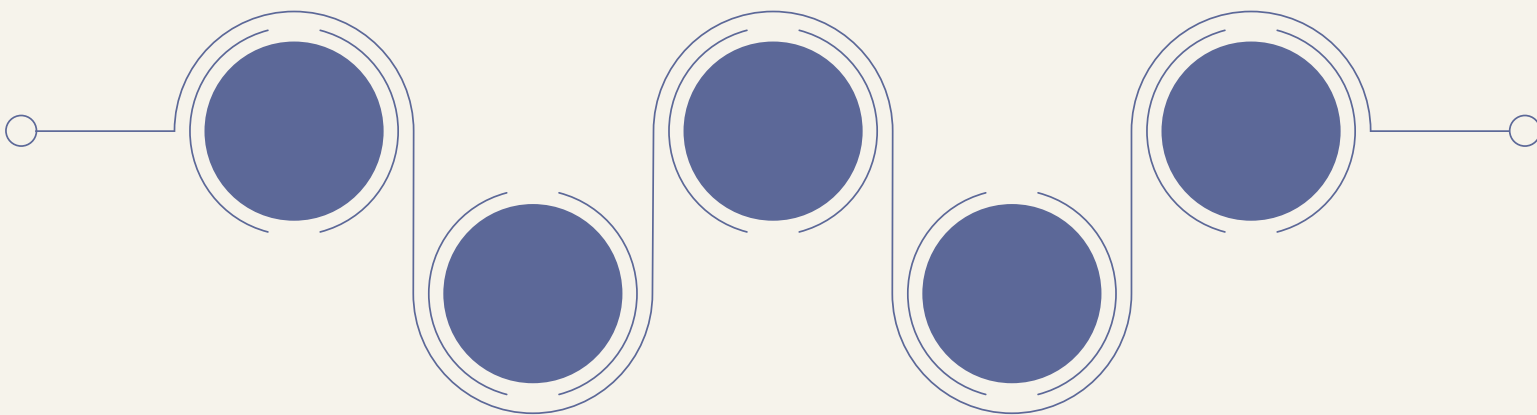


VOICES RISING: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO BLACK WOMEN USG SENIOR SERVICE MEMBERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AT THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND GENDER

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Background

Research was completed in February 2018 and defended in June 2018

Exploration:

- How Black women Senior Service members experienced being Black women as they progressed in their careers and how those experiences may have contributed to the construction of positive professional identities

Methodology:

- Narrative Inquiry (i.e. Storytelling)

Framework:

- Positive Professional Identity- virtue, evaluative, developmental, and structural
- Intersectionality

