maryland, a workforce development agency in Maryland, a reading and literacy-learning center in Maryland, and a pharmaceutical company in New Jersey. These companies employ greater than 5,000 employees or provide services to large populations.

Purpose of the Study

Bova (2000) suggested that African American women today do not generally experience overt discrimination as much as they experience covert discrimination and subtle prejudice. The purpose of this study was to increase that existing research in two areas. First, it was to increase

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existing research as to why increasingly diverse workforces, especially those that employ African American women, continue to struggle with inequality in White, male-dominated work cultures. Second, it was to increase the research by examining race and gender interactively. This study investigated the overt and covert discrimination and subtle prejudice experiences of 10 African American women and how they affected the participants' advancement.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for the research. It provides an illustration of the demographic and transition and/or advancement variables that potentially contribute to the under-representation of 10 African American women in management and leadership positions within White, male-dominated corporate American companies and non-profit organizations.

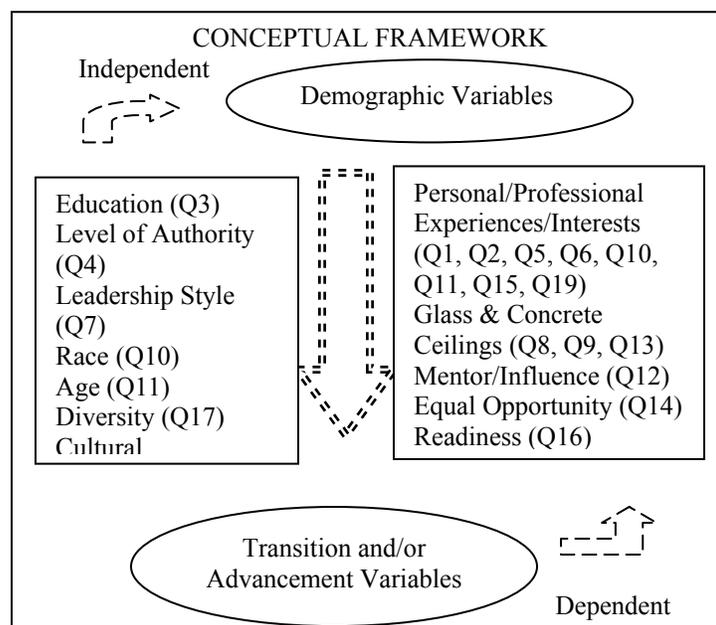


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for study on Mid-Management and Senior Executive African American Women in corporate America

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An objective of this conceptual framework was to determine if there is a correlation between transition and advancement opportunities or barriers and under-representation of African American women within the participants' respective organization. The independent variables in this situation presented more challenges because of their direct demographical correlations to the 10 participants. However, a more in-depth understanding of the dependent variables could offer organizational leadership direction for increasing advancement opportunities for African American women within the participants' respective organization.

Research Questions

According to Cooper and Schindler (2003), research questions are the fact-based translation of the question the researcher must answer in order to contribute to the solution of the management question. The authors suggested that a useful way to approach the research process is to state the basic dilemma and then develop other questions that progressively break down the original question into more specific ones. Robson (2002) suggested that the components of research questions address the research focus, the knowledge needed to achieve the study purpose, and the feasibility of the study.

The following research questions were developed for this study in order to capture personal and professional experiences of the study participants in their own terms:

- (1) What influential factors do these 10 African American women managers and leaders identify from their social, educational, and/or workplace experiences as guiding or impeding career advancement?

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- (2) Who are the sources of inspiration that these 10 African American women managers and leaders identify from their social, educational, and/or workplace experiences as influencing their leadership development?
- (3) What are demographic and/or situational obstacles that these 10 African American women managers and leaders recognize within dominant culture organizations?
- (4) What strategies have these 10 African American women managers and leaders developed given the recognized obstacles within dominant culture organizations?
- (5) What leadership characteristics of these 10 African American women managers and leaders have emerged within dominant culture organizations?

Definition of Terms

African American/Black: African American and Black are used interchangeably and refer to Americans having ancestors from sub-Saharan Africa (Mitra, 2003).

Discrimination: Discrimination refers to the power to make distinctions or the act of drawing distinction or showing partiality (Smith, 2002).

Glass Ceiling: Glass ceiling refers to the distinct insincere barriers based on attitudinal or organizational unfairness that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into managerial/leadership-level positions or a specific type of gender or racial inequality that can be extinguished from other types of inequality (Cotter et al., 2001).

White/Caucasian/European American: White, Caucasian, and European-American are used interchangeably to refer to Americans of European ancestry (Gazso, 2004).

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Women of Color: Women of color refers to American women of African, Asian, Hispanic, or Native Indian ancestry. (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002)

Assumptions and Limitations

This study assumes that study participants would answer interview questions honestly and forthrightly and that these individuals are best qualified to provide personal and professional insight on their career development. This study aimed to understand the experiences of African American women working in corporate America or non-profit organizations. This study was limited due to the sample population being 10 African American women holding managerial and leadership positions in corporate America and non-profit organizations. Specifically, the sample population was not representative of African American women beyond the 10 participants.

