An Alternative Way to Conceptualize African-American Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

This paper examines literature regarding African American job satisfaction and identifies conceptual gaps that create difficulty when attempting to utilize research in this area to inform retention methods. A theoretical framework, based upon a study by Linda Evans, is introduced as a research approach that can be used to conceptualize African American job satisfaction research in a manner that will provide for clearer connections to retention. A qualitative study designed to discover the factors of African American faculty at a historically black university and a predominantly white institution is presented for the purpose of providing validity to the theoretical framework.

African American faculty job satisfaction has been a focus of various studies for over twenty years. A vast majority of the literature has been quantitative studies using instruments adopted from industrial settings. There is qualitative research, but much of it is unbalanced due to the heavy focus upon negative experiences. In addition, the current studies tend to conceptualize satisfaction in a manner that is more breadth than depth based. The focus in these studies is mainly upon the faculty’s general satisfaction toward a variety of factors instead of in-depth analyses of what motivates or fulfills a faculty member. This breadth-based conceptualization of satisfaction makes it difficult for practitioners to use the findings to increase retention; a prime concern due to the low representation of this faculty group.

According to National Educational Statistics (2003), African American faculty constitute only five percent of the faculty at degree-granting institutions within the United States. This number represents relatively minor long-term progress since African Americans were approximately 4.4 percent of the higher education faculty in 1975 (Trower and Chait, 2002). In addition due to the low representation, there is mounting evidence suggesting that a significant increase may not be coming anytime soon. A study of institutions in the Irvine Foundation project in the Chronicle of Higher Education found African Americans constituted only 4.8 percent of the new hires between 2000-2004 (Smith & Moreno, 2006). Findings in the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (2007) indicate that there may be a limited pool of potential applicants. In 2004-2005, only 5.8 percent of all doctoral degrees rewarded were to African Americans.

This evidence elevates retention of African American faculty to a prime focus for institutions. If colleges and/or universities are to maintain their diversity goals, then it is pertinent that they retain the faculty of color that they do have. One way to do so is to
gain a deeper understanding of African American faculty job satisfaction. It has been noted that dissatisfaction can lead to a person leaving a job (Fritzsche & Parrish, 2004), however there is a need for research that focuses upon what motivates faculty to stay with an institution.

The purpose of this discussion is to re-conceptualize job satisfaction in a manner that will inform retention methods of African American faculty. This will be accomplished in three steps. First, conceptual gaps will be identified within the current quantitative and qualitative literature. Secondly, a theoretical framework for re-conceptualizing job satisfaction will be proposed. Finally, the validity of this framework will be proven through the presentation of a qualitative study that implemented it.

**Review of Literature**

An examination of the literature discussing African American job satisfaction presents four main clarity issues that can potentially cause difficulty in connecting the findings of the job satisfaction studies to African American retention. Two are conceptual issues within the quantitative based studies and two are due to gaps within the qualitative literature.

**Quantitative Literature**

Many of the instruments used in the quantitative studies were not well adapted to a higher education setting and result in findings that are potentially too abstract for institutions to identify specific areas of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. One example of this point is the job descriptive index (JDI), an instrument that consists of five subscales: (a) Work on the Present Job, (b) Present Duties, (c) Opportunities for Promotion, (d) Supervision, and (e) Coworkers. Each subscale has a list of descriptors that are specific to the area of work represented by the subscale. Participants are asked to place a “Y” next to the descriptor if it describes a characteristic of their job or a “N” if it does not.

The value of this instrument is that it provides a general idea of faculty satisfaction with various work aspects. However, it does not provide specific insight into what it is about these work areas that the faculty are satisfied or dissatisfied with. For example, the subscale of “Work on the Present Job” could be anything from teaching load to service responsibilities; both areas heavily discussed in the literature (Knowles and Harleston, 1997; Thompson and Dey, 1998; Stanley, 2006). The specifics of the subscale “Opportunities for Promotion” could vary greatly depending upon rank, career path, or mission of the institution.

This leads to the second issue within the literature. The findings do not conceptualize satisfaction in a manner that would provide a clear connection between satisfaction factors and retention. Many of the quantitative studies view job satisfaction as dualistic suggesting faculty are either satisfied or dissatisfied with a given factor. There are others that provide some form of a Likert scale and thus provide some insight into which factors the faculty are the most satisfied with. Nonetheless, this approach is still inadequate in
determining the factors that are the most likely to cause a faculty member to stay and/or leave an institution. For example, in one of the earliest studies over black faculty job satisfaction, Thomas Denier (1985) used a quantitative instrument he created to conduct a study of faculty at two predominantly black institutions in a southeastern state. He noted several faculty members described factors such as salary, opportunities for promotion and research as “quite a problem” or “major problem.” However, he concluded from the findings that the faculty were overall satisfied with their institution. Therefore, these dissatisfaction factors were not clear indicators of a potential retention problem.

