



Occupational Mentorship & the Black Female in the Corporate Midsouth

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Abstract

Career advancement barriers have become increasingly prominent in corporate manufacturing compared to other industries for Black female professionals. Based on extant literature, the crux of race and gender stereotyping in the corporate environment may be due to a lack of mentorship, formal and informal leadership development networks, and senior-level management's diversity support. Therefore, additional research is required to understand how occupational mentorship may contribute to the career success of Black females working in corporate manufacturing in the Midsouth region of the United States. Open-ended and in-depth interview questions were presented to 15 Black female participants to understand their lived experiences related to the contribution of occupational mentorship on their professional development and career advancement opportunities in corporate manufacturing. Additionally, the transcendental phenomenological design was employed to unveil thematic commonalities and philosophical meaning related to the lived experiences of Black females, having participated in either formal or informal mentorship in corporate manufacturing. Colaizzi's seven steps of analysis were leveraged, facilitating the emergence of 6 significant themes regarding lived experiences pertaining to occupational mentorship. The more prevalent themes include: 1) Mentorship aids in career advancement when supported by sponsorship and assimilation to corporate norms and organizational behaviors and 2) Occupational mentorship improves self-efficacy, competency, skillset, and professional readiness for promotion. This study will assist in providing Black females with strategies as to how occupational mentorship may be leveraged for professional development and career advancement. Regarding business application, corporations will gain in-depth knowledge regarding the

function, value proposition, diversity and inclusion, and design and implementation of structurally organized mentoring programs.

Keywords: Occupational Mentorship, Corporate Manufacturing, Black Women, Black Women, Career Advancement, Professional Development, Professional Competency, Glass Ceiling, Affinity Contradiction Theory, Human Capital Investment, Social Learning Theory

Introduction

The lack of career guidance through structured occupational mentorship opportunity has limited the number of Black females occupying senior leadership positions in mainstream Corporate America. Amongst Black female corporate professionals, the lack of mentorship is rated the most salient factor contributing to professional development and career advancement barriers in the workplace (Cohen, et al., 2018; Onyango et al., 2016). As such, corporations are being challenged to understand how occupational mentorship improves the professional development and career advancement for Black females working in corporate manufacturing. Black females are left to fend for themselves due to balancing intersectional identities of being both Black and female (Sims & Carter, 2019). Due to intersectional identities, Black females have expressed that mentorship by senior-level executives has provided guidance and protection while aspiring to executive-level positions in the corporate arena. In this context, occupational mentorship will be described as a social, personal, and professional exchange of knowledge and/or information between a seasoned executive (mentor) within an organization - and a less experienced or junior professional (mentee/protégé) (Greco & Kraimer, 2019; Postlethwaite & Schaffer, 2019; Welsh & Dixon, 2016). Further aligned to this context, organizational leaders are interested in exploring the impact of occupational mentorship as it relates to the protégé, in targeting their key strengths to maximize their potential in the professional workplace, while improving the career advancement and professional development of Black females working in corporate manufacturing in the Mid-South region of the United States.

Summary of the Literature

Although diversity and inclusion efforts are becoming more prevalent in Corporate America, as a tool being leveraged to improve the representation of race and gender minorities, the current research findings reveal that diversity-valuing behavior within an organization is not enough to advance the career of females and minorities in the corporate setting. Some literature exists regarding the potential value-add of occupational mentorship, however this study aids in determining the benefit that occupational mentorship provides within the Black female professional demographic and the impact of occupational mentorship on the overall success of the enterprise.

Mentoring

One of the primary functions of mentorship is to provide formal and informal guidance to less experienced professionals while increasing the visibility of the protégé (Carroll & Barnes, 2015; Weinberg, 2019). The intent of such mentoring is to expose the protégé to experiences and leadership opportunities in such a way that their strengths can be highlighted and then leveraged for further development and potential implementation towards higher-level roles within the organization over time (Carroll & Barnes, 2015; Holder et al., 2015). Essentially, the general function of the mentor is one that seeks to aid the protégé in targeting their key strengths to maximize their potential in the professional workplace (Weinberg, 2019). The function of the mentee may be to help facilitate mutuality, where the

mentor is mutually influenced by the mentee, and therefore, able to adapt to the developing and dynamic needs of the given protégé throughout the mentor-mentee relationship (Weinberg, 2019).

The Mentoring Function

The mentor should function as a professional coach, in that they listen to the protégé, understand his or her areas of professionalism that need development, to provide advice, knowledge, and professional counsel as the protégé seeks to develop into a thriving member and contributor to the enterprise (Carroll & Barnes, 2015; Weinberg, 2019). The occupational mentoring process should function to focus on career advancement to improve both psychological and social development while understanding unwritten processes having to do with organizational culture (Weinberg, 2019). The primary function of mentorship should work to provide a network of senior-level leaders and peers that aid in career guidance regarding best practices for career success within a given organization (Weinberg, 2019).

Regarding the existence of microaggressions, in a study designed to examine the function of mentorship for Black females in the corporate setting, research was conducted to capture the lived experiences of racial microaggression against Black females occupying senior management positions in industries such as apparel, beauty, financial services, hospitality, media, pharmaceuticals, and publishing. Holder et al. (2015) found that one of the major coping strategies leveraged by the females to overcome racial microaggression on their journey to senior-level management was occupational mentorship. While a mentor will likely help a mentee to network, a sponsor will actively include the mentee in their own professional network. The participants communicated the function of mentorship because it also transitioned into sponsorship while leveraging advice from other Black females regarding how to overcome racial microaggression in the corporate environment. Participants also discussed that they were excluded from certain networks, support, and mentorship opportunities—which created a barrier to their career advancement. The participants shared how being provided with access to certain networks, mentorship, and projects (having high visibility) that helped to cultivate their professional proficiency while providing exposure to key decision-makers of the organization as well - which expedited career advancement opportunities. Additionally, Holder et al. (2015) found that for these senior Black Executive females, the primary function of mentorship was effective in bringing them to the table on significant projects that may highlight leadership skills in a way that improves professional proficiencies while getting them a promotion.

