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The Other Gender: An Examination of African American Female Students' Career Aspirations

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Abstract: When compared to their White counterparts, African American women are often underrepresented in positions of power, authority, and influence (e.g., doctors, mathematicians, engineers, chemists, government officials, professors, lawyers, etc.), filling a small percentage of high-profile staff positions. From a social-cognitive career theory lens, the literature suggests that many environmental factors and conditions may influence African American female students' career aspirations. In this article, it is posited that environmental factors such as racial and gender induced societal ideologies and constructs, role models, a networking structure and foundation, and school and family variables may influence the career aspirations of these young girls, contributing to the disproportionate number of African American women in high-level often male-dominated professions.

Key words: African American female students, career aspirations, social-cognitive career theory

1. Introduction

The scenario is common in many high-level institutions across the United States, the image of one or two African American female women in affluent positions among several Anglo bodies. Regardless of the career field, (i.e., medical, law, finance, education, science, business, politics, etc.), when compared to their White counterparts African American women are often underrepresented in positions of power, authority, and influence, filling a small percentage of high-profile staff positions (Yeagley, Subich, & Tokar, 2010). Do these few African American female women continue to reside in such a scenario due to engrained affirmative action and diversity measures, or do these women sustain these positions because of their knowledge and skills? The former response, sought to promote social and economic equality, is initially considered when one solitary woman of color is viewed in a room of White, upper or middle-class professionals. What is even more disconcerting is decades after President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 speech, which outlined the principals of affirmative action, men, specifically White men, still predominately hold these affluent positions. With this persistent truth, where and how do African American women, young and old, fit into the prevailing historical equation that excludes the presence of the "other" race and gender?

In a response to the gender and racial inequality existing within many American institutions, President Johnson introduced affirmative action during a speech at Howard University (DC), and later signed an Executive

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Order authorizing the implementation of the law within the public sector (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2004). From its initiation, the objective of affirmative action was to ameliorate decades of social inequality, injustices, and institutionalized racism and sexism, which resulted in the underrepresentation of African Americans and women within multiple professions. Affirmative action specifically sought to aid those, all men and women of color as well as White women, whom were placed at a disadvantaged due to past acts of discrimination (Hall, 2004).

Although affirmative action measures were first publicly defined by President Johnson, the idea of affirmative action dates back to 1935 with the enactment of the National Labor Relations Act (1935), which was also known as the Wagner Act. Unlike the more current affirmative action act, the Wagner Act protected nonunionized White males during the period of industrialization from discriminative employers (Hall, 2004). Although these two acts, the Wagner Act (1935) and the affirmative action act (1965), parallel one another in regards to purpose and intent, both acts generated contrasting view points. The affirmative action act from its commencement faced great opposition and backlash. Specifically, White male conservatives claimed that it violated equal protection under the law, promoted reverse discrimination and preferential treatment, produced a victim mentality, and casted doubt upon the competency of the individual (Hall, 2004; Steinburgler, Press, & Dias, 2006).

Resistance to the affirmative action act reaffirmed underlying racist views that reside within the American society. Racism, a festering and malignant sore that permeates throughout the American body, reveals that when an act seeks to provide protection for middle-class White men from their wealthy White employers, the value of such an act is immediately recognized and seen as necessary for the betterment of society, but when a similar act seeks to render the same assistance to people of color and women, it is vehemently opposed and deemed as counterproductive (Hall, 2004). True regression lies in the flawed implementation of affirmative action due to traditional ideology that caters to the mantra of "business as usual". Rather than increasing the number of African American women in the workforce, these women were overlooked as the issue of race took precedence within the affirmative action act. Ironically, the language used to outline affirmative action measures suggests that African American women should have been the greatest beneficiaries of this act due to their dual possession of race and gender, but as African American men became the face of affirmative action and White women profited the most from its policies, African American women seemed to disappear completely, significantly disadvantaged by the joint role of race and gender.

To be Black and a woman, to possess a dual consciousness, defined by both race and gender causes one to examine and interact with the world differently (Lorde, 1984). Whether carefully treading on hostile territory or strategically waiting for opportunities to unfold, the knowledge that one is not solely judged by the color of one's skin but also deemed the inferior sex, produces numerous challenges that most within society are spared. Challenges that shape experiences, determine life's paths and destinations, and solidify one's status within society. African American women, due to their double existence must contend with racism and sexism, two modes of discrimination. As one single body experiences both modes, race and gender become synonymous, two sides of one coin, unable to exist in isolation. Race and gender, two features deformed by imposed societal views that one cannot choose nor change, serves as a disadvantage and restricts her from reaching her full potential, cloaks her, concealing her authentic identity. If gender or race is eliminated, the experience is altered. It is the existence of both features, simultaneously, that make the African American female experience unlike any other.

