

Black Women's Career Success: Integrating Intersectionality and Career Success Research

Abstract

Previous research has extensively studied career success, focusing primarily on objective and subjective career success. However, less attention has been given to the career success perceptions of members of marginalized and stigmatized groups whose unique experiences and cultural perspectives may provide new insights into career studies. This paper addresses these gaps by examining the unique experiences and histories of Black women. Drawing on intersectionality and Black feminist epistemology, we develop a conceptual model to understand how Black women perceive career success. Our analysis reveals that Black women navigate gendered racialized career scripts that not only reinforce stereotypes, such as the “angry black woman,” but also present multiple paradoxes, including invisibility and hypervisibility. Black women must also contend with career shocks, including mega-threats such as police violence directed toward Black citizens. We propose that Black women adopt repertoires of identity-aligned behaviors as strategic responses to these challenges, which significantly shape their perceptions of career success. Additionally, we introduce the concept of collective career success defined as self-evaluations by Black women that assess whether their career actions and achievements contribute to the advancement of their group’s interests. Our study contributes to the career success literature by detailing the intersectional challenges, adaptive strategies, and collective career success perceptions of Black women concluding with recommendations for future research and practical implications of our framework.

Keywords: Black women, career success, black feminist epistemology, intersectionality, gender, race, career scripts

Listen, I've been doing this for two decades and sometimes I get tired of fighting because I know what I do is bigger than me. I know that the legacy I leave will affect somebody coming up behind me. My prayer is that I don't want these Black girls to have the same fights that me and Viola [Davis], Octavia [Spencer], we out here thugging it out...Otherwise, why am I doing this? For my own vanity? There's no blessing in that. I've tried twice to walk away [from the business]. But I can't, because if I do, how does that help the ones coming up behind me?"

Taraji Henson, the acclaimed actor, made the above remarks in an interview that received extensive coverage in both mainstream and social media (Gardner, 2023). In the full interview, she not only addresses her struggles with pay inequality and navigating the complexities of Hollywood but also provides insights into her career motivations. Her drive isn't merely self-serving; instead, she perceives her success as intertwined with clearing a path for aspiring young Black women actors. Race and gender profoundly shape her views of career success. How do management and careers researchers include voices and experiences like Henson's?

For many years, scholars have discussed the relationship between careers and identity (Becker & Carper, 1956). Career success judgments are one way that people answer identity questions such as “who am I?” and “does my life have meaning?” Career success is defined in terms of the positive outcomes resulting from work experiences such as income, hierarchical position, or career satisfaction (Judge et al., 1995). What is underexplored in careers research is how racialized and gendered social structures cause members of different identity groups to define careers in ways consonant with their lived experience (Seibert et al., 2024). To address this gap in the careers literature, we theorize about career scripts and career shocks, which are rarely discussed as gendered and racialized constructs in the management literature. Career scripts are defined as “formal and informal rules that embody ingrained institutional views on

career progression” (Van Helden et al, 2023, p. 21). Many people, including professional communities, use scripts to determine whether career holders are deemed successful or unsuccessful. Akkermans et al. (2021, p. 454), defined a “career shock” as "a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual’s control and triggers a deliberate thought process about one’s career.”

Additionally, we apply black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to conceptualize how gendered racial career success definitions are crafted from the experience of Black women workers. Black feminist epistemology centers the gendered racial experiences and knowledge of Black women and, in this paper, we use it to explore how Black women define career success differently than those experiencing different racial and gender realities (e.g., Black men or White women). Specifically, three relevant core themes of Black feminist epistemology guide our research. First, according to Collins (1990) Black women’s work, family experience, and nurturing in African American culture yield a unique vantage point and set of experiences. For example, historical labor patterns reflect these unique sociocultural dynamics: from enslavement to the present day, Black women have traditionally been expected and required to work unlike White women who had to assert their right to do so. This historical context is demonstrated by labor force statistics from 1880 which show 35.4 percent of married Black women and 73.3 percent of single Black women were in the labor force compared with only 7.3 percent of married white women and 23.8 percent of single white women (Goldin, 1977). Second, the collective identity, Black American women, is one “shaped around the dialectic of oppression and resistance” (Alinia, 2015, p. 2335). Black feminist epistemology reveals additional dialectics, contradictions, or paradoxes within this collective identity, which can enhance our understanding of how Black women’s behavioral

responses to paradox influence career success perceptions. For instance, numerous studies have explored how invisibility and hypervisibility occur simultaneously among Black women (Smith et al., 2019). We posit responses to this paradox are aligned with the collective identity of “Black woman,” giving rise to what we call “identity-aligned behaviors.” These behaviors are outward expressions consistent with internal beliefs about what it means to be a Black woman. Finally, Black feminist epistemology provides insight into the diversity among Black women, highlighting within-group differences based on class, sexuality, and other social identities. Yet, despite these differences, Black feminist epistemology also demonstrates there is a common set of experiences that contribute to unique group knowledge and consciousness.

Intersectionality theory makes gendered racial experiences of discrimination visible by explaining how diverse and intersecting systems of power shape people’s experiences at work and in other contexts. The theory contends that using single axes of analysis, such as race or gender alone, does not provide adequate insight into lived experiences because factors like race, class, gender, and ability work together and influence each other. Intersectionality theory calls for examinations of interlocking systems of oppression. For example, Crenshaw’s groundbreaking work on intersectionality focused on work and careers by explicating the Degraffenreid vs. General Motors case where Black women were the last hired and the first fired (Crenshaw, 1989). The plaintiffs requested the judge consider that although white women were employed for decades in the front offices and Black men were hired for laborer work in the factory, Black women were excluded from front office work because they were *Black* women and from factory work because they were *Black women*. Yet, the judge ruled Black women must choose either sexism or racism as grounds for their suits but could not expect consideration of gendered racism. Although recent research (Rosette et al., 2018; Hall et al., 2019) has pointed to

the importance of including intersectionality in management studies, few scholars have examined how intersecting systems of oppression influence individual's perceptions of their career success.

In this paper, we make several contributions to the research on career success. First, we extend the traditional dimensions used to measure and understand career success perceptions.

Specifically, we introduce a novel conceptualization termed "collective career success."

Collective career success (CCS) is defined as evaluations that Black women's career actions and achievements contribute to the advancement of their group's interests rather than solely their own pursuits demonstrated in Henson's sentiments that she must "help the ones coming up behind"

her. CCS is rooted in an individual's recognition of their involvement in a collective, intersectional struggle. Moreover, we theorize about career scripts and career shocks which are

rarely discussed as gendered and racialized constructs in the management literature. Career scripts are described as mediators between institutions and individual action, providing

interpretative schemas that inform behaviors. We add to the literature by discussing how these frames replicate and reinforce stereotypes creating a complex professional landscape for Black

women who face paradoxical expectations at the intersection of race and gender. Next, we

propose that Black women adopt repertoires of identity-aligned behaviors to meet the challenges presented by career scripts, paradoxes, and career shocks. Finally, we describe the relationship

between behavioral repertoires and the career conceptualizations previously discussed. Our aim is to stimulate intersectional research on careers and shed light on the role systems of oppression

play in shaping career meaning making, as well as how Black women have confronted and resisted oppression in their working lives.

Theoretical Background: Career Success and Intersectionality

Research on career success has drawn from a wide and diverse range of theoretical approaches (Spurk et al., 2019), including the conservation of resources, human capital, identity, social capital, and social cognitive career theory. Consequently, career success has been defined and measured in various ways, such as achieving a CEO position, which is commonly recognized as an objective marker of success. However, career success has also been examined as a subjective perception, such as career satisfaction.