In a study performed to explore how the mentoring function optimizes career advancement and professional development in U.S. accounting organizations, Guthrie and Jones (2017) found that in both males and females, career development and role modeling were the most active functions involved in their mentoring relationships. The findings of Guthrie and Jones (2017) reveal that career development and role modeling are most salient in mentoring relationships. Based on the contextual meaning of the findings derived by Guthrie and Jones (2017), career development functions are defined as sponsorship by senior leaders/mentors, recommendations for promotion, being assigned to high-profile assignments for improved visibility, and provision of career guidance and advice as it relates to career goals.

Similar to the findings of female participants, Guthrie and Jones (2017) found that male participant scores for mentoring function mirrored the findings of the female, but at higher rates. The two primary functions of mentorship found in men were also career development and role modeling. The salient

functions related to career development and role modeling were increased for both males and females when paired with same-gender mentors, and where relationships were more informal than formal. Another interesting finding of Guthrie and Jones (2017) is female mentors have higher function scores for career development and role modeling when paired with male mentors. Although male to female mentoring relationships creates controversy relative to the potential of sexual involvement, Guthrie and Jones (2017) found that female participants' desire for informal (male to female) mentor relationships yet exists. As such, females believe that having a male mentor is more beneficial to their career development in an environment and/or industry dominated by males.

Value Proposition of Mentoring

The value of mentorship is such that it benefits the mentee by providing a transfer of knowledge to a less experienced professional (Ragins et al., 2017). Additionally, the value of mentorship benefits the mentor because they can refine their skill set by way of discovering new processes and methodologies while training the protégé (Ragins et al., 2017). Improved skillsets of the mentor and protégé are paramount because tactically competent employees favorably impact the financial performance of their organizations (Lewis, 2017; Rand & Pajarillo, 2015). Additionally, some current research study findings reveal that the value of mentoring is that it provides holding behavior against race and gender discrimination, potentially harming the professional development and career development of Black females working in the corporate setting (Ragins et al., 2017). Based on the current literature, we found that occupational mentorship benefits three primary entities: 1) the mentor, 2) the mentee, and 3) the organization.

Mentee Value Proposition

Mentorship is a professional benefit to an organization in that it allows acclimation for young professionals just entering their profession and an organization. Organizational mentorship programs are beneficial because they provide insight into the new professional in terms of culture and overall organizational behavior. This professional socialization process that occurs through the channel of mentorship helps towards building citizenship and camaraderie within the workplace. Camaraderie builds the professional's sense of belonging within the organization and allows for increased confidence as they take on new challenges—especially when partnered with senior-level professionals to help support their career success (Clement, 2014; Menges, 2016).

Mentor Value Proposition

Mentors bring value to the mentorship relationship by acting as a conduit for organizational knowledge transfer, providing as a benchmark for premier job performance, and by protecting and transferring the values and philosophies of the organization as well (Ragins et al., 2017; Whittemore et al., 2014). Additionally, mentors can develop their professional skills by teaching others. The mentor is also able to understand some of the challenges, questions, and concerns that newer, less experienced professionals are faced with when entering the job market and a new organization. And finally, there is a fair amount of knowledge exchange as it relates to generational trends and new business philosophies that allow

more senior-level professionals to maintain their relevance within the organization and with younger, less experienced colleagues (Ragins et al., 2017; Whitemore et al., 2014).

Organizational Value Proposition

Mentorship can provide value to an organization by enhancing superior performance due to the advanced development of skill sets and professional competencies. This benefit can become pervasive within the organization and positively influence the work environment for change towards the overall organizational goals (Rand & Pajarillo, 2015). When an organization's human resources are engaged with mentoring, it boosts the organizational morale primarily, and due to an increasing level of productivity that manifests as an uncommon advantage to the enterprise. The advantage of having mentored professionals engages the professionals so that they are passionate about new business technologies and methodologies for success in the marketplace. (Rand & Pajarillo, 2015).

Methods

Based on the background and literature review, the problem addressed in this study is a lack of knowledge regarding the perceived contribution of mentorship on career success (personal performance and upward mobility) and development (advancement in knowledge and skill base) specific to the Black female. A qualitative, transcendental, phenomenological design was used to aid in collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting data to explore the experiences of Black females in corporate manufacturing in the Mid-South region of the United States. This study aimed to understand the participant's experiences with occupational mentorship and their perceptions of the factors contributing to their career advancement and professional development.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the experiences of the Black female relative to occupational mentorship and subsequent career advancement and professional development in corporate manufacturing?

SQ1: How has occupational mentorship contributed to the career success (personal performance and upward mobility) of the Black female professional working in Corporate Manufacturing in the Mid-South region of the United States.

SQ2: How has occupational mentorship contributed to the personal development (A.K.A. advancement in knowledge and skill base) of the Black female professional working in Corporate Manufacturing in the Mid-South region of the United States?

Data Collection

Data were collected using in-depth interviews with 15 Black female participants from several states in the Midsouth Region of the US. Participants were recruited using several methods. The criteria for participation was adult Black female, full-time employment as a leader in manufacturing industry, residing in the Midsouth Region of the US, and having been part of a mentor/mentee relationship. Digital contact was made via LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms. Active

listening was engaged, where participants were prompted to expound upon their responses if such responses were unclear. Questions were open-ended with a limited structure to allow more fluidity and authentic discussion during the interview process. The interviews lasted up to three hours in duration.

The interview sessions allowed for meaningful discussion. Rich data was extracted with authentic experiences contributing to a meaningful research process, unattainable with a quantitative approach to this research study. Additionally, participants were only encouraged to divulge their lived experiences based on their personal level of comfortability in doing so.

Data Analysis

Epoche was used to exercise an analytical lens from the interviewer's perspective instead of the researchers' personal worldview. The goal was to explore the meaning behind the phenomena and address the research questions and overall interview process. Epoche helps the researcher consciously understand the participants' lived experiences openly and with transparency that flows from the participant to the researcher to gain the essence of experiences lived (Moustakas, 1994).

