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A Qualitative Look at Black Female Social Work Educators

Larry Davis
Washington University

Ramón Cartwright
Washington University

Phyllis Freeman
Columbia University

Louis H. Carter
University of Pennsylvania, carter@sp2.upenn.edu

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Abstract

This article reports the finding of a research effort which attempted to assess the qualitative experience of black female faculty in schools of social work. The data reported is part of a larger data set collected on social work faculty as a whole. The authors report some basic demographics on black females, but focus mainly on the roles that these women perform in schools of social work and how satisfied they are in these positions. It appears that significant numbers of black female faculty members are on "soft money" with fewer teaching Social Policy and Administration courses than might be expected. As a group these females are less satisfied with their academic positions than are their black male counterparts. However, when "degree held" is controlled for, it is black females without the doctorate who are significantly less satisfied than men. No such relationship was found to exist for males. Finally, the authors attempted, via a regression model, to assess which group of relevant others, faculty, administrators or students, as a function of their interactions, contributed most significantly to the satisfaction levels of black female faculty. Results from these analyses suggest that with respect to interpersonal interactions, white faculty have the greatest affect on the reported job satisfaction levels of black females.

Comments

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A Qualitative Look At
Black Female Social Work Educators

By

Larry Davis, - George Warren Brown School of Social Work

Ramon Cartwright - George Warren Brown School of Social Work

Phyllis Freeman - Columbia School of Social Work

Louis Carter - University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work

ABSTRACT

This article reports the finding of a research effort which attempted to assess the qualitative experience of black female faculty in schools of social work. The data reported is part of a larger data set collected on social work faculty as a whole. The authors report some basic demographics on black females, but focus mainly on the roles that these women perform in schools of social work and how satisfied they are in these positions. It appears that significant numbers of black female faculty members are on "soft money" with fewer teaching Social Policy and Administration courses than might be expected. As a group these females are less satisfied with their academic positions than are their black male counterparts. However, when "degree held" is controlled for, it is black females without the doctorate who are significantly less satisfied than men. No such relationship was found to exist for males. Finally, the authors attempted, via a regression model, to assess which group of relevant others, faculty, administrators or students, as a function of their interactions, contributed most significantly to the satisfaction levels of black female faculty. Results from these analyses suggest that with respect to interpersonal interactions, white faculty have the greatest affect on the reported job satisfaction levels of black females.

Researchers have recently begun to pay attention to the difficulties which female faculty experience in academia.¹ Most of this attention has addressed itself to the differentials in salaries and promotions between males and females in these schools.^{2,3} In contrast, slight attention has been given to the qualitative nature of this professional experience. Indeed very little attention has been given to the qualitative experiences of black female faculty. Despite the Council on Social Work Education's mandate 1234A, which pertains to minority issues and 1234B, which pertains to

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women's issues, little is known about the status of black Female Faculty other than mere descriptives, eg. numbers and rank.⁴ Perhaps as a reaction to the council's mandate there has been, and continues to be, some concern with the recruitment and hiring of minority faculty,⁵ but once hired little mention is made of their experiences.

Due to the fact that the concerns of black faculty in general and black female faculty in particular are so rarely given specific attention, we have selected, in this article, to focus on black female faculty, and, to a much lesser extent, on black male faculty. Hence the purpose of this study is to examine a series of dimensions which affect the black female faculty member in academia: the areas in which she works, the tasks she performs, the professional rank and status she occupies, the quality of her relationships with significant others in this workplace, and in general, her satisfaction with academia. It was a principal hope of the researchers that information derived from this study would be of interest and utility to all who are committed to the advancement, retention, and professional growth, of black females as social work educators.

The Sample

The data reported here are part of a larger data set collected on both white and black faculty members. The sample was selected from the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) 1977 roster of accredited Social Work Schools. The researchers believed that substantive qualitative differences might exist between predominantly white and predominantly black schools of social work; subsequently only black and white faculty members who were listed as working in predominantly white schools of social work were selected. Three hundred and fifty black faculty were identified and included in the total sample from which we received 133 (38%) completed questionnaires, 71 (53%) of whom were female.

