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Keywords

senior level leaders, higher education and Black women



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Abstract

Capturing the voices of Black women on their experiences leading to senior-level leadership positions in higher education warranted research. University leaders must ensure that units implement fair and equitable hiring practices to promote diversity and leadership from all backgrounds. Therefore, this study intended to take an in-depth look into Black women's trajectory in higher education. For this study, the researcher proposed interviewing Black women who have acquired senior-level leadership positions in higher education. The senior-level leadership positions included deans of student affairs, vice presidents of enrollment management, vice presidents of student affairs, college or university presidents, and other senior leadership roles that tend to be commonly filled by White men or women.

Keywords: Angry, Higher Education, Black women, Leadership, barriers, black feminist theory

Introduction

For many, the objective of obtaining a senior-level leadership position in higher education is a challenging task. However, that goal might be even more challenging for some people, particularly Black women. There is a distinct disparity between the number of White men and women in higher education and the number of Black men and women who serve in the same capacity (Perna et al., 2007). Since advancement for Blacks in leadership roles is seen as a disparity, it leaves one to question why this occurs and what steps are being taken by White Americans not seen in the Black community. Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) pinpointed that in 2012, the United States Department of Education acknowledged that Blacks only accounted for 9.4% of higher education administrators across the nation, while 80% of the college presidents were White Americans and 26% of that percentage were women.

Women have been struggling with a "glass ceiling" for many years as they advance into leadership roles considered dominated by men. The traditional leadership model assumes that good leadership is essentially masculine (Davis & Maldonado, 2015), creating a ceiling that prevents many women from advancing. For women of color, particularly Black women, obtaining senior-level leadership roles in higher education has been difficult, despite their education level or experience. Davis and Maldonado (2015) suggested that organizations fail to create environments supporting Black women's leadership advancement. Identifying the needs of Black women is essential to their progress and continued growth in higher education administrative leadership roles (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Barriers perceived by others, whether factual or not, can be an obstacle to becoming a leader for a woman of color (Barnes, 2017).

As described by Barnes (2017), a concrete ceiling concept was used as a metaphor. It represented the difficulty many Black women face in conquering the challenges of becoming leaders. Gamble and Turner (2015) referenced a study of Black women who were college presidents. They stated that sexism and racism operated to give the illusion that Black women were making significant progress. Still, Black women typically remain in what are traditional women's occupations. Butler-Sweet (2017) states that Black women's success in the white-collar workforce reflects their increasing educational attainment. They represent the most significant growth in education within the Black community. There is a divide among Black women that prevent them from working together to help each other accomplish their career goals is not often seen. It is suggested that a certain level of competition prevents these things from occurring (Butler-Sweet, 2017).

Butler-Sweet (2017) provided a cause and stated that differences, including class differences, threaten unity among Black women. One finding identified the socio-economic upbringing of Black women as being a cause for division among Black women (Butler-Sweet (2017). According to Butler-Sweet (2017), it is believed that this could be why many Black women are not mentoring other Black women aspiring for senior-level leadership positions in higher education.

These numbers can be surprising, especially considering that by 2010, Black women held 66% of all bachelor's degrees attained by Black Americans (Jones-DeWeever, 2014). With such a

high number of Black women obtaining degrees (Butler-Sweet, 2017), there must be a reason why Black women are not receiving senior-level leadership roles at a higher rate, not seen in a larger capacity. There are many barriers that Black women face, along with other factors that tend to have been discussed, particularly mentorship from the same race-identified peers. Due to data suggesting that not many Black women are in higher education senior-level leadership roles, mentoring can be an issue. However, identifying whether Black women who have obtained leadership roles experienced similar challenges during their journey toward leadership roles was a topic worth researching.

Furthermore, Black feminist theory (BFT) served as the theoretical guide to explore the lived perceptions of what barriers may have affected Black women's relationships. It influenced career advancement to senior-level leadership positions in higher education. The interviews from the voices of these purposefully selected Black women generated themes to understand how barriers may have altered their career paths within higher education. Black women are a disadvantaged group whose powerlessness reverberates in every sector of their lives (Davis, 2012); discovering if these disadvantages hinder their advancement into senior-level leadership roles in higher education will be the focal point of this research.

