A study of why Black females remain over-represented in traditional female oriented occupations.

Sex Role Socialization and Perception of Opportunity Structure: Impact on Educational and Occupational Decisions of Black Females

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Introduction

Some scholars have examined the ways in which parental socialization, teacher/student interactions and peer interactions correlate with academic success of Black females. Others have studied the educational aspirations, motivations and expectations of Black females as they relate to educational and occupational attainment. However, few studies have examined the influence of sex role socialization and perceptions of the opportunity structure on the educational and occupational decisions of Black females. Growing up in a patriarchal society that has clearly defined gender roles and in a society with distinct racial boundaries must at least in some ways influence the educational decisions and occupational choices of Black females. The purpose of this article is to explore the influence of sex role socialization and the perceptions of opportunity structure on the expectations for academic achievement and career choices of Black females. For Black females the influence of sex role socialization is most evident in their continued over representation in traditional occupations. It is proposed in this article that this overrepresentation is related to Black females' perceptions of the educational and occupational opportunities available to them as a race gender group.

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Selected Views of Sex Roles

As a race gender group, Black females are socialized as females in the American culture with distinct masculine and feminine delineations. As Black females living in a sub-culture of African–Americans, they experience a different sex role socialization process where the delineation of masculine and feminine roles is not always distinct. There is considerable literature describing the differential socialization of men and women in American culture. Briefly, men are socialized to be emotionally inhibited, powerful, assertive and independent. Women are socialized to be emotional, nuturant and to direct achievement through affiliation with others (Gilbert, 1987; Kaplan, 1979). Studies (Hershey, 1978; Rao & Rao, 1985) on sex role identities and attitudes indicate that Black men see themselves in more traditional masculine terms, and Black women tend to identify more with feminine qualities. Rao and Rao (1985) studied both White and Black males and females and found that race was not a predictor of sex role attitudes.

Within the African–American subculture, sex role attitudes are influenced by social and political forces that may prevent Black males and females from actualizing the gender roles ascribed by the society. Lyson (1986) found that although Black and White males and females shared similar sex role orientations, both Black men and women were more likely to sanction work as appropriate for women with school age children, and African–Americans viewed motherhood as a more ideal role than Whites. These findings correspond with other studies (Gackenbach, 1978, Gump, 1975) that have also suggested that unfavorable social and economic conditions have forced Black females into the labor force. The race of Black females and males has limited their ability to become acculturated and accepted in the American mainstream. Thus, Black females have historically played the traditional role of wife and mother as well as contributors to the economic survival of their families. While Black females identify with the traditional feminine role, they are aware of the limitations and restrictions placed on them because of their race. Their awareness of these limitations is clearly manifested in their educational and occupational expectations and choices.

The socialization process and the opportunity structure are major determinants of an individual's education and work expectations (Astin, 1984). Moreover, the socialization process and the opportunity structure are interactive, each influencing the other. For Black females the socialization process involves expectations of the role of homemaker and worker (Malson, 1983), whereas the structure of opportunity influences the occupations chosen. The socialization process begins at home where masculine and feminine roles are modeled and delineated. In a review of the literature on family socialization of Black females, Smith (1983) identified a built-in bias of many of the studies which have tended to examine maternal rather than paternal influence. She found little or no empirical data to support the assumption and myth that Black females have been socialized by their parents to achieve higher levels of educational attainment. In fact, another review of the literature on this topic (Scott–Jones & Clark, 1986) suggests that African–American families are egalitarian in their socialization practices.

There may be other factors that influence the socialization process in Black families. Fleming (1978) found that the socialization process differs for Black females according to their social class. She found that working class college females high in need for achievement were socialized with more emphasis on femininity than middle-class college females. Females who are socialized with a strong sex-typed

emphasis seem to gain more gratification in traditionally feminine occupations. It seems that social class may be an important and often unexamined variable in sex role socialization. While sex role socialization does not appear to limit levels of educational achievement in Black females, it does seem to limit their options of college major and career choice.

While it is important to understand the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence the socialization process, it is also important to consider the perceptions and attitudes that shape the sex role socialization of Black females. Burlew (1977) suggests that there are three attitudes about future directions that Black females may consider: (1) educational and career aspirations; (2) educational and career expectations; and (3) attitudes about the social consequences of achievement in education and career. She also identifies a second set of factors that indirectly influence educational and occupational outcomes as: (1) same sex role models (i.e., mothers); (2) information and awareness of the world of world; (3) attitudes about women's roles; and (4) perceptions about significant others' sex role attitudes. In other words, Black females' sex role socialization is based on a constellation of personal experiences which contribute to attitudes about sex roles along with the influence of significant others' views of appropriate sex role behaviors. Black females obtain knowledge and exposure to the opportunity structure through observations and evaluations of what happens to their female role models. These observations and evaluations may vary in impact depending on the individual female.

