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Dionne Rosser-Mims  
*Troy University*

Glenn A. Palmer  
*DeVry University*

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# The Career Paths of African Americans in the Corporate and Political Arenas

Dionne Rosser-Mims  
Assistant Professor, Troy University

Glenn A. Palmer  
Associate Professor, DeVry University

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**Abstract:** This paper compares the career development experiences of African Americans in the areas of politics and corporate America. The authors aim to identify congruencies in the career development experiences of African Americans in both fields.

## Introduction

This paper compares the findings of two separate empirical qualitative studies that explored the career development of African Americans in Corporate America and in politics. Both qualitative studies were conducted at the University of Georgia. Palmer's (2001) study explored factors that inhibit and facilitate the career development of African Americans in the field of training and organizational development. In his qualitative study of ten African Americans, six women and four men were interviewed. Their corporate positions ranged from first line managers to human resource directors, with their educational levels ranging from undergraduate to terminal degrees. The participants were employed by Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies located in the Southeastern United States. The research focused primarily on structural, attitudinal, and personal factors that affect career development.

In the second study, Rosser-Mims (2005) explored African American women's leadership and career development experiences as they pursued a career in elective office in Georgia. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select nine African American female elected officials. These women, who ranged in age from 50 to 80, currently serve or have served in elective office at the local, state, and federal levels. The objective of this study was to uncover the underlying reasons why African American women do not pursue a career in politics. In merging these studies, Palmer (2001) and Rosser-Mims uncovered congruencies in the career development of African Americans in both contexts. To gain an understanding of the career development experiences of African Americans, and to determine why their career development has been understudied, a review of the historical development of the career development field is warranted.

## History of Career Development

Herr (2001) observed that current usage of the term *career development* is inherently informed by the blending of two conceptual frameworks, "one that explains the development of career behavior across the life span and the other that describes how career behavior is changed by particular interventions" (p. 196). From a historical context, the pairing of these two terms occurred as recently as the late 1960s. Prior to this, the terms career and development were associated with vocational development/psychology, in other words, with individual abilities,

needs, and interests. Career development theory and research have only recently begun to focus on how contextual factors such as history, culture, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender influence the decisions individuals make toward their professional future (Hartung, 2002).

Several theories of career development and career choices exist (Brown & Brooks, 1996; Holland 1985; Super, 1957). However, many of these theories lack relevance to the career development and aspirations of racial and ethnic minorities (Stitt-Gohdes, 1997). Because career development research has primarily focused on white males, career development experts now question the applicability of such research to the career aspirations of African Americans. Traditional models of career development do not take into account the complexities confronting African Americans' career development (Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995). Only recently have researchers begun to examine the nature and scope of the career development experiences and choices of this group (Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2005, 2008).

### **African Americans' Career Development: Issues and Barriers**

Palmer's (2001) and Rosser-Mims' (2005) individual research studies identified several articles on career development, and both researchers concluded that few of these articles focus on the career development of African Americans. This confirms that there is a dearth of empirical research to identify and understand the factors that impact the career aspirations of African Americans in both political and corporate contexts (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Farmer & Associates, 1997; Hackett & Byars, 1996). Furthermore, Parham and McDavis (1987) and Sue and Sue (1990) acknowledged that the educational and career development of African Americans have been affected by poverty, racism, juvenile delinquency, and a high percentage of single-parent families. Smith (1983) contended that despite the odds, African Americans have made considerable gains in education and the workplace since the 1960s. However, several experts and scholars believe that various barriers (discrimination, prejudice, structural variables, lack of skills, etc.) have prevented African Americans from achieving their full potential in the workplace (Carnevale & Stone 1995; Cox, 1993; Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

African American women are more disadvantaged than African American men in the career development process (Hackett & Byars, 1996). According to Hackett and Byars, while both are confronted with racism, African American women must deal with the added layer of sexism. Despite this, research shows that African American females tend to have higher educational achievements and thus greater occupational attainments and aspirations than African American males. African American women are also more likely to be employed in professional positions than African American men (Catalyst, 1993; Schreiber, Price, & Morrison, 1993). However, the progress of African American women in the educational and occupational arenas does not translate into greater occupational status with better incomes. African American women continue to earn less than their male counterparts, and the situation is worse when compared to White men (Carnevale & Stone, 1995; Cox, 1993).

A summary of the literature on career choices and development of African Americans in the political and corporate arenas reveal several issues and barriers (Palmer, 2001; Rosser-Mims, 2005):

- *Lack of a culturally relevant career development model*—Career choices and aspirations of African Americans are different due in part to certain cultural determinants.
- *Expectations and Aspirations*—Differences in expectations and career aspirations impact career outcomes.

