

Interpretations of Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC) Leaders: Examining Identity, Response Styles, and Coping Mechanisms

Sade Davis
University of Alabama

William L. McClain
University of Phoenix

Identity is integral to how people come to understand their state of being, internally, in relation to others and within society. This study found that Black, Indigenous, and women of color (BIWOC) operating in leadership roles, constructed their identities using two frameworks: physical embodiment and social conduct. Once outlined, identity helped to inform how BIWOC responded when challenged within the workplace. A combination of mediated representations and interview data supported the following response styles: satire (comedic device), deliberate action, submission, and negotiated compromise. This understood, it was necessary to investigate coping mechanisms, as challenge can often incite confusion. Data showed that recreational activities and external support permitted the restoration of identity after it had been disrupted. Altogether, future studies should consider the frequency (how often) and the particular challenges BIWOC women face within the workplace, as compared to their White counterparts.

Keywords: black, indigenous, and women of color, identity, response styles, and coping mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

If people were given the assignment to delineate an original tale of how they came to be or sense their place in society, how and what would they present? Contrary to public perception, the voyage to identification is not facile. Immanently situated at the bare, unpolished core of humanness is a principle that headquarters, safeguards, and continually refines the state and quality of one's being (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Identity, as it is often termed, is characterized by a particular complexity. Under increased examination, its intangible and tangible characteristics may be observed as either competitors or partners that mutually reinforce one another. Language awakens it into a stream of consciousness, while actions and behaviors corroborate its existence. Collectively, it is a social construct that extends itself as an identifier, which facilitates communication and relation among individuals. If communicative conundrums arise, all should not be lost. It can be manufactured and narrowed into layman terms. At such a point, it becomes recognizable, relatable, and digestible.

Considering this, there is a proverbial saying that asserts a person can be taken out of their place of origin, but the origin and its accompanying characteristics can never be extracted. Therefore, identity isn't necessarily affixed to one's geographical positioning, but in essence it is internally embedded and externally enacted. This notion is essentially intriguing when examining the performances of the majority and

marginalized social members. In the way that, no matter how far removed one may be from their historical conditions, the actions, behaviors, and perceptions have grossly established a framework for repeat reference. Consequently, those who have been deemed as more acceptable (the majority), are provided with a certain, powerful foothold. In the same way, power's utility is intuitive. At its disposal is an authoritative muscle strength that sanctions people into obedience. It has a marked normalizing effect (Resser, 2010).

For this reason, an inquest into the identity management and reconciliation processes of Black, Indigenous, women of color (BIWOC), when placed in challenging contexts is warranted. To add depth to these efforts, this study illuminates the accounts of BIWOC women, seated in leadership positions. Leadership in this context has been defined as the ability to influence and guide organizational members (Pratt, 2017). The notion is that, regardless of the distinction notably assigned, the workplace itself is an embodiment of power. Per Resser (2010), institutions have a vested interest in exerting their influence over people, and where there is power there is resistance. Thus, whether a BIWOC is auditioning for organizational advancement or has just attained it, performances are procedural.

The researcher's efforts were backed by theoretical frameworks that, when paired, function as a complementary unit. Intersectionality theory contends that a combination of identities interact and intersect to inform an individual's lived experience against the backdrop of oppression (as suspended by power). Dissimilar to femininity, which has an unspoken urgency to White, heterosexual women (Han & Heldman, 2018), intersectionality expands the framing from which people are observed/identified. Thus, intersectionality intentionally makes space for identities that routinely escape recognition. Here, the oppressions provoked by sex, race, class, ability, and religion are confronted (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2022). Further, face negotiation theory petitions that everyone has a face they'd like to project and a desire for others to observe (Floyd et al., 2017). In the presence of challenge, when the face is tested, resolution responses and techniques are subjectively determined by one's cultural occupation. That is, culture is significantly influential in how others respond to and identify a resolve when challenged. Face negotiation acknowledges identity and provides feasible conflict styles, but it is done under the comprehensive umbrella of culture.