Research indicates that women have struggled with an imaginary glass ceiling when advancing their careers. Although several theories surround this phenomenon, few identify how it affects groups of women. Howard and Gagliardi (2018) and Stripling (2017) stated that when female Black higher education educators do move up to the executive ranks, they are most likely to find placement in women's colleges, community colleges, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). It needs to be clarified the steps needed to help women advance. Several opinions have surrounded the idea that barriers can be detrimental to women's growth in their career endeavors. Finding out what leads to those barriers would start a conversation that can drive more women into their desired fields. Specifically, Black women who seem to be considered a double minority may have more trouble breaking through that ceiling.

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore Black women's experiences, challenges, and barriers leading to senior-level positions in higher education. This study also aimed to identify commonalities within the lived experiences of Black women who have obtained senior-level leadership positions at higher education institutions. This study utilized the

following research question to uncover any systemic barriers that may provide insight into the lived experiences of Black women seeking advancement in higher education.

What do Black women in senior-level leadership positions perceive as the barriers leading to senior-level positions in higher education?

The results of this study will help Black women to identify barriers associated with advancement to senior-level leadership positions in higher education. The study results could also benefit in implementing hiring practices and policies when hiring and promoting Black women in higher education. This study's results could open the door for conversations about the challenges and barriers many Black women encounter when aspiring to seek senior-level higher-education positions. Institutions of higher education, along with Black women, will benefit from this study's findings to assist in breaking barriers and glass ceilings to create diverse and equitable environments for all employees.

Literature Review

This literature review includes research and related information that displays the barriers to upward mobility that might hinder Black women in higher education. Specific barriers prevent Black women's career advancement in higher education associated with the lack of administrative roles. Black women tend to fill. The information collected provides a solid basis for the need for more research in this category. It portrays the real-life experiences of Black women in higher education and their struggle to obtain senior-level leadership positions. This leads to the assumption that without career barriers, there would be a reason to believe that Black women would have more senior-level leadership opportunities in higher education than are currently seen.

Utilizing the Black Feminist Theory (BFT) allowed Black women's perspectives in the American higher education system to provide their truths through descriptions of experiences throughout their journey to senior-level leadership positions. The theory of BFT (Collins, 2000) is a post-structural approach to a feminist standpoint that aims to examine the systemic and critical relations of power that exist specifically as they relate to Black women in America. Collins (2000) stated that BFT allows for a foundation of understanding Black women's unique perspective and identity as they navigate through life, subjected to oppression and marginalization as a second minority group in this country.

Black feminist theory provides an experience that can only be explained or told from the perspectives of Black women. Their experiences allow for objectively clarifying the ideals portrayed through mediums the dominant culture produces. Concerning higher education, BFT will allow a microscope into how Black women intellectuals are treated in academia, which tends to be areas that patriarchal ideals and influences have traditionally dominated. BFT aims to give Black women a platform to speak their truth by using their voices in every aspect of their daily lives (Collins, 2000). BFT aligns with the goals of this research, which seeks to allow Black women administrators in higher education to reveal lived experiences as they progress into senior-level leadership positions.

Pinpointing data affecting Black women's lives in higher education leadership roles was limited. However, several research articles related to Black women in higher education, BFT, critical race theory, the angry Black woman, and colorism define the level of racism or inequity concerning Black women. Although these are all vastly different topics, they explain Black women's experiences in a sense that makes it understandable and puts away any myth that they do not limit Black women's success. As pinpointed by Davis and Maldonado (2015), articulating how racial and gendered identities inform the leadership development experiences of Black women in academia is needed to challenge any traditional discourse. Such information is also helpful in understanding the leadership experiences of Black women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). However, the question remains, why are these things happening, and how can we prevent them from minimizing the advancement of Black women in higher education administrative leadership roles?