Although the return rate was low, our sample closely approximates the total population of black social work faculty. For example, other researchers, notably Rubin and Whitcomb (1978)⁶ report that, in 1977, there were 489 black faculty members in graduate schools of social work. Of this number, 55% (268) were female. Our sample contained 53% (71) females. With regard to teaching status, Rubin and Whitcomb found that 78% of the black faculty were full time. The sample reported here is composed of 90% full time personnel. With regard to highest degree obtained, Rubin and Whitcomb reported 69.1% of the total population possessed MA's or MSW's with 30.9% holding DSW's or Ph.D.'s. The present sample is composed of 63% MA's or MSW's and 37% holding DSW's or Ph.D.'s. These findings suggest that the present sample is representative of the overall population of black faculty members in schools of social work.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument consisted of a 41 item questionnaire. Twenty-five of the items assessed either demographic or occupational

characteristics of the respondent, and the remaining 16 items were either direct or indirect assessments of the respondents' level of job satisfaction. On the questions of job satisfaction, respondents were required to make a response on a five-point Likert scale—five representing the highest level of a positive response.

The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small group of black faculty members who were not included in the final sample. While this method was employed to test the wording and format of the questionnaire, no tests were performed to examine specific types of validity or reliability of the questionnaire items. However, given our experience with the questionnaire's pre-test, it is believed that face validity of the items was achieved in the construction of the instrument. The questionnaire along with a return envelope and a cover letter describing the project was mailed to all potential respondents.

Findings and Discussion

Several demographic attributes of black females were assessed. These included age, status on faculty, academic rank and tenure status. The mean age was 44 years with the modal age group being 37-48 years. The majority of female faculty (51%) were assistant professors with slightly over 30% at the associate level or above. With respect to tenure status, 37% of all black female faculty were not on a tenure track despite the fact that 90% were full time faculty. Although Gould's data were collected from the 1972 CSWE Roster, our findings seem consistent with hers^{7,8} indicating that approximately 35% of black faculty are on "soft money." Gould suggests, and we agree, that the employment situation for black female faculty is tenuous. Indeed the uncertainty of future or continued employment may be of significantly greater concern for the black female than for the black male as approximately twice as many women (37%) as men (19%) reported being on a non-tenure track.

With regard to work roles, 48% of the black female faculty reported a combination of both classroom teaching and field work as their primary areas of responsibility, with 28% and 10% respectively reporting class or fieldwork only. However, of those black female faculty who reported teaching, the majority (60%) teach practice methods. In contrast only 30% of the black males teach practice courses. Also, noteworthy is the fact that even greater teaching disparities exist between females and males in the macro areas of Social Policy and Administration, with only 9% of the females as compared to 35% of the males teaching such courses. Thus it appears that black female faculty as a group are teaching in what has been considered "traditionally female" areas, namely methods case work, group work, and family treatment. Some research has indicated that disproportionately greater numbers of men than women at the masters level take administration and policy courses.⁹ It appears that this division in focus continues to manifest itself even at the university teaching level. Finally, only 6% of black female faculty teach research courses.

Third, we assessed level of job satisfaction for black female faculty. Job satisfaction was assessed by measuring two aspects: An absolute and a relative measure of satisfaction. Individuals were asked:

- 1) Overall, how satisfied are you with your position in the University College? (an absolute measure) and,
- 2) In comparison with other faculty members in your department who hold similar positions to your own, what is your level of satisfaction with your position in the university or college? (a relative measure).

The respondents were asked to make a response to these items on a five-point scale with 5 denoting a high degree of satisfaction and 1 denoting a low degree of satisfaction. These two measures summarized the basic dimensions of job satisfaction. Thus, job satisfaction here is the sum of the individual's perceived degree of overall and comparative contentment with their present faculty position.

