Barriers to Career Progression of Black African Middle Managers: The South African Perspective

Sive-Thina Mayiya[1], Chris Schachtebeck[2], Chuma Diniso[3]

Abstract: The primary objective of this research is to assess the perceptions of black African middle managers on barriers to career progression. While a number of studies have investigated barriers to career progression among previously disadvantaged individuals, no study has focused on the perceptions of middle managers on the barriers to career progression amongst black Africans in the workplace. The study was qualitative in nature, employing a purposive sampling approach. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews amongst 18 black African middle managers in two major South African banks. Results indicate that a lack of exposure to senior managerial duties, lack of career guidance and support, demographic composition of senior management, as well as perceived unequal career opportunities present barriers to career progression. The value of the research lies in the practical changes banks can make to Human Resource practices and policies to overcome current challenges. The paper is of value to managers and HR professionals in the banking sector by addressing a major South African labour market issue.

Keywords: South Africa; banking sector; career progression; management

JEL Classification: J24; O15

1. Introduction

Under the period of Apartheid, employment in all sectors of South Africa was regulated on racial grounds, with policies such as job reservation precluding black South Africans from participating meaningfully in the economy (Martin & Durrheim, 2006). Coupled with geographic segregation, various pieces of legislation, such as the Industrial Conciliation Act 11 of 1924, Bantu Labour Amendment Act of 1970, Bantu Education Act, Coloured Persons Education Act and Indians Education Act, were implemented to avoid rivalry and tension along racial lines in the workplace (Hepple, 1963; Martin & Durrheim, 2006; Naidoo,

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[1] Student, Department of Business Management, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, Address: PO Box 524, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa, E-mail: smayiya@gmail.com.

[2] Lecturer, Department of Business Management, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, Address: PO Box 524, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa, Corresponding author: cschachtebeck@uj.ac.za.

[3] Lecturer, Department of Business Management, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, Address: PO Box 524, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa, E-mail: cdiniso@uj.ac.za.

Stanwix & Yu, 2014). While these divisive pieces of legislation were removed post-Apartheid in 1994, their effects are still felt in the labour market today (Naidoo et al., 2014). As a result, the South African government introduced new legislation to redress past inequalities and discriminatory practices, such as the Employment Equity Act (EEA) and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BB-BEE) Act, in an attempt to promote the meaningful participation of black people in the economy (Balshaw & Goldberg, 2005). The EEA aims to establish that suitable, qualified individuals from previously disadvantaged groups experience equal employment opportunities, as well as ensure equitable representation of all race groupings in the workplace.

The Department of Trade and Industry (2007) identified the low participation rate of black Africans in middle and top management positions in the financial services sector as a severe challenge facing the industry. As a result, this sector was the first in South Africa to voluntarily adopt a charter to reduce inequalities and introduce measures to transform voluntarily, while at the same time engaging in robust public discussions around issues of transformation (Ndzamela & Jones, 2013; Banking Association of South Africa, 2016). Despite these efforts, inequalities in the workplace persist until today. A number of studies have investigated the lack of representation of previously disadvantaged individuals in the private sector and have identified barriers to employment and career progression. Yet, to date, no study has focused on the perceived barriers to career progression amongst black Africans in the workplace, particularly at middle management level. This study therefore aims to explore and convey the barriers to career progression as perceived by black African middle managers in the South African banking sector.

This article is structured as follows: first, the problem statement is presented. This is followed by an overview of the literature relevant to the study. Relevant definitions, as well as an overview of the South African banking sector, are then provided. This discussion is followed by presentation of literature on career progression and associated barriers to career progression. Next, the methodology employed in the study is outlined, followed by discussion of the findings. Lastly, conclusions and recommendations are presented.

2. Problem Statement

Various pieces of legislation introduced in post-Apartheid South Africa have the aim to redress the inequalities of the past, especially in the labour market. Yet the implementation of legislation such as BB-BEE has been largely unsuccessful in ensuring rapid advancement and adoption of the transformation agenda (Martin & Durrheim, 2006; Mthanti, 2017). In practice, opportunities for promotion are often afforded to candidates other than black Africans (Department of Labour, 2017). The banking sector specifically has witnessed an increase in representation of black

people (black Africans, Indian and Coloured people) at the junior and middle management levels, yet this has not translated into a corresponding increase in representation at senior management level. Paradoxically, a decline in representation of black people at senior management level has been noted (Banking Association of South Africa, 2017). The decline in participation is particularly troubling as junior and middle management levels are considered "feeders" to senior management roles.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Definitions

The study makes reference to terminology relevant to South Africa. The terms "designated groups", "black people", "employment equity" and "Affirmative Action" are outlined next.