Even with sex and race as supposed hindrances, some African American women manage to prevail, taking on what are considered male-appropriate professions. They, outnumbered in settings where the only familiar face that

resembles their own is among the cleaning staff, obtain and sustain these upper echelon positions. Even though African American women success stories exist, depicting triumph in the face of numerous impediments, there are even more narratives of complacency, defeat, and an inability to progress. For instance, Powell (1990) confirms that a high percentage of African American college students major in low-income areas such as the social sciences, the humanities, and education. Also, according to the U.S. Department of Labor between the years of 1992–2001, African American unemployment was double that of Whites (Hall, 2004). In 2000, the unemployment rate of college educated African American students was higher than White college educated students, and during the years of 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000, the average weekly income for Whites exceeded that of African Americans (Hall, 2004). With these facts considered, focused solely on race, the inclusion of gender causes an even greater employment and wage disparity.

The success stories of African American women breaking into positions of power, authority, and influence are acknowledged and are sources of hope, but as indicated by common observation, these stories are few and far between. Conventional wisdom reveals that because of the glass ceiling (Mckenna, 2007) women are absent or excluded from male-dominated, high-status occupations. In fact, a large percent of women today, including African American women, work in gender-specific occupations such as teaching, nursing, social work, office work, or librarianship (as cited in Murrell, Frieze, & Frost, 1991). According to the International Labour Office's (ILO) *Global Employment Trends for Women* 2004, there has only been a slight increase in the number of professional positions held by women (Miller, 2004). A study conducted by Corporate Women Director International shows that in the world's 200 largest companies, women merely make up 10% of corporate director positions and that 25% of these companies have no women among their director ranks (Miller, 2004). Furthermore in the area of business, women represent 15.7% of office corporate positions in Fortune 500 companies and only make up 3% of CEO positions (as cited in Yeagley et al., 2010). Lastly in politics, there are only fourteen female senators, sixty-seven women out of 435 House of Representatives; twenty-three percent of the nation's 7,382 state legislators are women, and women comprise only sixteen percent of the nation's governors (as cited in McKenna, 2007).

The limited number of women, including African American women, in high-level positions suggests that young African American female students eager to impact the world are limited or confined to certain career options. Rather than believing that the possibilities are endless, these young girls must fight for absolute success or accept absolute mediocrity, mediocrity in the sense that the norm depicts women of color in low or middle-class occupations. When considering the disparity that exist among African American women that break into high income, male-dominated professions and those that do not, one must ask why this disproportionality exists. The answer to this question cannot be express by one simple statement. Similar to the lives of African American women, the answer entails multiple environmental factors, all intertwined, formulating a complex result.

Employing asocial-cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) lens, this paper seeks to discuss the external factors that affect the career aspirations of African American female students. According to Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994, 1996, 2000), social-cognitive career theory, derived from Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, focuses on the relationship between various variables (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals), and how these variables interact with other features of a person and his or her environment (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, social support, and barriers). Examining the latter, environmental factors such as racial and gender induced societal ideologies and constructs, role models, a networking structure and

foundation, and school and family variables are highlighted, suggesting that career aspirations are often revised and rethought based on the availability of environmental resources and opportunities. It is postulated that if African American female students had greater access to certain environmental variables, they may broaden their career aspirations and be better able to negotiate their vocational path, increasing the number of African American women in high-level positions.

2. Literature Review

The existence of institutionalized barriers calls one to ask what it means to be an African American female student within the educational system. To answer this question, two additional questions must be addressed: (1) what does it mean to be an African American woman in America and (2) what are the social constructs synonymous with these women? While there are politically correct terms that define African American women (strong, beautiful, mother), words such as "slut, ho, matriarch, ugly, sexual, aggressive, [loud], demanding, fat, unattractive, [and often single teenage] mothers" paint a more accurate depiction of society's view of a marginalized group of women (Brock, 2010, p. 44). In addition, racial stereotypes, positive and negative define African American women's role within the American society.