Recent scholarship suggests that it is more accurate to view career success as "a dynamic social construction rather than an objective reality that is historically and culturally specific" (Afiouni & Karam, 2014, p. 549). By adopting a social constructionist view of career success, we contribute to existing careers research by illustrating how an understanding of career success perceptions must consider factors such as national history, current events (e.g., mega-threats), racial and gender norms, and day-to-day workplace interactions (e.g., microaggressions, sexual harassment, etc.) that influence career mobility and individual well-being. Thus, our model of career success is grounded in social constructionism.

Objective Career Success (OCS) and Subjective Career Success (SCS)

When individuals are perceived as objectively successful, their achievements are evaluated against norms indicative of career attainment, such as salary, hierarchical position, title, or occupational prestige (Dries et al., 2008). OCS is defined as "directly observable by others and measurable in a standardized way" (Spurk et al., 2019, p. 36). Thus, objective career success is often a comparison between career actors where those who make the most money or have climbed organizational or professional hierarchies are deemed objectively successful. Scholars frequently employ theories about individuals' knowledge, experience, and skills to predict OCS. For instance, human capital theory, personality traits, and career agency are among

the theoretical frameworks commonly utilized in OCS studies. These approaches focus on how individual attributes, such as work-related knowledge, skills, stable personal characteristics, attitudes, and proactive behavior, influence OCS (Spurk et al., 2019). Scholars have suggested that human capital and OCS should be positively related (Ng et al., 2005). The underlying assumptions driving beliefs about this relationship are that individual characteristics such as knowledge, conscientiousness, and effort are associated with merit, and merit is linked to OCS. However, despite being among the highest-educated minority female groups proportionally at graduate levels (slightly ahead of Hispanic women at the master's level and slightly behind Asian women at the doctoral level (Fast Facts: Degrees Conferred by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, n.d.)), Black women remain significantly underrepresented in board positions within Fortune 500 companies, holding 3% of these roles (MacLellan, 2023). Moreover, Black women continue to experience substantial pay inequity (Lean In, n.d.) and only two Black women occupy CEO positions in the Fortune 500 (Hinchliffe & Abrams, 2023). How do Black women interpret their outcomes given the prevailing odds against them regarding OCS norms?

SCS is defined as “a focal career actor’s evaluation and experience of achieving personally meaningful career outcomes” (Spurk et al., 2019, p. 41). SCS research frequently uses theoretical approaches such as the calling model of psychological success, identity theory, and protean career. Unlike OCS studies, which focus on external perceptions of an individual’s success, SCS theoretical approaches emphasize how people define success based on self-imposed standards, self-concept, or roles at work and beyond (Heslin, 2005). A key assumption behind these approaches is that when one's standards for career satisfaction align with their self-concept, and their outcomes reflect this alignment, they will experience SCS, regardless of normative success measures. While many studies have traditionally conceptualized SCS as a

unidimensional construct composed primarily of career satisfaction, recent work has demonstrated SCS is multidimensional. It includes recognition, quality work, meaningful work, influence, authenticity, personal life, growth and development, and satisfaction (Shockley et al., 2016). However, the career success literature has not extensively considered how an intersectional identity or gendered racialized self-concept might influence SCS.

Despite the prevalence of OCS and SCS studies, career success research has considered other success conceptualizations. For example, recent research has proposed a multidimensional model of career success comprised of regions such as creativity, cooperation, and contribution (Dries et al., 2008). This research seeks to bring the social construction of careers into focus and recognize the impacts that context, such as the diminishment of the industrial economy and rise of the knowledge economy, have on career meaning making. Yet, while broadening the success conceptualization, this and other careers research have provided little insight on how intersecting systems of oppression, an important aspect of the context, influence perceptions of career success. As the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of the workforce grows (Noria, 2022), this glaring omission prevents understanding how career success is determined by arguably the largest sector of the labor market – women of all races and people of color of all genders. Consequently, our current understanding of career success is difference-blind, described as “a meritocratic theory assuming that [career holders] are atomistic actors” (Pearce et al., 2015, p. 2431). Instead, we introduce the idea of CCS, a bias aware conceptualization of career success that assumes oppressed people recognize their role as actors in a collective, intersectional struggle. Specifically, Black women recognize they are frequently excluded from the marketplace because of gendered racism that discounts their resources and applies stereotypes to

explain their exclusion. This recognition influences how Black women define and perceive all dimensions of career success, including CCS.

Introducing Collective Career Success

The history of African Americans in the United States helps to explain a sense of racial solidarity that we posit is related to career success perceptions. Specifically, enslavement and its capitalistic disruption of Black family structures caused African notions of family to be recreated as extended kin units (Collins, 1990). Because Black people could not control the scattering of their families through the slave trade, they redefined family as a Black community comprised of other enslaved persons (Collins, 1990). Although cultural and religious differences existed among Blacks brought to the United States during enslavement and later those who immigrated from the West Indies, Africa, and the Caribbean, the state-sanctioned racial violence evident during enslavement, and the Reconstruction, Jim Crow and current eras, caused the emergence of definitions of community suggesting kinship among Black people beyond familial affiliation. Thus, we suggest that career success for Black women, rather than being solely self-interested, is community-interested and rooted in resistance.

Indeed, this sense of CCS, while unnamed, is captured in recent career studies. For example, in a study examining experiences of job embeddedness, Black women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) fields reported that commitments to community influenced them to stay in STEM (Sendze, 2023). Specifically, they felt that leaving the profession would impact the community as seen in this informant's quote: "It's just not in my heart to leave the profession...I feel like I'd be letting down a whole bunch of people if I did, and I don't even know who those people are...I just know I'd be letting down a whole bunch of people" (p. 386).

Further, in defining CCS, we also employed Rosales and Langhout's (2020) conceptualization of everyday resistance, which characterizes resistance as various forms of oppositional activity people engage in to disrupt oppressive norms and undermine existing power structures. Everyday resistance can be collective or individual, organized or spontaneous, overt or covert. Historical examples of everyday resistance include actions by enslaved people to slow down production or communicate plans for escape through methods only understood by other enslaved people such as the lyrics of spirituals or quilt patterns encoded with escape messages or maps (African American Spirituals, n.d., Rosales & Langhout, 2020). The idea of everyday resistance is further developed in the research of Ogbu (2004) who contributed "positional collective identity," which describes actions, expressions, and symbols of resistance, such as "Black is Beautiful" (p. 19), used by Black people to heighten racial pride and insulate them from anti-Black stigma.

In the contemporary context of careers, Black women's resistance and oppositional collective identity are evident in recent research exploring responses to hair bias in organizations (Dawson et al., 2019), legal actions like *Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mutual Hospital Insurance, Inc.*, (1976) and in advocacy efforts behind the CROWN (Create A Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act, which aims to protect Black individuals from hair discrimination in workplaces and educational institutions. For example, *Jenkins v. Blue Cross* was brought by Beverly Jenkins, a Blue Cross employee who was denied a promotion and told by her supervisor that she "could never represent Blue Cross" while wearing an Afro (*Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mutual Hospital Insurance, Inc.*, 1976). The suit was filed as a class action on behalf of "all black and female persons who are employed, or might be employed, by Blue Cross-Blue Shield, Inc." Although Jenkins sued based on her individual experience of discrimination, her lawsuit

sought to influence the experience of Black women throughout the organization and, through legal precedent, the experience of Black women throughout the nation. While investigation of these themes within careers research is nascent, these insights into community and resistance suggest that unlike OCS and SCS, which focus on atomistic views of career success, CCS has a communitarian ethos and prioritizes group success.