Designated groups

"Designated groups" are defined, according to the South African Employment Equity Act (1998:7) as black people, women and people with disabilities.

Black people

The Employment Equity Act (1998) further mentions that the term "black people" is generic in nature and refers to individuals of African, Coloured (mixed race) and Indian descent.

Employment Equity

The concept and purpose of employment equity (EE) is outlined in the Employment Equity Act No. 55 (1998, p. 11), which states the purpose of EE as the "promotion of equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination, as well as the implementation of Affirmative Action (AA) measures to redress the disadvantages in employment that are experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workplace".

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action refers to "measures implemented to ensure qualified people from designated groups are afforded equal employment opportunities and are well represented in all employment levels in the workforce" (Employment Equity Act, 1998:16).

3.2. South African Social Demographic Profile

The population of South Africa is estimated to be 55.91 million (Statistics South Africa, 2016). The black African population comprises approximately 81% (45.11 million) of the total population. The next biggest population group is the Coloured group, which makes up approximately 9% (4.9 million) of the population. The white

population makes up approximately 8% (4.5 million) of the South African population. The smallest racial group is the Indian/Asian population group, which makes up approximately 2.5% (1.4 million) of the total South African population.

The South African government, and business, utilise the term "Economically Active Population" (EAP) to describe its available workforce. The EAP is used as a baseline to assist organisations in determining the levels of representation from different race groupings (Department of Labour, 2017). Employers at national and provincial level utilise this baseline to set equity targets for employers, in order to achieve equitable representation of designated groups (Department of Labour, 2017). The EAP is a useful baseline measure, complemented by relevant legislation, in the fast-tracking of opportunities for designated groups, in order to achieve a workforce profile representative of this baseline (Motileng, Wagner & Cassimjee, 2006). The latest EAP statistics are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. National economically active population (EAP) by population group and gender

Population group	Male	Female	Total
African	42.8%	35.1%	78.0%
Coloured	5.3%	4.5%	9.8%
Indian	1.8%	1.0%	2.8%
White	5.3%	4.2%	9.5%
Total	**55.2%**	**44.8%**	**100%**

Source: Statistics South Africa (2016)

The private sector in South Africa is, by law, obligated to comply with relevant legislation, which influences a businesses' operational capacities to compete effectively and efficiently. This includes transformational policies which influence not only operational capacities, but also access to government contracts, social capital, access to new markets and resource capacity (Alessandri, Black & Jackson, 2011; Horwitz & Jain, 2011; Kruger, 2013). Compliance against these targets are measured in a number of categories, such as ownership, management control, employment equity, skills development, preferential procurement, enterprise development and socio-economic developmental initiatives (Department of Trade and Industry, 2007). Past studies have found that organisation's reflecting the EAP are more effective in satisfying the needs of their target market, while at the same time addressing significant business and societal issues (Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011; Daya & April, 2014).

3.3. The South African Banking Sector

The banking sector in South Africa is dominated by four major banks, labelled the "Big Four", who collectively employ 131 404 people. The Big Four echo their commitment to supporting transformation in the banking sector, as well as adherence

to the Financial Sector Charter. To ensure adherence to the EAP, each bank publishes its compliance statistics, outlined as a summary in Table 2.

Table 2. Racial profile of employees employed at each bank

Organisation	Population group			
	African	**Coloured**	**Indian**	**White**
Standard Bank	50%	17%	14%	19%
First National Bank	76% (Black employees)			24%
ABSA	68% (Black employees)			32%
Nedbank	47.5%	16%	14.7%	21.7%

Source: Barclays Africa (2017); FNB (2017); Nedbank (2016); Standard Bank (2017)

The Financial Sector Charter came into effect in January 2004 and outlines the industry's obligation to adhere to transformation objectives. The overall purpose of the charter is to promote a transformed, vibrant and globally competitive financial sector, reflective of South Africa's EAP (Banking Association of South Africa, 2017). The major objectives of the Financial Sector Charter (FSC) are to improve the quality of the pool of intellectual capital, attract new entrants and train existing and new black professionals and managers. Other objectives of the FSC include greater sectoral economic participation of black people living with disabilities, as well as furthering the development of strategic and operational black leadership, while at the same time improving skills of new and existing leaders and managers. The charter further states that black people should comprise 80% of junior management, 75% of middle management and 60% of senior management (Department of Trade and Industry, 2007). These targets have however not been achieved, with an analysis of the Big Four indicating small, but insignificant gains at senior management level. The representation of black people at various managerial is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Black representation at each management level at major banks in 2015