The interviews were manually transcribed and formatted into a text file. The data were loaded into Dedoose, a qualitative and mixed methods data analysis tool. While analyzing the data derived from the interview sessions, we made certain to adhere to Colaizzi's (1978) recommended methodologies. Colaizzi's (1978) process for interview data analysis is as follows: transcribe, extract, interpret, categorize, describe, identify, and validate.

The responses that emerged from participants during the interview process were coded and analyzed. Themes were developed by way of the coding process performed. The most frequently identified commonalities shared across the participants solidified the themes. Common themes discussed in this research study occurred more than 50% of the time throughout the participants interviewed.

Results

A total of 15 participants were interviewed to answer the main question: What are the experiences of the Black female relative to occupational mentorship and subsequent career advancement and professional development in corporate manufacturing? The sample makeup is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Information (n=15)*

Participant	State	Industry Years
1	TN	7
2	TN	12
3	TN	6
4	MO	7
5	KY	5
6	OK	20
7	MS	12
8	AR	10
9	KY	10
10	AL	9
11	TN	5
12	AL	9
13	TN	7
14	MO	5
15	TN	15

fourth question pertained to the effectiveness of occupational mentorship while taking on job shadowing, training, and cultural observation in the workplace.

The following themes will be discussed in more detail below:

Theme 1: Mentorship aids in career advancement when supported by sponsorship and assimilation to corporate norms and organizational behaviors.

Theme 2: Occupational mentorship improves self-efficacy, competency, skillset, and professional readiness for promotion.

Theme 3: Initiating mentorship is perceived as an aggressive male attribute but necessary to favorably impact career advancement for Black female professionals' development outcomes.

Theme 4: Mentorship by White males may be a solution for addressing tokenism and preventing affinity contradiction.

Theme 5: Occupational mentorship provides exposure to high-profile assignments, professional networks, and visibility for penetrating career advancement barriers.

Theme 6: Occupational mentorship provides insight to learning proven strategies for career success when customized to the career trajectory of the Black female professional.

Overarching Research Question

The overarching research question for this study is as follows: What are the Black female experiences relative to occupational mentorship and subsequent career advancement and professional development in corporate manufacturing?

Theme 1. Mentorship aids in career advancement when supported by sponsorship and assimilation to corporate culture, norms, and organizational behaviors.

In synthesizing interviewee responses, it became clear that mentorship is essential for the business professional because she must identify ways to learn the corporate culture to align herself well to said culture and its people, establishing trust that helps with gaining sponsorship. Mentorship allows its professionals to be aligned with the corporate objective to move the organization forward in a synchronized manner while improving professional development and career advancement for their professionals. From a sponsorship perspective, Participant 4 stated,

I got to know my mentors after hours, both personally and professionally, to gain sponsorship that contributed to my career advancement.

Participant 3 mentioned,

You need both an advocate and a mentor because a sponsor will speak up for you when you're not in the room. A sponsor has worked with you, should believe in you, and will say great things about you that will elevate you, improving your visibility—so that people will know who you are...what you can do...and value what you bring to the table.

Participant 3 elaborated on how professional goals can be ambiguous for fledgling Black female professionals and stated,

Opportunities can be identified for you when your potential is recognized. Mentors and sponsors will help guide your career when you don't where to go next in your career. It's okay to be general in terms of your goals, but we must be intentional about identifying both mentors and sponsors that have attributes and strengths that will bring value to your career.

From an assimilation perspective, Participant 6 stated,

You have to be willing to fit in, to stand out. Fitting in has allowed me access into certain circles of professionals that could teach me how to adapt to the organizational environments while pushing my career forward.

Participant 12 corroborated this statement, saying that

One of my old managers and mentors would say, "It's just a game. It's all a game. It's the social game—and you have to be willing to align yourself to the game."

Participant 7 also corroborated these findings and discussed how Black professionals in senior management positions are

...embarrassed because the other Blacks have not assimilated to the corporate culture, and therefore, don't want to be associated with those Black professionals.

Participant 12 elaborated on corporate assimilation and standard protocol that she learned from mentorship, stating,

I had to adopt his demeanor, and his approach to solving problems, which helped with my mentor's decision to sponsor me and recommend me for promotion as well; and that's because he trusted me.

Theme 2: Occupational mentorship improves self-efficacy, competency, skillset, and professional readiness for promotion.

This finding is essential for the participant as a business professional because professional competencies and skill development may assist the professional with building confidence to fearlessly pursue and occupy leadership roles while being equipped to drive favorable results in so doing. Organizations need

competent professionals by way of diverse people, which will improve the organization's diversity and inclusion perception, perhaps further enabling the organization to take advantage of cutting-edge methodologies to perform above and beyond their competitors in the marketplace. The findings derived from Theme 2 were that the participants believed that investing in themselves was necessary for promotion and that mentorship played a significant role in their self-investment for professional skill development. The participants further expressed that before being educated and/or having trained through occupational mentorship or other mediums, they were apprehensive about promotion due to fear of failure. Lack of investing in themselves and/or seeking out a mentor created thoughts of being unprepared or unqualified for promotion. Participant 14 stated that she eventually got trapped in certain roles and labeled as a worker bee. She elaborated further and stated,

It took me a while to pursue a mentor and pay attention to my career path and related jobs as well as special projects required for me to accomplish my career goals and get where I wanted to be. I was always busy at work and then at home with my family; and I just didn't have the time to broaden my knowledge in my field for promotion readiness. So instead, I just decided to learn my current job well at the time, but because I was stagnant, I was labeled as a 'worker bee' and was overlooked for promotion—until I connected with a mentor that showed me the ropes and provided guidance as to what other skills and related roles I needed to pursue to further develop professional competencies—and eventually promotional readiness that advanced my career as well.

The idea of professional unreadiness was prevalent, where participants expressed their need to be equipped for career advancement. Participant 15 stated,

I knew promotion couldn't happen for me until I gained new transferrable skills for the position I wanted, and mentorship helped me to get there.