Proposition 1: CCS perceptions can be conceptualized as self-evaluations by Black women that their career actions and achievements contribute to the advancement of their group's interests rather than solely their own pursuits.

Gendered Racialized Career Scripts

According to Barley (1989), career scripts serve as mediators between institutions and individual action, shaping individuals' behaviors and trajectories within societal structures. Institutions encompass regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements and play a pivotal role in conveying norms, behaviors, and relationships deemed legitimate in society (Scott, 2014). Recent research examining academic career scripts provides insight on their content and mediating role between institutions and individual action. Scripts are interpretive schemas that provide people with information about situations and perspectives on associated problems and solutions (Laudel et al., 2019). For example, academics have an organizational career script that reflects the sequence of organizational positions and role expectations associated with career success, such as assistant, associate, and full professor. Moreover, behavioral deviations from scripts are considered inappropriate, yet agentic behavior resisting rigid script guidelines can gradually and with difficulty alter institutions and shift behavioral expectations (Karam et al., 2013). For example, women faculty in the Arab Middle East may reject or conform to mandated gendered roles (e.g., caring for children) that can lead to change in how an individual woman

enacts her role in the future and how others define her roles. In this way, women's agentic behavior can modify the structure – at least for the focal woman. Taken together, scholars suggest that career scripts are comprised of prescribed and agentic elements crafted in the space between institutional mandates and individual agency (Valette & Culié, 2015).

To date, the intersection of race and gender is seldom addressed in research on career scripts. Given that race and gender are deeply embedded in society and shape organizational dynamics (Acker, 1990; Ray, 2019), we anticipate that career scripts are both gendered and racialized. Specifically, informal norms and expectations within the dominant business community often dictate career behaviors in a gendered and racialized manner. An example of these gendered and racialized norms shaping career scripts is the concept of "professionalism," which typically reflects the attributes and values associated with members of dominant social identity groups, such as Whites and men. On one hand, professionalism signifies that one can meet the standards associated with their profession because of their knowledge and expertise. However, professionalism also frequently means conformity to standards of dress, appearance, dialect, and even possession of names associated with White values and norms (McCluney et al., 2021). Gendered and racialized career scripts emerging from these rules prescribe how successful organizational careers depend on conformity by career actors (Carbado & Gulati, 2013). Thus, racialized and gendered career scripts encourage career actors to closely observe role models experiencing outward markers of career success such as promotion, visible assignments, or high salaries to determine and subsequently engage in the activities that caused them to meet or exceed expectations. Because scripts reflect dominant values and appearance norms, Black women are unlikely to be seen as meeting standards of professionalism or other gendered and racialized norms (Donahoo, 2023; Koval & Rosette, 2021).

Proposition 2: Career scripts are gendered and racialized frames that influence behavior by reflecting mandates imposed by racist and sexist structures and can be reinforced or modified (over time) by individuals' conformity to or rejection of the scripts. Racialized gendered career scripts provide prescriptions for “appropriate” behaviors that lead to career success.

The Role of Paradox in Career Scripts

Because career scripts are gendered and racialized, we posit that Black women encounter unique paradoxes stemming from the dynamics of race and gender, which shape the ways they interact with career scripts. We define paradox as contradictions that exist “simultaneously and synergistically over time” (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 75). Paradoxes are sometimes written as a set of statements where neither statement is problematic when viewed separately but, when the statements are taken together, illuminate the contradictory, often absurd, nature of a situation (Smith & Berg, 1987). Paradoxes represent systematic patterns that emerge as people seek to process and respond to social actions and interactions (Putnam et al., 2016). Building on this research, we identify three paradoxes related to intersectional oppression that hold particular relevance for Black women's career behavior and meaning making: invisibility, interests, and representation. These paradoxes, each comprising contradictions that mutually create and depend on each other, play a crucial role in shaping Black women's career experiences. Specifically, we explore how these paradoxes serve as both resources and constraints for Black women as they navigate career scripts and institutions. To explain each paradox using Putnam et al.'s framework, we provide two contradictory statements/realities and a discussion of the gendered and racial forces impacting how these realities reflect and impose on each other and have endured over time. In each section, we include examples of the paradox from extant research.

The Paradox of Invisibility.

Contradictory Realities:

(a) Black women are often overlooked, and their experiences are seen as less important than those of Black men or White women. This happens because systems of oppression, like racism and sexism, work together to make them invisible.

(b) At the same time, these same systems cause Black women to be viewed as "different" or "outside the norm" making them hypervisible.

Intersectionality theory has highlighted how intersecting systems of oppression make invisible Black women and other women of color, who are neither the standard group for understanding women's issues nor the reference group for matters concerning Black people or other marginalized racial groups (Bhattacharyya & Berhdahl, 2023; Collins & Bilge, 2016). This invisibility was illustrated in 1851 when Sojourner Truth addressed a White man's assertion that "women" should be "lifted over ditches, and...have the best place everywhere" (National Park Service, n.d.). She countered by sharing the harsh oppression she suffered as an enslaved woman who was forced to perform hard physical labor, given minimal food, and made to watch her children sold from her. Her poignant question, "Ain't I a woman?" exposes the intertwined racism and sexism inherent in his argument, highlighting the invisibility of Black women's experiences while simultaneously marking her commoditized hypervisibility as a chattel slave where her every action was surveilled and controlled by the state system of institutionalized bondage.

Like Truth, contemporary Black women find themselves on either and both sides of visibility, defined as the "extent to which an individual is fully regarded and recognized by others" (Settles et al, 2019, p. 63). On the one hand, their experiences and presence are often overshadowed by the experiences of White women or Black men rendering them invisible. On

the other, Black women's outsider status subjects them to greater scrutiny, drawing attention to nonconformity and amplifying perceived mistakes (Nash & Moore, 2022). Because they have been rendered invisible, when they exercise knowledge or authority, they are frequently seen as threatening, drawing negative and unwanted attention that further complicates their decisions about how to behave at work.

McCluney and Rabelo (2019) theorize that the invisibility paradox is complicated by the need for social inclusion (belonging) and individuation or uniqueness (distinctiveness) discussed in Brewer's (1991) theory of optimal distinctiveness. Individuals with low degrees of belonging face isolation and stigmatization – even when they display excellent performance. Conversely, those with low degrees of distinctiveness might be seen as interchangeable with others in their social identity group, risking an undifferentiated sense of self (Shore et al, 2011). As a result, McCluney and Rabelo (2019) describe four conditions of visibility in the context of work - precarious visibility, invisibility, hypervisibility, and partial visibility - that “dictate and distort how marginalized employees are perceived, evaluated, and relegated,” (p. 144). *Precarious visibility* describes a condition where Black women feel low distinctiveness and belonging and are powerless to increase their visibility in workgroups. Occupational segregation, which relegates many Black women to subordinate roles, may exacerbate feelings of being undervalued and precarious. *Invisibility* refers to high belonging but low distinctiveness, where issues affecting Black women are overlooked due to organizational emphasis on either race or gender, but not the intersection. Black women striving for greater distinctiveness may be labeled as angry or hostile. *Hypervisibility* entails high distinctiveness and high belonging, exposing Black women to greater negative scrutiny, pigeonholing, and tokenism. Lastly, *partial visibility* involves high distinctiveness and low belonging, where Black women are 'seen' but only through

historical roles or stereotypes. In this condition, supporting Black women in leadership positions may be challenging due to resistance and unease from both dominant and marginalized group members (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

Finally, recent research demonstrates the paradoxical effects associated with intersectionality by studying the careers of Black women executives and intersectional invisibility (Smith et al., 2019). According to this research, intersectional invisibility is both benign and hostile simultaneously exhibiting opposing but interrelated dimensions that create a need for Black women to behave in very different ways if they are to succeed at work. For example, some of the Black women executives invested in building a personal brand to escape intersectional invisibility only to experience notoriety (i.e., hypervisibility) resulting in jealousy and hostility. Managing this often requires the strategic use of invisibility as demonstrated by other women in the study. One woman discusses “positive invisibility” (p. 1724) emphasizing the ability to assert oneself when necessary while choosing invisibility when it is advantageous. This research underscores the diverse ways Black women experience invisibility and hypervisibility and highlights the diversity of strategies one needs to navigate negative sanctions and positively influence existing systems.

