

CAREER DEVELOPMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF CHALLENGES FOR THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE

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Abstract

Historically all men and women living in the United States had career goals defined by the White American culture; men worked outside of the home and women took care of the family. The white male held privilege over every population, including the African-American male. This privilege allowed for choosing a career of interest, higher salaries, and opportunities for advancement within career development. The African-American male did not share these privileges and experienced greater difficulty with vocational success due to limited options and an oppressive culture. This paper will define career development, the problems that exist today for the African-American male, and career counselor multicultural perspectives.

Many young people dream of what they ‘will be when they grow up.’ This is a fulfilled dream for some, but not for everyone. Pursuing the process of career development can be an exciting time of self-exploration, discovery of talents and skills. This process is generally an expectation for the White culture, but this is not necessarily a consideration for the African-American male. According to the National Association of Career Development (2003):

Career development is the total constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic, and chance factors that combine to influence the nature and significance of work in the total lifespan of any given individual.

The career counselor must view individuals as multidimensional. It is within this dynamic that employment opportunities suited to the needs of each person, are explored.

How do career development concepts and perceptions begin? From an early age children’s perception of self and the world is greatly influenced by their environment. Despite the diligence of parents providing emotionally healthy homes, children are not immune from negative affects of racism. For the African-American male, these negative experiences are accumulative, and each encounter with racism and prejudice eventually erodes positive self-esteem. The young male learns through the lens of the dominant white culture that sociopolitical systems such as school, laws and corporate America, are based on the ideals of white privilege (Langelier, Lecture notes, 2009).

What are some of the challenges facing this population? Historically African-American men have held positions that were inferior to their abilities. The white dominated American culture depicted this population as being intellectually inferior; therefore, the career choices imposed on them had little to do with intelligence, but rather were more labor intensive and demeaning. Some examples of these jobs were, railroad workers, gravediggers, and dish washers. Throughout the years, African-American males

have climbed the career ladder to include jobs within corporate America. Despite this climb, this population has not made enormous gains in career success. Problems of stereotyping, racial profiling, and prejudice still exist.

According to Chima and Wharton (1999):

Individual discriminatory conduct and deliberately discriminatory actions by consciously prejudiced individuals often are hidden and appear unintentional in the workplace (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1981). For example, personnel officers, whose stereotyped beliefs about African-Americans contribute to their hiring African-Americans for low-level and low-paying jobs exclusively, ignoring their potential experience or qualifications for higher level jobs.

This suggests African-American males with advanced education, experience, and skills, will be challenged by career prejudice during the interviewing stage. Racism and oppression that is perpetuated throughout the child's life, through the media, racial issues in schools, early employment experiences, and lack of social supports, limits the opportunities for success for the African-American male. These challenges alone may make the interest in career choices and dreams of career advancement nearly impossible. The notion that this population has opportunities to advance up the corporate ladder is unfounded. As the male seeks career choices, how will this population succeed when prospective employers have preconceived limit of their abilities? Until racism ceases to exist, the career development for this population is greatly limited.

According to Chima and Wharton (1999):

“Discrimination, though practiced by individuals, is often reinforced by the well established rules, policies, and practices of organizations. Once employed, discrimination at the organizational level results in advancement difficulties for African-Americans.”

Since multicultural understanding and tolerance has increased, African-American males may be able to gain employment of choice; however, this will not guarantee advancement, higher pay, and prestige. Eroding self-esteem and lack of social supports, limits available resources and recourses for unfair practices.

According to Dyer (2007):

African-American men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white males, and black males who work in comparable jobs earn only 75 percent of what white men earn. Half of black men in their 20s were jobless in 2004, up from 46 percent in 2000.

With these statistics and white privilege still predominant, what chance does the African-American male have for success in his career? How many men do not pursue desired career choices because they realize their dreams cannot be fulfilled? Why would some men persevere in trying to obtain what is seemingly impossible? Thus, it is imperative for a career counselor who is working with this population to process these and other issues that are problematic for the client. Further, education of career development with African-American males must begin early in life. Guidance through the career development process needs to include the education of affective management of racial issues, and

availability of community and legal resources. Community support groups run by proactive successful African-American males would serve as excellent role models for this population.

