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Exploring the Challenges of Breaking the Glass-Ceiling: A Historical Perspective

About the Author(s)

Dr. Tonya Cooper is an Abilene Christian University alumnus with a Doctorate in Education Leadership. I have worked in education for over 20 years. My experience includes developing curriculum and sports activities for middle school students. My middle school environment roles included serving as the Lead Teacher in the Social Studies program and as the athletic director. I also coached the girls' volleyball and basketball teams.

Keywords

Glass ceiling, senior-level, women of color, career paths

Cover Page Footnote

Philippians 4:19: But my God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. First, I acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who continues to supply all my needs according to his riches in glory. Second, I would like to acknowledge my deceased parents for their hard work and relentless sacrifices of their time, energy, and love. To my siblings, who stood by me in every stage of my educational endeavors, I acknowledge you and your patience during my academic journey. The journey has not always been easy; I have lost loved ones during my time completing my dissertation and have gained new loved ones. Through this experience, I have persevered and overcome various trials and tribulations, but I kept my faith and remembered my deceased mothers' pearls of wisdom to pursue whatever my heart desired. Third, I would like to acknowledge my numerous nieces and nephews, great-nieces and nephews, and great-great nieces and nephews; I now leave this legacy of completing a doctoral program, and determination does pay-off in the end. I now pass the academic baton to them to excel in their academic endeavors. Last, I certainly would like to thank my dissertation committee: Dr. Wilson-Jones, Dr. Elias, and Dr. Ramos, for their acceptance to join and actively participate in this study. A special note to Dr. Wilson-Jones for her voice, leadership insight, knowledge, and continued support throughout this process. Thank you all for your time, feedback, and diligence in working with me to complete this study.



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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the voices, experiences, and factors promoting the leadership career paths of senior-level women of color in higher education and to capture their voices on how they were able to overcome the barriers and challenges to breaking the glass ceiling on leadership career paths to senior-level administration in higher education. A phenomenological research method was employed to capture the participants' voices, experiences, and leadership career paths of their roles in higher education. Results show that the women of color in the study confirmed the perceived challenges and barriers, perceptions of establishing a career path, and factors to overcome barriers and challenges to breaking the glass ceiling. Twelve themes emerged from the 15 participants. The women in the study were from community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and predominately White institutions. The interview process consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions to capture their voices about lived career path experiences. Through adversity, they persevered with a single-minded determination to overcome the barriers and challenges faced in higher education.

Key Words: women of color, glass-ceiling

Introduction

Women of color, especially Black women in leadership roles, have had to navigate various identities as they serve in executive leadership roles (Beckwith et al., 2016). They continued to make strides in management roles and positions; however, they aspired to move past middle-level positions to senior-level roles and face an invisible barrier called the glass ceiling. The participants used the glass ceiling metaphor to describe obstacles or barriers that obstruct the advancement of women and minorities in leadership and decision-making positions. The overrepresentation of women in the workforce is in mid-level positions with some form of

leadership and decision-making processes. Barriers prevented upward mobility to prestigious leadership and decision-making roles such as president, provost, or chancellor.

According to a statement by former First Lady Michelle Obama, "men still, run the world, and they are not always doing a great job at it" (Giorgi, 2019, para. 7). Men in leadership roles must begin or continue to have a seat at the table with minority women who are seeking senior-level positions in higher education (Giorgi, 2019). Hearing and understanding the voices of minority women regarding their lived experiences in leadership career paths and the barriers faced at institutions in higher education was essential to know, recognize, and understand. Johnson (2016) pointed out that women earned 50% of all doctoral degrees since 2006, women earned more than 50% of all bachelor's degrees since 1982, women earned more than 50% of all master's degrees since 1987, and 32% of women held full professor positions at degree-granting postsecondary institutions. In other words, by 2024, approximately 107,000 women will earn doctoral degrees, outnumbering men by a 10% increase. During the year 2016, presidential positions were held by 30% of women, whereas men still held 70% of the presidential positions at institutions of higher learning (Johnson, 2016). The data pointed out that women outperformed men with conferred degrees, yet this population is still not represented at the presidency level at predominately White universities (PWIs) and community colleges.

