

Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity

Ella L.J. Edmondson Bell and Stella M. Nkomo



Ella Bell is the Leon E. Williams Visiting Professor of Business Administration at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business. Stella Nkomo is a Professor of Business Leadership at the University of South Africa Graduate School of Business Leadership.

Our Separate Ways represents an eight-year research effort spotlighting the life and career struggles of successful black and white women in corporate America. Following are excerpts from the chapter entitled "Barriers to Advancement." We feel these segments are particularly poignant in the struggle of black and white women to forge new relationships with each other and with their male colleagues. A full review of this book can be found in our Resources section.

Much of what has been written about women in managerial careers leaves the impression that all women make similar journeys to the doors of corporate America. And that once in the doors, they face common obstacles

and choose common strategies for overcoming them. Our research shows, however, that black and white women travel separate paths and make different choices about how to persevere in their professional careers. Black women, in particular, have had to break away from traditional career choices as teachers and social workers, occupations historically available to college-educated black women. Having entered careers traditionally dominated by white males, black women have had to contend with both sexism and racism. These experiences contribute to separate approaches toward both navigating their careers and making change in the workplace.

The obstacles to advancement perceived by the black women managers were different both in degree and kind from the obstacles perceived by white women managers. As black women, they were subjected to a particular form of sexism shaped by racism and racial stereotyping. The theoretical concept of *racialized sexism* also captures the idea that the experience of gender discrimination in the workplace depends on a woman's race.

National Survey Results

Our survey data offers a quantitative picture of the differences we found. First and foremost, the white women managers in our national survey made greater progress in reaching upper-level management positions. Thirty-two percent of the white women managers were in top-level management positions compared to 14 percent of the African-American women managers surveyed. When we analyzed the respondents' employment histories, we found important differences. The proportion of jobs held that were promotions for black women was considerably greater than for white women. Similarly, black women tended to make more lateral moves in their companies than white women. The difference in managerial levels is also reflected in salary level differences. Twenty-seven percent of the white women were earning \$100,000 or more, compared to ten percent

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of the African-American women. A larger percentage of the white women managers (67 percent) were satisfied with their career progress; only 58 percent of African-American women managers were satisfied. One of the important keys to career advancement is proving one's ability in "line positions" - jobs that have direct impact on a company's bottom line. The white women surveyed had an edge over the black women in gaining experience in line positions (70 versus 61 percent).

As a consequence, we found less satisfaction among the African-American women with their present positions. Sixty-two percent of the African-American women managers surveyed agreed with the statement, "I am satisfied with my current position," compared to 75 percent of the white women. While 74 percent of the white women agreed with the statement, "I have considerable decision-making power in my position," only 59 percent of the African-American women agreed. White women managers perceived their current responsibilities to be more significant than African-American women did, and they also believed to a much greater degree that their jobs allowed them to use their skills and knowledge. These differences existed even though there were no differences in the educational levels of the black and white women managers in our sample.

There were also significant differences in perceptions of relationships with colleagues. The African-American women managers were more inclined to feel that they had to outperform their white colleagues - both male and female - to succeed. African-American women had less positive perceptions of their relationships with their bosses and colleagues. Consequently, they reported receiving less collegial support than did the white women managers in the survey. Generally, the white women surveyed were more positive than African-American women about their organizations' overall management of race and gender relations and commitment to the advancement of women and people of color. African-American women did not feel their companies were implementing policies that would advance people of color.

Held to a Higher Standard

The African American women felt they were held to higher standard because they were always fighting the stereotype of being incompetent, despite having the right educational and experience credentials. On one hand they are held to a higher standard, having to jump additional hurdles to advance in their jobs.

On the other hand, when they display competence, their colleagues often express surprise. Deborah Jones recalled one of her white male colleagues asking her, "Where did you learn to speak like that?" Even though she expressed confusion about the question, her colleague persisted in wanting to know if she had taken a special speech course to learn how to speak. Psychologists refer to this as the "flower blooming in winter" effect. When majority group members set lower standards for a black woman and she exceeds the standards, then the black woman's performance becomes remarkable. Or they treat the woman as an exception to her race and gender, leaving intact the general stereotype of black women as incompetent and unqualified.

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Psychologists suggest that stereotyping occurs as a way of filling information voids about people. Again, at the time these women entered corporate America, there were few if any models or examples of successful African-American women managers. In a decade when male-dominated corporations openly questioned whether women could even be managers, African-American women presented an altogether different challenge. There were no reference points, no models of them in authority positions for white colleagues to draw upon. Rather, the most pervasive images of African-American women ingrained into society were either negative images or images of African-American women in subservient roles. The language and actions of white colleagues suggest they define black women first as black and female before seeing them as managers and executives. The women we interviewed were faced with the dual

challenge of transforming negative stereotypical images and simultaneously creating new professional roles.

Julia Smith's story is instructive about another dimension of the issues black women managers face. She was placed in a highly visible position in her company that was not a position that would lead to a higher level of responsibility. African-American women managers often find themselves in this predicament - placed in highly visible positions that benefit the company but not necessarily their careers. They can be unwittingly used as "affirmative action cover girls." Sociologist Sharon Collins found in her study of black mobility in white corporations that black executives are sometimes placed in positions that present an image of diversity to external audiences to serve race-related purposes. Instead of Julia advancing to the next level of management, she ended up having to prove her ability once again in a position with the same level of responsibility.