There are also several studies that concluded African American faculty at predominantly black institutions are more satisfied than their counterparts at predominantly white institutions even though they report lower salaries, heavier teaching loads and lower publication rates at the former (Eason, 1996, McNeal, 2003, Berrian, 2006). These studies exemplify the difficulty of determining job satisfaction and linking it to retention. Despite the findings from these studies that African American faculty at predominantly white institutions express higher satisfaction with factors such as salary and teaching load, their representation in these institutions suggest that these factors have not lead to retention. According to Hubbard (2006), African Americans constitute 58 percent of the faculty at historically black colleges and universities and 4 percent of the faculty at all other higher education institutions in the United States.

Qualitative Literature

The vast majority of the qualitative literature over this subject is not framed in terms of job satisfaction. Instead, the findings tend to be descriptions of faculty’s experiences at an institution. Generally, there are two main gaps within the qualitative literature. First, the findings focus heavily upon negative experiences. Without a balanced discussion of positive and negative experiences, there will be no clear indicator of what would motivate the faculty to stay with an institution. It can not be assumed that the prevention of certain negative experiences will lead to fulfillment in the faculty.

Herzberg (1968) addressed this point in his motivational hygiene theory. He described two sets of satisfaction factors; intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic are those that motivate an employee. These are factors such as achievement, recognition, and personal growth. The extrinsic factors are factors such as company policies, salary, and working conditions. He referred to these factors as job dissatisfiers for if they were removed, the employee would be dissatisfied. However, Herzberg concluded that these factors do not motivate or fulfill the employee. Therefore, based upon Herzberg’s logic, it would be difficult to make a connection between the removal of negative experiences and job fulfillment of African American faculty.

A second gap within the qualitative literature is that there is no clear indicator about how much these experiences factor into a faculty member’s overall job satisfaction or desire to stay or leave an institution. For instance, there is literature discussing black faculty perceptions of the tenure process with much of it being negative (Knowles & Harleston, 1997; Stanley, 2006; Williams & Williams, 2006). However, these discussions fall short
of determining if the tenure process is a major or relatively minor factor in the faculty members’ satisfaction.

**Theoretical Framework**

Simply understanding which factors African American faculty are satisfied or dissatisfied with is not sufficient when the overall goal is retention. Satisfaction must be reconceptualized in a manner that will enable researchers to determine what factors faculty find fulfilling enough to stay at an institution.

Linda Evans (1997, 2002) addressed the issue of job satisfaction conceptualization in a qualitative study designed to assess the morale and job satisfaction of teachers. Her reasoning was not to establish a link between satisfaction and retention but to respond to an earlier study that questioned the applicability of Herzberg’s motivational hygiene theory in education. In her study, she asked teachers what factors they were satisfied by, what factors they were satisfied with, and what factors they were dissatisfied with. Evans’ main focus was upon satisfaction factors and she discovered that there is a difference between factors the teachers were satisfied by and those they were satisfied with. She defined the former, satisfied by, as factors the teachers found to be fulfilling or motivating. The latter, satisfied with, were factors the teachers found to be acceptable, but not fulfilling. In a similar manner as Herzberg’s extrinsic factors, the satisfied with factors could lead to dissatisfaction if removed but were by no means a factor of fulfillment. Evans later referred to her satisfied by/satisfied with dichotomy as job fulfillment and job contentment.

Evans’ approach provides an ideal framework for determining the satisfaction factors that could possibly lead to increased retention among African American faculty. In the aforementioned quantitative studies, there was no distinction between the factors the faculty were satisfied with and those they were satisfied by. Even the studies that used a form of Likert scale as their instrument did not make this distinction. For instance, a faculty member expressing “a high level of satisfaction” with a given factor does not necessarily mean that he/she is fulfilled by that factor. One example of this point is that a person could state that she is “very satisfied” with the size of her office, however, this factor alone would most likely not retain the faculty member if she is unhappy with other aspects of the job.