The typical pathway for a presidency position has been a full-time faculty member, department chair, dean, or vice president of instruction or academic affairs. However, according to former Spelman College president Johnnetta Cole, for minorities, the pipeline is different (Gray et al., 2017). Minorities and women experience the glass ceiling metaphor, especially women, who experienced additional barriers such as lack of a strategic pathway to leadership roles, recruitment, retention, and promotion, which were less forthcoming and where seasoned leaders were given preference.

Data from Carey (2017) showed that 80% of university presidents were White males, and 70% were males. Therefore, to address, understand, and resolve the problem at higher learning institutions, the presidential office's internal infrastructure and the senior staff at PWIs and community colleges should want to address the barriers and glass ceiling effect that continue to be a roadblock for minority women.

When senior-level leaders begin to have transformational conversations and put into practice measurable goals for women of color, the landscape of diverse leaders will shift. By 2024, more women will hold a conferred doctoral degree (ACE, 2017) and more academic presidential positions. Having embraced conversations with these women at the table matters in 2020. Carey (2017) states that the student body is becoming more diverse. While 30% of college presidents are women, female students have outnumbered male students since 1979. That compares to 17% of presidents with an enrollment of 44% nonwhite students. This qualitative study explored the voices, experiences, and leadership career paths of senior-level women of color in higher education.

Statement of the Problem

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2010) African American report listed numerous obstacles to solidifying the issues of not hearing the voices or exploring the journeys of African American women. However, this study focused on the following four obstacles: unconscious biases and perceptions about African Americans that still play a significant role in employment, African Americans' lack of adequate mentoring and networking opportunities for higher level and management positions, insufficient training and development assignments perpetuate inequalities in skills and opportunities for African Americans, and the narrowed recruitment methods negatively impacting African Americans.

Purpose of the Study

This study also aimed to capture the voices of senior-level women of color on overcoming the barriers and challenges to breaking the glass ceiling in their roles as senior-level administrators.

Research Question

How do you, senior-level women of color, perceive the challenges of breaking the glass ceiling in higher education?

Literature Review

The goal of this research explored what scholars still need to address, the deficit this population encounters in leadership roles in higher education. Bell et al. (1994) pointed out that research on women in management needs to be addressed. Barriers to leadership opportunities are a global phenomenon where women, compared to men, are disproportionately concentrated in lower-level and lower-authoritative leadership positions (Northouse, 2010). The historical

literature by theorists such as Chickering and Reisser (1972), Josselson (1987), and Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist theory (1986) provided a unique perspective and insight into women's experiences at institutions of higher learning. Much has been written, and questions have been asked; however, what is limited in research are their voices, journeys, and leadership career paths in higher education. Exploring numerous scholarly journals, peer-reviewed articles, and books on women in higher administration leadership, I found that the research in the 21st-century workforce has made strides.

However, women in the workplace still experience challenges and face barriers that can hinder upward mobility. A woman who is of color that aspires to be promoted to a senior-level position in a community college, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), or a predominately White institution (PWI) faces barriers that sometimes seem insurmountable because of the glass ceiling metaphor and barriers. The American Council on Education (2017) reported, "the percentage of minority college presidents has slowly increased over the last 30 years. This population, however, is the most underrepresented in the presidency" (p.25). The absence of women in leadership throughout higher education is problematized in the literature. The explored data from the American Council on Education (2017) said seven out of 10 college presidents in 2016 were men, and fewer than one in five were racial minorities. As a result, the goal was to identify central issues that related to legitimate research questions: What central theories were used to explain the flaws senior-level women of color perceived to be the challenges to breaking the glass ceiling in higher education, and what they saw were the challenges toward leadership career-path in higher education. In summation, the explored voices, journeys, and leadership career paths of senior-level women of color in higher education reflected the central theories explaining these women's absence in a presidential role at community colleges, HBCUs, and PWI.

