Self-Determination and Black Women Leaders

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Abstract

This article presents a phenomenological study of the leadership experiences of Black women through the lens of self-determination theory. Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests people can grow and change when their needs for competence, connection, and autonomy are fulfilled; once those needs are met, people become self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The researcher designed this qualitative study on the conceptual framework of self-determination theory to understand the success factors associated with Black women. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve Black women leaders living or working in Virginia. Three main themes emerged during data analysis corresponding with self-determination theory: (1) relatedness/support, (2) autonomy/authenticity, and (3) competence/confidence.

Keywords: Black women leaders, self-determination theory, motivation

Introduction

Black women have been negatively portrayed as servants, enslaved people, or house workers for hundreds of years. More recent media has portrayed Black women as angry, confrontational, and sexual objects (Kamesha et al., 2020). As a result, Black women are frequently fighting to erase historical imagery while being portrayed as subordinate to White hegemony (Kamesha et al., 2020). Historically, Black women have been largely absent from the rungs of executive leadership (Seo et al., 2017). While a select few Black women have advanced to executive leadership or C-suite positions in recent years, the representation is menial, with more than 10 million Black women in the U.S. workforce (Catalyst, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Although leadership positions for Black women have been challenging to secure, a select few are entering the executive levels in some organizations.

Understanding what drives Black women to persist in pursuing leadership positions despite encountering barriers may assist aspiring women leaders in developing a career strategy (Beckett, 2020). In addition, understanding the motivating factors for Black women can help organizations create a culture fostering and sustaining cultural diversity in leadership positions. Organizations are challenged to increase diversity in leadership roles to more closely mirror the population's changing demographics (Seo et al., 2017). Abundant research points to labor shortages and increased competition for employees among developed countries (Beckett, 2020; Gobin, 2020; Seo et al., 2017). Recruiting, promoting, and retaining a minority workforce is a business challenge of the 21st century as social pressures demand action (Catalyst, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to explore the self-determination of Black women leaders. The researcher designed the qualitative, phenomenological study to understand motivating factors tied to the success of Black women leaders. Deci and Ryan (1985) opine success and engagement connect to relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The research question served as a guide to uncovering meaning in how Black women leaders describe the journey to leadership using the framework of self-determination theory. Black women face numerous barriers to achieving promotion to leadership positions (Gobin, 2020). Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-determination theory asserts the three main drivers of motivation are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The authors suggest people are more intrinsically motivated when they control their choices and impact outcomes.

Self Determination

Wigfield and Koenka (2020) note motivation is not static but rather dynamic and negotiated with and through experience and context. Hierarchical relationships continue to matter in motivation, but they are a nuanced construct in that behavior relates to a perceived notion of value which is variable. More recently, acknowledgment has been given on the need to better understand how motivation occurs with diverse, underserved populations.

Motivation theorists recognize the need for an intersectional approach to motivation. Despite the acknowledgment of a need for research on sociocultural influences on motivation, research remains limited. Systemic research on diversity and motivation has not occurred. Quite specifically, a discussion has not occurred around critical experiences dealing with racism and discrimination and the

impact on motivation. Scholars assert racism and discrimination are the central influence on minority group members. Consequently, the experience and motivation of marginalized groups are fundamentally different from their White counterparts.

Ryan and Deci (1985) assert cultural universality across the three basic needs of Self-determination theory. Magson et al. conducted a study on Australian indigenous people across different occupations to test SDT applicability across cultures (2022). Indigenous people are disadvantaged on all socio-economic scales. The authors found a strong correlation between the need for relatedness with increased job satisfaction and greater resilience in the workplace.

Self Determination theory claims behavior and social norms associated with a certain culture might be internally or externally regulated. Some authors have defined culture as an ethnic identity. Individuals perceive themselves as belonging or identifying with a group based on their cultural identity (Lynch, 2020). When culture is externally regulated, an individual may act in ways due to feelings of pressure or coercion to adhere to a norm, such as when Black women refer to having to blend in (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Lynch, 2020). Similarly, when cultural behaviors are internally regulated, individuals report higher levels of overall well-being. SDT asserts internalization is a dynamic, continuous process influenced by the social environment (Lynch, 2020).

Method

This qualitative study explored self-determination in the lived experiences of Black women leaders in Virginia. All research participants met the criteria of being Black women leaders living or working in Virginia. This study adds to the extant research on self-determination in the leadership experiences of Black women. The following research question guided the study: RQ1: How do Black women leaders describe their experiences with self-determination when faced with barriers during the leadership journey?