Not limited to one definite idea or perception of African American women, stereotypes describe the joint relationship of race and gender, ranging from the plausible to fiction. Stereotypes, although misleading, are often accepted because many believe such descriptions hold some truth. African American women, according to popular and accepted views, are seen as indolent, deceitful, and quick-tempered (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdel, 1998). This shared conscious or unconscious belief possessed by many within society affects how African American women are seen and understood. The notion that these detrimental and severe thoughts are associated with African American women may reveal why occupational progression is a slow-moving process. The descriptions described above, deemed as truth, depict African American women as inadequately suited for such positions of power, authority, and influence. It stands to reason that these stereotypes significantly hinder African American women because why would any employer appoint a high-ranking position to an emotionally unstable, angry, and irrational African American woman when a White male or female can supposedly execute job-related tasks without expressing these detrimental qualities.

2.1 Race

The barriers that accompany race are a constant obstacle for African American women. Within the American society, the complete opposite of an African American woman is supposedly a White man. By sheer presence of White skin, White men are legitimate entities within many professional arenas due to enduring racist ideology, while African American women are seen as outsiders, not belonging. As observed within society, "this 'fitting in' is one of the most important benefit of White skin, and the resulting license is the currency of access to all things better in society" (as cited in Johnson-Bailey, 2008, p. 320). For centuries, White men have belonged to a racial and gender group that has dominated many influential professions. Their lot is full and plenty, possessing vast privileges and opportunities. This social difference between African American women and White men is the power of Whiteness and White privilege (McIntosh, 1988). Unaware or unwilling to acknowledge White privilege, many Whites proclaim that racist views no longer hinder the professional growth of African American women, and that colorblindness has instead replaced how people view one another. This claim is of course challenged by

the disparities that continue to separate and define Black and White roles. Racism, which is present, even in the 21st century, propels stereotypical thinking, assigning superior roles to Whites and subordinate roles to African Americans.

Considering that African American women must contend with negative socially constructed stereotypes, one must ask who or what assigned these negative qualities to being Black and a woman in America? Being in the American society means being exposed to numerous images of what it means to be an African American woman. Robinson and Biran (2006) declare that historically the media has portrayed African Americans as violent, drug addicted criminals on welfare. These depictions are strengthened by numerous media outlets such as movies, books, radio messages, comic strips, television programs, cartoons, advertisements and more that present an inaccurate portrait of African Americans. Those unable to interact with African American women on a daily basis may accept these false media portrayals, adversely effecting how they interact with African American women.

Though a positive societal perception of African American women is paramount as African American female students develop their career aspirations and subsequently attempt to gain entry into certain professions, perception of self is even more important in regards to whether one even tries to socially elevate herself. With all these negative images, stereotypes, and expectations, one's view of self may become distorted. Greater exposure to negative images makes it difficult to develop a solid self-image that opposes societal stereotypes. By accepting society's characterization of African American women, feelings of self-worth and insecurities about ability inevitability arise. Questions are posed such as, "Am I good enough; do I belong; and can I compete knowing that I am expected to fail?" Unfortunately, these questions are developed out of implanted, external ideas of inferiority and from a weak understanding of one's true racial identity. As one begins the climb towards success, one must also attempt to alter stereotypical thinking by challenging or opposing accepted ideology. Such a challenge, although plagued with uncertainty and distress as one is labeled inferior due to race, can ultimately lead to a clearer understanding of self.

In rejecting negative stereotypes and uncovering an accurate image of self, Ladson-Billings (2009) identifies three erroneous stereotypes associated with African American womanhood: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. The Mammy persona is characterized as a callous woman that is neglectful of her own family, but caters to the needs of Whites (Ladson-Billing, 2009; Steinburgler, Press, & Dias, 2006). African American women as Jezebels are seen as overtly sexual, using their sexual nature to yield control over men. The last stereotype and often the most detrimental within the workforce is that of Sapphire, the strong and angry Black woman. This persona portrays all African American women as bitchy, bossy, angry, and onerous beings, driven by an inner strength. As evident by the media and African American women's ability to overcome cultural and racial adversities, African American women are strong, but their strength is the same strength within every human being. Unlike the erroneous descriptions above, African American women are far more dynamic individuals, not possessing a vast and unnatural strength but able to persevere even though impediments may arise.