The Paradox of Interests.

Contradictory Realities:

- (a) *Black women, as a group, succeed when individuals focus on their personal interests.*
- (b) *At the same time, Black women achieve personal success when they set goals that support the progress of their community.*

Race is constructed hierarchically, providing dominant and subordinated groups with justifications for why inequalities exist (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). When racial categories are taken

for granted as objective realities, people perceive racial groupings as communities, assuming that shared phenotypes correlate with shared attitudes and behaviors. These assumptions expose members of racialized groups to similar consequences, such as workplace discrimination or hostile encounters with policing, perpetuating economic and social inequalities. As such, these dynamics animate the paradox and help set seemingly irrational conditions wherein recognizing and identifying with racial groups offers the opportunity to develop collective power, while rejecting such identification is often seen as a path to individual success.

The paradox of interests is situated in the socio-historical conditions prominent after emancipation when Black women entered the paid labor market and encountered new types of exchange relationships where individual gains and the collective good often conflicted (Collins, 1990). During the Reconstruction era, the Black women's club movement emerged as a grassroots effort to address racism and improve social and economic conditions within Black communities (Nadasen, 2006). They adopted the motto "lifting as we climb," emphasizing both individual advancement and collective progress (Jones, 2020). Black Women were encouraged to prioritize and pursue individual career interests that often reinforced capitalism or White norms for behavior or appearance. Simultaneously, they worked to "lift" other Black women along with them by improving the economic conditions or access to education created by those same capitalist and white racial norms. For example, Madame C.J. Walker, a successful businesswoman at the turn of the 20th century, secured her financial well-being while also significantly contributing to racial uplift and community support (Hasan et al., 2020; Prieto & Phipps, 2019). While some argue that her products reinforced White standards of beauty, a charge Walker vehemently denied, others view her contributions as empowering Black women by providing economic opportunities denied to them in the racialized labor market (Gill, 2010).

Inherent to the paradox, Walker's pursuit of her individual career interests inadvertently reinforced a racial hierarchy that systematically oppresses Black women while simultaneously helping Black women ascend it.

While Walker's choices illustrate movement forward amid the paradox, the 'crab in the barrel' syndrome (Miller, 2019) illustrates a kind of "vicious cycle" that may alternatively develop. This metaphor, derived from crabs pulling each other down while trying to escape, effectively depicts how competition within minority communities prevents collective escape from gendered and racial barriers. When competition does not allow for the achievement of individual or collective interests (i.e., no crabs are allowed to escape and none are lifting others while they try), it can ultimately reinforce the very racial structures that constrain individual and collective outcomes, leading to negative consequences that are interpreted as evidence of racial inferiority.

Finally, the paradox of interests is suggested in studies of Black women's careers, where felt responsibility to the Black community can both be a barrier and a pathway to personal success. For example, a recent qualitative study described a Black woman's conflict: "I am also frequently approached by members of the larger African-American community, who want me to 'do more in the community' and 'give back.' I try to balance these requests and say no as often as I can. Nonetheless, my service burden is higher than it should be. This directly interferes with my productivity" (Kameny et al., 2014, p. 13). This quote exemplifies the tensions resulting from the paradox by capturing the persistent challenge of balancing community and individual demands that workers who are members of dominant groups do not face. Furthermore, she faces a seemingly impossible choice that may feel like a "double-bind:" to act without supporting the goals of her community helps to ensure that all Black women will continue to be collectively

oppressed, yet choices to support her community interfere with her personal interests and achievement, thereby reducing her ability (influence) to advance her community. Taken together, socially constructed racial hierarchies, historical dynamics of Black women's entry into the paid labor market, and findings from research on Black women's career experiences highlight the constitutive nature of the paradox (Putnam et al, 2016).

The Paradox of Representation.

Contradictory Realities:

(a) For Black women, the choice to engage in the full range of human emotions and behaviors depends on knowing if they will be subjected to stereotypical judgments (e.g., if I feel angry and I show it, will you see me as the "angry Black woman" and judge me and all Black women based on your racialized view of my actions?).

(b) At the same time, for Black women to know if they will be subjected to stereotypes, they must choose to engage in the full range of human emotions and behaviors.

Stereotypical judgments involve the "out-group homogeneity effect" and result in ingroup members being perceived as more diverse (i.e., as individuals) than outgroup members (Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992). This bias prevents people from recognizing differences among outgroup members, leading to judgments based on group stereotypes that profoundly shape interactions and outcomes. Furthermore, Black people are frequently aware of negative stereotypes about their group, how they impact individual and group outcomes (Najdowski, 2023), and the expectations that Black people act as racial representatives (Mack, 2012). Together, these dynamics help set the conditions for a self-referential loop: choices by Black women to express themselves fully and freely risk reinforcing and subjection to the racialized biases that obscure their individuality and the individuality of all Black women. Yet, it is only

through authentic self-expression that they experience the freedom of engaging with their full humanity rather than avoiding being judged by stereotypes.

Mack (2012) discusses historical conditions laying the foundation for the problem of race and representation, noting how Americans have imagined themselves as a unified nation formed from diverse groups since the country's founding. However, Black people were not seen as fitting into this identity. Instead, their connection to the nation was established through representatives who stood in for the group, advocating for its interests and navigating social expectations. According to Mack, "representative" persons, a term commonly used in the mid-nineteenth-century, were expected to embody "the highest aspirations of his racial or cultural group in terms of education, professional advancement, and intellectual ability" (p. 4). This expectation required Black individuals to align their behavior with White societal norms, suppressing authentic self-expression to counteract stereotypes.

Serving as a representative for a racial group impacts authentic engagement. When people feel obligated to embody not just their best selves but the best of their community, they lose the freedom to express their individuality. This conflicts with the fundamental human need to experience uniqueness (Brewer, 1991), essential for a positive self-concept. We posit that Black women recognize the historical requirement to serve as racial and gender representatives as they enact their careers, a role that creates fear that any behavioral misstep - grammatical error or fashion choice - may reinforce stereotypes. This can result in further inequities for themselves and their group, justified by existing narratives of gender and racial inferiority.

For example, imagine a Black woman often experiences microaggressions that undermine her credibility and authority in her workplace. In these situations, she must decide whether to confront her colleagues with the intensity she believes is appropriate. However, there

is a significant risk that showing her frustration with their disrespectful behavior may lead to her being labeled as “an Angry Black woman.” Moreover, the application of this label might prompt colleagues to share perceptions that hiring her – or any Black woman - was a mistake because they are too “volatile” or “threatening.”

However, providing constructive feedback to colleagues is a fundamental aspect of collegiality and fostering cooperation. True collegiality cannot exist if Black women cannot offer feedback without fear of being stereotyped or having stereotypes applied to her group as a whole. Therefore, Black women face a difficult choice: acting as a representative or engaging authentically at work, expressing their full range of emotions and behaviors with an awareness that their choices carry the risk of reinforcing pervasive stereotypes about all Black women. Ultimately, these decisions depend on first having some assurance that they will not be subjected to these stereotypes in the workplace.