Institution	Occupational level	Population group	Representation
Standard Bank	Junior Management	Black	81%
	Mid. Management		66.9%
	Senior Management		39.5%
Barclays Africa	Junior Management	Black	72.4%
	Mid Management		52.5%
	Senior Management		35.6%
Nedbank	Junior Management	Black African	56%
	Mid. Management		26%
	Senior Management		14%
First National Bank	Junior Management	Black	N/A
	Mid. Management		N/A
	Senior Management		37%

Source: Barclays Africa (2015); FNB (2015); Nedbank (2015); Standard Bank (2015)

Overall, Table 3 indicates that representativeness at senior management level is far below the targets set in the Financial Sector Charter, with adherence to EAP mainly being visible at junior management level. Representativeness according to EAP has however improved dramatically since the introduction of the Financial Sector Charter. The Banking Association South Africa (2017) states that black employees now comprise the majority of all managers in the sector. Most of the gains, however, have been at junior and middle management level. From 2012 to 2015, the number of black junior managers grew by 16 000, black middle managers grew by 6 000, while, the number of black senior managers grew by 800.

3.4. Career Progression

Career progression can be defined as the process of managing development of employees, as well as progress in learning and work over their lifetime (CiCA, 2016; Watts, 2016). Career progression is therefore mainly controlled by the employer, with some control and judgement by the individual employee, mainly driven by the need for personal contribution, recognition, avoidance of stagnation and self-realisation (Bown-Wilson & Parry, 2013). The concept can however be defined both subjectively and objectively. Subjectively, progress in the eyes of the individual can refer to attainment of one's potential through self-development, while objectively career progression can refer to professional recognition and reputation, as well as advancement in organisational hierarchy, job stability and adequacy of income (Santos, 2016). These views are consistent with other South African-based studies, such as by Visagie and Koekemoer (2014).

Potential barriers to career progression

A number of barriers inhibiting career progression have been identified in literature. One such barrier is the presence of a recruitment and promotion bias, which disfavours qualified, diverse candidates for leadership roles as a result of bias in promotion or hiring decisions (Martin, 2013). Prejudices and non-supportive cultures can also lead to a bias in promotion for existing candidates (Mathur-Helm, 2006).

Dessler (2015), as well as Steyn and Jackson (2014) argue that during the initial stages of job analysis and definition of job requirement, bias often occurs as the conceptions of an ideal candidate are shaped by the beliefs of the hiring manager. Furthermore, during the screening stage in promotion and hiring, the utilisation of non-job-related information, such as race and gender, can introduce bias in decision-making (Cascio, 2013; Steyn & Jackson, 2014). Also, past performance appraisals often act as the basis for promotion, remuneration and retention (Dessler, 2015). The bias of past evaluating managers can influence the decision to promote, not necessarily accurately reflecting the potential of a candidate (Dessler, 2015). Mobley (1982), as cited by Sharma (2016), states that a variance of 4.8% during performance appraisals can be attributed to employee and supervisor demographic differences. This is particularly important for the South African context, as Table 3 outlined severe demographic disparities between varying levels of management. Additionally, factors such as networking abilities, being part of the inner circle, strength of interpersonal skills and provision of opportunities by managers all pose potential barriers to career progression (Grimland, Vigoda-Gadot & Baruch, 2012; Visagie & Koekemoer, 2014; Santos, 2016; Wilson, 2016).

4. Methodology

This section delineates the research methodology used in this study. First, prominence will be given to the discussion on the research approach. Then the research design, research population and sampling approach will be discussed, as well as the data collection and data analysis methods outlined.

4.1. Research Approach

The primary objective of this paper is to ascertain the perceptions of black African middle managers about the barriers impeding their career progress into senior management in the South African banking sector. In line with this objective, the qualitative approach, which generates deeper insights and comprehension of the meanings associated with phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2009), was deemed most appropriate for this study.