This study visualizes all the barriers that impact Black women's lives and demonstrates a monopoly of issues that occur that have the potential to hinder their growth into leadership roles in higher education. When the different experiences discussed are viewed through higher education administration, Black women's expertise can be assumed to be actual barriers, or lack thereof, to their professional success in higher education. This study's findings could guide Black women and higher education institutions to ensure equality among this group of women. This study will also provide much-needed guidance on fostering professional development programs to assist Black women's career advancement in their professions. The data collected and used

will help draw inferences that provide a clearer understanding of the collective experiences and the meanings derived from Black women administrators' interactions.

Black Women's Advancement in Higher Education

Black women do not have the same advantages in higher education as their white counterparts. This disenfranchisement is not to say that White women do not suffer from prejudices against gender because they do, but this is to point out the double minority stance Black women face. As Gardner et al. (2014) indicated, higher education institutions receive a failing grade in commitment to diversity at many predominantly white institutions.

According to Gamble and Turner (2015), Black women face significant barriers, such as racism and sexism, that hinder their career advancement. Unfortunately, barriers hinder career advancement for Black women, even though since the late 1970s, minority staff has increased at higher education institutions (Harvey, 2014). Hodges and Isaac-Savage (2016) stated that Black women are more likely to experience adverse outcomes and higher stress levels due to racial and gender discrimination and stereotypical beliefs that tend to affect hiring practices and result in exclusion. The stereotypes associated with Black women have caused them to use methods such as "code-switching" while at work to fight against what is expected of them. Davis (2018) defined code-switching or role flex as a way for Black women to appear non-threatening by adapting their speech style to the environment. This involves shifting from Black vernacular to Standard English, or "intellectual talk" when surrounded by business associates (Davis, 2018).

Sandler (1991) stated that Black American women administrators are often placed in positions considered a dead-end. These positions usually work with minority students, such as multicultural affairs, minority affairs, equity, and inclusion. According to a study conducted by Konrad and Pfeffer (1991), women and minorities in educational institutions were more likely to be in positions previously held by members of their groups in the past. Holmes (2003) stated that their race and gender shaped many women's experiences. Despite the challenges of racism and sexism in the workplace, these women were courageous. They continued to fight racism and sexism and hoped to help other Black women professionals and faculty in academia.

Black women tend to feel a need to shift to acceptable styles of communication in the workplace, allowing some women to avoid the unfair judgment of nonnormative, culturally specific demeanors (Davis, 2018). The stereotype also surrounds the idea of the "Angry Black

Woman." Jones and Norwood (2016) suggested that Black women face the stigma surrounding the Angry Black Woman concept. This comes when a Black woman is just going about their business and gets put into the Angry Black Woman category. Black women experience this because they are Black and female and tend to suffer at the hands of White men, Black men, and White women (Jones & Norwood, 2016), and any conflict that may cause tension places them under this description.

Sturnick et al. (1991) found that women have been mistreated due to gender and strongly patriarchal institutions, have worked in unsupportive systems, and have been required to perform at higher levels instead of their male counterparts to achieve the same level of success. According to Moses (1997), most Black female administrators are often employed at historically Black colleges and universities in positions below the dean level, in student affairs and other specialized positions, or most often at 2-year institutions rather than 4-year. Their salaries are generally 15% less than those of their counterparts.

Black women in higher education must maintain self-confidence and self-esteem (Snearl, 1997). This approach helps build confidence in Black woman's ability and help them feel more comfortable in settings that often make them feel unwelcome. According to Bailey (2008), doing so will help Black women be more comfortable acquiring the credentials needed for a promotion, becoming assertive about strengths and weaknesses, and networking with other underrepresented groups. Many factors contribute to the low number of women hired in administration, which according to Schmidt (1992), include a lack of female role models, increases in the number of men in education, and society's misconceptions. Ottinger and Sikula (1993) pointed out that even women discriminate against other women out of fear of competition and promotion.