For those who have successfully surpassed racial challenges, this does not mean the end of racism and the promotion of racial equality. Most African-American men will be a minority within the workplace. In knowing this, how can these men concentrate specifically on their job, and not be emotionally distracted by real or perceived racial tensions or prejudice? Since these issues have been apparent for their life span, it is reasonable to assume that there will be a continuation of monocultural beliefs.

According to Fiero (2009):

Fitting in – or the perceived ability to fit in – is a major consideration in hiring decisions. But it doesn't end with the obvious. On a deeper level, fitting in can also mean upholding someone else's agenda. Sometimes black men are hired because they will be less of a threat for advancement (i.e., less likely to take someone's job), and less expensive because they tend to lack executive opportunities, and thus executive experience for competitive executive pay, or because they make a positive statement about a company's "commitment" to a diverse workforce.

Despite the idea of political correctness and culturally sensitivity, these suggestions have grave consequences for African-American males. This concept proposes hiring is a token gesture to fulfill a racial based quota. It means if this person is hired, the corporation has little to consider in terms of advancement in pay and power for this employee. It infers no matter how hard this person works, level of dedication and commitment to the company, his work will not be recognized in the same way as his white counterpart. The on-going discrimination may take the form of verbal innuendoes or as severe as threats to the male's safety (Chima & Wharton, 1999). "Such environment causes low productivity, increased accidents, increases rate of turnover, absenteeism, and contributes to increased abuse of alcohol and other drugs by some employees as a coping means" (Chima & Wharton, 1999).

With the many challenges faced by the African-American male, career development counselors play a vital role in helping this population to become successful in all domains. The role of change agent is essential to guide males through the process of choosing a career, defining goals, and support plans for achievement.

A primary focus for the career counselor is to be aware of his or her own cultural identity, bias, prejudices, as well as being educated on the African-American culture. This must include concepts such as, gender roles, family expectations, religious practices, communication styles, and oppositions facing these men. The career counselor should also process any concerns of the client about counselor to client gender or racial issues (i.e. white female counselor working with African-American male client). If issues present, these must be processed with the client as they arise; the earlier these are dealt with affectively, the greater the likelihood of building a safe and trusting counselor-client relationship. As a cultural consideration, there may be resistance for the African-American male to seek career counseling; therefore, the trusting relationship between client and counselor is imperative (VIP Counseling, 2001).

Once the relationship feels safe and well established, the career counselor may work with males to develop goals for the desired career. Questionnaires, discussion and on-line research may be used to decide what career choices are available. According to Utah Valley University (2011):

Career testing is very helpful in assessing career aptitude and interests and an important step toward developing professional competency. Two commonly used tests to help in career counseling are the Strong Interest Inventory Test and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Test.

One technique that should be utilized by career counselors is the Holland Codes. According to McCracken (1997):

Holland's major contribution was to develop the Self Directed Search (SDS). The SDS is a self-administered, self-scored, and self-interpreted vocational interest inventory which provides scores on Holland's six occupational themes: (R) Realistic, (I) Investigative, (A) Artistic, (S) Social, (E) Enterprising, and (C) Conventional. These scores are keyed to every occupational title imaginable. Because the themes apply to both the person and work characteristics, these statements provide a measure of fit between the person and the work environment. Holland's categories have held up well over time, as well as across cultures and genders.

These constellations are designed to reflect interests and understandings of the person who is pursuing a career, and the work environment itself. In using this approach, the counselor should teach the male client analytical thinking skills. The more the client understands himself from different perspectives, in conjunction with problematic work issues, the greater the chances will be for occupational success. The counselor should process the SDS results with the African-American male, in order to generate goals in each domain of his life.

The career counselor is challenged when working with African-American males. Societal stereotypes and prejudices are prevalent, and beyond the control of both the counselor and the clients. It is purposeful however, that the career counselor facilitates a thorough examination of the client's issues as an African-American male, when discussing career choices. The counselor must help the client in generating a list of supports once a career choice has been made. These supports should help the client cope affectively with any racial or gender issues that may arise. Additionally, the counselor should also provide an 'after care' system including societal based support groups to insure the success of the client once employed. Will all these proactive strategies end prejudice and racism for the African-American male? Unfortunately not; however, it is certainly empowering to create career choices based on effective strategies and coping systems that are culturally sensitive for this population.

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