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**Modernizing the Approach to Mentoring for
African American Women in the Federal
Government**

**POSTER
PRESENTATION**

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Author

Fatimah D. Pierce, PhD

Graduate

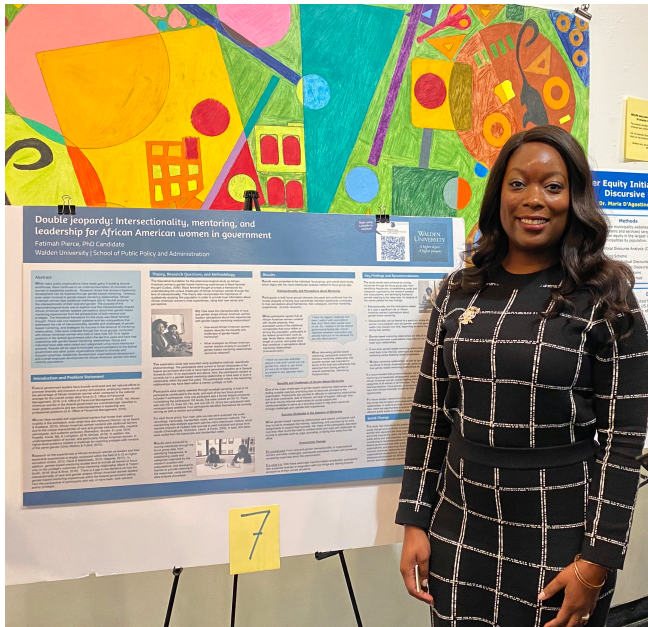
School of Public Policy & Administration

Founder and Principal

Hickman Rose Strategies

Email: pierce@hickmanrose.com

[in piercefd](#) [@drpierceceo](#)



Abstract

The federal government has implemented laws, policies, and programs to protect and promote women and minorities. African American women, having both gender and racial disadvantages, are not prototypical of either women or minorities, in general, which presents the unique challenge of “double jeopardy.” Framed by Black feminist thought, this phenomenological study explored how intersectionality shaped African American women’s perceptions about gender-based mentoring. Data were collected through focus groups. Results centered on the (a) significance of intersectionality, (b) difficulty with mentoring relationships, and (c) organizational barriers. Recommendations had implications for social change regarding inclusion and equity, and employee and organizational development, particularly for this intersectional population.

Doctoral Capstone

Problem

Although the US federal government has undertaken initiatives to improve diversity and mentoring, problems for marginalized individuals still exist. The underrepresentation of women and minorities in leadership presents a challenge to fostering meaningful gender-based mentoring relationships.

African American women face additional challenges as employees and leaders due to the intersectionality of their race and gender.

Research with these individuals has been largely conducted within the field of K-12 or higher education (Grant, 2012; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Heppner, 2017).

In addition, gender-based mentoring studies tend to include all women or focus only on the protégé's outcomes of the mentoring relationship (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Brue & Brue, 2016).

There is a gap in the literature on how the intersectionality of race and gender shapes African American women leaders' gender-based mentoring experiences within the federal government setting, from the perspective of participants who are, or have been, mentors and/or protégés.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to explore how the intersectionality of race and gender shapes perceptions about gender-based mentoring experiences for African American women leaders in the federal government. The gender-based mentoring relationships were formal or informal, and the perceptions were captured from the perspectives of both mentors and protégés.

Significance

As the world's largest employer, the US federal government has an obligation to foster the growth and development of all employees, and one way to foster that growth is through gender-based mentoring. Yet, there are significant barriers to finding and maintaining such relationships for African American women.

Studying this phenomenon may yield recommendations to the federal government and other public organizations regarding diversity and inclusion practices, leadership development, organizational development, and overall employee development for African American women and other minority individuals.

Discovering the unique challenges of these individuals and learning about their needs directly from them through qualitative inquiry, could help organizational leaders become more aware and inclusive.

The findings may also prompt African American women to use their own voices by sharing experiences and knowledge through gender-based mentoring and serving in advisory or change-making roles within their organizations.

Theory or Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was **Black feminist thought** (Collins, 2009).

Its main tenet is that African American women face additional challenges in leadership positions due to the intersectionality of race and gender or double oppression.

Relevant Scholarship

Racism and sexism simultaneously create a dilemma of double jeopardy or gendered racism that leads to cumulative consequences (Remedios, Snyder, & Lizza, 2016; Lewis, Williams, Peppers, & Gadson, 2017).

African American women have less access to the formal and informal professional networks that are vital to building their careers (McGee, 2018).

Instead of a “glass ceiling,” these women’s experiences are compared to a “concrete wall”—a colloquial description of the totality of systemic exclusion, lack of resources, gendered racism, negative stereotypes, stressors, and other barriers that African American women face (Linnabery, Stuhlmacher, & Towler, 2014; McGee, 2018).