Theoretical Lens

This section includes the theoretical framework of Chickering and Reisser's (1996) three vectors (managing emotions, developing competence, and establishing identity), Josselson's (1987) purveyors of heritage, and Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist thought (1986). These provide the background necessary to understand the participants' leadership career paths.

Chickering and Reisser's theory (1972) primarily dealt with students. However, the three vectors highlighted in the study for women of color are as follows:

- managing emotions: a person becomes aware of their emotions and how to manage them,
- developing competence includes intellectual manual skills, interpersonal competence, and
- establishing identity: discover what kinds of experience and at what levels of intensity and frequency; see Figure 1).

Figure 1



As a woman of color, managing emotions, developing competence, and establishing identity are exhausting. Patton and Catching (2009) capture and speak to Chickering's three vectors.

My White colleagues do not deal with these situations nearly as much. They do not have to prove anything because their script says they are credible before speaking one word. I sometimes spend most of my time explaining my credentials when instead, it could be spent disseminating knowledge about the subject matter at hand. I must work twice as hard on my teaching, knowing that few extrinsic rewards will follow. The result is that on many occasions, I feel frustrated, exhausted, and drained mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. (p. 720).

Chickering's and Reisser's (1972) three of the seven vectors are broad. However, the viewed senior-leadership lens addressed the challenges women faced in higher education as they pursued leadership career paths. In the journal article Pipeline to Presidencies Carries Lots of Women, Few Members of Minority Groups (2008), Audrey Williams June made the following statement, according to a new survey by a leading higher education group, women represent a

significant share of the senior campus administrators whose jobs are most likely to lead to a college presidency. However, when it comes to members of racial minority groups, the supply of such potential leaders is much smaller. The survey, conducted by the American Council on Education, revealed that women—most of them White—made up fully 45% of senior administrators. (para. 1).

Josselson's (1987) research focused on identity development, specifically with women, and upon discovery, Josselson documented women portrayed in similar ways to the identity theory seen in Marcia's (1966) theoretical framework. The work of Josselson provided a different perspective that viewed the identity development process specifically for women. This structured identity development, specifically for women, was generated by Josselson using Marcia's (1966) framework stages that women assumed. Although the theory has four stages, foreclosures will be the stage used for this study. Foreclosures: Purveyors of Heritage were women who were strongly committed but had not explored much independently. These women highly valued following family traditions and meeting familial expectations. They pursued goals with single-minded determination without doubt or hesitation. Josselson's work centered on women's identity and the four stages women assume. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks listed above focused on identity development; therefore, Chickering and Reisser (1996) and Josselson (1987) build upon each other's framework and develop a different approach or perspective to view identity development at various stages in a person's life.

Methodology

The study examined the voices, journeys, and leadership career paths of women of color at community colleges, HBCUs, and PWIs. This chapter addresses the methodology of how these women navigated their path to success amid the barriers and glass ceiling experienced. I organized the study into the following sections, research and design method, phenomenology, population, setting, sample, participant protection, data collection, interview protocol, data analysis, ethical procedures, and research questions. Most social science studies aim to contribute to a cumulative body of verifiable information (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2015). The chapter concludes with the ethical procedures and a summation of the study methods used.

Research Design and Method

This qualitative research method focused on the phenomenology research approach that described the participant(s) experiences in a setting while trying to understand a phenomenon (Terrell, 2016). Researchers should emphasize developing a research environment that is trusting, balanced, and ethical, with all parties respecting the opinions and participation of others (Terrell, 2016).