Several of the participants interviewed discussed the importance of being fully equipped through mentorship for management positions leading up to the C-suite. The participants discussed their apprehension of taking on management positions until they were prepared with the right skill set to thrive in such roles. Participant 15 elaborated,

I need to be confident in what I know because I know how hard it is for Black females in this industry (referring to corporate manufacturing). I need to feel prepared with the right skills so as not to take on a responsibility that I am unfamiliar with and completely unprepared for.

Theme 3: Initiating mentorship is perceived as an assertive male attribute but necessary to favorably impact career advancement.

Based on synthesis of the participants' responses, this theme is essential for the business professional because mentorship and related career advancement are accessible to those who ask for it by aggressively pursuing occupational mentorship. When occupational mentorship opportunities are created that address diversity and inclusion, such organizations may mitigate undue attrition, attract the most talented diverse professionals, and drive favorable financial performance. The findings derived from Theme 3 was that initiating mentorship—although perceived to be a male attribute—improves career advancement and

professional development outcomes.

Although the common theme across the broader group of participants was that improving skills by way of initiating mentorship opportunities was necessary, the participants expressed apprehension about aggressively pursuing training to advance their careers due to it being associated with assertiveness typically demonstrated by White males only. Participant 5 elaborated that her experience with pursuing professional development through a mentor has been more motivational instead of focusing on professional competencies. Participant 5 further explained that one must be very specific about what you are seeking to learn or gain in terms of skillset when it comes to professional development. Although there may have been those willing to provide mentorship, her personal experience was that you only get what you ask for. By initiating and pursuing professional development and some follow-up, the participants experienced favorable results in their professional competencies and job readiness skills. Participant 8 stated,

I thought that if I worked hard, that elevation would come, but I was missing something; so, I pursued mentorship. After taking the initiative to pursue a mentor, it helped to move career forward; and the mentor could see certain skills in me that helped to guide my career path and helped me identify certain projects to pursue to cultivate those skill sets continually - and I was able to experience promotion shortly thereafter.

According to Participant 5, speaking in terms of professional skill development through occupational mentorship,

You have to seek mentorship out for yourself, and then follow-up.

Another participant expounded on how important it is for Black female professionals to take the initiative in learning new skills by way of occupational mentorship, and stated,

They expect more from you, so you have to prove your worth and earn your promotion more than White males.

Theme 4: Mentorship by White males may be a solution for addressing tokenism and preventing affinity contradiction.

Based on the synthesis of participants' responses, White males' occupational mentorship may help prevent tokenism while improving mentorship outcomes contributing to professional development and career advancement. Theme 4 may address the adverse stigma that organizations are only concerned about diversity and inclusion from a perception standpoint alone but rather committed to supporting and engaging their influential White male executives to participate in diversity and inclusion initiatives, such as occupational mentorship targeted at Black female professionals.

Several participants discussed that the majority did not necessarily perpetuate tokenism, but something Blacks have enjoyed and, therefore, have conformed to the lack of diversity and inclusion to prevent other

Black females from career advancement. Participant 10 explained her personal experience and stated,

I have had other Black females praise me for my skill, but then as soon as they see you are about to get promoted, they turn on you. If you have more potential or skillset, then other Black females in your area don't want to see you thrive in your career; and this is mainly due to their fear of losing their positions, or they're being jealous of your potential.

Participant 10 concluded,

Professionals that look like you may not always be willing to sponsor or mentor you.

Participant 2 shared her personal experience on how to address the issue of tokenism and the lack of real diversity it perpetuates and stated,

Sometimes other Blacks can't speak for you due to the corporate political game. But having a well-diversified coalition of mentors and sponsors have helped my career. They don't have to look like me; and more specifically, in this type of environment, you need your White male counterparts speaking on your behalf and to keep them in your corner.

Participant 6 corroborated this sentiment and stated,

You need a board of people to mentor you. My mentor was a German guy that I still speak to today. I need people of all different backgrounds...and people in different places...I have White Jewish mentors, German mentors, African mentors, you name it...But we have connected on both a personal and professional level. These people know me because I was willing to share my authentic self with them without reservation due to color of skin, background, creed, or sexual orientation.

Theme 5: Occupational mentorship provides exposure to high-profile assignments, professional networks, and visibility for penetrating career advancement barriers.

Based on our synthesis of the participants' responses, a lack of exposure to opportunities that allow Black females to drive favorable results on high-profile projects may cost the professional the visibility and experience needed to improve professional competencies and gain promotion into management and other senior-level positions. Commitment by way of integrating high-profile assignments into their occupational mentorship programming may help bring innovative, cutting-edge ideologies and solutions to address critical business needs, and thereby having the organization reap the benefits that diversity and inclusion provide from a business performance perspective. The findings derived from major theme five were that professional exposure through occupational mentorship could help penetrate the glass ceiling. Several participants discussed how accessing senior-level leaders above the glass ceiling could benefit the other side of this professional barrier. One of the primary ways discussed was through professional exposure to high-profile meetings, networks, and assignments. Participant 7 stated,

Your contribution to your team and organization can help to penetrate the glass ceiling. It's no longer about just doing your job, but it's about determining the business need and taking the initiative to drive favorable results, improving processes and methodologies as to how we do business. We assume that it's

gender and race that holds us back, but the main crux of the issue has to do with you getting the attention and gaining exposure to the right people so that they are aware of your contribution to the business—which occupational mentorship can help to provide those opportunities.

Participant 2 also stated,

We have to seek out those that are above us to see what they can impart in us. This is all a part of occupational mentorship. Sometimes that includes high-profile projects that can provide you with the exposure and experience required to rise above the ceiling; and this is what happened for me.

Theme 6: Occupational mentorship provides insight to learning proven strategies for career success when customized to the career goals of the Black female professional.