Using these measures of job satisfaction, we found that on a five point Likert scale that females reported a mean of 2.87; an average or moderate level of overall job satisfaction. Similarly, on the comparative measure of job satisfaction, women reported a mean of 2.98, again an average or moderate level of job satisfaction. These measures of job satisfaction are in contrast with mean satisfaction levels of black male social work faculty. They reported an overall mean satisfaction level of 3.40 and a comparative mean satisfaction level of 3.53 for job satisfaction. Both of these male satisfaction means were significantly higher than those of women ($p < .01$) and ($p < .01$) respectively. Thus, on both the absolute and relative measures of job satisfaction, the black female appears to be less satisfied than the black male.

Given that other research has found the presence or absence of a doctorate degree to be a significant factor in academic retention and promotion, we hypothesized that it might also affect job satisfaction.¹⁰ Thus we decided to measure faculty levels of job satisfaction while controlling for the highest academic degree obtained. This is especially appropriate for our sample in light of the fact that only 26% of the black female faculty hold doctorates compared to 70% of the black males. The results from this analysis suggest that the level of attained degree, master's or doctorate, significantly affects the satisfaction level for black female faculty. That is, significant differences exist between males and females at the M.S.W. level with black females having lower levels of reported overall and comparative job satisfaction than black males, ($p .05$), and ($p < .001$) respectively. However, black females with doctorates do not differ significantly from black males with doctorates in their reported levels of overall and comparative job satisfaction. Thus, with respect to level of job satisfaction, black female faculty who are without doctorates are at a distinct disadvantage. There appears to be no association between attained academic degree and job satisfaction for black female faculty. In other words, unlike black male faculty, the presence or absence of the

doctoral degree appears to significantly influence the satisfaction levels of black female faculty.

It also occurred to us that an individual's level of job satisfaction might in part be a function of how well they perceive themselves as "getting along" with significant others in the work environment. We hypothesized that perceptions of degree of respect from and rapport with others should contribute significantly to how well one feels they "get along" with others. In short, one would expect those persons who perceived themselves as having the best interpersonal relationships with professionally relevant others would also have the highest levels of job satisfaction. In this sense, reported faculty perceptions of respect and rapport were thought to be important determinants of the quality of interpersonal relationships.

Using Likert measures similar to those used to measure overall and comparative satisfaction levels, we asked black faculty to rate on five point scales, with five being the highest, the degree of respect which they perceived themselves as receiving from others, i.e., black and white faculty, administrators, and students. Similarly they were also asked to rate the degree of rapport which they perceived themselves as having with these persons.

In an effort to assess the contributions of each of these groups to the reported job satisfaction levels of black female faculty, a linear regression model was utilized. The two measures of job satisfaction (overall and comparative), were combined into one score as were the two measures of interpersonal interactions. Thus, in the regression equation, job satisfaction (overall and comparative) was the dependent variable, and the independent variable the respondents perceived degree of interpersonal interaction (respect and rapport) with black and white faculty, administrators, and students.

For the black female faculty members, the multiple correlation produced by the six independent interpersonal variables of black and white faculty, administrators and students was .63. This multiple correlation value was found to be significant at the .05 level ($F = 5.85$ with 6 and 54 degrees of freedom). Therefore, approximately 39% of a black female's degree of job satisfaction can be explained or predicted by her perceptions of the quality of interpersonal interactions or how well she perceived herself as "getting along" with these six groups of significant others. Of the six independent variables included in the regression equation, we concentrated on the three most powerful as predictors of job satisfaction since these variables account for the majority of the variance in the dependent variable.

The findings indicate that the quality of interpersonal interaction (perceived respect and rapport) with white faculty members was the most powerful predictor of job satisfaction among black female faculty members. The standardized regression coefficient for this independent variable was .35.

The second most powerful predictor of job satisfaction among black female faculty members was the quality of their interpersonal interactions with white administrators. The standardized regression coefficient for this predictor was .22.