One could say how Black women deal with these types of oppression yet still do not assist each other in higher-level administrative leadership roles in higher education. One theory on why this phenomenon exists is colorism within the Black community. According to Hunter (2007), colorism has a more substantial effect on Black women's lives than on Black men and refers to this as gendered colorism. Therefore, depending on skin tone, it is safe to say that the odds may be higher against a darker-skinned woman than a lighter-skinned woman. Race, class, gender, and dark skin can lead to mutually intersecting oppressions shaping dark-skinned women (Hall & Whipple, 2017).

The Angry Black Woman

“The 'angry Black woman' mythology presumes all Black women to be irate, irrational, hostile, and negative despite the circumstances” (Ashley, 2014, p. 28). Characteristics that make up the myth of the angry Black women stereotype, which include hostility, rage, aggressiveness, and bitterness, may all reflect survival skills developed by Black women in the face of social, economic, and political oppression (Ashley, 2014). Angry Black women are characteristically described as aggressive, undesirable, unfeminine, bitter, overbearing, mean, attitudinal, and hell-raising (Malveaux, 1989; Morgan & Bennett, 2006). White fragility can be a barrier for Black women pursuing senior-level leadership positions, and the angry Black woman stereotype could lead to this barrier. Aggressive encounters with White fragility have two distinguishing traits. The aggressor acts based on negative stereotypes or biases about Black women (Jones & Norwood, 2016). Second, “when a Black woman pushes back against this treatment, she is viewed as being 'out of line' and becomes the source of blame for the encounter rather than the negative stereotypes and biases that initially fueled it” (Jones & Norwood, 2016, p. 2069). According to DiAngelo (2018), “White fragility is the phenomenon in which White people are unable or unwilling to remain productively engaged in dialogue that would bring them to a deeper understanding of racism and a more significant commitment to it” (p. 54).

Method

This qualitative study used an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). It was viewed through the lens of the BFT, which best defines the need for a unique worldview that encapsulates the knowledge and experiences of Black women (Collins, 2000). Qualitative research aims to generate awareness through a “collaboration within a social structure and with its people” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4) and the thorough description and attention to processes in place. Using qualitative methodology, the researcher gained an in-depth investigation, yielding extensive data on this topic that is scarce in the research.

The theoretical approach of phenomenology was utilized for this study because it allowed me to approach this phenomenon with a nonbiased perspective through the participants who have direct, immediate experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). Using this definition helped to align this study's intent to understand Black women's barriers as they progressed in their careers and the

challenges they encountered to gain senior-level administrator leadership roles in higher education.

IPA was selected as the research approach to be used for this investigation. IPA allows qualitative researchers to investigate how others make meaning of their significant life experiences (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). Smith et al. (2009) stated that interpretative phenomenological analysis involves detailed examination. Using IPA allows for the existence of a double hermeneutic, with the understanding that the participants in the research are attempting to make sense of their world; the researcher is knowingly trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009, p. 53). Using the IPA concept allowed me as the researcher to understand what Black women in higher education have faced regarding barriers in their career advancement opportunities and struggles. One of the concepts surrounding the idea of BFT is the belief that race directly impacts Black women's everyday life experiences and opportunities.

Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher examined the lived experiences of Black women currently serving in positions related to senior-level administrators with the hope of gaining more insight into the barriers faced in their journey to their respective roles. Semi-structured interviews combine structured and unstructured interviewing (Merriam, 2002). Using semi-structured interviews conducted via video conferencing, the researcher could thoroughly and effectively ask questions that prompted responses from the Black women and identified commonalities within the barriers that each faced during their career progression.

Population

Using the LinkedIn social media platform, the researcher identified 15 Black women from the Association of Black Women in Higher Education (ABWHE) group. By utilizing the LinkedIn group, Association of Black Women in Higher Education. Black women administrators were selected who fit the description needed for my participants. The mission of this group, which currently has 1,802 members, as posted on their LinkedIn page, is to:

Promote the intellectual growth and educational development of Black women in higher education; strive to eliminate racism, sexism, classism, and other social barriers that hinder Black women in higher education from achieving their full potential; communicate the history of personal and professional achievements of Black women in

higher education to preserve and increase the presence and place of Black women and men in higher education; Provide academic and social mentoring for Black youth to ensure the participation and success of future generations of Blacks in higher education; and utilize our talents, strengths, and expertise to advance our vision of social justice. ABWHE seeks to fulfill its mission of celebrating Black women's historical and present achievements by providing various services to its members. ABWHE members seek “To lift as we climb.”