Based on a synthesis of the participants' responses, learning best practices, protocols, and rules of engagement as it relates to conducting business tactically may mitigate risk in terms of egregious error(s) and missteps transpiring that could have a detrimental impact on the professional's career advancement opportunities. Additionally, the participants shared the importance of having targeted training and job-shadowing opportunities, specifically aligned to their overall career goals. Sharing best practices for success related to tactical processes and procedures may provide consistent and high-quality results aligned to the organization's professional standards. Moreover, such standard operating procedures can be improvised after the mentor's fundamental concepts have been mastered. As such, standard practices for success may be improved more expeditiously when the fundamentals of the business and related process have been garnered.

Occupational mentorship provides insight about learning best practices and proven strategies for career success through targeted job shadowing. Several participants discussed that occupational mentoring provided opportunities for job shadowing. Participant 14 stated,

Job shadowing and knowing how to do a myriad of things is good for your experience and provided a blueprint for success to drive favorable results on major projects having significant visibility throughout the organization; however, job shadowing should be specific and aligned to prepotent career moves to be effective in getting you to that next level in your career. Job shadowing is what I needed to learn proven strategies for success and what I have enjoyed. But because I have a vast knowledge of how to do many things, I have experienced success on projects and related tasks I was unfamiliar with before the opportunity.

Participant 14 also elaborated,

Because I knew how to leverage the strategies for success gained from my mentors, I was always the person approached when down a teammate, or needing to fill-in for a project due to the comfort level I have had with high profile assignments while knowing how to achieve success based on what I learned from job shadowing and observing my mentors.

When participants were not trained with guidance related to heuristics and rule of thumb methodologies

for success towards prepotent career moves, the participants expressed that they lost opportunities to shine in the absence of their superior. For example, participant 14 indicated that although she was trained to do a myriad of tasks on the team, that she was unable to help her boss when he left for paternity leave due to a lack of training that was specific to the next step in her career path—which was his job. Participant 14 stated,

I told my boss that he had never trained me in preparation for his being out of the office. However, he had trained the next person in charge, who when my boss left for his maternity leave, he went to a counterpart that was beneath me to help run processes when he (my boss) left for maternity leave. I became frustrated and communicated my concern that with my being the senior member on the team, that I should have received the opportunity was a young White male in a lower-ranking order and a lower pay grade than mine. His excuse was that I was already overloaded and was not familiar with best practices for their reporting processes and presentations to take on the additional responsibility. I wasn't included or trained as it relates to best practices exercised by my boss, in terms of how he ran his reports that were required when he was out of office. I told him that I felt overlooked, but he said it was never their intent to overlook me, and that he was sorry and should have better communicated and provided the best practices and protocol for the tasks needing to be done during his time out.

The participant also shared that she had another opportunity extended to her where she had spent some time training for. She made sure to engage her mentor for role-specific job shadowing and best practices for success in her current and future roles and was able to get further promoted shortly after. Participant 6 shared the sentiments, and personal lived experiences of Participant 3 and stated,

My mentors have advice about protocol and best practices. I have leveraged my mentors as partners, bouncing ideas and concepts off of them to do things better.

Summary

The findings of this study pertain to the influence of occupational mentorship on the professional development (professional competencies) and career advancement (upward mobility) of Black females working in corporate manufacturing in the Mid-South region of the United States. The participants involved in this study were asked open-ended questions to understand their personal lived experiences regarding the impact of occupational mentorship in their careers in corporate manufacturing. Analysis of the data for this research study identified six significant themes with detailed analysis provided for enhanced insight into the participants' personal lived experiences in this study.

Discussion

Implications for Professional Practice

The findings from this study indicate that Black females value occupational mentorship in corporate manufacturing, especially when provided with high-profile assignments and opportunities to drive favorable results thereby. However, several participants interviewed conveyed the importance of social learning (developing professional competencies while understanding cultural norms and behaviors

through observation) and sponsorship working in tandem, being integrated into occupational mentorship. The participants interviewed shared thematic commonalities that they felt inadequate in terms of competency for C-suite type of positions. Additionally, participants expressed that they were challenged in controlling their anger and/or related responses when feeling overlooked, disrespected, and/or overwhelmed in their jobs. Several of the participants interviewed communicated that social learning can help address issues related to the lack of professional competencies and adjustment to attitude to properly communicate and engage the corporate climate around them. Finally, several interview participants expostulated that partnering with White male counterparts would provide an opportunity to penetrate the Glass Ceiling, therefore, having the opportunity to exhibit competencies and social norms learned by way of occupational mentorship. From a practical perspective, occupational mentorship initiatives in corporate manufacturing may benefit Black females working in the Midsouth region of the United States if coupled with social learning and professional sponsorship by senior management, namely their White male counterparts.

Cultural and Behavioral Assimilation. The literature seems to embrace innovativeness, advanced degrees, and cutting-edge ideologies that female professionals provide, findings reveal that Black female professionals feel pressured to assimilate before they are able to apply cutting edge methodologies and ideologies for solving business problems and driving favorable results for the business. This is inversely related to some extant literature, where Cook & Glass found that female leaders (females in general) are expected to stand out with having advanced degrees and employing innovative methodologies for success—all while Black females are pressured into “playing the game” so as not to stand out, but to gain rapport by assimilating to acceptable organizational norms and leadership behaviors demonstrated by their mentors and predecessors (Smith et al., 2019).

The implication for Black female practitioners is that they (Black females) may need to understand and embrace current operating procedures, while being slow to demonstrate innovativeness until rapport has been established amongst their peers and superiors to gain the rapport and trust that will aid in sponsorship for career advancement. Implications for business is that the awareness of the burden that Black females experience to assimilate may thwart their creativity. Therefore, the organization’s initiatives to create assimilation should be balanced within an incentive for those willing to share and act on their creative thoughts by establishing formal recognition and rewards systems.