We need to point out here that the white women we interviewed also talked about stereotyping as the major obstacle to their corporate mobility. However, the stereotyping they describe centered on gender differences: male colleagues believing they could not have a career and a family, for example, or male colleagues criticizing a "feminine style of behavior." Gender stereotyping, not surprisingly, was perceived to be more prevalent among older men—the men at the highest ranks of the organizations.

The Invisibility Vise

To be accepted, African-American women are expected to assimilate. They have to literally lose their blackness for white colleagues to feel comfortable with them. White-dominated organizations often make cultural assimilation the price of acceptability for racial minorities. This, of course, is a condition impossible for the African-American women to fulfill. They take this as an affront to their identity, but it is also a threat to their ambition, as maintaining a strong racial identity at work is an important grounding and coping mechanism. Most of the African-American women we interviewed were not willing to leave that part of themselves, learned from their family and educational experiences, outside of the corporation. This makes sense, since armoring - the socialization from family early in life - helped these women withstand the racism and sexism they encountered in their later years. This armoring is indeed one of the major reasons why the black women in our study have been successful in corporate America despite the challenges they face daily.

It may seem puzzling that the black women had such a negative response to being made raceless by their white colleagues. Isn't this a positive result, as it meant they were viewed simply as individuals? It may appear black women want it both ways. On the one hand they are upset because their colleagues cannot get beyond race and gender and accept them as managers, yet at the same time they do not want colleagues to ignore their racial identity. How can these apparently contradictory perceptions be reconciled? Without question, having a clear sense of their racial identity helped them to maintain self-esteem and confidence in the face of racism and sexism in their work environments. But the implication that they acted in a way to conceal their racial identity (i.e., "acting white") or that they were focused on making white people comfortable was disturbing to the black women we interviewed.

This notion of comfort also surfaced in the narratives of the white women. They talked of what we refer to as sexual tension - men feeling "uncomfortable" working with women. Although not explicitly stated, it was clear these women were talking about white men working with white women as their equals. "All it boils down to is being comfortable," Sylvia Whitakers said. "Men and women, side by side working together. For some reason low in the ranks,

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that's very comfortable and no one has a problem with it. There's something that happens on that top floor. Something about it is not comfortable. Up to this point all of their life experiences with top people have been with all men." Judy Rosener refers to this phenomenon as sexual static.

A significant part of this sexual tension arises from the newness of women in nontraditional roles. When women leave the home and enter the public sphere, they violate the original, if tacit, sexual contract. In the original terms of this contract, a woman's place was in the home, not the boardroom. Jean Hendrick offered this observation, "I think there are men who are very easily intimidated by smart, strong women because in their experience women are not like that; plus, they're not attracted to women like that. So they don't know how to handle them. Men who are used to thinking of women as sexual partners or as potential relationships don't really know how to deal when they're presented with an intelligent, opinionated, forceful woman. It is very awkward."

On the Outside: Exclusion from Informal Networks

Another barrier experienced by the black women is limited access to informal and social networks within their organizations. The African-American women we interviewed felt they had less access to these networks in their organizations than white men and white women. As a result, they felt cut off from important organizational information and less accepted as full members of the organization. Many of the women spoke of the critical importance of informal networks in career advancement. In most corporations, excellent performance is necessary for advancement but is not the sole criterion. Getting ahead also depends on access to informal networks and the relationships those networks can foster - mentorships, sponsorships, and help from colleagues. Building these relationships requires that the women be part of the social networks within the company.

In our national survey, we found that having white men in their network and being accepted by white men on the job helped African-American women managers attain higher management levels. Yet, only 59 percent of the African-American women reported having white men in their networks, compared to 91 percent of the white women managers. As we pointed out in the previous chapter, African-American women often feel as if they are outsiders in their own organizations.

Hollow Commitment to the Advancement of Women and Minorities

The final barrier the black women perceived was a hollow company commitment to advancing women and minorities in companies. Our survey data echo what we hear from women we interviewed: skepticism about their companies' efforts to affect real change. Patricia Tiggs was of the opinion that top management in her company wants diversity and multiculturalism, and yet fears it.

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We found that only 21 percent of the African American women who completed our national survey felt their companies were committed to the advancement of people of color in management. In contrast, white women were much more positive about the efforts of their companies to advance women and minorities. The women's perceptions point to the fact that African American women need a commitment beyond mere words issued by top management. Careers can be blocked at lower levels of an organization when managers are not held accountable for the advancement of African-American women.

Perceptions of Career Progress

How did the women feel about their overall career progress in corporate America? A large percentage of the black women felt they were *behind* where they should be while about the same percentage of white women felt they were *ahead* of where they expected to be. When we analyzed the black women's reasons for feeling they were behind in their career progress, we found that the majority attributed the lack of progress to being stalled in their companies.

White women explained their lack of progress differently. Few attributed their slow progress to gender discrimination or company failure. A majority of the women offered explanations related to the nature of the work, cited things they had not done to assure their promotion, or suggested they were not "really behind."

The white women who felt they were ahead of their expectations for their careers expressed surprise and amazement at how far they had progressed. For the most part, they were not comparing themselves to white men but to their early lives. This was true of women from both humble and privileged backgrounds.

We heard some of this sentiment in the voices of black women. Many made it clear that they had achieved far more than what they thought their early background and race would allow. Yet, most were careful to distinguish that from where they should be compared to the white men in their companies.

See Also...

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