Phenomenological

Phenomenological research examines the experiences of consciousness from a first-person perspective (Creswell, 2017; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Smith, 2013). This research type goes beyond the surface to gain a deeper depth of a person's lived experiences. Phenomenology (Creswell, 2017; Maxwell, 2013) permits researchers to ask open-ended, semi-structured questions to ensure the same foundational questions are being asked while allowing latitude for the participant's experiences on their rise to success to be untainted by the researcher's ideas. Ultimately, phenomenology aims to obtain the underlying meaning of the experience (Creswell, 2017), then categorize the experiences of the participants with the phenomenon-defined topics that are identified and coded as the structures develop.

Population, Setting, and Sample

The setting, population, and sample size criteria are explicitly based on women who identified as women of color. The participants held senior-level leadership positions at selected universities, community colleges, HBCUs, and PWIs in the various regions of the United States. According to Terrell (2016), purposive sampling, also called intentional sampling, is, as the name implies, gathering a sample on purpose because those sampled meet specific criteria. The research allowed me to identify small groups of these women.

A purposeful, selected number of women who held a leadership position in higher education for at least three years were invited to participate in the study. The sampling size consisted of participants who were suitable and met the criteria. The following process explained the sampled selection. Five participants were selected from community colleges, five from HBCUs, and five from PWIs. The sample size remained relatively small to accommodate the integrity and analysis of the study. I recruited members from the National Association of Professional Women on LinkedIn. The interview process consisted of semi-structured, open-

ended interview questions to capture their voices about lived experiences on their career paths. The qualitative research data used technology software to record and transcribe the telephone interviews.

Research Question

What do senior-level women of color perceive as the challenges of breaking the glass ceiling in higher education?

Institutional Perceptions

The participants conveyed that institutional perceptions were barriers and challenges to their leadership career path in higher education. These women expressed their emotions during the interview, especially women who work at a PWI. All the participants discussed institutional perceptions. According to the responses, some are still experiencing institution perception from various colleagues at their perspective institution. Chickering and Reisser (1972) discussed the importance of managing emotions as one of their vectors. Managing emotions is when a person becomes aware of their feelings and how to manage them. As a Woman of Color, managing emotions, developing competence, and establishing identity are exhausting. Patton and Catching (2009) capture and speak to

Chickering's three vectors. My White colleagues do not deal with these situations nearly as much. They do not have to prove anything because their script says they are credible before speaking one word. I sometimes spend much of my time explaining my credentials when instead, it could be spent disseminating knowledge about the subject matter at hand. I must work twice as hard on my teaching, knowing that few extrinsic rewards will follow. The result is that, on many occasions, I feel frustrated, exhausted, and drained mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

Omicron

It is the perception of how ambitious women are perceived relative to their male counterparts. Thus, that is just a continuous challenge that I have noticed, notice more as I get; as I move up in my career, I did not notice it as much when I started or even mid-level. However, now that I am at higher levels, I have noticed that people are treated differently, and I do not just mean by their bosses but also by their peers.

Lambda

I am thinking, "Wow, it is weird." You are right. You cannot explain it. You cannot explain this feeling. Nobody is telling you, laughing at you; nobody is saying anything to you, but you feel it. However, you know what is helping me. He is white, so he gives me that power. This is interesting. Whenever a Mexican or a minority woman marries a white guy, it feels like they have elevated you. It is weird

Pi

I have always worked for predominately white institutions challenges are going to come. They are people who do not think that you know what you are doing or do not think that you know what you are talking about. I have had an unsupportive boss or two, especially in the diversity space."

Women of Color: Chi. Chi stated,

I would say yes. There have been some institutional challenges and barriers. Again, as an administrator at an HBCU, we are expected to wear multiple hats. Furthermore, our salaries are not always comparable to some of our colleagues at our other similar sister institution sizes. However, that has been an institutional barrier, not just getting the necessary resources and where we should get them, but still having to respond and provide all the programs and services that other universities provide.

Conclusion**Institutional Perceptions**

These women conveyed that institutional perceptions were barriers and challenges to their leadership career path in higher education. The women expressed their emotions during the interview, especially women who worked at a PWI. All the participants discussed institutional perceptions. According to the responses, some women are still experiencing institution perception from various colleagues at their perspective institution.

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