Black women administrators were selected who fit the description needed for my participants. The Black women selected for this study have been in higher education for at least ten years with proof of progression into their current senior-level leadership positions. These participants hold senior-level leadership positions at two or four-year public or private institutions. Using the LinkedIn platform was appropriate for this study because the researcher could identify candidates based on work history and position by reviewing their user profiles. A contact made by email to identify qualified candidates was used to recruit women interested in participating in the study using the LinkedIn platform. Of the women who showed interest in participating, 15 were selected for the study. The participants were selected and invited to participate in the study based on the selected criteria to create a homogenous sample.

Results

This identified the commonalities within the lived experiences of Black women who have obtained senior-level leadership positions at higher education institutions. This article highlights the responses from Black women who participated in a larger study that identified the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman as a barrier to the career progression to senior-level leadership roles in higher education. In the following, the researcher responds to Black women who experienced barriers in their advancement which they felt may have been related to this stereotype.

The women in this study represent senior-level leaders in roles encompassing academics, financial aid, advancement, equity and inclusion, wellness, student affairs, and workforce development. To explore the lived experiences shared by Black women in senior-level leadership positions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each woman to answer the following question:

RQ1: What do Black women perceive as the barriers leading to senior-level leadership positions in higher education?

Findings – “The Angry Black Woman”

Some women who participated in this study indicated that they had experiences where they presumed to be angry due to their demeanor, hand gestures, and speaking passionately. They expressed feeling as though this stereotyping shaped how their colleagues perceived them and, at times, thought that they could not be passionate about specific topics in the same manner as their counterparts with the fear that they would be deemed angry or lacking self-control.

Evelyn

Usually, I am the only person of color, a Black person, a Black woman, and it has impacted me because my natural work ethic is better than most. And so, I have been accused of having a takeover spirit because I naturally run circles around folk. But my other colleague who did great work was never accused of being an overachiever. She was considered an overachiever. You can see the language differences and how they describe this. In health and wellness, you only know a few influencers who are people of color. When you think about health and wellness, typing in Google shows white-skinned primary women.

Thus, being Black, plus size, has not been easy for me in these spaces because I am an outlier; being Black in higher education overall means that we take on the extra burden of becoming mentors, coaches, and aunties to our students. So, we have two jobs we are hired for, and we embrace them because they need us. However, this beautiful melanin skin requires me to do additional uncompensated labor. When I walked into this space, I was five feet eight plus size, so I carried myself very heavily and well, as we say in the South, and I am from North Carolina. So, when I walk into a space, I am confident, know what I am talking about, and come off very strong in those spaces. So, the students are like, "Oh, my God! You are a breath of fresh air." The colleague who is not doing their job says, "Let me get my shit together." I constantly must think about what I say and how I say it, and my passion is often misconstrued for anger. I am like, "Why can't I be passionate? Why can't I be highly engaged or an overachiever like you all described to other folks, but you all go to authenticate and tone it down." I have also been told I need

to talk better. Two people on two campuses tell me I did not speak well enough, which is triggering.

Dasia

I often feel like, even personally, I have intimidated people. When I have asked people for feedback, like, "Oh, I think so and so," maybe I said something wrong, they are like, no, do not worry about it. The person is just intimidated. So, many times, my experience has been that I was kept out of positions because others perceived me as not knowing the information. Nevertheless, because you are a threat to their ego or their position, even if you do not have any eye set on wanting that position, the person will see you as a threat. And so, I tend to see that most, and I have seen it most, even here where I am now with white men.