Recent careers literature offers examples of stereotypes or controlling images that Black women must navigate in professional environments. For instance, Black women across three employment sectors—military, law enforcement, and city government—experienced higher levels of incivility than their Black male and White female counterparts (Cortina et al., 2013). This disparity is often attributed to persistent stereotypes portraying Black women as unsuitable for certain roles. Similarly, mentoring research reveals that Black and Latinx women receive less professional support than their male counterparts, whether Black or Asian (Davis et al., 2022). Extending earlier findings, this lack of support is tied to stereotypes that paint Black women as less competent and warm (Fiske et al., 2002). Negative stereotypes also manifest in tropes like “Sapphire” or “Crazy Black Bitch,” which depict Black women as both angry and domineering

(Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harris, 2008). Such portrayals reinforce workplace bias and negatively affect performance evaluations and growth opportunities.

Yet, under certain circumstances, fulfilling a stereotype, such as being seen as angry or dominant, may yield unique advantages. For example, Leigh & Desai (2023) suggest that because of their non-prototypicality in gendered or racial stereotypes, Black women may receive better negotiation outcomes than both Black men and White women. This is attributed to perceptions of Black women as more prestigious than Black men and more assertive than White women. Similarly, discrimination claims by Black women are treated differently than those by White women and Black men (Ponce de Leon & Rosette, 2022). The researchers found that discrimination claims made by White women were often taken more seriously than those made by Black women. However, when it came to financial remedies, Black women fared better than Black men but worse than White women. These differences are attributed to Black women being perceived as warmer than Black men, who are more likely to evoke contempt, but less warm than White women, who are more likely to evoke pity. These findings underscore the complex interplay of stereotypes in shaping Black women's career experiences. Whether stereotypes act as barriers or provide occasional advantages, they perpetuate a workplace dynamic where Black women's behavioral choices are inherently risky.

Taken together, each paradox contains contradictory realities that are self-referential, present seemingly impossible choices, and create the need for a complex repertoire of behavioral responses. To paraphrase recent research on Black executive women's careers, on the one hand, the paradoxes neutralize the effect of being a Black woman, while simultaneously compounding the stigmas and stereotypes associated with being both Black and a woman (Smith et al., 2019, p. 1729).

Proposition 3: Gendered and racialized career scripts reflect and perpetuate paradoxes that uniquely influence Black women's careers.

Gendered Racialized Career Shocks

In addition to career scripts, shocks can occur during one's life and career that stimulate career success meaning making and influence the individual's career choices and behaviors. Akkermans et al., (2021, p. 454) defined a "career shock" as "a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and triggers a deliberate thought process about one's career." For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic has been discussed as a career shock that spurred "the Great Resignation," the mass voluntary quitting by employees of all races at historic rates during 2021-2023 (Akkermans et al., 2020). Career shock events may be singular or repetitive events that are predictable or unpredictable, short or long in duration, and positive or negative in valence (Siebert et al., 2013). Shocks trigger individuals to deliberate about their careers, disrupting the status quo (i.e., one's normal thinking and actions) to consider the meaning of the event relative to one's job or career progress (Lee et al., 1996). Akkermans et al. (2018) further suggest that career shocks may reduce or enhance employee personal resources and/or emotional reactions impacting how and to what extent employees engage in various behavioral coping strategies in response to the shock. We extend the existing definition of career shocks to include racial and gender dynamics that are clearly seen when we examine the career experiences of Black women. We offer three broad examples below to illustrate.

Interracial relationships. Interracial workplace relationships involve, create, and reflect tensions that challenge forming authentic bonds at work, which may stimulate career shocks for Black women. For example, Bell and Nkomo's (2001) study found that during discussions about

workplace gender discrimination Black women managers often experienced White women managers as unwilling or unable to include racial perspectives. White women, who often held more senior leadership positions, were also more likely to align with dominant narratives that advancement in their organizations was based on merit and job performance. A career shock may occur during or after an important workplace meeting on diversity issues when a Black woman leader recognizes her lived experience is omitted by another woman leader or finds that she is alone in her efforts toward racial equality, prompting her to evaluate how to best proceed under the status quo of her current organization. Career shocks may also ensue when Black and White women form genuine relationships and act collectively (Opie and Livingston, 2022), or when a Black woman gains the support of a career sponsor whose advocacy of her and her contributions facilitates a new leadership opportunity (e.g., Erskine et al., 2021).

Inequitable treatment. Our review of the research examining Black women's career experiences also demonstrates significant disparities in workplace experiences and treatment that would lead to career shocks for Black women. Over the course of her career journey, a Black woman is likely to experience a disproportionately high number of disruptive events that stimulate, if not demand, that she intentionally reflect on her career progress and behavioral strategies. Disruptive events include but are not limited to experiencing "selective incivility" targeted at women of color (Cortina et al., 2013), higher barriers to mentoring and more negative mentoring experiences (Davis et al., 2022), and daily doses of racism (Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

Mega-threats. Finally, research on "mega-threats" shows that the effects of negative, large-scale, and often highly publicized identity-relevant societal events "spillover" to influence Black employees' experiences and behaviors at work. Recent mega-threats include mass shootings of Black people in grocery stores in New York and Florida and police killings of Black

civilians, including Michael Brown, George Floyd, and Charleena Lyles. Leigh and Melwani (2022) found that mega-threats trigger “embodied threat” in employees who share identities with mega-threat victims, prompting heightened attention to the likelihood of experiencing identity-based harm at their workplace and compelling work-avoidant behaviors like decreased engagement in work tasks or with coworkers. We posit that such mega-threats involving Black victims could also lead to career shocks for Black women prompting them to evaluate their behavioral choices (e.g., work withdrawal as found in Leigh and Melwani’s 2022 study) in their workplaces.

In sum, when interracial relationships, inequitable treatment, and mega threats prompt deep career contemplation, then they are poignant career shocks for Black women, providing salient reminders of one’s membership in an oppressed group and triggering considerations for how one’s behaviors in response to these shocks might be met with critiques or further tensions. Thus, we posit that Black women will shift their behaviors as they cope with these shocks.

Proposition 4: Black women experience gendered racialized career shocks. Examples of career shocks include interracial workplace relationships, inequitable treatment at work, and mega-threats that trigger deliberate thought processes about their careers. Career shocks influence Black women’s engagement in behavioral coping responses.

Repertoire of Identity-Aligned Behavioral Responses to Career Scripts and Shocks

Studies examining the behavior of minoritized people groups such as racial minorities and immigrants have long discussed repertoires of coping strategies. These strategies are defined as problem-focused or emotion-focused efforts to deal with environmental threats or stress-inducing situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Forms of coping include self-directed behaviors such as altering how one thinks about a situation or activities directed toward the environment

such as asserting oneself, seeking support, or suppressing culturally aligned ways of speaking or dressing (McCluney et al., 2021). Similarly, we posit that Black women adopt a repertoire of identity-aligned behavioral responses to gendered racialized career scripts and career shocks. Behavioral repertoires encompass the orientations and self-presentation strategies utilized by Black women to enact gendered racialized scripts and respond to career shocks in alignment with their gendered racial identity. Over time, these behaviors can influence institutions such as professions. Like other kinds of repertoires (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2022), career response repertoires are shaped through a variety of influences including observations, advice, media, interactions with family, social networks, religious leaders, educational institutions, as well as from both successful and unsuccessful experiences navigating workspaces. We posit that Black women construct a repertoire of behaviors because no single strategy is always effective or ineffective in influencing career success perceptions.