In a comprehensive review of the literature, Smith (1982) found that the educational and career aspirations of Black female adolescents exceeded those of Black males. She also posits that Black females held greater expectations for completing their goals. In a similar review of the literature, Scott–Jones and Clark (1986) posit that at the college level, the aspirations of Black females drop below those of Black males. They attribute this drop to the adherence to sex role stereotypes of both White and Black college age females. This change in aspirations of Black females was apparent in a study of educational attainment of Black male and female undergraduates done by Epps and Jackson (1987). They found that social-psychological factors such as aspirations and influential others accounted more for the educational attainment of Black males, while school factors (i.e., grades and track) and background factors (i.e., socioeconomic status and ability) were more important for females. These findings suggest that what goes on in schools, especially at the college level, as well as what the female students brings to the college environment, becomes more important than social psychological factors such as aspirations for success. Other studies (Chester, 1983) have also indicated that Black females experience environments differently than do Black males.

Black females at the college level may become more pragmatic in their expectation of educational and occupational goals. This pragmatism seems to include decisions about college majors and occupations that are traditional and non-threatening to societal perceptions of stereotypic sex and race roles. It is suggested by Burlew (1977) that perceptions about appropriate sex role behavior may bias Black females' expectations about the social consequences of stepping out of stereotypic roles. For some Black females, the social consequences of pursuing higher levels of education and nontraditional careers is to be perceived as being masculine and ultimately as an unlikely marital candidate. Thus perceptions of appropriate sex roles, as well as acknowledged racial discrimination in employment, may cause Black females to limit career options. Black females choose traditional careers more often than do White females and tend to perceive more occupational barriers than Black males (Howell, Freese, Sollie, 1984, Ogbu, 1978).

The combined and independent effects of racism and sexism may be manifested in the academic and occupational expectations of Black females. The sex role socialization process for Black females includes the traditional feminine role as well as the role of a person of color in this society. Black females must deal with the negative stereotype of being a matriarch, as well as the socialization of the majority culture for females to be weak and dependent. Settling for traditional occupations may be one way of coping with the educational and occupational stress of making decisions that may have perceived negative social consequences. Some literature (Bridges, 1988, Vondracek & Kirchner, 1974, Wolfe & Betz, 1981) indicates that Black females seem to be more influenced by sex stereotyping and by traditional occupational models in their educational and occupational aspirations than males.

While Black females have surpassed their male counterparts in educational attainment at the high school and college level, they tend to pursue traditional fields of study and are predominantly employed in traditional occupations (Malveaux, 1986, Moore, 1987, Sutherland, 1988, Thomas, 1987). Malveaux (1986) found that not only were Black females occupationally separated into jobs that are "typically female," but also "typically Black female." She defined "typically Black female" occupations as those in which Black women's representation is more than twice their representation in the labor force. For example, 41 percent of the Black women who work in service occupations were employed in four types of jobs: chambermaids, welfare service aides, cleaners, or nurse's aides. In addition, about one-quarter of all Black women were concentrated in 6 of 48 clerical occupations: file clerks, typists, teacher's aides, keypunch operators, calculating machine operators, and social-welfare clerical assistants. Black females with college degrees tended to choose traditional occupations such as teaching, nursing, social work, etc.

Many Black females may experience conflicts between the sex role socialization process of the American society and that of their subculture. Some of the norms for sex role socialization of their subculture are a survival reaction to the discriminatory actions of the American society. Black females have similar motivations for education and careers as do other females and males. This motivation has been clearly demonstrated in the pursuit of higher levels of education and professional careers on the part of Black females. However, they continue to be confronted by the limitations of race and sex discrimination that play an integral role in the structure of opportunity. While this paper has focused on Black females' perceptions of the opportunity structure, their perceptions are formulated from knowledge and awareness of the discrimination that has occurred against others who have ventured out before them. Perhaps the message learned by many Black females has been to play it safe and not venture beyond acknowledged race and sex boundaries.

Conclusion

If we are to understand why Black females are overrepresented in traditional occupations, we need to understand the emotions, cognitions, and environmental factors that contribute to their career decision-making process. It seems that sex role socialization issues for Black females are more complex due to their unique experience and posi-

tion in American society. It has been found that discrimination is more prevalent when females apply for out-of-role positions (Martinko & Garner, 1983), and the research on sex and race discrimination in employment indicates that Black females continuously are the least favored group in hiring decisions (McRae, 1990).

The direction and paths taken by Black females and perceptions of self in this process is an area that calls for increased attention from educators and counselors. While several Black females have been involved in the women's liberation struggle, for many their primary struggle has been against racism. By not focusing on issues of gender in education and employment, Black females have limited their career options, which seem to be guided by negative race and sex stereotypes and societal discrimination. Perhaps Black females perceive the stereotypes of being strong as more of a deterrent than a benefit with respect to family and marriage, especially since strong Black women are often portrayed as and destined to remain that way.

Educators and counselors can help by exploring nontraditional career options and by advising Black female students on how to manage the personal, social and career aspects of their lives. Issues of education, work and family are important in the lives of Black females. Learning how to manage family and career roles within their subculture and that of the American society is a necessary skill for success, especially in nontraditional careers. Black females also need to understand the environments of the various educational and occupational institutions in which they must function and to develop adequate skills to cope and strive in different types of settings. Educators and counselors can also help Black females to develop strategies that allow them to pursue educational and career goals that have previously been limited by the race and sex of the applicant. Breaking through the boundaries will send out a message to Black females that a broader scope of career options can be realized.

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