Framework

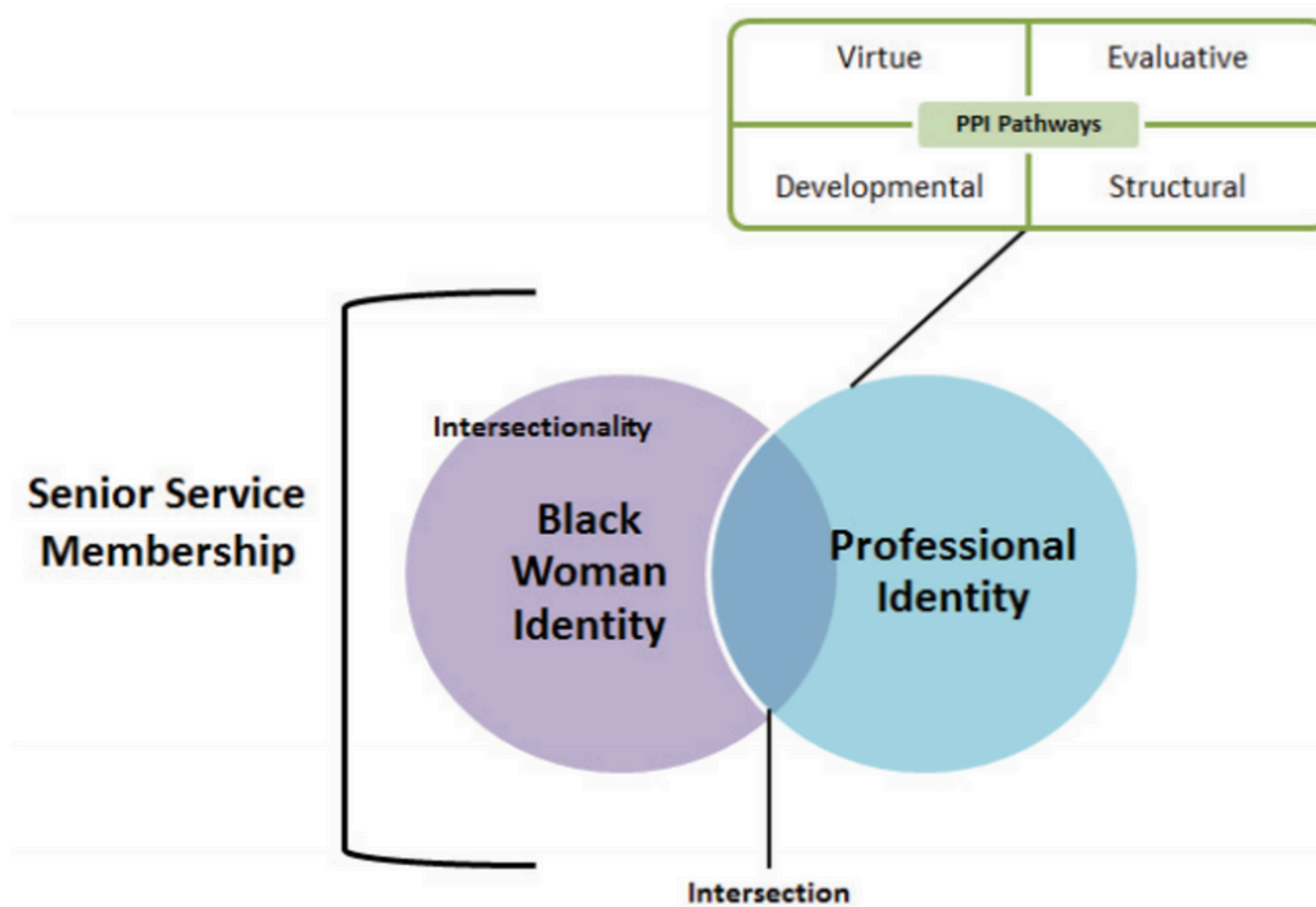


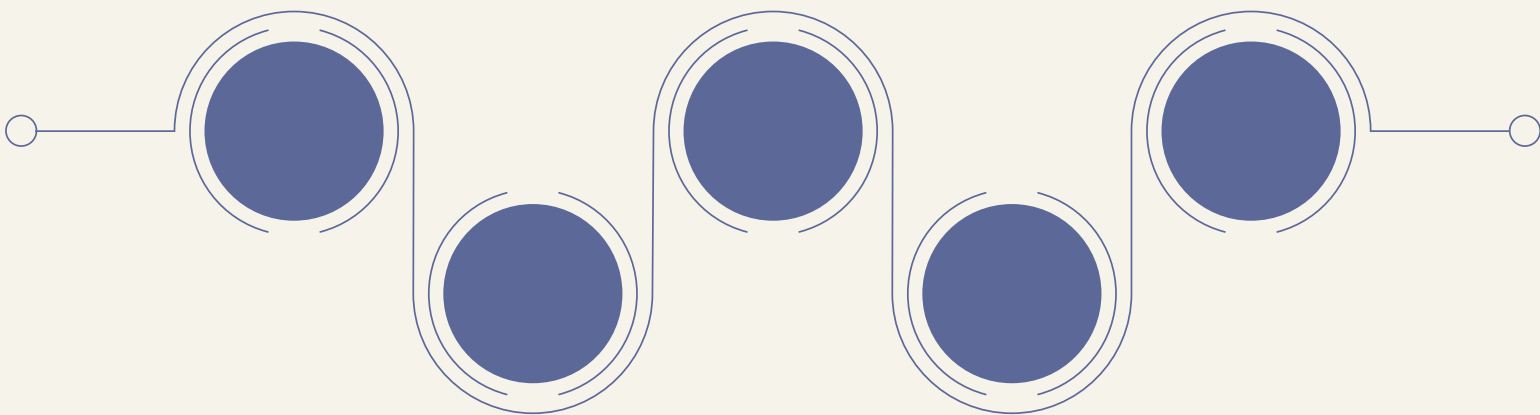
Figure 1.1. Conceptual framework.

Important Concepts

Identity	The meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves that are developed and sustained through processes of social interaction as they seek to address the question 'who am I?'
Social Identity	One's membership in social or cultural groups alongside the value one places on said membership.
Professional Identity	The relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role.
Black woman identity	A distinct hybrid identity that Black woman may construct and/or enact in response to specific difficulties encountered by Black women due to tensions between being Black and being a woman while existing in a complex social context.
Gender	An identity that is socially constructed through language and embedded in power relations via sociocultural master narratives and discourses in local interactions (LaPointe, 2013). For the purposes of this study, I relied on participants' self-reported gender as woman.
Race	A socio-historical concept whose meanings and categories are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded.

RESULTS: THE NARRATIVES

The Sensational Six- Tracy, Belita, Shay, Frances, Sasha, & Mary



Tracy

- “I have found that there are times that in articulating my message and or presenting my ideas, making certain that I'm doing it in such a way that other people are not going to be intimidated by it...my presence is felt when I come into the room, which is a great thing, because that's something that I think I was taught very early on. At the same time, for others, that can be something that they don't necessarily welcome.”
- “I would say that there were probably an instance or two where I was equivalent to someone [and they] thought they could talk to me any kind of way, as if they were my superior and things like that. I thought, "No, that's not really how this works...I'm not going to accept you talking to me this way.”