Based on existing research, we expect Black women's behavioral repertoire to include five categories of responses: authentic self-expression, shifting or codeswitching, active resistance, threat reduction/mitigation, and reinvention. There may be other categories, but we focus on these because research demonstrates their connections to scripts, paradoxes, or contextual threats.

Authentic self-expression is described as the ability to bring one's whole self to work. Authentic self-expression is a response to the paradoxes of invisibility and representation. For example, in a recent qualitative study of Black women executives, the majority (80%) discussed how "benign intersectional invisibility" - described as a condition where gender and race seem to cancel the impact of the other - gave them the freedom to be themselves (Smith et al., 2019) including representing their communities. These women discuss coming to terms with their

differences from White men and women and choosing to be known rather than shrinking from vulnerability. Authentic self-expression may include engaging in displays of anger or being authoritative despite the angry Black woman stereotype because this behavior is consistent with identity and appropriate for the situation. One example of authentic self-expression may be related to how Black women style their hair. A recent study (Dawson et al., 2019) found that for some Black women, wearing chemically straightened hair is conforming and shameful while others see it as the price of admission to a professional career. Authentic self-expression is the result of reflection on who one is and aligning one's internal sense of self with external behavior (Cha et al., 2019).

Shifting or code-switching has been identified as a subterfuge that Black women engage in to placate others by hiding their authentic selves (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; McCluney et al., 2021). Code-switching includes behaviors related to work success that meet White cultural standards such as adopting a "White sounding voice" (McCluney et al., 2021). Identity shifting is a common strategy used by Black women. Indeed, in their survey of Black women, Jones and Shorter Gooden (2001) found that most survey respondents (58%) reported identity shifting to gain acceptance by Whites. However, shifting is not confined to interactions with White colleagues but may also be enacted in interactions with Black men and women due to bicultural stress, a psychological tension Black women experience when "they are compelled to suppress or diminish one part of their identity in order to exist in either of the cultural contexts where they work or live" (Bell & Nkomo, 2001, p. 13). We propose shifting may be a response to the paradoxes of interests and representation as Black women seek to advance the interests of multiple stakeholders and represent multiple communities well. Black women's codeswitching entails understanding the "social requirements, values, and behavior patterns" (Bell, 1990, p.

462) of the various groups they belong to. For instance, when engaging with a women's employee resource group (ERG), composed of primarily white women, a Black woman may find herself shifting into "white voice" or talking about organizational or national issues and events that highlight gender but are colorblind. In a Black ERG, she may shift the conversation to talking about issues and events that highlight Blackness but downplay gender. Importantly, shifting stands in contrast to authentic self-expression because one pole of paradox demands codeswitching while another permits a degree of self-expression.

Active resistance is defined as tactics, spurred by anger, to call out and correct behavior perceived as wrong or unjust (Bhattacharyya & Berhdahl, 2023). We extend the idea of active resistance to include certain agentic visibility tactics described by Smith et al., (2019) such as taking on high-visibility risky assignments, accepting risky jobs, and making bold statements. Both sets of tactics are responses to the invisibility paradox and involve women making demands that injustice, unfair treatment, and the women themselves be recognized. Black women may also resist when things in the context, such as mega-threats, demand greater attention (Leigh & Melwani, 2019). Examples of active resistance include challenging others, demanding acknowledgement of problematic situations, and other acts of positive deviance such as pro-group voice (Leigh & Melwani, 2019) to improve organizational conditions for Black women, Black people, or women of all races. Similarly, agentic visibility challenges people to see Black women as credible and persons of conviction by making bold statements (Smith et al., 2019).

Threat reduction involves suppressing a stigmatized identity and seeking to blend in (Smith et al., 2019). We distinguish threat-reducing behavior from codeswitching. While both are designed to make white or black people more comfortable with the focal person, they are different kinds of responses to invisibility or other career script content. Code switching is an

attempt to be noticed as an ideal employee that meets white cultural standards. In contrast, we describe threat reduction as behavior designed to blend in and downplay what makes one different or stellar. This is akin to McCluney & Rabelo's (2019) definition of invisibility with high belonging and low distinctiveness. Thus, it might include the use of strategic invisibility (Smith et al., 2019) such as going under the radar or doing the work that others don't want to do (such as office housework). Additionally, Black women may behave in stereotypical or non-stereotypical ways to appease coworkers and managers (Dickens et al., 2019). An example would be ignoring discrimination out of fear that by addressing it one would fulfill the angry Black woman trope.

Reinvention is described as a process of changing roles or organizations to achieve greater alignment between personal values, skills, or work environments (Smith et al., 2019). Reinvention might include role changes, pursuing entrepreneurial dreams, or working with nonprofit organizations. For example, in research from the African American Women's Voice project (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), one woman discussed leaving the practice of law and a prestigious law firm to become a professor. As a professor, there was more acceptance of her hair, dress, and speech patterns. She experienced a greater degree of belonging as a result of this change. Another woman described leaving banking to open a daycare and after-school center for single mothers. Indeed, Black women are the fastest-growing group of entrepreneurs (Smith, CNBC, 2024). Finally, Tomlinson et al. (2013) found a similar pattern where Black women reinvented themselves but within the field of law. For example, one woman opened a law firm and founded the "first black-owned firm in the City," creating a practice committed to diversity and equity (Tomlinson et al., 2013, p. 261). Importantly, Black women relate experiences of being plateaued (Smith et al., 2019), not belonging, or feeling that they are letting people down

(Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Thus, behavioral response repertoires appear related to individually held perceptions of career success. In our next section, we will discuss the implications of behaviors for career success perceptions.

Proposition 5: Identity-aligned behavioral repertoires represent strategic adaptations by Black women to navigate and reshape career scripts and respond to career shocks, ultimately influencing both personal career success perceptions (forward arrow) and institutional practices (backward arrow).

Implications of Behavioral Repertoires for Career Success Perceptions

Recent research has suggested greater emphasis on objective career outcomes due to their methodological value for making quantitative comparisons across people (Siebert et al., 2024). However, we challenge this focus by emphasizing the value of studying career success *perceptions*, aligning with critiques that view career success as socially constructed rather than objectively defined (Dries et al., 2008). A social constructivist worldview contends individuals construct meaning through their experiences which are negotiated socially and historically (Creswell, 2009). Thus, we do not seek to define success as an objective reality but as determined by the “world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture” (p. 8). Employing a Black feminist epistemology lens, we center the voices of Black women and their perceptions of their success, rather than imposing normative views of career success that may overlook the historical and intersectional experiences that influence their career success definitions and perceptions.

In exploring the under-researched area of career success perceptions and identity-aligned behaviors, we draw on findings from studies examining Black women’s career experiences. While the extant research has not directly addressed these important relationships, our analysis

uncovers evidence substantiating their significance. We detail our interpretations and the implications below.

OCS perceptions. We posit a negative relationship between Black women's perceptions of OCS and their engagement in identity-aligned behaviors deployed in response to gendered and racialized career scripts and shocks. This relationship is influenced by their acute awareness of inequities within objective career outcomes, making any perceived career success feel elusive and tainted by systemic injustices. Such perceptions are often reinforced by well-intentioned mentors and leaders' whose attempts to urge Black women to work twice as hard as others to achieve success (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020) inadvertently highlight the unequal playing field.