The two main goals or benefits of mentoring for protégés are career development and psychosocial support (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011; Bailey, Voyles, Finkelstein, & Matarazzo, 2016; Hudson, 2016; Early, 2017).

Because women face societal and workplace barriers, they are less likely to find mentors, regardless of race, and they usually receive less mentoring than men (Welsh & Diehn, 2018).

When contending with issues stemming from intersectionality, African American women’s uniqueness from other groups creates an understanding or bond between them, and that sense of community compels them to overcome challenges in society and in the workplace (Johnson-Bailey, Lasker-Scott, & Sealey-Ruiz, 2015). However, challenges with developing mentoring relationships hinders this ability to bond and overcome these barriers in the workplace.

Research Question

How does the intersectionality of race and gender shape African American women leaders' perceptions about their experiences with gender-based mentoring relationships?

Participants

Through utilization-focused sampling, participants were initially recruited through LinkedIn. Then, the snowball method was used to recruit additional participants.

10 African American women met the inclusion criteria of

- being civilian employees of the federal government in the Washington, DC, area, in a General Schedule (GS) 12 position and above.
- in a gender-based mentoring relationship, as either a mentor, protégé, or both.

Procedures

Data were collected through two, in-person focus groups.

The 14 focus group questions were developed from relevant research studies and addressed intersectionality, mentoring experiences, benefits and challenges of mentoring relationships, and success strategies.

Analysis

The data were coded through micro-interlocutor analysis (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009), which allowed for group and individual thematic analyses.

Key Findings

- 1) Intersectionality, and the implications related to it, play a significant role on African American women's perceptions about gender-based mentoring.
- 2) Intersectionality can be likened to a spectrum, where African American women move between race and gender, and their gender-based mentoring needs may change over time, depending on where they fall at any point during their careers.
- 3) Gender-based mentoring relationships are difficult to find and maintain, and federal government organizations most often do not have programs that foster such relationships.
- 4) If and when gender-based mentoring relationships are developed, they are most likely to be informal, catering to the social emotional aspect of mentoring versus fostering career progression.
- 5) Multiple mentoring relationships, as well as sponsorship, may be more beneficial to African American women, particularly for career advancement, than gender-based mentoring relationships alone.

There were two overarching themes that provided additional meaning to the responses:

- 1) *it's complicated*, described the complexities embedded into the phenomenon.
- 2) *it is what it is*, pulled together perceptions about feeling resigned to the challenges and complexities.

Interpretation

Findings were consistent with Black feminist thought and research on gendered racism (Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Remedios, Snyder, & Lizza, 2016; Lewis, Williams, Peppers, & Gadson, 2017).

Participants also confirmed their experiences with the concrete wall (Linnabery, Stuhlmacher, & Towler, 2014; McGee, 2018).

Another key finding of the study centered on the challenge of entering and maintaining gender-based or any kind of mentoring relationships because of exclusion from networks, lack of support, and limited opportunities (Wynen, op de Beeck, & Ruebens, 2015; Welsh & Diehn, 2018).

Limitations

Transferability. Other populations impacted by intersectionality, such as Asian American women or Hispanic women were not included. Findings may be limited in their transferability to other groups.

Career level. Perceptions from participants in lower grades (below GS 12), or those who are in the Senior Executive Service, were not explored.

Contributing factors. This study only considered the role of intersectionality and not other factors that may have contributed to participants' perceptions.

Anonymity. Focus groups lacked anonymity. Participants could have been reluctant to provide honest and complete information.

Breadth. This study included participants from across federal government. Specific policies, practices, programs, or employees were not gained.

Recommendations

Recommendations to improve practice:

Listen. Conduct non-scientific focus groups, interviews, or surveys with African American women to allow them to express their challenges with current approaches and contribute to new programs and policies.

Evaluate. Measure the effectiveness of formal and informal mentoring programs, and publish results at the agency level, with trend analyses, disaggregated by minority groups and subgroups.

Commit. Maintain deliberate efforts to foster meaningful mentoring relationships, particularly for African American women, as it has been confirmed that they are excluded from networks and systems.

Research recommendations include, narrowing the study setting, using semi-structured interviews, including participants from lower grade levels, and exploring other complexities.

Social Change Implications

During the focus group interview, participants were asked, “What can the federal government do to better support African American women?” This directly informed the recommendations to improve practice. Based on their suggestions, African American women would have better access to gender-based mentoring, and less overall challenges in the workplace if:

- Their ideas and recommendations about how to support these individuals were considered.
- There are target approaches to mentoring programs, instead of broad attempts at achieving diversity.
- Their experiences with gendered racism and the concrete wall were validated and addressed.

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