- *Discrimination and Prejudice*—African Americans are denied certain opportunities due to racial, ethnic, and cultural factors.
- *Gender Differences*—Women tend to experience greater occupational barriers than men.
- *Career paths*—The career trajectory of African Americans is not linear but marked by various interruptions.

### **Corporate America and Politics as Career Options**

Current trends indicate that by the year 2050, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, African-Americans, and non-Caucasian groups will represent 47 percent of the total American population (Bremner & Weber, 1992; Farrell, 1993). Consequently, almost half the workforce is projected to be made up of minority employees. Given the projected demographic changes, the management, organizational development, and human resource literature have stressed the need for organizations to value diversity through continuous career development in order to maximize organizational effectiveness. Experts in training and organizational development have urged organizations to learn about cultural differences and not surrender to ethnocentrism (Cox & Blake, 1991; Cox, 1993) and to provide meaningful intervention and opportunities for minorities to continually develop their careers (Arbona & Novy, 1991; Evans & Herr, 1994). The challenge for these organizations is to create effective strategies and programs that will change internal structures, systems, and cultures to make them receptive to a culturally diverse workforce. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the workforce becoming increasingly multicultural, and the resulting increase in productivity and efficiency, relatively few organizations are taking the necessary steps to develop and nurture the careers of African Americans (Arbona, 1990; Leong, 1995).

#### *Corporate America*

Minorities are greatly and adversely affected by poor and inappropriate career planning. Morrison (1992), acknowledged that if minorities are not well guided in the early stages of their careers, the residual effect is that of “losing development opportunities over time [which] keeps them from qualifying for high-level positions” (p. 2). Morrison argued that minorities are given less challenging assignments, usually in non-revenue generating functional areas. This results in minorities not being given opportunities to effectively demonstrate their capabilities and potential to function in high profile areas of the organization.

According to the Glass Ceiling Commission report (1995), the critical career path for senior management positions requires taking on responsibilities most directly related to the corporate bottom line. However, the few minorities found at the highest levels tend to be in staff positions, such as human resources, or research, or administration, rather than in line positions, such as marketing, or sales, or production. At the same time, most companies require broad and varied experience in the core areas of the business to advance professionally, experience that, even now, too few women or minority men are in a position to develop.

Studies reveal that the career track of minorities does not lead to upper management and executive level positions (Morrison, 1992; Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990). Morrison acknowledged that minorities are usually assigned jobs with low visibility and less challenging than those assigned to white males. Catalyst (1993) also argued that career-enhancing assignments are usually not given to minorities. Frustrated with the lack of career planning and

advancement in organizations, many minorities either move to other middle management positions or exit the organization.

Minorities complain that lack of access to and understanding of the informal culture and network of the organization are additional barriers to career advancement. A study by Wentling (1992) of thirty women in middle management positions revealed many had difficulties conforming to corporate norms and values, embracing the corporate culture, and reaching out and finding support. Wentling also found the women had little understanding of the informal political structure because of lack of access to critical information. A thorough understanding and access to information about the informal organizational culture, history, and politics, are necessary to negotiate the corporate hierarchy (Morrison, 1992; Schreiber, et al., 1993). Morrison confirmed that the lack of political savvy about the organization is a hindrance to career advancement, and this lack of savvy is manifested in two ways. First, minorities lack information and understanding of how the informal network operates, and how to avail themselves of the opportunities and advantages. Second, they experience difficulties in seeking to be accepted in the informal culture. The in-group/out-group phenomenon, and the values, norms, and beliefs espoused by the in-group or dominant culture significantly impact this relationship (Carnevale & Stone 1995; Cox, 1993). Lack of access to the informal culture, lack of political savvy, and lack of access to vital information, are barriers thwarting the career advancement of minorities in organizations (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Wentling 1992).

### *Politics*

The question that undergirds this section is: why don't more women, particularly African American women, consider politics as a career option? Rosser-Mims (2005) suggested that one explanation is that history reveals that men tend to approach politics as a career because their political ambition is cultivated at an early age. Moreover, men are encouraged at an early age to get involved in politics and to pursue it and thus have planned for it. Women do not receive this same support. Therefore, this is an example of how gender bias can affect women's access to certain careers and arguably to political leadership roles (Carroll, 1993; Thomas & Wilcox, 1998). While women are left with the responsibility of determining how to manage multiple social roles: wife, mother, employee, community/civic leader, this often delay their entrance into politics (Carroll, 1983, 1984).