Professional Competency and Preparation. Findings from this study have revealed that Black females may be reluctant in taking risks as it relates to assuming senior management opportunities if feelings of professional unreadiness persist. Findings also reveal a difference in cross-lateral roles compared to high-profile and highly visible assignments. Bradford et al. (2017) described how cross-lateral lateral moves provide professional readiness in cross gender and race study. However, Smith et al. (2019) discussed high-profile and highly visible projects as providing human capital investment. The implication of this study and related findings for Black female professionals is that they should avoid lateral moves (role changes equal in power and influence); and that cross-lateral moves do not breed feelings of professional readiness in Black females. However, professional readiness stems from high-profile projects with exposure to talented colleagues and complex business problems. Black females may gain human capital and perceived professional readiness through meaningful business experiences and not multiple roles and related titles—which should be pursued by Black females working in

corporate manufacturing in the Midsouth region of the United States. The implication for business and the organization at large is that a survey prompting feedback from their Black female professionals may provide benefit in ascertaining which skill-sets are perceived as most needed to adequately prepare and fortify professional readiness in Black females seeking to advance into senior level management positions.

Aggressively Pursuing Mentorship and Innovativeness. Study findings indicate that it may be palatable for White females when compared to Black females. Rincon et al. (2017) and Cohen et al. (2018), noted that male bias exists as it relates to females taking an assertive role in pursuing mentorship to push their careers forward. Findings of this study indicated the need for strategic pursuit and organizational support with formal programming to alleviate pressures and misperceptions of Black females desiring to take ownership of their careers by independently pursuing mentorship.

Thus, the implication for practice is that Black female professionals should participate in structurally organized mentoring programs sponsored by the corporation to protect their image, and prevent the perception of the “Angry Black female” to create a buffering affect against micro-aggressive and ambient discrimination, while on their journey towards pursuing professional development and career advancement in corporate manufacturing. The implication for business and the organization at large is that additional training may be required as it relates to diversity inclusion, emotional intelligence and social role stereotypes to raise the awareness of the double-standard at play to improve opportunities for Black females seeking career advancement, but while removing the negative stigma by with diversity training that helps corporate executives recognize when gender role play and related stereotypes are interfering with work relationships and helping behavior by way of occupational mentorship in the workplace.

Tokenism and Affinity Contradiction. Regarding this aspect of Theme 4, the findings from this study reveal that White male sponsorship may counter-act adverse influence or contradiction of black-on-black mentoring relationships or lack thereof. The common theme is that Tokenism is no longer systemic at the organizational level, but at the individual and/or community level where affinity exists specific to Black females and perhaps other minority and/or protected classes in general. Cook and Glass (2018) found that even a single female token in organizational leadership will positively impact effective organizational change and address tokenism—and that a single high-status-female in corporate leadership is enough to bridge the gap between qualified female professionals being promoted to senior-level managerial positions—even in male-dominated industries.

The implication for practice with Black females is that White men may be most willing to help sponsor and mentor them in White-male dominated environments for career advancement, and not other Black females. As such, Black female professionals may bode well relative to professional development and career advancement through mentorship when mentored by senior White male executives. The implication for business and the organization at large is that it should engage, incentivize and recognize diverse mentors, namely White male senior executives, when they participate in mentorship programming to improve their (White male) vested interest.

Professional Visibility Aiding with Penetrating Career Advancement Barriers. Career advancement and barrier penetration may be primarily provided to Black females when exposure to high-profile

projects and networks are targeted and customized, in a manner that supports the professional goals of the mentee. Cohen et al. (2018) found that one of the most eminent prohibiting factors of career advancement for females working in the accounting profession was described as a lack of being exposed to projects and professional networks. Thus, the implication for the Black female professional in practice is that one of the benefits that should be pursued by way of occupational mentorship is exposure to a network of high-powered corporate executives, having the influence required to penetrate career advancement barriers, supporting upward mobility for Black female professionals working in corporate manufacturing. The implication for business and the organization at large is that senior level executives of diverse races, namely White male senior executives, should seek to participate in affinity group meetings and activities, where questions and concerns are addressed regarding professional development, career advancement and occupational mentorship opportunities.

Targeted Roles. Projects and Promotion rates improved when exposure to high profile projects and networks are harnessed as leverage for specific and anticipated outcomes relative to career advancement. Job-shadowing and general cross-training and lateral moves; however, Black females coined as worker Bee and stuck in lateral zones if job-shadowing and lateral moves aren't aligned to a specific career trajectory. The findings of this study also revealed that occupational mentorship programs should be structured in a way that is specific with mentor and mentee's thoughts on career goals to receive customized training suitable for prepotent career moves, supporting professional development and upward mobility within the business environment. Moreover, the mentee's exposure to professional network groups should be customized to those that may be influential to provide opportunities within certain roles, departments and professional disciplines aligned to the interests and skill sets of the mentee.

Interview participants stressed an importance for having the right type of training and network exposure—and that training, job-shadowing experiences and exposure to networks should be targeted and customized to refrain from the worker bee syndrome, resulting in Black female professionals being overlooked for executive level positions where both tactical and strategic experiences were required. The implication for practice is that Black female professionals should pursue occupational mentorship where a targeted set of diverse training experiences, job-shadowing opportunities are professional networks are provided to equip Black female professionals with a specific set of skills, fostering leadership skills and professional competencies that are aligned to their specific career goals.

Additional implications for practice may be that Black female professionals should pursue on the job training, job shadowing and professional networking that is aligned to a specific career progression; and that on-the-job training experiences should be focused on job assignments and professional networks that are not generalized, but highly specific to ensure upward mobility, rather than lateral movement into functional roles.

One of the most eminent implications for practice may be that Black female professionals should avoid being pigeon-holed into functional and administrative busywork to prevent being looked over for promotions. Implications for business and the organization at large may be that direct managers are required to document the career aspirations of their Black female professional subordinates, to assist with a career roadmap and professional development plan for career advancement and mentorship

perhaps required to accomplish their career goals. The career planning may be reviewed during performance assessments cycles, and continually tweaked to meet the specific needs of the professional as they aspire to gain the skills required to facilitate career advancement. Managers may be appraised based on their success in the professional development of their subordinates, specifically those of protected classes such as the Blake female professional.