Participants

A qualitative research method was used to allow the emergence of new concepts through open-ended questions (Patton, 2014). Twelve participants were selected who identified as Black women working in a manager level or higher position and living or working in Virginia. Participants were over the age of 21. The researcher confirmed data redundancy upon hearing repetitive comments and validating a lack of new themes by analyzing the participant responses manually and with Nvivo software (J.W. Creswell & J.D Creswell, 2017; Lowe et al., 2018).

Procedures

The researcher has a moral and ethical obligation to protect the rights of each study participant. Therefore, to ensure consideration is given to protecting the privacy of participants from beginning to end. The researcher received research approval from The University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation in this study was voluntary. The participant's identity remained confidential by substituting first and last name with a key, known as pseudo-anonymizing (Syed et al., 2021). Invitations were emailed to Black women leaders to invite them to participate in the study. Upon confirming participant eligibility and receiving a signed participant consent form, the researcher conducted teleconferenced interviews. Participants did not receive any compensation for participation.

Results

The study's objective was to understand how Black women leaders described their experiences with self-determination during the leadership journey. The study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological design (J.W. Creswell & J.D Creswell, 2017). Data was collected by interviewing participants using videoconference technology. As suggested by J.W. Creswell and J.D Creswell (2017), participants meeting the study's criteria were identified using purposeful sampling. Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (1985) provided the conceptual framework for the study. The researcher coded each participant's transcript both manually and systematically using Nvivo qualitative software. Three main themes emerged from the participants' transcripts.

Discussion

Thematic analysis of the interview responses identified three main themes to help answer the research question: (1) relatedness/ support; (2) autonomy/authenticity; (3) competence/confidence. The research revealed the participant's responses agreed with the literature reviewed within the study and are well suited for additional research to understand more about the Black women leader's experience.

Relatedness/support emerged early as a dominant theme as participants described those who had helped them in their career, confidence, or development. Every study participant voiced the importance of having a support network. Many participants expressed a diverse network of people who provided influence, feedback, or sponsorship. Networking, peer support, faith, and mentoring have been established as viable methods to increase career development and well-being (Brambilla & Assor, 2020; Randel et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Randel et al. (2021) suggested mentoring relationships as a bridge to support career growth among African Americans. The suggestions from the participant group endorsed the concept of ensuring opportunities for mentorship for aspiring Black women leaders. One participant was adamant about the influence

of networking and proactively seeking out mentors. While another participant confirmed that female leaders of black descent should build their own board of directors.

Mentorship from White males was common among the study participants. Participants 9 and 12 confirmed the support of White male allies was instrumental early in their careers. Randel et al. (2021) discussed the significant career impact attributed to sponsorship from White males. Indeed, Black employees with sponsorship are 65% more likely to achieve promotions than those without sponsorship. Participant 9 attested, "sponsors can speak on your behalf and market your skills even when you are absent." Employees with mentors and sponsors report higher engagement and satisfaction at work (Hewlett & Lhezie, 2022; Sidorenko, 2019). The responses from the participants are in agreement with the research findings on the positive impact of relationships, networks, mentorship, and sponsorship (Brambilla & Assor, 2020; Hewlett & Lhezie, 2022; Randel et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Sidorenko, 2019).

Support also came from faith, prayer, and religion for the study participants. Participant 1 highlighted the support of prayer and god's help in her journey. Whereas participant 12 said, "God put me in the positions he wanted me in." Zhang et al. (2021) wrote of the robust system of support faith provides for Black women. Sandro (2021) agreed church provides a sense of comfort. Stephens (2020) confirmed grandmothers are often the spiritual leaders in African American families, passing their religious teachings to their children and grandchildren. The Church and all that comes with it has been found to positively impact human capital development confirming learning happens in a social context (Stephens, 2020). The second participant corroborated the church's profound impact on her life and recalled family rituals led by her grandmother.