Belita

- “I was at [another Agency], and I was second in charge because they needed someone to come in and help manage the place. They brought in a political appointee who was a White guy. In our first conversation he said, “Yeah, I think it would be good if you spent the majority of your time looking at EEO-type cases,” and that was really bizarre because I was literally running the place. So his immediate perception of me was “Okay, let me put you in this little box over here.”
- “I think the biggest impediment that I see in the women I've mentored is their confidence. I think I figured out when I was [working after college] that the people who were in more senior jobs, they weren't smarter than I was.”

Shay

- “I had to keep that because I don't think I could have made it and have been so successful without that work ethic, and I didn't want to lose the one edge I have. I [already] have these strikes against me. A lot of women in my agency don't have children, they're not married. I've got a family...”
- There was this huge project. I was still breastfeeding, so I was pumping while at work. I remember working for this guy. We had blinds so we could pump in our office. I'm running between meetings...and my little 10-minute pumping session, he sees my blinds are closed, which is a sign that a woman in there pumping. He knocks and says, "Are you in there pumping?" I said, "I'll be done in a minute." But, he asked me later, "How long are you going to pump?"

Frances

- "...honestly I don't know how much of it is race and how much of it is socio economics, but...no matter how much I climbed, no matter how much positive feedback I got from supervisors...there were times when I would be in a room full of people and feel like, am I going to mispronounce a word? Am I going to use a word out of context?"... Am I polished enough? Do I come across as professional?"
- "...the fact that I have to be on 24/7 is exhausting. It is tiring that I can't even fall back to what is my natural speaking pattern because you were waiting to judge me." Again, he may not have meant [anything]... I don't know. But that, for me, is like saying... I will always have to prove to you that I deserve to be here. That is draining and exhausting. You know, you've been raised that you have to be 10 times better than everybody else. It's draining to know that that is forever the case.

Sasha

- “I saw the other way around, that other people were afforded many liberties that I probably wouldn't be afforded. So the difference is that I really worked to perform but when at a high level, so things couldn't be questioned. Things couldn't be scrutinized. I see other people fall, and fall very short, they're afforded certain liberties and privileges that I don't think I, or people of color, would have been.”
- “I think I would be perceived as someone who was probably very open, very outgoing. But if I was going to go to a music concert of an artist that I would associate [with Black people], I wouldn't share it...if somebody else was going to a David Bowie concert, they wouldn't feel ashamed for sharing it. So I stopped feeling weird sharing it too. But there's a time I wouldn't have, and it wasn't necessarily because I felt like I had to be private. I would have said, "Oh I'm going to the Cher concert." So just...bringing myself to the table and normalizing [for me] what is normal.”

Mary

- “The Agency that I was working in was 85% men, and about 90% Caucasian. There were very few Black people, much less Black women, in senior positions. I was told when I was going through the candidate development program by a boss's boss that they didn't have any positions open for me as a Senior Executive Service member. I was never expecting to actually get into a Senior Executive Service position. I had applied for a couple of them in the same agency, but I didn't even get interviewed”
- “They're surprised that I don't take offense really quickly or anything like that. I explain to them, "I've been getting this all my life... but those who try to offend. You need to try something else." I think they're very healthy conversations that we have. We would never have this if we had the same type of person [as before] in charge.”

Conclusions

- Black women SESs are subject to an intersectional invisibility which adversely affects the potential for the construction of positive professional identities
- Persistent identity threat and an inability to bring the true self to work diminish the potential for construction of positive professional identities
- Cultural, social, and moral identities serve as sources of positivity in the construction of the professional identities of Black women SESs

Practical Strategies

- **Understand that Black women, and subgroups within, are not a monolithic**
 - There is diversity among Black women
 - Consider the whole person—including the gamut of experiences and identities
 - Avoid using a one-size-fits-all approach when planning outreach activities targeted at increasing the number of Black women in an organization
- **Ensure Black women are at the table during decision-making processes**
 - Enhance recruitment methods
 - Implementing formal, rotational and/or mentoring programs
- **Be intentional about creating a safe space where Black women feel comfortable being their true selves without fear of being judged**
 - Be straightforward and transparent about how organization culture may perpetuate interactions that lead to identity threat for Black women
 - Implement and strictly enforce zero tolerance policies with an emphasis on types of discrimination--such as stereotyping and microaggression--that are typically covert
 - Train members of all backgrounds on the best ways to support their colleagues who are historically prone to marginalization

Reference

Link Name :

[Link to full dissertation](#)

Brief Description :

This narrative inquiry explores the professional identity construction of Black women U.S. Government Senior Executive Service members in the Washington, DC area.