

Chapter 7

Life Context Model, Intersectionality, and Black Feminist Epistemology: Women Managers in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the life context model and the intersectionality and Black feminist epistemologies. Using two studies conducted in a South African context, it examines how these three theories can be employed to explore the challenges that a Black female manager in South Africa faces. The chapter also briefly outlines the underpinnings of the theories and gives an overview of the South African context that pertains to Indian and African women. The authors provide insights from the studies they have carried out and outline the similarities and differences between the three theoretical approaches which they identified based on their research. The results obtained indicate that the use of these three theoretical approaches and the subsequent analysis of the data gathered can be a powerful method for reaching an understanding of contexts. Some recommendations are made regarding using the relevant theoretical approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

The voices of black African women are silent in most scholarly research (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Davis, 1981; Holvino, 2010; Hooks, 2000). In particular, black African feminist scholars struggle to have their voices heard within the African context. In South Africa, debates among feminists gained momentum in the early 1990s, shortly before the democratization of the country. These debates centered on gender, race and social class (De la Rey, 1997; Mama, 2011). A pattern similar to that of the American feminist movement emerged, and the question was asked whether white and black women in organizations in South Africa experienced the same forms of subjugation (Mama, 2011).

Existing literature indicates that the lives of black African female managers in organizations, unlike the lives of their white counterparts, are complicated by multifaceted factors that extend beyond organizational issues (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Studies conducted on the experiences of black African female managers on the African continent have focused on organizational factors such as policies and procedures (Amidu & Abor, 2006; Chovwen, 2007), racism, lack of management training (Booyesen, 2001), exclusion from male networks and mentors (Chovwen, 2007), and work-life balance issues that impede career advancement (Chovwen, 2007; Kargwell, 2008). Cultural elements, such as women's sexuality (Chepp, 2015), their inferior social status (Omar & Ogenyi, 2004), ethnic beliefs discouraging the education of women and their working in male teams and occupying higher-level management posts have also been focused on in management studies (Carrim, 2019; Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). However, there are many gaps in the research conducted on the African continent regarding the career progress of black African female managers, which could be ascribed to African researchers' use of Western perspectives to examine the experiences of female managers in African workplaces. More research has to be undertaken in African organizations focusing on cultural-ethnic beliefs and socio-historical-political environments related to local conditions that impede women's managerial progress. Studies using life-story approaches to explore the ways black African female managers navigate their careers are also lacking.

Therefore, the purpose of the authors of this chapter is to consider multiple ways to understand the complexity of black African female managers' experiences. In this chapter, three recognized frameworks that scholars have used in empirical work are compared and contrasted, and the way each framework illuminates key features of the black African female's management experience is illustrated. The research can serve as an example to compare the frameworks and highlight both their strengths and limitations. It is believed that the combined use of these three frameworks can offer scholars a new way to understand the deep influences of systemic oppression as well as of the perpetuation of inequality through everyday experiences. The aim of this chapter is to provide future scholars with an integrated set of tools and perspectives on which to draw as they continue to give voice to the black African female manager. The three frameworks presented in this chapter are the life context model, intersectionality, and black feminist epistemology (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Davis, 1981; Holvino, 2010; Hooks, 2000). The authors selected these three frameworks (details of which are given later in the chapter) as they could aptly unpack the experiences of the participants in the study.

Intersectionality and black feminist epistemology are theoretical approaches that researchers use extensively in research relating to black women's workplace experiences, especially in Western countries (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Davis, 1981; Holvino, 2010; Hooks, 2000; McCall, 2005). However, only four South African studies on black¹ women in the workplace made use of black feminist epistemology (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Mama, 2011; Nadar, 2014), one made use of both black feminism and intersectionality (Senne, 2013), and another one made use of the life context model and intersectionality

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