Andrea

So especially being from the South and when I moved up to the Midwest, they were not—they were like, "What?" It is unacceptable. Do not do that. Then when you layer, even though we are from the same race, we have cultural barriers. I am from below the Bible belt. So, they think that it is not acceptable. So, it would help if you respected those cultural boundaries. So, also being from the South, when I spoke and may have been passionate about something, my passion was often construed as aggression. I am not aggressive. I am just telling you my point until being told, "Well, your neck started moving, and we just thought..." I was like, "No, I am passionate, and this is how I express myself. Unfortunately, you perceive that as aggressive, and I am not aggressive; I am just getting my point across, and you may choose to cry, and I choose to become more affirmed in my voice and change my inflection." Furthermore, you said she is aggressive, and I did not know what to do because she got aggressive.

Marilyn

We must be cautious about how we show up, and often, as people of color, when it comes to talking about race, equity, and inclusion, we tend to become very passionate about it, but often, that passion is perceived as being angry. So, it is okay for a white woman to express a particular viewpoint, but we must be cautious and guarded when we do it.

Yolanda

The barriers that I thought were like, well, no one is going to take me seriously, or they may not want to follow my lead; I thought I was coming out, like I felt that they would not want to follow what I was saying, because of my race. So, I thought epic, not only under me but also with peers, other people in my area, and other administrators; I also thought they would not want to be respectful of my opinions and things like that. So, as far as various, you can have all the education in the world, five doctorate degrees, and people still see you as a Black person. We just talked about all the education, all the experience, almost 30 years of experience in education. Some people will still not poll your opinion on the same level as someone saying the same thing you were saying who is not African American or Black. Another barrier, sometimes, if you are outspoken, you could be considered an angry Black woman if you talk a certain way or are passionate about something. It is like, you must communicate a certain way was my feeling. If you do not, you are considered angry, and Wow, what is wrong with her? Someone else can go off in a meeting, and that person needs help. They may need to go to HR to see a counselor. They need medication, and with me, there is that stereotype. So, I do not want to go on too long, but I think those are some barriers perceived by my peers and people who report to me and that stereotype of being an angry Black woman. So, those were some concerns.

Conclusion

The "Angry Black Woman" stereotype depicts Black women as aggressive and hostile in their interactions with others (Motro et al., 2021). Geddes and Stickney (2011) argued that the angry Black woman stereotype could negatively impact Black women's employment status and career progress. The barriers Black women face in the workplace are a complex issue. When conducting the interviews, it was relayed by a few of the participants that things such as walking into a meeting without a smile, expressing concern about a topic, or even using hand gestures while talking could be taken as signs of anger or aggression. One participant expressed that when their White counterparts did similar things, it was taken as "just how they are," or passion.

This apparent description of a clearly stated stereotype can damage the careers of Black women and mislabel their passion. For example, in a study conducted by Donovan (2011),

participants were to select 5 out of 92 traits to describe Black women and White women, traits chosen to identify Black women were associated with the angry Black woman stereotype (e.g., loud, tough, strong) compared to White women (e.g., sensitive, independent, family-oriented). In addition, Collins (1990) stated that oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if they frame their ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group, which in turn often changes the meaning of their ideas and works to elevate the ideas of the dominant group.

One participant stated that being considered an angry Black woman was a barrier. If you are outspoken, talk a certain way, are passionate about something, communicate that something needs to be done, or want to do something, the label will present itself. Hence, she had to be careful with explaining certain things. Motro et al. (2021) stated that based on two studies, they found support for their hypotheses that participants attributed Black women's anger to internal factors due to stereotype activation, which led to poorer performance evaluations assessments of leadership capabilities.

Black women face several obstacles when attempting to advance their careers in higher education. To belittle or ignore the challenges they face would be negligence, especially in an era of diversity and inclusion. The Black women in this study identified the Angry Black Woman stereotype as a barrier they face anytime they express emotion or passion, which they believe has led to their difficulties on their journey to their current senior-level leadership positions in higher education. The lived experiences of each participant were significant in themselves.

This article only focuses on one significant barrier related to the advancement of Black women to senior-level leadership positions in higher education: the inability to express themselves the same as their white counterparts. Higher education is an ever-changing and evolving field, and Black women must have a presence; however, based on the information gathered in this study, it may be difficult but not impossible.

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