Much like the issue of strength, the issue of anger is equally flawed. African American women are not perpetually angry. Unfortunately, the constant depiction of African American women in this negative light calls society to accept such an illustration. To be a strong and angry Black woman is to live in isolation, those of different racial and gender groups often keeping their distance and rendering little to no support. The reoccurring media depictions of these stereotypes engrave a lasting impression of African American women in the public's mind, which consequently influences society's interactions and opinions of these women. Lacking proper

guidance and assistance, African American women are too, regardless of level of strength and anger, susceptible to mediocre occupational aspirations and stagnation.

2.2 Gender

Besides racially charged environmental factors that limit African American female students' professional pursuits, being a member of the "weaker" sex in a patriarchal society places additional constraints. Traditional gender roles and ideologies associate women's relentless pursuit of a prominent career path as a perverse behavior. Because of this social perception, Grevious (1985) reveals that due to sex-role restrictions, African American women continue to pursue low-level occupations when compared to their male peers (as cited in Hamilton, 1996). This act is strengthened by the socialization of young girls. Women were and are encouraged to conform to female-appropriate roles while discouraged to pursue male-designated roles and behaviors (Fleming, 1982). Women are taught their gender roles at an early age; a woman's role is submissive, nurturing, and void of authority and power, which may explain why many young women choose stereotypical feminine professions geared towards creativity and caring (Francis, 2002). Furthermore, womanhood in the American culture depicts women's role in creating a concrete family structure. Women have traditionally resided in the domestic sphere, taking care of home, husband, and child. When women do pursue careers, they are often forced to choose between family and career, and if women choose both, it is expected that one area will suffer (Yeagley et al., 2010).

Moreover, because women are viewed as inferior to or not equal to men in many areas (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008), women are often assigned roles that prevent them from challenging themselves, and subsequently reaching their full potential. It is noted that once women enter the workforce, they are often restricted in the area of advancement (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998). Essentially, gender-specific occupations mean a waste of female potential as women pursue lower-level professions with lesser pay. Instead of becoming doctors and superintendents of school districts, women become nurses and teachers. Instead of becoming CEOs of companies, lawyers, and government officials, women work as secretaries. The latter professions, though commendable in their own rights, are gender assigned, significantly limiting vocational opportunities to women, especially African American women.

2.3 Role Models

With these predominate, underlying racial and gender thoughts associated with women, how do African American female students, lacking exposure to positive African American female identity, rationalize success? In order to broaden African American female students' career aspirations, circumvent feelings of inferiority, and assist these girls in accepting the notion of educational and professional possibilities, certain environmental factors must be present. One resource African American female students need is African American female role models because "only an African American woman could understand the complex intersection of race and gender" (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 71). African American female students specifically need guidance, intentionally embedded knowledge, and exposure to realistic Black female images and tangible figures who will oppose accepted social constructs of African American women. Unfortunately, [African American female students] have the most limited access to ethnic role models and mentors like themselves" (as cited in Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 68).

Instead, African American female students must observe African Americans women in the areas of entertainment, sports, and crime (Robinson & Brian, 2006). Why should these media portrayal of African American women serve as role models, especially when success is dependent upon a strong sense of self? It stands to reason that using African American women as role models to introduce and disperse valuable knowledge

about multiple career options may alter African American female students' own ideas about their future career aspirations. With exposure to more positive African American female role models, sharing their same cultural background, gender, and physical features, African American female students may begin to challenge society's expectation of African American women entering into certain professions and excelling only up to a certain level. Moreover, rather than accept inaccurate media portrayals of African American women, the presence of a positive, African American female role model may provide a new perspective, a new narrative. Perhaps then, African American female students can truly understand their identity, an identity rooted in self-worth and determination. Gaining such knowledge about one's identity is instrumental when navigating through the sometimes hostile professional ladder. Along the path, one's abilities and intellect may be questioned, but one's resolve cannot be shaken with a firm understanding of one's accurate identity.

Although African American female students need positive African American female role models that can create a strong networking structure and foundation, often there are a limited number of African American women in professions of power, authority, and influence. Unfortunately, many African American female students do not know or have access to a wide range of professionals that share their cultural background. This lack of professional knowledge and guidance hinders African American female students from eventually obtaining access to higher-levels positions. Their limited networking community obstructs their career aspirations because networking often determines the types of opportunities one is afforded.