Laws and regulations acknowledge the reality of discrimination, by targeting potential sites and sources. However, they do not negate its emergence or illuminate the lived experiences of the oppressed when they are directly challenged. This study will dissect responses to challenging behaviors and coping mechanisms. In this manner, three research questions are proposed for this research:

Research 1: *How do Black, Indigenous and women of color (BIWOC) construct their identities?*

Research Question 2: *How do Black, Indigenous and women of color (BIWOC) women in leadership positions respond when one of their identities is challenged?*

Research Question 3: *What coping mechanisms help BIWOC women repair the disruptions to their identity/identities?*

METHODS

The intent of this study was to conduct an exploratory investigation into the rationale and response behaviors of marginalized women, who occupy leadership roles. Quantitative approaches are particularly helpful in the determination of patterns and statistical inferences. However, the current pursuit sought to understand the lived experiences of BIWOC, without constructing estimations. In this manner, qualitative research methods were identified as the most appropriate. These methods permitted the preservation of interpretations as they were and invited researchers to fairly assess them. This study used a combination of discourse (mediated representations) and semi-structured interviews, to sense how the identities of marginalized women are negotiated and resolved when challenged.

The researcher's identification as an African American woman, authorized a premature and intimate connection to the study. Understanding the historical and continuing experiences affixed to those regarded

as racial minorities, constructed a safe space, void of rehearsed speech. Participants were the rightful owners of their thoughts and provided confident contributions. That said, while race fashioned an anchor to the participants, there were other commonalities and inevitable differences. For instance, the researcher has operated in several leadership roles, which entailed overseeing teams and recommending protocol revisions. Conversely, occupations and identities are predicated on life experience and interests. At no point would these ever seamlessly align. In sum, while the researcher's subjectivity could have influenced the orientation of the results, the researcher believes it did not decrease or impede its integrity. Instead, it facilitated rapport and encouraged thoughtful engagement.

DATA COLLECTION

Two types of data were applied to address the research questions. Firstly, discourse in the form of mediated representations of BIWOC was analyzed to fabricate the starting point. A total of three shows included *Insecure*, *Station 19*, and *The Chair* were surveyed to wholly capture and round the approach to the concepts at hand. These separate accounts included illustrations of Black, Latinx, and Asian women as the central figures. Moreover, outside of their distinct racial qualities, the women occupied roles that influenced change within their respective non-profit, domestic, and academic spheres. To obtain a raw understanding of their conditions, the researcher refrained from watching beyond the pilot series, unless it was necessary. That is, if a foundational picture could not be drawn from the episodes (which averaged 30 to 40 minutes), additional observation was vital to create a realistic outline. The second source of data was interviews conducted with four BIWOC operating in leadership capacities. The interview protocol and strategies have been included below.

Participants

The participants in this interview were vetted and determined to be qualified sources. All of them were middle-class, African-American women who worked in a post which helped shape, guide, or inform departmental strategies and their implementation. One woman was in her 50s and the remaining three were in their late 20s. Three out of the four participants had a relatively extensive history with their position and occupation. One had just recently transitioned from educational services to corporate consultation. The participants were college educated and had differing degrees of schooling. Between the women, there were 3 bachelors, 2 masters, and 1 doctoral degree. Two women self-identified as mothers and one reported that she was married. While each participant indicated an indifference for the disclosure of their names, pseudonyms were used to ensure the protection of their contributions. As it stands, this study is not meant to reduce or present an embodiment of the participants' character.

Athena was the most versed. She had accumulated a breadth of knowledge and experience that extended beyond her position. At the time of the study, she had well over 25+ years of experience as a lieutenant for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. Prior to this, she served in the military and within the last two years, had attained a doctoral degree. Tems and Doe both completed their bachelor's degrees in 2016 and immediately entered the workforce. Tems had spent five years working as a program manager, before she made the transition to consulting. This shift was recent, and she had only been in her current role for five months. Doe had spent four years in her role as a program services senior specialist and was in the process of changing organizations. She was expected to retain certain responsibilities, such as case management and outreach services. Being said, she would be departing from the non-profit domain, to work more closely with the local and state government. Lotus had been working as a social worker for the last three years and just changed agencies within four months of the interview.

Interview Protocol

The current researcher generated 11 main open-ended questions to capture information to address the research questions (see Appendix A). The questions were posited in their entirety during each interview, unless the participants acknowledged them indirectly or needed additional context. This was done largely so as to not slant or destabilize the degree of information received. However, after the first interview, a

definitional rather than personal exemplar for identity was integrated. Follow-up questions were preemptively built in to be used if the main questions failed to achieve generative or comprehensive insight.

Interview Procedures

The sample of this study was selected by convenience. In this manner, the accessibility and reduced costs associated with the population outweighed other options. Alternatively, one participant attempted to enlarge the selection, but outreach to the referral was unsuccessful. Still, opportunistic sampling enabled the circumvention of excess time needed, usually to build rapport and establish trust.