Limitations

The following/additional limitations exist in this study:

- 1) The qualitative phenomenological approach (research design) is based on perception and lived experiences rather than by survey or numerical data, making results subjective to experiences.
- 2) Lived experiences of participants will only capture those of women of color and not applicable to other races/gender.
- 3) The sample population would only consist of Black females having mentored either formally or informally.
- 4) Research is primarily being analyzed through the lens of social learning theory based on observational learning (direct and/or indirect) and not based on cognitive abilities, and therefore, primarily looking at learning through others and not independently based on knowledge alone.
- 5) Data collection is by way of interview questions, which cannot be quantified for objective facts, but responses will be analyzed for subjective experiences, which requires the unbiased of the instrument (researchers).

One important limitation of this study is participants only include Black professional females within corporate manufacturing in the Midsouth Region of the U.S. This demographic is limited in terms of gender, nationality, and industry due to the scope of this study being specific to Black females working in corporate manufacturing in the Mid-South region of the United States—and therefore, unavoidable. As such, this research study may not be relevant across varying nationalities, industries, and demographic areas of the U.S. When a sample population is small, there is some aspect of underrepresentation that could create bracketing as the researcher analyzes the data.

Another notable limitation of this study is that the 1st author and primary researcher is of a protected class as well, being a Black male. As such, the researcher will need to make certain that Epoche is exercised not to allow personal bias or experience to influence the participants' response or misinterpret findings based on the Black male experience. By ensuring against researcher bias, the research study is a valid document that accurately captures the essential lived experiences of the participants involved.

Future Research

The research conducted in this study was to explore the influence of occupational mentorship on the professional development (professional competencies) and career advancement (upward mobility) of Black females working in corporate manufacturing in the Mid-South region of the United States. Our recommendation for future research would be to analyze the impact of occupational mentorship across multiple ethnicities and regions, using a quantitative approach for an objective view relative to the number of promotions by region due to occupational mentorship. Additionally, other research studies could be designed to measure the skill level through self-rating systems to understand the perceived impact of occupational mentorship on professional development (improved skillset). Conducting research across regions and ethnicities may help determine if the impact of occupational mentorship differ throughout various regions of the United States and/or by ethnicity.

The recommended quantitative approach would quantify the number of interview participants that have been favorably impacted by occupational mentorship based on number of promotions and participants experiencing career advancement and/or professional development. Additionally, the quantitative approach could allow for ratings as to the level of expertise by self-evaluation and ranking to understand perceived self-efficacy (or lack thereof) for those Black females having undergone occupational mentorship in the corporate manufacturing arena in various regions of the United States.

Another recommendation would be to examine the concept helping behavior within specific affinity groups. One of the primary takeaways of this study was related to a social dynamic that creates affinity contradiction, which seems to occur when individuals share affinity in one or more areas, be it race, gender, communities, and more. Where affinities exist, in this case, Black female professionals in the Midsouth region of the United States working in corporate manufacturing, individuals within this peer group may contradict one another in terms of helping behaviors that may support professional development and career development amongst their fellow colleagues.

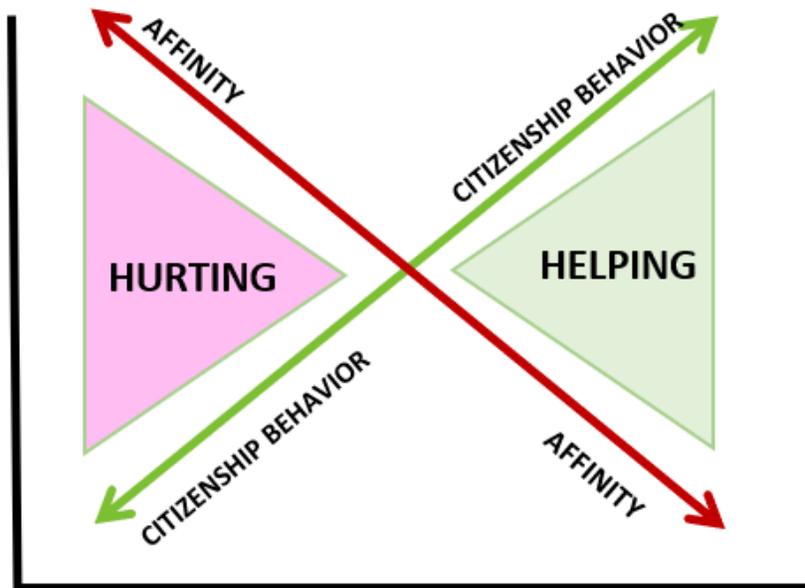
Affinity contradiction theory suggests that non-white token professionals not only seek to prevent dilution of majority, but may seek to cause adverse impact to the career of other non-white professionals where both non-white professionals are contending to maintain or gain senior level executive status in the corporate environment. Affinity contradiction theory (ACT) speculates that as affinity increases in minority people, there is an inverse relationship between personal and professional commonality and citizenship behavior within said groups. Moreover, ACT proposes that where affinity is most prevalent amongst a group of people, the less they are willing to support each other—and may even pursue action to cause adverse impact to their peers to prevent upward mobility of individuals within their shared affinity groups. This phenomenon has been graphically depicted in figure 2 below.

Figure 2 is a graphical depiction that demonstrates the inverse relationship between affinity and helping behaviors, and can be described as the Affinity Contradiction Model. Essentially, when affinity increases within a group of individuals, then helping behaviors may decrease simultaneously and ultimately transition into hurting behavior. Moreover, the graph reflects how helping behavior can transition in hurting behavior, where adverse actions or discussions are engaged in by one party, to cause undue harm

to their opposing party, but only where affinity is shared. This phenomenon may be primarily due to the fear that one party has of being replaced by the contending party, where shared affinity exists.