Unlike African American female students leaving higher education and entering the workforce, many White male students often have a larger networking base. Whether due to family connections, social and economic ties, or the numerous privileges that accompany White skin, White males students gain access to information about how one should proceed, which is evident by the disproportionate number of White men that hold powerful roles within society (Johnson-Bailey, 1998). In order to professionally complete, African American female students must actively seek out numerous mentors, regardless of the mentor's race and gender. The most important quality that a mentor must possess is that he or she is knowledgeable and wishes to render assistance. Although race and gender are important when acquiring a mentor, when a mentor has an African American female student's best interest in mind, assistance in the form of vocational guidance can be provided by any racial or gender group.

2.4 School Factors

An additional component that determines the career aspirations of African American female students is one's schooling experiences. The quality of the educational experiences a student is exposed to as he or she obtains an education can alter one's career path and desire to succeed (Lent et al., 2000). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] (2010), in the areas of mathematics, science, reading, and writing, African American students, including young African American female students, typically receive lower marks when compared to either their White male and female counterparts. The national achievement gap that exists between these two racial groups must decrease if African American female students are to broaden their career aspirations. In order to adjust this common academic trend, the low achievement of African American students when compared to white students, drastic and innovative measures must be implemented, and the end goal should be a balancing of the playing field so that regardless of one's race or gender, education (what is taught and learned) does not substantially vary, assisting rather than hindering vocational aspirations.

In specifically examining African American female students in the education system, Rollock (2007) argues that there is a silence surrounding African American female students' schooling experience and achievement. This

statement rings true when one considers the disproportionate amount of literature examining African American female students and African American male students. The abundant volumes of literature on African American male students when compared to African American female students suggests that too often African American female students are overlooked, and are deemed as doing well when compared to their male counterparts (Rollock, 2007). This misleading oversight by educators, coupled with prevalent societal constructs fails to assist African American female students in need of guidance and direction. In fact, studies suggest that females may be at a higher risk than males due to multiple factors: pregnancy, suicide, gangs, poverty, or failing at school and subsequently at life (Reis & Diaz, 1999). It stands to reason that if greater attention is not given to African American female students then the number of those that succeed academically, economically, and socially will gradually decline.

Of an African American female student's schooling experiences, the most important experience is the relationship that develops between the African American female student and her teacher. Unfortunately, this relationship may not foster educational growth or a deep-rooted desire to achieve. Why is the relationship between African American female students and their teachers weakened? The answer may reside within social constructs. Prevailing social constructs categorizing African American female students, prevent a nurturing atmosphere of academic possibilities while perpetuating educational neglect. Among all districts, there exists a disproportionate student teacher ratio in the area of race. One only needs to walk into a school to observe that White female teachers dominate the education field (Goodman & Hilton, 2010). Although the students demographics of many urban schools are becoming more diverse, the faculty and staff of urban schools still remains predominately White (as cited in Ford, 2002, p. 165; Shipp, 1999). While race does not determine whether an educator can empower and educate a student, race does play a role in how that student may perceive him or herself within educational institutions. If African American female students do not see themselves represented within an educational setting, then they may develop a narrow understanding of their role in education and in turn society.

It is not enough to have role models and mentors outside of the education system; an African American female student's school experience must expose her to motivated and self-confident women of color that possess a visible passion for knowledge. Such a role model would assist African American female students in selecting a profession and then negotiating certain settings in order to secure their desired career path. This mentor would teachAfrican American female students survival skills, such as how to maintain a level professionalism while rejecting negative stereotypes that have been traditionally used to negatively characterize African American women (Patton & Harper, 2003). Through this exposure and interaction, African American female students will inherently make certain social connections and may aspire to emulate the positive African American female figure.

Kincheloe (2010) comments on how some White urban female teachers may possess unconscious biases and views concerning the plight of urban African American students. It is also suggested that faculty members of many schools may interact with African American students based on negative stereotypes that are held by the general public (Robinson & Biran, 2006). No matter how one may protest and denounce such biased thinking, it does exist. Such imposed ideology unconsciously affects one's thinking, actions, and relationship with African American female students. Educators must learn to combat theses persistent and negative media portrayal of African American women when educating young African American female students. This unconscious mindset, if not continually acknowledged, could affect a teacher's academic expectation of African American female students, which will consequently affect how these girls are educated.