The researcher identified and recruited the participants after assessing work, family, and social networks. Three of the participants were contacted through written correspondence, such as text and instant (Microsoft Teams) messaging. One participant was recruited in-person. During the initial contact attempts, participants were briefed on the framework of the interviews. The objective of the study, option for anonymity, and right to termination were thoroughly articulated. Each of them provided informed consent to have their interviews recorded for transcription purposes. Of the four interviews, two took place face-to-face, one by phone, and the other over Microsoft Teams audio. It should be noted that due to time constraints, one of the face-to-face interviews was halted, and resumed a week later over FaceTime. Participants were not inconvenienced by or expected to travel. Nonetheless, with two of the participants being family members, pre-arranged visits helped facilitate data collection. The format of the interviews was semi-structured to allow room for elaboration and the flow of ideas. The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 minutes to an hour. Interviews were then transcribed for the analysis aspect of the study. Scripts for the television programming can be found in Appendix B. Interview transcriptions can be found in Appendix C.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Interviews were transcribed by a 3rd party transcription service, GoTranscript. Upon completion, the transcriptions were replayed alongside the original audio. Revisions were made that required correction to the wording to preserve originality. Mediated discourse and interview data were then categorized through comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Dialogue and text were analyzed extensively to determine themes and their underlying subsections. Under this method, categories were sensed to help shape the codes for the research questions. Based on the assigned codes, mediated discourse and data were affixed to relevant categories. Finally, quotes from interviewees and mediated characters were pulled to strengthen the interpretation of the categories.

RESULTS

Interpretation of Identity

Research question one asked how BIWOC construct their understanding of identity. To answer this question, participants were first asked to name their identity (identities), illustrate its use in shaping and understanding decisions, and to describe its perceived visibility. The questions were necessary for establishing the foundation of the interview, as it provided a frame(s) for repeat reference. Through the evaluation of identity, participants were able to conceptualize their identities and recognize its influence in both internal and external facing interactions. Participants identified a variety of identities, but the most significant component was embedded in how the identities were channeled. The two primary themes that emerged were: physical embodiment and social conduct.

Physical Embodiment

Identity was addressed in the sense of physical characteristics, that actively assisted in the way participants came to understand themselves and their place in society. Comments made by Tems directly illustrated this notion. Tems mentioned that she had never really saw herself as anything other than being Black and a woman:

I guess I've never really thought about it besides anything that goes beyond race, I always just refer to myself and identify myself as an African American woman or a Black woman. Anything past that, I don't think I really thought about it too much.

For Tems, identity was determined by her external framework. They were the inbred components of herself, that could be realized by anyone with clear eyesight. While all respondents varied in the list of reported identities, each identified as being Black and a woman.

Social Conduct

A number of participants were able to recount behavioral traits that weren't particularly tangible, but could be observed through demonstration. These traits were often mannerisms that connected or distinguished participants from others. Doe mentioned:

I carry myself in a professional way. Upon hearing the way, I speak and talk, I think people understand that, hey, this is someone who's a professional and works in this environment. It may be even after seeing the title under my name, "Oh, yes, of course, this is a professional."

Echoing Doe, Athena offered:

I would say an introvert, most would probably say not an introvert. Uhm with extrovert attributes depending on the environment situation.

Doe was able to characterize herself apart from physicalities, especially in a context where appearance could not be examined. While anyone can identify as a professional or an introvert, the qualities that constitute these identities cannot be corroborated through the mere acts of being and existing. Rather, it is recognized through socialization.

Responses to Identity Challenges Within the Workplace

The second research question asked about how BIWOC responded when their identities were challenged. This question offered a glimpse into the emotional and cognitive behaviors of respondents, as they navigated uncomfortable or unpleasant situations as organizational members. Additional insight was gathered from the dialogue of BIWOC as shown through mediated representations. This led to the discovery of four response styles: satire (comedic device), deliberate action, submission, and negotiated compromise. Satire (Comedic Device) Issa Dee, a fictional character on the television show *Insecure*, attempted to galvanize student interest in the educational non-profit organization (of which she was an employee). Instead of exploring the organization's purpose and utility, a slew of questions rang testing the presentation of her identity. A student posited: "Why do you talk like a white girl?"

Issa replied: Haaa...you caught me. I'm rockin' Blackface.

In the same vein, Ji-Yoon Kim as the designated chair of an English department on *The Chair*, attempted to alleviate the concerns of a colleague by asserting:

When I started, it was like, "Why is some Asian lady teaching Emily Dickinson?"

Both Issa and Ji-Yoon were able to accommodate their identities using satire. Whether it was apparent or perceived, challenges were repackaged into humorous frames. However, there is a possibility that these frames, despite their willful application, prompted internal conflict. In line with Gilyard, African Americans

routinely “adopt a laughing to keep crying response to “keep on pushing” through oppression” (as cited in Carey, 2020, p. 275).