In summary, support does not conform to one size fits all. Supportive networks and relationships can be found in affinity groups, peer networks, mentorships, or within the church. Organizations that are committed to diversity and inclusion efforts seem to be making headway in helping Black women feel a sense of belonging. Participant 2 shared a new sense of empowerment to speak up after the leadership team announced support for social justice issues, Black Lives Matter and fostering an environment of inclusion. Finding and feeling a sense of connection and relatedness is the glue that helps Black women leaders feel a sense of belonging and increased career progression opportunities. Self Determination Theory confirms when an individual feels a sense of connection, that individual will feel increased levels of fulfillment (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The theme of autonomy/authenticity arose as participants

reflected on the need to feel in control of their paths, the desire to be entrepreneurs and to reject the force to blend in and dilute their Blackness. Participant 9 wanted to be in a leadership position to make decisions and have more control over outcomes. Another participant noted that being in control was non-negotiable due to her strong willpower to be a leader and not a follower. All participants commented on the importance of showing up authentically. Prior researchers have confirmed the need for individuals to be true to themselves. Feeling external pressure to conform diminishes feelings of fulfillment. Authors contend an environment supportive of autonomy promotes job satisfaction (Jungert et al., 2021; Slemp et al., 2018).

Autonomy support enables free choices, personal initiative, and competence. Self-governed support encourages cultural and ethnic authenticity and embraces diversity. An autonomy-supportive environment does not attempt to thwart individualism, silence voices, or discourage creativity (Jungert et al., 2021; Slemp et al., 2018). According to Lynch (2020), when individuals are able to internalize one's culture, there is a higher level of satisfaction for basic psychological needs. The results of the data confirm Rengers et al. (2019) assertion where employees unable to act authentically reported low levels of satisfaction and a sense of belonging.

The women in this study described experiences with discrimination, intersectionality, micro-aggressions, and self-doubt. Participants agreed there is pressure, sometimes self-inflicted, to work harder and outperform others to prove themselves. All of the study participants experienced barriers of one form or another. However, the barriers did not present as immovable, impenetrable objects. Instead, they were hurdles to overcome, duck under, or skirt around.

The participants noted a mindset change in response to COVID-19. The pandemic spurred the women to reconsider their priorities. Eleven of the twelve respondents shared that work-life balance was more of a priority, along with a focus on their family. Eleven of the twelve respondents were either working from home or on a hybrid schedule. All eleven participants indicated work flexibility had become a requirement for any place where they worked. Several examples of social injustice in 2020 prompted executives to speak out and confirm a commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Building and supporting an inclusive climate is critical for organizations to thrive as the U.S. working population shifts to be more diverse (Poole et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2017). The results of this study agree with Poole et al. (2021) and Seo et al. (2017), the current workforce requires environments supportive of diversity. Inegbedion et al. (2020) assert diversity is now a business priority

and strategic goal (Cox & Lancefield, 2021; Sidorenko, 2019).

Conclusion

This phenomenological study was concerned with understanding the lived experiences of Black women leaders in Virginia. Twelve women who met the study criteria participated in semi-structured interviews. Each participant shared details about their lived experiences. The participant data aligns with self-determination theory's claim that when basic psychological needs are met, an individual will experience higher levels of well-being and become self-determined.

When marginalized groups can identify with others in leadership positions, it increases their sense of well-being (Rengers et al., 2019). Microaggressions, racism, and discrimination result in emotional distress and limit the victim's ability to achieve optimum health (Travis & Thorpe-Moscon, 2018). Increasing the number of diverse leaders reduces the risk of racism and discrimination. Researchers have called out the need for all areas of the workforce to have representation from ethnic minority groups. Providing an entryway to leadership for Black women may allow the women to prosper financially and wholistically (Travis & Thorpe-Moscon, 2018).

Authenticity matters to marginalized groups. When an individual is forced to change who they are, blend in, and suppress their authenticity, it can result in emotional distress, identity confusion, feelings of low self-worth, and isolation. Creating a culture of inclusion satisfies one's basic psychological needs and enhances feelings of well-being (Inegbedion et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2019; Sidorenko, 2019). Diversity is multi-faceted; thus, inclusion must be broadly applicable. The workforce is changing, and organizations must respond. By 2050, the racial and ethnic composition will be unrecognizable as ethnicities blend (Sidorenko, 2019). The U.S. population is beginning a metamorphosis to resemble an intertwining of diverse people with different experiences. Paiuc (2021) asserts that ethnically diverse companies are 35 percent more likely to perform better than organizations with a homogeneous workforce. As more and more organizations grapple with increasing workplace diversity, care must be taken to ensure authentic inclusion versus forced assimilation takes place (Jacobs & Hemingway, 2022). The participant 's responses in this study tightly align with self-determination theory.

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