For an African American woman the roles are greater. Not only does she have to manage all roles enumerated above, she has the added burden of coping with the complex issue of conflicting identity issues that surface in her professional and personal life. According to Farmer and Associates (1997), socialization affects the various career choices we make. Indeed, more women are entering traditionally male dominated professions deemed "credible" for political leadership roles (i.e., lawyers, doctors, business owners, the wealthy, etc.) in respectable numbers (McGlen & O'Connor, 1998). However, they are still socialized in helping fields such as education and nursing, for example. These fields are not as highly esteemed in the political arena as are the traditionally male dominated professions—though this trend seems to be slowly changing (Carroll, 1983, 2003; Clark, 1991). Despite the changing focus, women are still not oriented towards politics, which can be regarded as a helping field, because of the power that politicians can possibly possess and wield.

Baraka-Love's 1986 research study indicates that no clear model of a successful career pattern in public service exists for African American women. Moreover, the current career development literature fails to examine the career development experiences of African Americans

women who choose professions in public service, namely political leadership positions. However, what has been learned about women's career development in general is that the career decisions that women and men face are significantly different which is relevant to this study. In addition, differences in career development also exist between women of color and White women (McCollum, 1998, Sokoloff, 1992). For example, Barrett, Cervero, and Johnson- Bailey (2003) assert that African Americans women encounter subtle and deliberate barriers in their career development. Such barriers stem from personal and institutional challenges, in so far as:

Institutional challenges are structural and environmental barriers, such as limited access to vocational guidance and assessment, tracking into 'appropriate' jobs and discrimination in hiring, promotions, and transfers. Personal challenges would encompass specific problems or issues related to the individual. Examples are lack of self confidence, less career exploration and more career indecision, and the inability or unwillingness to play the political 'game'. (p. 2)

In addition to these challenges, the literature shows the decisions that women of color face in general tend to be more complicated as a result of the double jeopardy of race and sex discrimination (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Leong, 1995; Farmer & Associates, 1997; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Sokoloff, 1992). For example, African American women are faced with the phenomenon of 'biculturality' (Bell & Nkomo, 2001) existing between White and African American worlds. Accordingly, Barrett et al. (2003) posited that biculturalism is the notion that "depicts how African Americans interact with White society...the ability to function in two socio-cultural environments and to negotiate between them" (p. 111). Historically, African American women living within the dominant White culture have been forced to either assimilate or find ways to maintain their identity. Another major issue for African American women in the workplace is balancing their "personal, professional, and communal lives" (King & Ferguson, 2001, p. 125). Negotiating among these life forces requires an exorbitant amount of physical and emotional energy, which has severe consequences for African American women's health and well-being (King & Ferguson, 2001). This circumstance is exacerbated by the "strong African American female" image which is characterized as

The strong [B]lack woman is a motivated, hardworking breadwinner. She is always prepared "to do what needs to be done" for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her own emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has a seemingly irrepressible spirit unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection (Harris-Lacewell, 2001, p. 3)

As evidenced, several studies have identified and documented the limitations of employing classical career development theories to the experiences of African Americans, particularly, the impact that both *social context* and *positionality* have on their experiences (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; King & Ferguson, 2001; Schreiber et al., 1993; Sokoloff, 1992). Potentially more useful and relevant to understanding the career development of African Americans and other marginalized groups, whose career development experiences do not fit into existing frameworks, has been the application of social learning theories (King & Ferguson, 2001). Farmer & Associates (1997) concurred, "Promise for a more comprehensive theory, relevant for the diversity of the U. S. population today in terms of ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, will likely come from emerging theories based on social learning theory...." (p. 3).

### **Findings and Conclusions**

Palmer's (2001) and Rosser-Mims' (2005) studies have reinforced the finding that African Americans are often not allowed to optimize their career and leadership potential due to various obstacles. These obstacles are classified as (1) structural barriers (i.e., organizational policies, programs, rules, procedures, and practices), (2) attitudinal barriers (i.e., feelings, perceptions, and stereotypes held by certain members of the organization), and (3) race and gender barriers. In both studies, these barriers were identified as thwarting the participants' opportunities to achieve optimum career success, despite being qualified experientially and educationally.

In conclusion, this paper serves to inform those involved in the development of career and leadership development programs of the need to cultural variables in career development training models. As more African Americans aspire to positions in the corporate and political arenas with expectations of building careers in these fields, it is important for educators, career development trainers, and human resource managers to attend to the development needs of this group. We also need to understand the ways in which the intersections of race, gender and other differences impact learning along one's career development path. By comparing the findings of Palmer's (2001) and Rosser-Mims' (2005) studies, the authors reiterate that barriers persist and that these barriers thwart efforts of African Americans to realize their career potential in corporate and political spheres.

*\*References will be provided during presentation*