Deliberate Action

To varying degrees, the respondents acknowledged their comfort in addressing a situation and/or person head-on. Timing and space were significant elements that influenced the expression of feelings. Teme described that it took her a while, but she eventually developed a response style that she felt was appropriate:

It took some work, but I feel like I’m successful at it now. I always pull the person to the side or speak to them outside of the group and let them know what my issue was. What they said and why it’s not okay, and why it does not matter in the workplace. That actually happened between me and my first manager at my first job. She used to always call me a little girl and reference my age a lot. I had to pull my boss to the side and let her know how inappropriate that was.

The notion of addressing superiors was reinforced through Athena:

Um, different places, different faces that I can respond differently to it, you know either by reporting it, either by having a conversation with superiors who may or may not be allies with these same individuals or reporting it to outside entities.

And again, with Andrea (Andy), a Puerto-Rican firehouse lieutenant in the run for Captain:

I just don’t appreciate you pulling these “Fun Dad” moves with the steaks and the boots when we both know I have a bigger hill to climb here. I heard what she said to you, Jack. You did? She made it pretty clear this was your race to lose. I’m not going down without a fight.

The performances of Teme, Athena, and Andy actualize the cognitive exchanges that many marginalized persons experience. When the desire to overcome and resist emerges, only a select few have the self-confidence to take measures into their own hands, for themselves and the betterment of others.

Submission

What if the challenge was accepting that there was no challenge? Despite respondents’ willingness to stand their ground if/when their identities were questioned, there was an almost equal admission that their perception didn’t or wouldn’t always signify truth. Thus, the encounters that feel like attacks to one’s identity, are intentional responses predicated on consciousness. Some were willing to take the step back and assess. This was perfectly described through Lotuts’ account:

I just kind of tried to be like, “okay, well like that, if you” because at that point I had only been working for like two years in that field. So it was like, “okay, well you’ve been doing this longer than I have. So maybe you’re right. Maybe you-you are making a better decision, um, or you’re making the right decision at this point.” So just kind of trying to like go into, um, I guess kind of admit to it and use the reasoning. “Well, you’ve been doing this longer than me, you are not an expert, but you-you can make a better decision than I can.”

Negotiated Compromise

In so many words, several respondents alluded to an intrinsic superpower they had developed over the course of repeat encounters. Essentially, before they were ever approached, they had preplanned

troubleshoot strategies. Thus, they were spared the “told you so’s” and were able to retain their composure and headspace. Doe described how she routinely presented an alternative:

I feel it’s challenged every so often as opposed to it coming from my boss, Michael. I think sometimes, I’ll say something, and they’ll just still go up and double-check with Michael. Even sometimes I’ll be flat out like, “I’m not super sure. I’m pretty sure it’s this, but you can feel free to touch base with Michael to confirm.” I think my first guess would be that it’s because I’m a woman...

Tems retold this concept through the lens of a social worker:

Like if it’s something when they’re like, “Oh, well, do this.” And it’s like, “Well, remember last time we did that, like, mm, it wasn’t the best outcome. Let’s try something different.”

There were no tricks or gimmicks, Doe and Tems were able to enter and depart from challenges, knowing they had tried. Whether the insight they had supplied was accepted wasn’t worth considering, as was the preservation of their state of mind.

Coping Mechanisms That Repair Identity Disruptions

The third research question asked about the techniques employed by BIWOC to repair identity disruptions. An assemblage of creative and vocal practices appeared, sketching the range and availability of helpful outlets. Respondents demonstrated that their sentiments could extend beyond internal vessels. Indeed, these practices contributed to the development and shaping of future experiences. Albeit this didn’t mean they were abandoning their identities, but refining them. As such, everything occurs and changes through time and space, the makings of identity and interpretation, are not exempt from this truth.

Recreational Activities

Before sentiments can be shared and informed by others, efforts are often made by the affected to privately untangle their challenges. In the same manner, every person does not necessitate engagement in dyadic exchanges. Thus, they embrace different pastimes that permit them to just be. Participants didn’t shy away from brandishing such undertakings. Tems framed it as a step that enabled her to own and discover potential gaps and improvements:

Also, journaling, venting on paper. Just taking a step back in understanding what I’m doing or how I’m going to approach the whole thing.

Issa’s preferred medium was journaling, but evolved into rhythmic, spoken word:

It’s not easy being awkward and black. I feel like I’m constantly second guessing what it means to be me. I used to keep a journal to vent. Now I just write raps.