**Methodology**

I used Evan’s approach as a framework in a qualitative study seeking to discover job satisfaction factors of African American faculty at a historically black university and a predominantly white institution (Wright, 2009). The two universities are both comprehensive public institution and part of the same university system in the southern region of the United States. For the purpose of protecting the identity of the participants, the historically black university will be referred to as Mid-South University (MSU) and the predominantly white institution will be referred to as Public University (PU).
There were eleven total participants with six from the historically black university and five from the predominantly white institution. The work experience of the participants ranged from two to thirty-six years. The faculty represented a variety of disciplines including Education, Sociology, Math, and English. The participants were a mixture of non-tenured, tenure-track and tenured faculty.

Using Linda Evan’s theoretical framework, six research questions were proposed:

RQ 1: What are African American faculty at a historically black university satisfied by?
RQ 2: What are African American faculty at a historically black university satisfied with?
RQ 3: What are African American faculty at a historically black university dissatisfied with?
RQ 4: What are African American faculty at a predominantly white institution satisfied by?
RQ 5: What are African American faculty at a predominantly white institution satisfied with?
RQ 6: What are African American faculty at a predominantly white institution dissatisfied with?

Data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. Each applicant was asked the same thirteen questions and several were asked additional follow-up questions for the purpose of clarity. The first four questions were closed-ended seeking demographic information such as years of experience, rank, and institutions of previous employment. The remaining nine questions were open-ended and seeking responses geared toward the aforementioned research questions. The interviews were conducted on the campuses of the participants and each was recorded with the consent of the faculty members. Each interview was transcribed.

Data analysis was conducted according to three concurrent flows of activity consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data reduction and display process was conducted through the use of case level matrices. Miles and Huberman (1994) described these types of matrices as “master chart[s] assembling descriptive data from each of several cases in a standard format.”

Using the transcribed interviews, a matrix was created for each institution and coded according to the interview questions. The coding process was through frequency counts based upon keywords or phrases such as “interaction with students” or “job flexibility”. As themes emerged, they were documented and then displayed in a second set of matrices coded according to the six aforementioned research questions. The data from the interviews were only considered to be a theme if at least three of the faculty from one of the institutions mentioned the same factor.

There were clear themes that emerged for each of the six research questions. The findings, which will be discussed in the following section, showed a clear distinction
between factors the faculty at both institutions were *satisfied by*, *satisfied with*, and *dissatisfied with*. There were also several valuable unintended themes that emerged. The findings provide credence to the assertion that job satisfaction can be conceptualized to better equip practitioners with insight that can possibly increase African American faculty retention.

**Findings**

The section is divided into three sections. The first two sections will focus upon factors the faculty at both institutions were *satisfied by*, *satisfied with* and *dissatisfied with* as well as additional themes that emerged that are specific to each university. The final section will focus upon a common theme that emerged from the participants at both institutions.

*What African American Faculty at a Historically Black University are satisfied by*

As previously noted, Linda Evans referred to the concept of *satisfied by* as the highest form of job satisfaction. These are the factors that brings fulfillment to the faculty members; that motivates them enough to return their institution day after day and year after year. The faculty were asked specifically what factors they were *satisfied by*, to describe an experience when they felt fulfilled, and to describe what aspects of their job they find to be the most rewarding. The responses to the latter inquiry were only considered if they were consistent with the participant’s earlier responses.

The faculty at the MSU were *satisfied by* their interactions with students. However, these interactions were not limited to the classroom, for many of the faculty participants noted activities such as their formal and informal advisement of students, sponsorships of student activities, and the extended greetings they often receive simply walking around the campus.

The faculty also expressed fulfillment with their ability to identify with the student body. One faculty member noted, “I can see myself in many of these students. I understand them.” Another faculty member mentioned that his research area was with African American males and that MSU provided him with the opportunity to continue his work with this student group. This theme was shared by all six participants from this university.

*What African American Faculty at a Historically Black University are satisfied with*

Linda Evans described *satisfied with* factors as those that a person would finding satisfactory, but not fulfilling. These are factors that could lead to dissatisfaction if removed, but they are not the factors that motivates a faculty member to stay at their institution. Faculty participants were asked what factors they were *satisfied with*, but not by. This question often needed clarification to communicate the distinction.
There was not a consensus among faculty members at MSU for this theme, but the most salient was job flexibility and freedom. Several of the faculty participants expressed contentment with having schedules flexible enough to allow them to spend time with their families. One faculty member noted that she was able to attend all of her children’s band concerts, games, and other school activities due to the flexibility of her work schedule. Another faculty member, that is a new father, expressed his contentment with being able to visit his son’s daycare during the day if he wished.

