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••• Right Before Your Eyes

••• Research Symposium

GENDER & WORK:

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

DIFFERENCE

GENDER & WORK

RIGHT BEFORE YOUR EYES

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Introduction

Twelve years ago, Harvard Business School Press published *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*, the book I coauthored with Stella Nkomo. Employing a life history methodology, our book contrasted the early life stories and career experiences of African American and White women. It was a book about differences between and among women. We wrote *Our Separate Ways* because we wanted to fill the deep void existing in the managerial literature on women. African American women were for the most part invisible in critical works on women managers even though they were present, albeit in small percentages. In this paper, I discuss the problems of omitting diverse women in our research studies. Next, I offer a theoretical framework for conducting more inclusive investigations.

The year 2001 was not impressive for women in the managerial or executive ranks regardless of their race or ethnicity. According to Catalyst, women comprised one-fifth of corporate executives (18 percent white women, 3 percent women of color). Back then, women of color usually meant African American women. It was difficult to track the number of Hispanic, Latino, and Asian women executives because their numbers were so few. Neither were there any work force statistics for Native American professional women; a practice that still exists today. Women of color who held top jobs in their organizations were very rare. In 2000, there was one woman CEO. Her name was Andrea Jung, of Avon.

In our study, Black women described the obstacles they faced when trying to advance in the corporate ranks. They were subjected to a particular form of sexism shaped by racism and racial stereotyping. For Black women managers, sexism was entwined with racism. So, there were no images of glass ceilings in their minds. Instead their image of barriers conjured up a concrete wall. Their interpretation was that glass could be shattered but there was no breaking a concrete wall. With concrete, a woman had to blast her way through, which was nearly impossible to do. With glass, White women could at least be seen and it was breakable. With concrete, Black women felt invisible even though they were right before their managers' eyes.

This wall consisted of a combination of barriers they experienced at work, including daily doses of racism, being held to a higher standard, the invisibility vise, exclusion from informal networks, challenges to their authority, and a hollow company commitment to the advancement of women and minorities. Without the support of mentors and sponsors, the women we interviewed felt trapped and unable to advance at their companies.

What About Working Women Today?

So, here we are in a new decade and the landscape for women in the workplace has changed. The number of women CEOs has risen. They now account for 4.2 percent or 21 women CEOs heading

Fortune 500 companies. Ursula Burns of Xerox is the first African American woman to be on this prestigious list. She is joined by Indra Nooyi, an Asian Indian woman who heads PepsiCo. According to Catalyst, women currently hold 4.2 percent of CEO positions in Fortune 501-1000 companies. Linda Lang of Jack in the Box and Denise Ramos of ITT who are both Hispanic, and Constance Lau, CEO of Hawaiian Electric Industries, who is of Asian ethnicity, are included on this list.

The number of women in the workplace has risen as well. Statistics from Catalyst's Overview of Women in the Workplace report that, in 2011, women made up 46.6 percent of the labor force. Women comprise a slight lead over men in managerial and professional positions at 51.4%. At first glance, it would appear that women are succeeding in shattering the glass ceiling. When you unpack these numbers, you get a very different picture. The total combined percent of women of color (African American, Hispanic, Latina, and Asian American) working in these professional positions is only 11.9 percent. In workplaces and marketplaces where our society is becoming more diverse in its racial, ethnic and global populations, this number is shockingly low and unacceptable.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics offers a different view. According to the 2011 Occupational Employment by Race and Ethnicity report, "employed Asian and White women were more likely than Black, Hispanic, or Latino women to work in management, business, and financial operations, or in professional and related occupations". These two occupational groups comprised 44 percent of employed Asian women and 42 percent of employed White women. By contrast, 34 percent of employed black women and 25 percent of employed Hispanic and Latino women worked in these occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

In 2007, I founded Ascent-Leading Multicultural Women to the Top, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to developing diverse women for the leadership tables of blue chip companies. PepsiCo, Intel, Xerox, Time Warner, Bank of America, and American Express have sent their high potential, upper-middle female managers to our program. Ascent operates in partnership with the Tuck Graduate School of Business at Dartmouth College. Thus far, sixty-three women have graduated from the program. Here are a few of my observations of the challenges these women experience:

- These women are in the Millennial and Xer generations.
- Too many of these women believe performance is the only criteria for advancing in their organizations, so they don't build critical relationships.
- They lack sponsors, mentors and allies.
- They are lacking supportive relationships with other women both at their companies and in broader networks.
- Although they are really smart, they lack confidence in themselves.
- They don't have much patience to "hang-in" until they are promoted.
- They still think they are invisible to senior executives and are uncomfortable when interacting with them.
- They are worried about combining work with other aspects of their lives, such as marriage and having children and are unsure if they want to advance to the senior ranks.
- Too many of the women lack critical assignments that will give them "star" visibility in their companies, even though they are considered high potential. Such assignments enable a woman to prove herself by showcasing her skills, tenacity, leadership, and making a difference to the company's bottom line.