Figure 2

Affinity Contradiction Theory Model



Affinity contradiction behavior expounds upon tokenism theory, which was originally used in literature by Martin Luther King in his book entitled *Why We Can't Wait*. In this book, King (1964) describes tokenism as a marginal attempt to facilitate the acceptance of black people in both the workplace and US mainstream society at large. Additionally, other token non-whites may be used as leverage to fortify career advancement barriers for the sole purpose of preventing dilution of majority think in corporate America.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations for business practice would be to leverage occupational mentorship for career advancement and professional development; however, while pursuing sponsorship by White male counterparts and undergoing assimilation to the corporate environment by way of social learning. Maintaining partnerships with White male executives may address organized Tokenism and reverse affinity contradiction (ACT) discussed in the previous section. Additionally, for mentees pursuing professional development and career advancement, our recommendation would be to engage in self-investment through occupational mentorship for improvement of tactical skillsets and professional competencies as aligned to the human capital theory. The participants interviewed all conveyed the need for sponsorship by White male counterparts—or those who may not share affinity with the mentee; and

leveraging this to emulate standard protocol as it relates to organizational behavior, social corporate norms and to counteract the adverse impact of tokenism and affinity contradiction. Some other recommendations:

First, having a coalition of sponsors will improve mentorship outcomes related to career advancement—and primarily due to addressing any perceptions of professional incompetence.

Second, participants should learn the art and science of playing the “political game.” Participants noted the importance of learning how to play “the game” through social learning, mirroring corporate social norms and fully assimilating to the corporate environment. Becoming one with the organization, its people, culture, and corporate norms is a primary way to gain influence with peers and superiors while improving your likeability. Successfully emulating social corporate norms and behaviors is achieved through observation, which includes mastering the approach and methodologies used by her mentor to excel in the workplace. Moreover, social learning by way of observation provides benefit to the mentee by learning the interpersonal aspects of the business when dealing with people and aspiring for career advancement.

Third, mentees should pursue occupational mentorship for best practices for success, and guidance on projects to improve knowledge and skillset while approaching a business problem. Having guidance on highly visible projects helps with the mentees' ability to drive favorable results while improving feelings of self-worth, efficacy, and professional competency, leading to productivity in the workplace.

Fourth, minority professionals should seek to understand affinity contradiction and its impact on their working environment. Black female professionals should strive to have a diverse coalition of mentors across multiple nationalities to maintain relevance in diverse corporate environments. By pursuing mentoring relationships with mentors that do not look like them (the mentee), the mentee may successfully address the “crab mentality” with organized tokenism. The mentee may also experience an adverse impact on their career imposed by those they share the highest affinity. As such, a diverse coalition of mentors based on ethnicity will potentially address the issue of affinity contradiction, where professionals refuse to participate in citizenship behavior—which exists when the highest level of affinity is shared amongst a community of professionals. The micro aggression that occurs related to affinity contradiction may fail due to diverse mentoring relationships being pursued by the mentee.

Finally, organizations may benefit from this study by integrating sponsorship, social learning, and human capital metrics into their occupational mentorship programs and initiatives. Essentially, organizations can seek to do the following: 1) Assessments can be created to measure and improve the sponsorship opportunities that exist within or outside of their mentorship relationship to ensure that the mentee is partnered with a tenured professional that will champion for them in the workplace, both publicly and privately, 2) Leverage mentorship to discuss social norms, organizational behavior/climate and ways to assimilate the mentee in terms of professional dress attire, communication, teamwork and to other unwritten rules related to organizational culture and social protocol; 3) Utilize occupational mentorship to provide Black females opportunities to spearhead highly visible projects where guidance is provided as to best practices for success to improve the mentee's knowledge base, experience, skillset(s), performance and the overall result of the project based on the success factors thereof .

Conclusion

The findings derived from this phenomenological study contribute to the body of knowledge related to the impact of occupational mentorship on the professional development (professional competencies) and career advancement (upward mobility) of Black females working in corporate manufacturing in the Mid-South region of the United States. Additionally, the findings derived from this study may guide organizations as it relates to the effectiveness of their occupational mentorship programs. Where such programs do not exist, the findings of this study may guide at the time of, or prior to, implementation. Findings reveal that occupational mentorship should be infused with concepts related to sponsorship, social behavior, and high-profile projects. By leveraging the key takeaways and concepts potentially required for successful implementation of occupational mentorship programs, the impact of said programs may favorably impact the organization by improving citizenship behavior and driving favorable performance for the enterprise.

Regarding the professional (mentee), the findings of this research may provide benefit to the Black female professional working in corporate manufacturing in the Midsouth Region of the United States. The primary themes derived from this research study is that occupational mentorship should be supported by sponsorship, corporate social behavior, and high-profile projects that provide visibility to the professional. The participants postulated that sponsorship provides support through senior executive leadership championing for the mentee, either behind the scenes or covertly, to support their career advancement and professional development process.

The second theme related to career advancement was that occupational mentorship should focus on teaching social behavior that allows the mentee to assimilate to the corporate culture. The last most significant theme was that occupational mentorship, sponsorship, and assimilating to corporate norms should be combined with favorable performance on high profile projects that allows the mentee to gain influence, rapport, and the attention required for improvement in career advancement and professional development (improved skillset).

The most important take-away from this study is how occupational mentorship improves social learning and human capital. The participants shared that they were able to experience career advancement and professional development through occupational mentorship/sponsorship contingent that they learned the social, behavioral norms of the organization (SLT) and willing to conform accordingly while gaining knowledge, experience and driving favorable results on high profile assignments (HCT). However, the most prominent theme was understanding people and winning friendship, and gaining influence with their willingness to fit in.

The resounding themes derived from our findings were that we are people working in an organization that is ran by people; and when the mentee has learned the social behavior of the corporate environment—and willing to conform—it's then, that leadership will seek out opportunities for you to drive favorable results by way of spearheading high profile projects, while championing for you behind the scenes to facilitate upward mobility within the organization. Occupational mentorship has a favorable impact on the career advancement and professional development of Black female professionals working in the Midsouth Region of the United States by helping her to develop sound interpersonal skills. If the Black female professional is to thrive in a male-dominated culture, such as corporate manufacturing, she must be willing

to undergo occupational mentorship that are diverse in nature. Having a diverse coalition of mentors will help address career advancement barriers related to Tokenism and affinity contradiction. Moreover, occupational mentorship is a great tool that will aid in the Black female professional's opportunities to forge healthy professional relationships with their colleagues, while simultaneously demonstrating authenticity in getting to know them, not just professionally, but personally.

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