Lastly, the third best predictor of job satisfaction among black female faculty members was the quality of their interpersonal interactions with black faculty members. The standardized regression coefficient for this predictor was .17.

Intuitively, it might have been expected that the quality of interpersonal interactions with black faculty administrators and students would have been the most significant determiners of job satisfaction for black female faculty. However, it must be remembered that these data were compiled from black females employed in predominately white schools of social work. Indeed, their minority status suggests at least two reasons why white faculty and administrators and not black faculty and administrators should contribute most significantly to the job satisfaction level of these black faculty members: 1) The greater number of white faculty and administrators with whom they must interact, and 2) the greater positions of power and influence which whites possess in these institutions.

In view of the fact that the majority of respondents reported classroom teaching as their primary task, it may seem surprising that students were not powerful predictors of their job satisfaction. However, given the large numbers of black females who were non-tenured and the fact that students do not generally play an important role in retention and promotion process, their lack of greater student influence is understandable.

Summary and Conclusion

The researchers conducted these analyses for the purpose of specifically examining the quality of the work experience of black female faculty in schools of social work. This study was different in focus from what has sometimes been researched in the past, e.g. salary, promotion. The foremost intention here was to gain greater insights into the qualitative nature of the black female's professional experience by assessing her obtained level of job satisfaction and the quality of her interpersonal interactions with relevant others. There are a number of points highlighted by this investigation which we feel are instructive for those who are concerned with the enhancement of this group of faculty members.

First, it appears that a third of all black female faculty are in non-tenure track positions. As a consequence, it would seem reasonable to assume that the vast majority of those in non-tenure track positions are also probably on "soft money", thereby making their employment situations precarious, especially in light of the existing economic and political

currents. This cogent factor must undoubtedly contribute to a sense of anxiety among black female faculty. Surely departmental efforts to increase the number of those on "hard money" would diminish the uncertainty about future employment which this group of faculty must experience. In addition, it seems reasonable to expect that such steps would also increase the degree of personal investiture and commitment these women would be willing to make to their schools.

Second, black females, as a group, appear to be overrepresented in those teaching areas which are sometimes viewed as "traditionally female," i.e., methods courses, and are starkly under-represented in the teaching of macro and research courses. Hence, in an effort to be consistent with the Council on Social Work Education's mandate that, "special efforts shall be made to encourage women to consider these areas of professional practice in which women have been under-represented,"¹¹ schools of social work, and indeed the profession, should begin to put forth greater efforts to recruit, graduate, and employ more women who have substantive interests in these areas.

Thirdly, the level of academic degree attained appears to be a critical factor affecting job satisfaction for black female faculty. However, no such relationship appears to exist for black males. This suggests that it is possible to be "satisfied" in academia without the doctorate. Hence factors other than degree are apparently influential in affecting how satisfied one can feel in a given academic position. Consequently, efforts to increase job satisfaction of female faculty should not begin and conclude with the insistence that females without doctorates obtain more advanced degrees, since their male counterparts appear to fare well without them.

Fourth, interpersonal interactions, i.e., perceptions of perceived respect and felt rapport with others were intuitively assumed to be important contributors to job satisfaction. Given the large numbers of white faculty and the frequent positions of power they hold as faculty and administrators, it is not surprising, perhaps, to find that job satisfaction among black female faculty members appears to be significantly influenced by their perceived quality of interpersonal interactions with other of faculty.

In conclusion, it was the purpose of this study to obtain insights into the qualitative work experience of a group of female faculty who are also black. It was our hope that the findings of this investigation will be of interest not only to black females who have an inherent investment in this topic, but to other educators who also believe that this group of faculty; by their unique status as female and black bring a valuable and much needed perspective to the educational process. The findings from this study suggest that a viable approach to enhancing the experience for black female faculty should include the promotion of academic environments which increase professional security, broaden professional utilization, and bolster and propagate positive interpersonal relations between black female academics and their colleagues.

FOOTNOTES

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