Seeking external support doesn’t weaken or lessen one’s sense-making capabilities. Still, participants demonstrated an eagerness to navigate and settle their experiences.

External Support

The utility of networks stretches beyond their material offerings. In fact, it can be argued that their ability to maintain well-being is vital to their continuation. Participants readily disclosed their comfortability by recruiting the insight of their close others and/or coworkers, to help hash out their encounters. Even if it meant the dialogue would bolster the inflexibility of their conditions, participants appreciated reciprocity.

Tems offered that external support helped her account for unhinged behaviors:

Oh, I most definitely vent to my friends about it because I understand that sometimes you only see what you're doing, so I just always want to make sure I get opinions from other people to see me, am I crazy? Did I handle this the right way, or should I handle this? Venting is always a big one for me.

Athena supplied a different benefit to external support, which did not involve recognizing possibilities. Instead, it reinforced what she already knew. Talking with a familiar other simply revealed what exists across organizations. She mentioned:

Yeah. Well, I'll talk with others, but you talk about a historical process of-of-of a practice. Every organization is different. Um, but there's a lot of similarities 'cause I've had a fortune—I've been fortunate to be in different organizations and been around a lot of people from hundreds of different agencies, you know, East Coast, West Coast, Alaska. Um, unfortunately, the same practices take place almost everywhere, uh, at most organizations, and sometimes people will say a great deal.

I can only, again, from my experience, let me just say that 'cause I'm not in every organization. I can only go from the people that I've been exposed to and talked to. Most people just say, "Don't need it. We don't wanna deal with-- You know how it is. Um, you don't wanna-- You don't get black," all of that. You hear all of that 'cause people are-are-are fearful a lot of times because it is, um, good job.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how BIWOC in leadership positions construct their identities, respond to challenges as holders of their reported identities, and the techniques they employ to nurture how they view and understand themselves. The main findings are that BIWOC leaders identified themselves using two frameworks: physical embodiment and social conduct. These constructions permitted the women to reach appropriate justifications of themselves and their place in society. Interviewees uniformly acknowledged the marked presence of their racial and gender assignments. Yet, they were able to draw from skills attained through social interaction and use them to define themselves.

When interviewees faced challenges to their identity (whether perceived or blatant), they responded in four ways: satire (comedic device), deliberate action, submission, and negotiated compromise. Participants were able to reconcile disruption by using humor, which didn't require unnerving confrontation. On the other hand, deliberate action and acknowledging involved parties, was deemed necessary for some. Submission: however, enabled interviewees to yield without wholly giving in. Of the response styles, negotiated compromise was the sweet spot. Participants prepared alternatives to soften the impact of challenges. The implications of this study, interestingly, reinforce an assumption posited by Ting-Toomey's face negotiation theory. That is, people in all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations (Floyd et al., 2017). Although interviewees presented differing approaches to challenge, there was a subtle indication that time and place informed delivery. Here, delivery and face are interchangeable.

Ultimately, the techniques delineated by the participants were the most insightful and assuring. By participating in recreational activities, the women were able to retain ownership of their experiences, identify gaps, and visualize strategies to resolve parallel occurrences. In the same vein, external support permitted reciprocal exchanges with familiar others and offered different angles of observation. Network members carried the means and power to expand the lens of the interviewees, by erecting the looking-glass illusion.

Certainly, there were limitations to the current study. Importantly, the study could have been more racially diverse. Interviewees all self-identified as Black or African American, women, middle-class, and college educated. Thus, the results can only contribute to the understanding of those who occupy or share

commonalities with this community. Even so, the use of BIWOC was maintained, as mediated representations permitted the researcher to acknowledge the experiences of other women of color (Latinx, Asian-Americans). Nevertheless, it would be remiss to deny the differences in observation versus direct accounts. Additionally, most women were recounting historical challenges, which they had been far removed from. Therefore, disparities may exist between past and present understandings. It should also be noted that data obtained from several questions was not included in the paper, as they did not support the research questions.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study added depth to the lived experiences of BIWOC leaders within the workplace. Still, there are additional approaches that can be taken to understand the true conditions and challenges faced by marginalized women. For instance, future scholarship should consider the degree and frequency to which BIWOC in leadership roles are challenged, as compared to White female and male counterparts. Further, examining the types of challenges often faced by BIWOC leaders, would also be generative. It is my hope that BIWOC and marginalized others feel confident when tackling challenges and the emotional debris. When standing in the face of challenge, should the need for protest arise, may these accounts serve as a fundamental field guide.

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