Infusing Difference in Our Scholarly Understanding of Gender

In 2013, when it comes to understanding gender in the workplace, we can no longer afford to simply look at differences between majority women and men. In other words, we cannot just study elite White women and men. The study of gender must become global, economical, multicultural, hierarchical, generational, and even sexual. Take, for example, the study *Lifting as We Climb: Women of Color, Wealth and America's Future*, conducted by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development (2010). I selected this study because it truly illuminates the intersection of race, gender, and class among working women.

The study examined the net worth of women--the total of their assets minus their debts. Assets were considered as money in checking accounts, stocks or bonds, real estate, or businesses owned. Income, in terms of money coming in during a stated period of time, was not considered. Excluding their vehicles, single Black women had a median wealth of \$100. Hispanic women fared a little better at \$120. To put it simply, the average Black woman has about 100 bucks to her name. The median wealth of single White women was \$41,500. Single Black and Hispanic women have a tiny fraction of a penny for every dollar of wealth owned by White women. For the record, single Black, Hispanic, and White men have an average net worth of \$7,900, \$9,730 and \$43,800 respectively.

Marriage does make a difference to net worth among women. Married or cohabitating Black couples have a median wealth of \$31,500. It drops for Hispanic couples to \$18,000. For White couples, it is \$167,500. For single parents, the picture gets much darker. All women, regardless of race or ethnicity, experience a "motherhood wealth penalty." But for women of color it is far worse. First, they are most likely to be single parents. The average net worth of single Black women and Hispanic women with children under age 18 is zero, compared to \$7,970 for White women.

Now some may question why this study is important to management scholars and practitioners working to advance women in corporate America. My answer to you is this: many of the women of color represented in the *Lifting as We Climb* study are working in the lower stratospheres of American companies. They occupy those positions where there are no stock options, paid days off, bonuses, or health insurance. Many of them work in banking or retail call centers, are trapped in dead-end administrative positions, or are reduced to work in part-time positions where they lack job security. They are not considered for advanced positions even when they have college degrees, and their names do not come up when HR is discussing women to fill their corporate pipelines.

An Approach for Capturing Difference in Our Organizational Research on Gender

Studies of gender in organizations which ignore race end up presenting incomplete, and possibly distorted, views of inequality and social relations in organizations. I would go even further to argue that we need to move away from studies that focus on gender without considering race, ethnicity, or class. I am sure there are additional variables that should be added to my list, but for this part of the discussion, I am going to focus on race and ethnicity. There are not just men and women in organizations, but men and women of particular races and ethnicities. Gender concepts are not race neutral nor are race concepts gender neutral. Organizations are simultaneously gendered and racialized social phenomenon.

The concept of intersectionality also underscores the point that everyone in organizations has race and gender. They are both relational concepts gaining meaning in relation to one another. Hence, differences among groups in organizations are systematically related. When race is gendered and gender is racialized, there is the recognition that everyone has varying degrees of privilege and/or subordination in organizations. Racial minority women and majority group women occupy different social locations relative to White men because of race and gender. As Zin

(1992), notes, "For some women, race/ethnicity is a source of their group identity and solidarity. For other women, although their own race is often invisible to them, their location in organizations and in society is nevertheless racialized" (p.6). The domination of the White middle class male group in organizations depends on the subordination of different race-gender-class groups.

Yet, the experience of subordination of different race-gender-class groups is not experienced in the same way. White women are privileged because of their race, yet subordinated because of their gender (Hurtado, 1989). As a group, consequently, they simultaneously experience privilege and subordination, and even this must be contextualized by class and sexuality.

Along the same lines, the term "women and minorities" has become largely accepted in academic and practitioner vocabulary. Although not explicitly stated, it has come to represent White women and all those who are nonwhite, even though the word "white" does not appear as a prefix to women and gender is not explicitly included in the "minorities" part of the phrase. This representation says a lot about how racialized gender groups are constructed in organizations. Foremost, race and gender are positioned as mutually exclusive categories. White males are a familiar group and therefore do not have to be labeled. They are neither racialized nor gendered. White men are not represented as a group but as individuals. It is those who do not fit the familiar group of "manager" who must be labeled: "women and minorities." White women and racial/ethnic men and women are represented as problems outside of the norm. Notions of managerial competence are based on White and male models (and, for that matter, middle to upper class White males).

