

MAD Black WOMEN: African-American Women and Structural Oppression in the Advertising Industry

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Introduction: Diversity Challenges for Ethnic Minorities and Women in Advertising

Mad Men, a popular television series, dramatizes the lives and careers of men and women in a fictitious 1960s-era New York City advertising agency. While the setting is fictional, the show illuminates a harsh truth about the advertising business: historically, career opportunities for ethnic minorities and women – especially in managerial and executive roles - have been quite limited. Although advertising is a \$500 billion global industry, its poor track record with respect to diversity among its professional ranks has been referred to as its “dirty little secret” (Winsky, 1992). In the United States, concerns about the lack of diversity in advertising jobs have existed since at least the 1960s, prompting action from various stakeholders including members of the U.S. Congress; the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; the New York City Commission on Human Rights; the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and other activist groups. In response, a number programs have been launched to encourage, train, and retain diverse peoples for advertising careers. Despite these efforts, the diversity issue has continued into the modern era with recent U.S. employment figures for minorities working in advertising management positions totaling 9.6% for Hispanics; 2.3% for Asians and only .8 % for African-Americans (Vega, 2012). In addition to minorities, scholarly research has revealed a long-standing dearth of opportunities for women with respect to high-level creative and managerial positions in advertising and marketing firms (Maclaran, et al. 1997; Mallia, 2009). Indicating that fewer than 30% of such jobs are held by women, a 2013 industry study referred to the situation as “a major problem” (Liesse, 2013). While there has been recent improvement in placing young minority college graduates in entry-level advertising jobs, it is acknowledged that African-Americans encounter exceptional challenges in their career trajectories. Taken together, these facts suggest that opportunities for high-level managerial positions in the advertising industry for African-Americans - especially women – have been and remain extremely rare.

Purpose and Theoretical Context

The goal of this study is to provide a comprehensive, scholarly examination of the professional careers of pioneering African-American women who served in significant managerial and entrepreneurial roles in the advertising business from the 1960s to the present. Despite the industry’s discriminatory practices (Bush, 2011) toward minorities and women, several black women led prominent advertising careers and established their own agencies. The main subjects of this research are: Barbara G. Proctor (1932-); Caroline R. Jones (1942-2001); Joel P. Martin (1944-); and Carol H. Williams (1948?-). Proctor was the first African-American woman to establish an advertising agency, based in Chicago in 1970. Featured on national television during the 1984 State of the Union address, Proctor was cited by U.S. President Ronald Reagan as an example of “the spirit of enterprise” (Reagan, 1984). Jones, the first black woman to become a vice-president at a major mainstream advertising agency, later founded her own New York City agency in 1986 and was named, posthumously, by trade publication *Advertising Age* (2012) as one of the “100 most influential women in advertising.” Martin was the first black woman to establish an ad agency in New York City and received numerous awards for work

with major corporate brands. Williams, who is still active as CEO of her own agency, was the first black woman to serve as Creative Director and Vice-President at two large general-market advertising agencies. Since launching her own agency in the late 1980s, Williams' firm is consistently ranked among the top black-owned ad agencies (*Black Enterprise*, 2011) and she is considered an industry icon. All of these subjects began their advertising careers during the 1960s *Mad Men* era.

Given the advertising industry's poor diversity record, there is an assumption that these women encountered some form(s) of structural oppression in their professional careers. Described in the business and marketing literature, structural oppression is a collective term which refers to various types of systemic discriminatory practices which occur in institutional settings (Open Source Leadership, 2012). Structural oppression as typically experienced by minorities and/or women in advertising and marketing jobs appears in the literature and is described by several typologies such as the Economic Detour model (Butler, 1991; Chambers, 2008; Davis, 2002; Stuart, 1940); the "glasshouse effect" or "glass ceiling" models (Alvesson, 1998; Maclaran, et al. 1997; Mallia 2009; Still, 1986) and the Simultaneous Oppression model (Bristor & Fischer, 1995).

Methodology

This research uses an historical method called a biographical narrative approach as described by Jones (1998; 2012) and Savitt (2011) to study the subjects and their careers. The approach requires a cogent recreation of key events during the subjects' lives; an indication of the significance of these events; and analysis and explanation of the causes and consequences of those events. It also helps us to understand how societal and institutional influences affected the subjects' opportunities, choices and practices. This method calls for the systematic collection, synthesis and analysis of relevant primary and secondary information which is obtained from the subjects, research archives, library materials and other sources. Typically, biographical information sources fall into four categories pertaining to the subjects: 1) personal data (demographic information); 2) intellectual data (education and training); 3) professional data (career-related events, activities and experiences); and environmental data (social and economic conditions during the subjects' lives). Books, trade and newspaper articles are important sources of environmental data in historical research. In addition, the typology presented in Table 1 is linked to the biographic profiles of the subjects. For this study, important sociological contextual events include the Civil Rights movement; the feminist movement; and the emergence of multiculturalism as a marketing orientation.

Research Implications

This work fills a gap in the scholarship which has largely ignored the experiences of black women in the advertising profession. Proctor, Jones and Williams have received limited attention in the academic press and Martin has not been studied. They have also been largely overlooked in the biographical studies of important advertising figures. For example, Applegate's (1994) collection of 54 biographies of important advertising historical figures includes nine women and one black male, but no black females. Chambers (2008) has provided the most comprehensive scholarly examination of black advertising professionals, however, the subjects of this research are overwhelmingly male and scant attention was paid to the unique challenges of black women in the industry. Finally, Sivulka (1998) makes a brief reference to Caroline Jones; and discusses Jones, Proctor and Williams, respectively, over less than a dozen pages in *Ad Women* (Sivulka, 2009). The other scholarship in this topic area has been published by Davis and concerns the development of black-owned advertising agencies from an historical perspective (Davis, 2002); and advertising pioneer Caroline Jones (Davis, 2007; Davis, 2013). In sum, these African-American women pioneers are important to the study of advertising history and their stories need to be told in a meaningful and comprehensive way so that their legacies are preserved and available to future generations of practitioners and scholars. The findings from this research are also instructive for young people who are considering careers in advertising and can benefit from understanding the institutional history and culture of the industry with respect to opportunities, especially for women of color.

Source Materials for the Study

1. Documents from the Chicago Historical Society's Research Center archive concerning Barbara Proctor; transcripts from several hours of conversations with former business associates and Proctor's only child, who is a former employee of her agency.
2. Personal and business papers and artifacts obtained from the Caroline Jones Collection at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

3. Transcripts and notes from several hours of personal interviews with Carol H. Williams, her staff and family members at her agency offices in Chicago in 2014.
4. Transcripts and notes from several hours of interviews with Joel P. Martin in 2015.
5. Photographs, advertisements and awards pertaining to all four subjects and their agencies obtained from the CEBA (Communication Excellence to Black Audiences) *Exhibit Journals*, archived at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City.
6. Numerous articles and documents, audio and video recordings pertaining to all subjects from trade and business journals, popular magazines, book chapters and newspapers in hard copy or downloaded from the internet.

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