Despite there not being a consensus among the faculty members on this theme, the importance of spending time with their children was apparent among those participants who were parents. This could explain why job flexibility and freedom was the clearest theme in reference to the factors the faculty were satisfied with.

What African American Faculty at a Historically Black University are dissatisfied with

The faculty participants were asked what factors they were dissatisfied with, to recall a time when they were dissatisfied and to describe the job duties that they found to be the least rewarding. The responses from the latter question about least rewarding duties were only used if they were consistent with the participant’s responses to two earlier questions about dissatisfaction. There were several areas of dissatisfaction though only two will be discussed in this paper.

Despite being satisfied with their job flexibility, the faculty felt as if they were overworked. One faculty member, that previously worked a predominantly white institution, stated, “I have never worked this hard in my life.” The faculty participants openly expressed dissatisfaction with the number of classes they are required to teach. In addition to their heavy course loads, they also felt as if they were required to perform duties that either their supervisors or administrative assistants should be responsible for. For instance, one faculty member noted that he and his colleagues must always “put in all the legwork” when it comes to finding and implementing computer programs that they use each year. Another expressed dissatisfaction with not having media personnel who could carry and set up a computer and projector for her when she needs this equipment in class.

The faculty were also dissatisfied with their pay though they were quick to note that money would not cause them to leave their institution. This is a point that will be elaborated upon later. Nonetheless, their dissatisfaction with pay, as with the number of classes they taught, seemed to be based upon comparisons to the pay and workload of faculty at predominantly white institutions. They would often mention that amount of classes one of their colleagues taught at another university. Overall, despite these dissatisfaction factors, the faculty appeared to be pleased with their institution.

What African American Faculty at a Predominantly White Institution are satisfied by

The faculty at the Public university (PU) were also satisfied by their interactions with students. However, the faculty participants from PU differed from those at MSU in that
they were satisfied by how they worked with students. These faculty members were satisfied by how the academic programs and courses they developed impacted students. One faculty member noted that she was fulfilled by a diversity course she taught. She felt as if she was “opening the minds of her students.” Another expressed fulfillment in a program she developed for public school teachers. One assistant psychology professor discussed a psychological clinic she was in charge of on campus. This satisfied by factor was the clearest theme that emerged from the faculty at PU.

There appeared to be two reasons for their fulfillment in program and course development. First, the programs and courses gave the faculty a sense of ownership. They often described a specific course or program as their contribution to the university. Secondly, PU is in the midst of becoming a research focused institution. This new focus was a major concern among the faculty participants. They all expressed a willingness to research, but noted that their passion was with teaching and service. Therefore, their discussion of program and course development was often used as a rationale for their relatively lack of focus on and/or time to research.

**What African American Faculty at a Predominantly White Institution are satisfied with**

As with the faculty at MSU, the faculty at PU were satisfied with their job flexibility and freedom though their reasoning differed slightly. The main campus of PU is located in a rural community and all but one of the faculty participants lived in a local metropolitan area that is approximately an hour’s drive way. Due to this drive, several of the faculty were pleased with not having to work at the main campus each day. Two taught their classes at satellite campuses and a third taught a majority of her courses online. The faculty expressed contentment with not having to check in or work under a supervisor that micromanaged their day. It is important to note that two of the younger faculty members have small children that they want to spend time with.

**What African American Faculty at a Predominantly White Institution are dissatisfied with**

Unlike the faculty at MSU, the PU faculty participants did not note any specific factors they were dissatisfied with. Instead, they focused upon hypothetical situations that would cause them to be dissatisfied. These factors included the idea of being micromanaged and the notion of working with dishonest people or individuals not willing to change. There were other factors but none were common enough to be considered a theme. The only distinct factor specific to PU was the location of the main campus. This was mainly due to the long drive though there were two faculty members that noted incidents of racism that they had encountered while in the city of the main campus.

**Additional Theme**

There were several unintended findings though only one will be discussed in this section. The faculty at both institutions appeared to make a distinction between the factors they are dissatisfied with but willing to tolerate and those that would cause them to leave their
institution. For example, when discussing pay, a faculty member from MSU stated that while he is dissatisfied with the pay, it is not enough to cause him to leave the institution. Another faculty from MSU made a similar statement when discussing her dissatisfaction with her workload. She stated that though she was unhappy with the lack of support that leads to her extensive workload, she still loves her job and had no plans of leaving. She further stated that it was the “personal factor” at MSU that kept her satisfied. She noted that she was happy with the students and her relationships with her colleagues. These statements were two examples of responses that showed there are dissatisfaction factors that faculty are willing to endure.