For instance, African American female students are often chastised due to subtle behavioral issues in the classroom. Unlike their male counterparts, punishment does not necessarily mean a change in educational placement. Rather, what is considered a behavioral problem causes many African American female students to experience educational neglect. The discipline issued to African American female student results from them supposedly challenging authority and being loud and not ladylike (as cited in Muhammad & Dixson, 2008). Culturally engrained behavior such as being outspoken, assertive, confident, independent, and challenging weaknesses within the system causes some educators to ignore African American female students, declaring that such behavior does not align with the educational culture. A negative response to African American female students' behavior is developed from varying cultural backgrounds and beliefs. While an African American female student may think she is showing an interest and passion for learning by repeatedly vocalizing her strong and opposing viewpoints, some educators may deem her behavior problematic, encouraging less frequent input and commentary.

Another area causing great tension is the maturity level of African American female students. Many teachers are guilty of "adultify" African American female students by misinterpreting their confidence, assertiveness, and academic eagerness as "overly mature" behaviors that "normal" students should and do not exhibit (as cited in Muhammad & Dixson, 2008). Differences in cultural beliefs that determine adequate behavior in an educational setting will often conflict, but that does not prove that one behavior is more accepted or suitable than another. Rather than silencing these young girls, stripping them of their voice, a quality education, and an ambitious nature needed to excel academically and professionally, educators must nurture African American female students and foster a desire for greater aspirations outside of the classroom. In order to increase the number of African American women in high-level professional fields, educators must recognize that stifling academic growth and exploration in the early years of young adulthood may cause African American female students to reject or avoid areas they believe will oppose their cultural beliefs.

2.5 Family Factors

As stated previously, many environmental factors influence African American female students' career aspirations and result in a small percentage of these girls obtaining prestigious positions and roles that their White male counterparts dominate. Of those factors, family variables (the presence or absence of family barriers) heavily influence whether an African American female student's career aspirations align with mainstream society's belief of appropriate racial and gender professions or whether she defies the norm, deviating towards higher career aspirations. Among family variables, parents play a significant role in the career paths of African American female students. A number of parental elements dictate African American female students' vocational choice. Parental expectations, support, and involvement along with the parents' own career choices and socioeconomic status all contribute to a well-threaded tapestry, which ultimately promotes or hinders African American female students' professional aspirations.

Mau and Bikos (2000) argue that apparent parental expectations have a positive relationship with students' aspirations. If parents' expectations are high in the area of academics and subsequently future aspirations, then young African American female students will often strive for success in order to please their parents. It is vital that parents encourage African American female students to meet and surpass accepted criteria. Implanting certain expectations at a young age will ensure that African American female students will firmly understand what is achievable, even though society may present a different ideology. The absence of understood, concrete

expectations will weaken African American female students resolve to elevate themselves, unable to aspire to greater achievements. Set parental expectations symbolize parents' belief that their child can and will succeed. Parents become a central support group, knowing their child's weaknesses, strengths, and capabilities, and reaffirming African American female students' confidence in their own abilities.

Alongside parental expectations is parental involvement and support. Parental involvement is often dictated by parents' level of efficacy, "the belief in one's ability to positively influence educational outcomes for one's own children" (Field-Smith, 2009, p. 163). Although it may not be possible for all parents to consistently play active roles in their child's educational and professional pursuits, involvement and continual support from parents does strengthen African American female students' overall level of academic success by increasing cognitive and social skills at an early age (Prater, 2002), which will in turn strengthen African American female students' tenacity to pursue various career possibilities outside of their assigned racial and gender role. Parental involvement in the lives of African American female students also provides a necessary role model. Though role models outside the family structure are equally important considering that "women mentor themselves by watching others" (Johnson-Bailey, 1998, p. 90), parents often are the most influential figures in their children's lives. As parents participate more in African American female students' academic and professional pursuits, African American female students will naturally wish to emulate the same positive qualities possessed by their parental role models, much like all children consciously or unconsciously display behaviors that resemble their own parents.

