And Some of Us Are Braver: Women Employed in the Ivory Tower

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Objectives

Purpose of Workshop:

◦ To report the findings from qualitative study on stress and coping among African American women.
◦ To elicit your reactions to the study and the questions the findings raise for you.

Why study African American women’s experiences of stress and coping?
Workplace Stress for Women

- Gender Role Bias
- Work/Family Balance
- Sandwich Generation
Conceptualization of Stress

- There is no consistent definition of stress that everyone accepts, according to the American Institute of Stress (http://www.stress.org 2009).

- Smith and Carlson (1997) define stress as “an event, situation, or combination of situations in which demands are perceived as exceeding one’s capacity to comfortably respond” (p. 232).

- Stress is defined as the problems, hardships or threats that challenge the adaptive capacities of people (Pearlin, et. al, 1981).
African American Women: Stress and Coping

- The stressors that African American women encounter and their appraisal of these stressors reflect a distinct history, socio-cultural experience and position in society (Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008).

- Their stressors differ in magnitude and content from that of white women, white men and African American men.
A Multidimensional Conceptualization of Stress (Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008)

- Race-related stressors
- Gender-related stressors
- Socioeconomic-related stressors
- Generic stress
Research Questions

- What do Black women perceive to be the major stressors in their lives?

- How do Black women perceive the effects of these stressors on their daily life?

- How do Black women cope with these stressors and what are the consequences?
Research Methods

- Research Design
  - Qualitative study
    - Narrative data
    - Experience-near
  - Grounded Theory
    - Inductive approach
    - Theory discovered, developed, and verified
    - Use of constant comparison in the analysis
Sampling and Recruitment Methods

- **Sampling Method**: Convenience sampling was used to identify the site and to recruit potential participants.

- **Recruitment of subjects**:
  - posting flyers and announcements in student centers, college offices, social club newsletters, and church bulletins.
  - Verbal descriptions of the study were presented at social club meetings and church meetings and emails were forwarded to student groups as well.
Data Collection

- Method: Focus Groups
  - Two in Knoxville, TN
  - Two in Boston, MA
  - One in Northampton, MA
  - One in New York
Groups consisted of 8 to 12 women
Used a structured interview guide & demographic questionnaire
Length of Focus groups was 1 and 2 hours
Sample Characteristics

- N= 41
- The majority were over 40 years of age
- Less than a third were married; 17% were single
- Educational levels consisted of:
  - 14.6% had some college;
  - 26% had bachelor’s degrees;
  - 39% had master’s degrees;
  - nearly 10% had doctorates or professional degrees (law or medicine)
Workplace Stress

- Being ignored and harassed
- Exclusions from work cliques
- Exclusions from work cliques

- Racism and Sexism
- Perceived Bias in the Hiring Process
- Isolation
- Undervaluation of Research
- Unrealistic Expectations
- Lack of or Insufficient Mentorship
- Campus Climate

Demands

- Work
- Family
- Financial Things

- “It’s competing interests within the work itself but you’ve almost sort of put aside things that may be as important to you but you don’t have a chance to really address them”.

- “The thing that is most overwhelming is managing a staff, it’s having to anticipate everybody else’s needs and being proactive in what needs to be done”.
“I started on the bottom and worked my way up. There was an opening, I applied for the position and did not get it. The other person, of course, was white. She did not have near as much education. But she got the job. I went in the restroom and I cried. This was a good lesson to learn, even if you work and follow the rules, racism will keep you down.”
“There’s the stress of work and everything you have to do and then there are the more indirect things we’ve talked about. Not being recognized, being discriminated against, being treated in a way that’s not right. That’s more stressful because you tend to internalize them…”
Not Being Known

“I think a stressor and not just yesterday but everyday is that I work with people that just don’t get me.”
“Noticing that you’re the only African person, African American or of African descent is very stressful because that adds on an extra – I don’t know how to put [it], you have to show yourself that you’re worthy or prove it. I feel like I’m in a fishbowl and in a pressure cooker. We’re [black women] the burden bearers, is it because of what people expect, or the position we have allowed them to place us in? It’s a lonely feeling.”

“I feel like I live in two worlds. I can very much get along and do the whole thing when I have to, in certain settings, because unfortunately, we do have to, but I’m clear about the fact that I have to play different roles. And I can do that.”
Isolation

“And I swear. It's not a lie. They're quite comfortable with all the other white faces that come in and out all the time, but let a black person come and sit in my office and it's like -- I can go, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, without seeing a black person, and I can say that because on Monday, there's a black woman in one project, and there's a black woman in our project on Tuesday, so at least I'm guaranteed that I'll see one, if they actually show up. So, if anybody of color comes sit in my office, everybody wants to know, why they're there. What is it? I swear.”
So who provides social support for African American women that allows them to manage daily life stressors?

- Spouses
- Female family members
- Female friends
- Colleagues
- Church members
Black Women as Supports

“…talking with other Black women that I feel close to. If you don’t do that on a regular basis, know that there are others out there dealing with similar things and talk with each other about how to deal with it then it really could do you in, but it’s those sort of insidious, underlying forms of stress that are worse than everyday paperwork but that’s always going to be there whether you’re here or not. I think connections with other Black female friends, that has been so important to me.”
Managing Stress

- **Letting go**
  
  “I just kind of push things to the side a lot. Because I feel like what I’m going through, I’m sure someone else is going through a lot worse, so like why complain about it”.

- **Controlling one’s reactions to stress**
  
  “I felt like I couldn’t control anything that stressed me out, but I could control how I react to it, so that kept things down to a minimum. Certain things that happen in life---being struck with cancer, or being terminated, laid off, those are things I couldn’t help. They are very stressful, but they were things I couldn’t help. To combat that, it would be, how I would react to that, rather than, it happened and let it destroy me”.
Managing Stress

- **Pacing stress**
  - “I try to better organize my life in terms of work”.

- **Putting it in someone else’s hands**
  - “My foundation has been becoming a part, an active member of our church”.

Coping

- Taking care of self (Exercise, Massages, etc.)
- Meditation
- Getting spiritually focused
- Taking time to reflect
- Avoidance
- Reading, watching movies, seeing friends
- Therapy
- Problem solving and taking action
Summary of the Findings

- Family, caretaker roles, finances, racism and intra-group racism in the workplace were sources of stress.

- Spouses, female family members, Black female friends, colleagues, church members and cultural messages were social supports.

- Letting go, controlling one’s reactions to stress, pacing stress, putting it in someone else’s hands were forms of coping.
Implications

- Developing social support systems within and outside of academic settings
- Identifying and using mentors
- Caring for self
- Establishing realistic goals
- Prioritizing
- Managing one’s time
- Prepare to negotiate
Diversity in Full Time Faculty Members Fall, 2009

- Full Time Faculty Total: 712,919
- Female: 43.0%
- Asian: 8.4%
- African American: 5.6%
- Hispanic: 3.9%
- American Indian: 0.5%