Statistical evidence supports the pervasive nature of these inequities: Black women earn less than their White and male counterparts and are significantly underrepresented in C-suite roles despite high educational attainment. For example, in a Government Accountability Office report published in 2022, Black women earned 63 cents for every dollar White, non-Hispanic men earned (compared to 82 cents for White women and 73 cents for Black men; Women in the Workplace, n.d.). Additionally, Black women occupy 1.4% of C-suite roles (Richard-Craven, 2023).

Moreover, a recent study on the careers of executive Black women illustrates this negative relationship (Smith et al., 2019). It details how, even after taking on high visibility, high-risk assignments, participants still faced career plateaus, such as being demoted or receiving meaningless titles instead of real advancement. For example, a senior managing director, despite earning national recognition, was passed over for a promotion she deserved and was instead offered a nominal vice-chair position, which she declined. This case illustrates how Black

women's efforts are often not reciprocated with commensurate OCS, thereby reinforcing the negative relationship between their identity-aligned behaviors and their OCS perceptions.

While there is limited empirical research examining the relationship between OCS perceptions, race, and identity aligned behaviors such as authenticity and reinvention, examples from the popular press suggest that these behaviors may positively influence objective career outcomes for Black women. Bozema Saint John, a prominent marketing executive, offers a compelling example. With an estimated net worth of over \$30 million and executive roles at major firms including Apple, Uber, and Netflix (Networthy, 2024) Saint John has achieved notable career success. In a Harvard Business Review multimedia case (Gino, 2021), Saint John reflects on her journey, sharing that she has often been advised to alter her tone, gestures, attire, and hairstyles to align with conventional corporate norms. Yet, despite attempting to adapt, these adjustments did not resonate with her identity and were rarely rewarded; she recounts that she has never received a positive performance review.

Instead, Saint John found success by embracing authenticity, choosing to show up “unapologetically” as herself. She argues that the rules of self-presentation were written for “someone else” and suggests that authenticity is a source of strength and empowerment. This example highlights an important area for future research: while the positive impact of identity-aligned behaviors on OCS is not yet empirically established, real-world cases suggest that authenticity and reinvention may indeed serve as viable strategies for supporting OCS perceptions for Black women.

SCS perceptions. We posit two possible relationships between identity-aligned behaviors and SCS perceptions. First, we theorize that a negative relationship between Black women's SCS perceptions and identity-aligned behaviors is indicated by persistent double standards, invisible

rules of workplace engagement, and other gendered racial dynamics (e.g., stereotype threat) that consume significant cognitive and emotional energy to navigate organizational spaces resulting in little subjective career success. An example of double standards relates to normative expectations, which name straight hair as more “professional” than curly or coily hair. According to the NAACP legal defense fund, 80% of Black women reported feeling compelled to change their hairstyle to be accepted at work. There have also been cases of Black people being terminated or having job offers revoked because of hair discrimination (*NAACP, n.d.*). Meeting professional expectations frequently also means that Black women are unable to engage in the full repertoire of identity-aligned behaviors, particularly authentic expression. Consistent with extant research (Shockley et al., 2016), we posit that the inability to be authentic leads to less subjective career success. Moreover, Black women may also have less satisfying and personally meaningful career experiences because they are less likely to have career support in the form of mentoring. Davis et al. (2022) demonstrated that Black women experienced more negative mentoring experiences where their mentors fell short of providing the mentoring they promised, engaged in manipulative behaviors, or provided poor and conflicting advice resulting in the need for Black women to assert themselves. A lack of reliable, helpful mentoring will likely lead to less subjective career success. Thus, we propose that the relationship between engagement in a repertoire of identity-aligned behaviors and SCS is likely to be negative.

Alternatively, when individuals can engage in authentic self-expression and reinvention, which involves leaving unsatisfactory career experiences to engage in ones that are more aligned with personal values and skills, then SCS may result from identity-aligned career behaviors. For example, in Smith et al.’s (2019) study, Pilar, a former Executive Vice President of Consumer Products, shares that she happily decided to retire from a career that others might think was

objectively successful so that she could commit the rest of her life to work she believed had significance. Reinvention gives individuals a greater sense of satisfaction and meaning by taking control of their careers and focusing on tasks aligned with their values. Thus, we also posit that feeling freed from constraints, engaging in authentic self-expression, and having room for reinvention are positively related to SCS.

CCS perceptions. We posit a positive relationship between CCS and Black women's repertoire of identity-aligned behaviors. These behaviors enable Black women to navigate frequently hostile workplaces where their treatment reminds them that they are part of a collective struggle against racism, sexism, and gendered racism. The need to survive hostile workplaces through actions such as active resistance or code-switching connects Black women to historical roots, fostering a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves – intertwined with the struggles and progress of the larger Black community. This is exemplified in the epigraph where Taraji Henson expresses a sense of responsibility toward future Black women actors.

Historically, Black women have been encouraged to be “race women” leading the charge in transmitting values for racial uplift through professional and civic activities. For example, Black women educators saw themselves “more as ‘uplifters’ than as working women...Educating the children of poor unlettered blacks was considered part of their moral and social obligations as educated women” (Collins, 1990, p. 51). To seek to uplift the race appears to resonate with many Black women, as captured by a Medgar Evers’ college student who stated, “...it’s important to realize that no matter your age or what you’ve been through each person can make a contribution to changing the conditions of our people” (p. 154).

Careers research highlights the potential importance of a positive relationship between identity-aligned behaviors and collective career success perceptions. For example, scholars have emphasized the need for further investigation into how gendered racial socialization influences shifting behaviors (Dickens et al., 2019). We interpret their advocacy for this research as an indication that Black women, taught to value their Black woman-ness and make contributions to the Black community, may engage in identity-aligned behaviors such as code-switching or active resistance. We posit that they believe these behaviors will potentially yield positive long-term impacts, such as increasing the number of Black people in places of power and decision making, even in the face of personally challenging work situations.

An example of reinvention and collective career success can be drawn from an executive Black woman who retired from a financial services firm. She shared that her passion for the health of older women, especially African American women, influenced her to retire so that she could devote herself to this cause. She states, “When my mother passed, she was morbidly obese, hypertension, diabetes, she had it all ... and was in a wheelchair the last five years of her life because of her morbid obesity. I thought to myself, “I’m not going out like this, and, if I can help some other sisters not go out like this, that’s what I am going to do” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 23). Her statement suggests a positive link between reinvention and CCS.

Finally, we theorize that identity-aligned behaviors are important strategies that are frequently positively related to career success perceptions. However, there may be costs associated with engaging in behaviors like codeswitching. In their study of working, college-educated Black women, Dickens and Chavez (2018) discuss several negative consequences of identity shifting. For example, some study informants describe experiencing the “frozen effect” (p. 767), where they resorted to “checking out,” a behavior characterized by silence, as a coping

mechanism. Self-silencing, in turn, has been linked to declines in self-esteem and a diminished sense of self (Jack & Dill, 1992). While we predict that identity-aligned behaviors generally have a positive effect on perceptions of career success, we recognize that engagement in such behaviors can also have negative effects, such as self-silencing and feelings of inauthenticity.

In conclusion, while the research in this area is nascent, we believe that the existing evidence suggests a positive relationship between identity-aligned behavioral responses and CCS perceptions. We provide the following propositions:

Proposition 6: The engagement in identity-aligned behaviors by Black women, in response to gendered and racialized career scripts and shocks, will be negatively associated with their perceptions of OCS, influenced by their acute awareness of pervasive systemic inequities. In some cases, identity-aligned behaviors, such as authenticity, may be positively associated with OCS perceptions.

Proposition 7: Engagement in identity-aligned behaviors is associated with both positive and negative perceptions of SCS among Black women.