The career choice and socioeconomic status of parents greatly influences the career aspirations of African Americans female students (as cited in Mau & Bikos, 2000; Guttman, 1991). Specifically, mothers play a great role in the career aspirations of their daughters (Basow & Howe, 1980). Burlew's study (1982) further reveals that African American women who selected male-dominated, high waged occupations were more likely to have educated mothers that worked outside of the home (as cited in Murrell et al., 1991). In addition, the socioeconomic status of African American female students' parents may either serve as a benefit or a hindrance to the development of their children's career aspirations. If a financial barrier or economic need exists, career aspirations may alter because of these environmental conditions (Lent et al., 1996). Due to financial restraints, African American female students may find it more difficult to obtain a quality education, limiting their skill set and abilities. Furthermore, economic limitations may negatively affect African American female students' exposure and access to their desired career choice. Johnson-Bailey (1998) argues that "the more one is similar to those in power the more one is likely to know the rules of the culture of power. Therefore, [African American female students] from working-class backgrounds are less likely to have access to knowledge of the unspoken rules for career development and advancement" (p. 91).

Although financial restraints and environmental conditions may limit African American female students' parents from providing ample opportunities to assist their girls in acquiring the rules of the culture of power, parents wishing to promote high career aspirations in their young girls must find innovative and creative ways to provide opportunities for African American female students so that they may explore multiple academic and career possibilities. Ensuring that African American female students have a strong knowledge base foundation about possible career choices will help them become aware of their various options, broadening their career aspiration, and assisting them in better negotiate the competitive and at times exclusive career field.

3. Conclusion

As suggested, when considering the career aspirations of African American female students, many environmental factors and conditions, more than can be discussed in this article due to length, contribute to why a great percentage of these women are unable to obtain positions of power, authority, and influence. If issues such as traditional societal ideology, negative social constructs, appropriate role models, a concrete networking structure, and family and school variables are not adequately addressed, young African American female students will continue to face dire circumstances as they attempt to elevate themselves socially and economically. Rather than challenging society's traditional views of women or negative view of African American women, [African American women] may become "victims of self-hate, [displaying] feelings of inferiority" (cited in Robinson & Brian, 2006, p. 49). The effects of such emotions may lead to long-term psychological issues, preventing young African American female students from understanding their true identity and reaching their occupational goals. Moreover, school, a significant part of many African American female students' lives, may cause these young girls to ask why they should persist. Why should they continue to pursue high educational and career aspirations when their own teachers attempt to silence them, associating them with negative societal stereotypes? If African American female students are limited academically or if restrictions are placed on them, they will begin to internalize these social impediments, believing that success is not achievable due to conditioned ideas of failure. This constant neglect of young African American female students by educators and society will do little to decrease the numbers of African American women in low-level professions.

To combat this occurrence and other career barriers, African American female students need to possess a high level of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as "people's judgment of their own capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (as cited in Lent et al., 1994, p. 83). The possession of this belief is vital as young African American female students navigate through the often taxing educational and occupational terrain. The obtainment of self-efficacy ensures an adaptive nature, displaying resiliency amidst stress and failure (Bandura, 2001). An African American female student's level of efficacy is strongly dependent upon her support group, consisting of educators, family members, and various other influential role models. In promoting high self-efficacy among African American female students, educators must first change their views of African American female students. It is imperative that educators acknowledge how societal views indirectly influence their classroom instruction. With this awareness, educators can then work to foster a better educational environment and create a productive and encouraging relationship with African American female students. In order to promote drastic change in the career aspirations of African American female students, teachers must change their mindset towards these students, a mindset that shifts away from limited possibilities to endless capabilities. Once educators' change their views, knowledge must then be poured into these empty vessels. Adequately assisting African American female students will call for schools and educators to render substantial support and for parental expectations and involvement to increase. The partnership of school and home, both providing needed guidance in the form of role models, will empower and expose African American female students to skills, knowledge, and possibilities that were once unknown.

Being an African American female student in America is not an easy task, and being an African American woman carries even greater challenges. As an African American woman, one must accept that many non-Blacks view the dual nature of race and gender as a constant hindrance. For better or worse, both features shape one's life experiences. Although African American women are often defined by their skin and sex, they cannot buy into

society's depiction of what it means to be Black and a woman. They must instead write their own narratives, narratives that scream defiance, that erode inaccurate social stereotypes, and that vehemently reject positions as second-class citizens.

Imagine a child, a little Black girl with the whole world at her fingertips. Then image that same little Black girl being told that she cannot become an astronaut, a professor, a physicist, even president because before she was even born, society placed subtle and blatant obstacles in her path simply due to her race and gender. Why focus attention on the career aspirations of African American female students? Because African American women are capable, willing, and are ready to make an enduring impact on the world. Because "it is important for me to get [those little Black girls]…while they're still young as opposed to older, so they don't have to go through this" (Brock, 2005, p. 53).

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