Participants were solicited from a manufacturing spice company in Maryland, a manufacturing and distribution company in Delaware, a University in Maryland, a workforce development agency in Maryland, a reading and literacy-learning center in Maryland, and a pharmaceutical company in New Jersey. These companies employ greater than 5,000 employees or provide services to large populations.

This study did not encompass or research the experiences of women not working in corporate America or outside of the specific companies previously mentioned. It did not discuss the specific experiences of men in the workplace, nor did it discuss African American leadership in the framework of female-dominated organizations.

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Nature of the Study

Grounded theory was the qualitative research approach used to conduct this study. This approach provided the researcher with opportunity to use the reality-based experiences of the study participants. Interviews were conducted as well as audio recorded in person. The responses of the study participants were reported using open, axial, and selective coding (Austen, Jefferson, & Thein, 2003; Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Kushner & Morrow, 2003). Interviews were approximately one hour in length and the researcher facilitated the interview using an interview guide (see Appendix D). These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

The purpose of this research study was to focus on 10 African American women managers and leaders within corporate America and non-profit organizations and understand how they identified factors that contributed to the low representation of African American women managers and leaders within their respective organization. Another objective of this study was to understand how the current body of knowledge pertains to the workplace inequalities and the interactions of race and gender for the 10 African American women.

Anticipated Findings

The perception of why there is an under-representation of African American women working in managerial and leadership positions within White, male-dominated cultures is based on a perceived unfairness that leaders base their decisions on irrelevant factors, not performance. It is perceived that irrelevant factors, not performance, have governed advancement opportunities for African American women for decades. The perception is that most talented people want a fair

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chance to contribute to and make a difference within the organization. The researched anticipated that by using the grounded research approach, such as an information collection strategy, individual experiences of barriers facing the 10 participants would assist in gaining a deeper understanding pertaining to these perceptions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study and justification for the need to increase research pertaining to two areas of (a) the under-representation of African American women managers and leaders working in White, male-dominated cultures and of (b) the examination of race and gender interactively. It identified and defined terms that were used throughout the study and it presented the researcher's assumptions about how the study participants would respond to the survey questions and the limitations of this specific study. Finally, it described the nature and objectives of the study.

Chapter 2 presents information pertaining to relevant research studies and the methodologies, results, and study findings from these studies that have identified and examined women leadership socialization and communication strategies for managing obstacles and opportunities within dominant culture organizations. These studies focused on all elements presented in the problem statement, such as social context, gender comparisons, gender identity, and race marginalization (Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Lockwood, 2004; Oakley, 2000; Ollisemeka, 2004; Yoder & Kahn, 2003).

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature in support of the current study. The focus is African American women facing obstacles and challenges while working in a White, male-dominated corporate American company. Butler and Skattebo (2004) claimed that society has long stereotyped individuals by gender. Although these issues have been and continue to be studied, there is a research gap between opportunity for and representation of African American women managers and leaders working in White, male-dominated companies. Some specific research areas included in the literature review relevant to this study are, career development, occupational segregation, devaluation, diversity and the intersection of gender and race in the labor market, leadership theory, and African American women leadership roles, styles, and communication.

The first section of the chapter discusses some of the gender-based barriers and career development issues that women face in the workplace. The second section of the chapter discusses occupational segregation and devaluation of women's work. The third and fourth sections discuss diversity and its impacts pertaining to managing organizational relationships and culture. The remaining sections discuss leadership theory pertaining to women and diversity, leadership theorists, feminist epistemology and feminists, womanism, womanist theology and theologians, attainment of job authority, and African American women leadership roles, styles, and communication.

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Gender-Based Barriers and Career Development

Oakley (2000) identified the following as some of the gender-based barriers that women have generally faced in the workplace: promotion policies, compensation practices, training and career development, behavioral and cultural explanations, communication styles, stereo types, preferred leadership styles, power in corporate culture, maintaining the status quo (old boy networks), and tokenism in top management circles. Linehan and Scullion (2001) identified the following overt and covert barriers for women in the workplace: balancing home life and career, isolation and loneliness, constant awareness of being a woman in a man's world, lack of access to male networks, having to prove oneself to others, having to work harder and be better than male counterparts, having to ask for promotions, and less availability for networking because of domestic commitments.

Cook et al. (2002) stated, "The glass ceiling remains omnipresent, and many talented employees never reach their vocational goals because of their race or gender" (p. 303). Alleged signs of the glass ceiling have been described as invisible, covert, and overt discrimination (Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Lockwood, 2004). Lockwood (2004) found that for women, discrimination could result in lower pay and fewer advances in salary when compared to men. The author indicated that discrimination could also manifest in hiring practices, training and development, and promotional opportunities that disproportionately favor men.

Lockwood (2004) stated, "Both domestically and globally, women represent a relatively untapped source of talent for leadership in the workplace" (p. 9). He also indicated that much progress has been made for women's advancement, but there remains more to be achieved. Actions pertaining to education and support that have contributed to this progress include: