Gender Differences in the Upward Mobility of Black Managers: Double Whammy or Double Advantage?

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This study draws upon the theory and research on intraorganizational mobility to examine gender differences in the upward mobility of black managers. Results suggest that neither the “double whammy” assumptions nor the “double advantage” assumptions are accurate descriptions of the contemporary experience of black female managers in corporate America. Upward mobility rates were nearly identical for both gender groups. Other findings and the implications of the results for future research are discussed.

In the last 20 years, the subject of women in management has emerged as a significant research field (Freedman & Phillips, 1988; Larwood & Gutek, 1987; Nieva & Gutek, 1982; Larwood & Wood, 1977). However, researchers in the field have given scant attention to the experience of minority women managers (Nkomo, 1988). At the same time, research on black managers typically focuses on black/white differences in managerial experiences. Only fleeting reference is made to the case of black women managers and the gender issue is typically subordinated to the race issue (Dickens & Dickens, 1982; Davis & Watson, 1982; Fernandez, 1975). As a result of these approaches, the study of black women managers has fallen between the boundaries of these two research tracks. Black women managers are subsumed alternately under the category “women or blacks” while the combined category of black women is often ignored. Demographic trends indicate that the U.S. work force is becoming more racially diverse. It is therefore important that researchers give attention to women from various racial and ethnic minority groups in
order to provide a more complete picture of the experience of women in management. The present study addresses part of this void by examining gender differences in the upward mobility of black managers in organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Race and Gender

Much of the limited writing on black women managers has been impressionistic and based on anecdotal explications (e.g., Weathers, 1981). A common issue pervading these writings is the nature of the impact of race and gender on black women in organizations. While most researchers have recognized the effect as cumulative, they differ on whether it is positive or negative. The "two-fer" or "double advantage" theory posits that the sum effect of race and gender is positive while the "double whammy" or "double blind" theory holds that black women suffer a double-negative effect (Ladner, 1971). The "two-fer" theory has generally advocated the proposition that black women enjoy a preferred status vis-à-vis black males. Scoring one affirmative action point because she is black and yet another because she is female, an ambitious black professional woman is said to have assured success (Weathers, 1981). The origins of this argument can be traced back to the historical interpretation of black women's sex roles in social science writings. Black women have often been stereotyped as strong-willed powerful matriarchs, suggesting that the black woman has greater power than the male in the black family and generally enjoys a higher status in society. Some researchers have further suggested that there have been loopholes in racial discrimination that permitted black women to take better advantage of educational opportunities and that black families may have encouraged their daughters rather than sons to continue their education (Fox & Hesse-Biber, 1984).

Epstein (1973), in a descriptive study of 31 black professional women in prestigious male-dominated professions, argued that the effect of two negatively evaluated ascribed statuses—the sex status of female and the race status of black—did not result in negative consequences but formed a positive matrix for a meaningful career. Epstein (1973) argued that focusing on one of the negatively valued statuses had the effect of raising the worth of the other negative status, thereby creating an offsetting effect. For example, in a white male dominated environment, a black woman is viewed as lacking the "womanly" occupational deficiencies of a white woman—that is, seeking a husband—and the black woman's sex status is given a higher evaluation. Adams (1983) in a study of biracial groups concluded that within a social