The faculty participants also noted factors that would cause them to leave their institutions. For instance, one faculty member at PU strongly expressed how important a diversity course she taught was to her. She stated the course is a ten in importance to her overall job satisfaction and that “if they took it tomorrow, I would find a hard time staying.” Another faculty member from PU recalled two hiring committees he was on in which two faculty members of color were hired. He stated that due to their qualifications, if they were not hired, he would have thought strongly about finding another place to work. He expressed a willingness to stay at an institution that did not have a significant amount of faculty of color if the institution was willing to hire qualified minorities. However, he was not willing to stay if he felt that the institution was not willing to “embrace diversity.”

This distinction between dissatisfaction factors was apparent in the statements of several faculty participants from both institutions. I found this finding to be particularly insightful in providing potential factors that could lead to faculty attritution. Therefore, based upon this finding, I suggest a modification to Linda Evans’ theoretical framework. Just as there is dichotomy of satisfaction factors, the framework should also include a similar dichotomy of dissatisfaction factors using similar language. The concept of dissatisfied by would be those factors that causes a faculty member to become unhappy enough to leave their institution. The concept of dissatisfied with would be those factors that a faculty member is not happy with but willing to endure.

Conclusion

Determining job satisfaction of black faculty can be difficult within itself. However, making a connection between satisfaction and retention can be even more of a challenge. In order to do so, researchers must conceptualize job satisfaction in ways that explore the more specific and detailed nuances that accompany feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Quantitative studies must move away from trying to determine which factors black faculty are satisfied with the most. Instead, instruments should be created that will determine which factors fulfills the faculty. In other words, which factors are the faculty satisfied by. Qualitative studies must frame discussions of faculty experiences in terms of satisfaction. In addition, these studies must also include a balanced discussion of satisfaction factors in order to provide insight into reasons faculty members will stay with an institution. Linda Evans’ reconceptualization of Herzberg’s motivational hygiene theory can be used as a framework for conceptualizing black faculty satisfaction.
differently. Her satisfied by/satisfied with dichotomy has the ability to provide insight into the factors that would fulfill individuals to the point of staying with an institution, thus increasing retention. However, a separate dichotomy is needed for dissatisfaction so researchers can make a clear distinction between factors faculty are dissatisfied with but willing to endure and those they are dissatisfied by to the point of desiring to leave.

This study proved the validity of Evans’ framework for re-conceptualizing job satisfaction. Instead of gauging general satisfaction toward given factors, this study provided a clear analysis of the factors that fulfill the faculty members. For example, the faculty at the historically black university was clearly satisfied by their interactions with students. These interactions were more than a general factor of satisfaction, they were a factor of fulfillment that served as a significant reason these participants work at their institution. The same can be said about program and course development for the faculty at the predominantly white institution. In addition, this alternative way of conceptualizing job satisfaction clarifies the importance of factors such as job flexibility and freedom. It would be difficult to determine if these were factors of fulfillment or factors the faculty merely found satisfactory using the instruments in previous studies of African American job satisfaction. However, this study found that they are factors the faculty are simply content with and/or found satisfactory. Flexibility and freedom were not factors of fulfillment.

Evans’ theoretical framework contains the potential to inform the retention methods of practitioners. It enables researchers to focus more on the depth of job satisfaction. In addition, the suggested modification to the framework’s analysis of dissatisfaction factors provides valuable insight into factors that may be directly related to faculty attrition. A thorough understanding of faculty job satisfaction will continue to be a priority of practitioners and researchers. However, it is important that studies relating to this subject be conceptualized in a manner that will provide clear connections into the reasons faculty return day after day and year after year to an institution.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What is your current title and/or position?
2. How long have you worked at this institution?
3. Have you worked at any other institutions? If so, where?
4. How long have you worked in higher education?
5. Why did you enter higher education?
6. Why did you choose this particular institution?
7. What is it about your current position that fulfills you?
8. Tell me about a time when you felt fulfilled as an educator.
9. What aspects of your job do not necessarily fulfill you, but are needed in order for you to feel content with your institution? In other words, what are you satisfied with but not necessarily by?
10. What are factors that would lead you to feel dissatisfied with your institution?
11. Reflect on a time when you were dissatisfied with some aspect of your job and/or the college/university in which you were/are employed.
12. When considering your multiple job duties and requirements: (a) which do you find the most rewarding, (b) which do you find the least rewarding?
Of all of your job duties and contributions: (a) which do you feel are the most appreciated and/or rewarded by your institution, and (b) which do you feel are the least appreciated and/or rewarded?