The successful organizational leader is still too often constructed as a tough, heroic, White male. By its repeated representation, this image becomes the ideal and standard against which the leadership of others is to be judged. The fact that racial minority women are virtually invisible in the term "women and minorities" reflects their extreme subordinated status and the way in which racialized gender constructs groups differently. They are represented not only differently from dominant White men, but also other subordinated groups of racial and ethnic men and White women (Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997). In other words, their representation is particularized.

The intersection of race and gender gives rise to the recognition of racialized sexism and gendered racism. Racialized sexism refers to the ways in which the experience of sexism is grounded in racialized perceptions of gender roles and stereotypes. Sexism, rooted in patriarchy, is intertwined with an ideology of racial hierarchy. The work of Essed (1991) offers a useful way to examine gendered racism and racialized sexism interactions. According to Essed, gendered racism and racialized sexism are manifested through the practices of problematization, marginalization and containment (Essed, 1991).

Problematization is the exaggeration and hierarchical organization of difference where real or imaginary differences are attributed along racialized gender lines. For example, a White male colleague assumes a Black female colleague is lacking quantitative skills or the White male among a group of females at a meeting must be the one "in charge."

Another process is marginalization, where nondominant racialized groups experience rejection in their interactions with dominant group members. For example, a Black female manager's white subordinate implicitly refuses to follow her instructions on a project, preferring instead to go above her command of authority. Or, a Latina is explicitly excluded from informal work related activities by her White colleagues.

Still another form of marginalization might take the form of assigning clients along racialized gender lines. This can occur in the financial industry when Black women are encouraged to concentrate in minority communities to build their businesses rather than in the larger population.

Finally, containment occurs when dominant racialized group members attempt to suppress resistance by non-dominant groups. While such behavior can be direct, it is mostly indirect consisting of intimidation, harassment, being made to feel inferior, and denial of conflict. Examples may range from correcting a Latina woman's language, or stereotyping an African American woman's behavior, or labeling a woman's charge of discrimination as oversensitive or paranoid.

Drawing upon the concept of racialized sexism, we can also then talk about what Cho (1997) refers to as racialized sexual harassment. Racialized sexual harassment denotes a particular set of injuries resulting from the unique complex of power relations between the harasser and harassed, rooted in sexualized racial stereotypes and racialized gender stereotypes, in addition to the racial and gender politics of the work environment (Cho, 1997).

For instance, Cho (1997) describes the complex convergence of racial and gender stereotypes in understanding how Asian Pacific American women experience sexism. The model minority traits of passivity and submissiveness are intensified and gendered through the portrayal of obedient and servile Asian Pacific women in popular culture. Hence, the repeated representation of a compliant and catering Asian feminine nature feeds harassers' belief that these women will be receptive objects of their advances, make good victims, and will not fight back. At the same time, they experience the overlay of racialized ascription of being exotic, hyper-eroticized, masochistic, and desirous of sexual harassment.

Gendered racism points to ways in which the racism experienced by men and women of color is shaped by patriarchal and historical conceptions of gender roles. Consider the hostile Black woman (the Sapphire stereotype), the over-caring, nurturing Black woman (the Mammy stereotype), or the wanton, sexually explicit Black woman (the Jezebel stereotype)—in this case think Anita Hill. Unfortunately, they are all still alive in the organizational experiences of Black women in their day-to-day interactions with their White male and female colleagues (Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

A Few Last Thoughts

As organizational studies scholars, our research should reflect the diverse employee workforce currently existing in today's companies. Too much of our research is focused primarily on white elite women, although there are a growing number of studies comparing white and black women. Still missing are investigations of other women of color, including Hispanic, Latina, Asian, Middle Eastern, and immigrant women. We should think about partnering with other researchers on several levels. First, when assembling research teams we should think about including investigators from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Their perspectives will only serve to make our research richer and more complex with more depth. Second, another way to think about diverse research teams is to include researchers from other disciplines, especially sociology, anthropology, and history.

Speaking of history, research on gender in the workplace is made stronger when a context is provided. Many of the phenomena we investigate regarding gender have an implicit correlation to the history of White women and women of color in the United States. For example, Black women are held to a different set of standards and expectations when it comes to motherhood and their careers because of the legacy of slavery (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Thomas 1989).

Companies need our insights and knowledge now for ways to advance all women in the global workforce. Diverse women are right before our eyes but we still are not making them a priority in understanding organizational life; or, making their work lives better.

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