Proposition 8: Identity-aligned behaviors are positively related to perceptions of CCS among Black women, reflecting their commitment to both personal success and broader community uplift.

Discussion

The aim of this conceptual analysis is to address gaps in research about career success by exploring how gendered racialized social structures influence career success perceptions.

Specifically, as most career success studies have focused on OCS and SCS, we suggest that future work examine CCS perceptions, which we describe as a Black woman's evaluation that her career actions and achievements contribute to her group's interests rather than solely

benefitting her or even the world at large. We further suggest that scholars examine how career scripts are racialized and gendered to reflect and perpetuate stereotypes that uniquely influence Black women's careers. Black women respond to these career scripts with identity-aligned behavioral repertoires informed by internal and external career shocks such as mega-threats, inequitable treatment, and interracial relationships. Our resulting conceptual model, while not exhaustive, depicts gendered racial dynamics impacting Black women's career behaviors and introduces a new conceptualization of career success that provides insight into the importance of incorporating intersectionality in future career studies.

Implications for Future Research

We extend recent research calling for greater attention to career success among socially marginalized and underrepresented group members (Seibert et al., 2024). Specifically, we have focused on a particular minoritized group – Black women – because of the intersecting systems of oppression that affect their lives, work experiences, and career trajectories. Based on our analysis, we offer several implications for future work on Black women's careers and career success research.

First, we suggest further work considering the meaning and content of scripts. Recent research described career scripts as predefined frameworks shared within a professional community (Laudel, 2019). According to this conceptualization, scripts are instrumental in guiding individuals through an expected career progression within certain fields or organizations. Other scholars have defined scripts as individuals' context bound answers to questions about their career paths (Valette & Culié, 2015). We argue that career scripts are not neutral guidelines but are inherently racialized and gendered, shaping different agentic responses for Black women compared to members of more dominant groups, such as White men, Black men, and White

women. These differences in script interpretation and enactment are primarily a consequence of the disparate opportunities and constraints imposed by social structures based on race, gender, and other identity dimensions. Future research can also examine other identity dimensions, such as social class, age, ability, sexual orientation, and their intersections. For example, career scripts may also be age-stratified and able-bodied normalized. A career script may suggest that individuals of a certain age should retire, and able-bodied normativity may support this narrative with stereotypes that physical or mental challenges disqualify individuals from being effective employees. Additionally, there are age-related paradoxes that provide both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, age is revered (e.g., elders are wise), while on the other, it is demeaned (i.e., older people should step aside because they have outdated ideas and values). Indeed, these dynamics appear to significantly influence societal perceptions and structures, as evidenced in the 2024 presidential election process, where President Biden's age became associated with infirmity and was viewed by some as a disqualifier for a second term (Lerer & Igielnik, 2024).

Moreover, studying the careers of Black women may provide insight into the link between institutions, scripts, and agency. Black women's responses to racialized and gendered career scripts have prompted institutional changes. For example, advocacy for and passage of the CROWN Act in 17 states signifies a shift in societal norms, challenging conventional definitions of professionalism and advocating for inclusivity. Similarly, Black women contend with career shocks, including mass media coverage of police violence. However, career shocks studies rarely consider this kind of career disturbance. To further work on career scripts and career shocks as gendered and racialized, we suggest future research incorporate racialization research (Ray, 2019), which explains how race influences agency, resource distribution, the

credentialization of Whiteness, and organizational practices. With these considerations, future research holds promise for scholars, career actors, and managers alike, to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between careers and institutions.

Paradox has been an important framework for examining the careers of women and Black women in particular (Bhattacharyya & Berdahl, 2023; Hall et al., 2019; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). We extend this research by examining the repertoire of identity-aligned behaviors that Black women employ to manage paradoxical and gendered racial expectations and how those behaviors influence career success perceptions. While our focus has been on identity alignment, it is important to note that Black women do not always engage in such behaviors. For example, adopting White cultural expressions in hair, dress, or speech because one believes they are superior to Black cultural expressions is not code-switching but rather a form of assimilation characterized by the internalization of negative stereotypes and uncritical acceptance of these stereotypes (assimilation ideology, Williams & Lewis, 2021). According to the research, the adoption of an assimilation ideology is typically associated with early stages of Black women's gendered racial identity development.

We further suggest future researchers refine and measure CCS, which we see as distinct from SCS. Unlike SCS, CCS is deeply tied to an individual's membership in a stigmatized or marginalized group, where community uplift is frequently prioritized over personal career satisfaction (Sendze, 2023). This type of career success is uniquely experienced by individuals who are not just serving but are also members of the communities they aim to uplift. For example, an individual from outside a marginalized community might work to improve conditions within that community and achieve SCS; however, without shared membership and identity, we contend CCS would not occur, because CCS inherently involves a personal

connection and commitment to the group's welfare. Future studies should also explore the relationships among OCS, SCS, and CCS. Research such as that by Abele and Spurk (2009) reveals that while SCS has a strong positive influence on OCS over time, the reverse does not appear to be true. This finding highlights the complex dynamics between different types of career success.

Finally, we encourage careers researchers to broaden their epistemological frames beyond the traditional White, Eurocentric social constructions of knowledge (Collins, 2000; Williams & Lewis, 2021). Incorporating diverse perspectives, such as indigenous epistemologies, has proven valuable, enriching management and organizational science research with new insights and methodologies (Salmon et al., 2023). In our research, the application of black feminist epistemology has introduced unique historical and lived experiences of Black women, contributing to a previously unexplored conceptualization of career success. This approach has revealed dimensions of career success rooted deeply in the unique history of Black women in the United States. Building on this foundation, future studies should investigate how membership in various marginalized and stigmatized identity groups, including immigrants, refugees, and members of the LGBTQ+ community, influences career decisions and perceptions of success. Explorations of these diverse experiences promise to expand our understanding of career success in a more inclusive and comprehensive manner.

Implications for Practice

Our paper provides important practical implications for Black women, career counselors, coaches, and organizational leaders. First, leaders often adopt a difference-blind approach, ignoring the unique experiences and institutional expectations of Black women. Our proposed

framework offers leaders insight into how career scripts are gendered and racialized and replicate stereotypes that uniquely complicate workplace experiences for Black women.

Second, our analysis posits that Black women engage in a repertoire of behaviors that may appear contradictory, such as authentic self-expression followed by threat reduction. These behaviors are often responses to career shocks and are shaped by the overarching gendered racialized career scripts they must navigate. Recognizing this, career counselors and coaches should tailor their strategies to help Black women manage these challenges effectively, enhancing the range of career behaviors that can be seen as identity-aligned and lead to career success perceptions.

Finally, our research reveals that Black women often have a concept of career success that diverges from traditional definitions prevalent among other employees. Their sense of success is deeply intertwined with a collective, intersectional struggle, emphasizing the advancement of broader Black community interests. Organizations that create opportunities for Black women to pursue these collective interests will likely see improved recruitment and retention of Black talent. Leaders must consider these collective dimensions when designing career development programs and organizational policies that support Black women's unique career success concerns.

Conclusion

While some may view the focus on Black women's careers as too niche, this paper demonstrates that research on Black women is essential for a comprehensive understanding of career dynamics. By employing intersectional analyses, we reveal how diverse influences—such as racialized and gendered career scripts, paradoxes like invisibility and hypervisibility, and career shocks such as mega-threats —impact careers. Finally, we introduce CCS as a novel

concept that broadens our understanding of career success to include contributions to advancing group interests. Thus, our work not only highlights specific challenges faced by Black women but also provides insight on factors that affect the career success perceptions of many individuals in an increasingly diverse global workforce.

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