4.2. Target Population and Sampling

Malhotra (2010, p. 372) defines a target population as the collection of elements that have the information required by the researcher. Therefore, in this study, approximately 17 000 black African middle managers who work for different banks in South Africa constituted the target population. The target population size was derived from the Big Four banks' annual reports (Barclays Africa, 2017; First National Bank, 2017; Nedbank, 2016; Standard Bank, 2017). From this population, purposive sampling, which is an effective method to utilise when interviewing a relatively small number of participants (Vogt, Gardner & Haeffele, 2012), was used to derive a sample size of 18 participants (i.e. black African middle managers). Interviews were conducted in two of the Big Four banks (Bank A and B), comprising a staff completement of 2 500 middle managers. In qualitative research, where the main objective is to understand a phenomenon in-depth, 15 to 30 interviews are usually deemed sufficient for analysis (Boddy, 2016; Dworkin, 2012).

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted to unearth insights of black African middle managers on the factors hindering their career progression in the banking sector. According to Alshenqeeti (2014), as this approach allows the researcher to probe participants for more information, it is suitable for uncovering practical solutions to complex problems. An interview guide was developed to ensure that data collected is aligned with the study's research objective on career progression. Therefore, the interview guide comprised of six broad categories of questions to solicit views of participants on the career progression phenomenon. Probing questions were included to gain additional insight.

Data collection was conducted in line with ethical clearance parameters, which stipulated that participants and participating organisations had to grant permission prior to conducting interviews. Furthermore, all participants were made aware of their right to privacy, voluntary participation and right to refuse to answer questions they are uncomfortable with. Interviews were recorded using a mobile phone and dictaphone to ensure that participants' responses were not distorted. The recorded interviews were transcribed and the transcription was used to analyse the data.

5. Results

A number of factors, discussed in this section, were identified by participants as presenting hindrances towards career progression of black African middle managers into senior management roles in the South African banking sector.

5.1. Demographic Variables

A total of 18 black African middle managers were interviewed for the purposes of this study. In terms of gender, both sexes were equally represented, with 9 male, and 9 female participants. The majority of participants were between the ages of 31-40 years (67%), followed by the 41-50 year age bracket (22%). The remainder of the participants were between the ages of 18-30 (6%) and 51+ years (6%). In terms of qualifications, most participants held an undergraduate degree (56%), with 25% holding a postgraduate qualification. The remainder held certificate and diploma qualifications at post-school level. Lastly, in terms of length of service with the current employer, a large proportion of participants (44%) were employed between 3-5 years, followed by a service length of 10 or more years (22%), and 6- 10 years (17%). The remainder of participants enjoyed a service length of between 1-2 years (17%).

5.2. Skills Set and Personal Attributes

The majority of participants (61%) indicated that skills and personal attributes such as leadership skills, diversity management skills and being sociable were fundamental. According to participants, they observed that senior managers are responsible for managing a diverse team, and therefore require leadership and diversity management skills to manage team dynamics effectively. Participants further indicated that if middle managers hold aspirations of progressing to senior management levels, they need to be sociable for the purposes of building industry networks and negotiating business deals. A summary of the required skills set and personal attributes is depicted in Table 4.

Table 4. Required skills set and personal attributes

Skills set	Personal Attributes
Leadership skills	High emotional intelligence
Financial acumen	Solution driven
Analytical thinking	Sociable
Strategy development	Open-mindedness
Negotiation skills	Trustworthiness
Diversity management	
Relationship management skills	
Entrepreneurial skills	

Source: Research findings

5.3. Training and Skills Development Program Awareness and Participation

Gauging from the gathered responses, a discrepancy between the awareness of training programs and participation by participants emerged. This is evident from that fact that despite 78% of participants being aware of training programs offered by their employer, only a mere 33% participated in these programs. When probed further on reasons behind non-participation in a training program, it transpired that

oftentimes these training programs were deemed more relevant to junior managers and therefore were not valuable to middle managers, who had ambitions of moving into senior positions.

5.4. Future Career Plans

Reponses to the question which aimed at ascertaining if middle managers held aspirations of progressing into senior management revealed that approximately 72% expressed interest to occupy a senior position in future. While 28% of these managers indicated a timeframe of between 2 to 5 years to achieve this career goal, most managers (44%) did not provide clear career plans. The essence of these findings is illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. Future career plans

Participants	Responses
Participant 2	"In 5 years, my plan is to be an operational executive. Within that 5 years, I want to move laterally and vertically in order to gain experience across various business units."
Participant 4	"…I am not that ambitious to say, I see myself in a certain position. As long as my work is recognised."
Participant 6	"I have 3 more years of formal employment. My future plans are outside of formal employment."

Source: Research findings

5.5. Level of Control of Own Career Advancement

Participants were asked about the level of control they have over their progress in the respective banking institutions. Whereas 44% of participants believed they were in control of their own career advancement, 28% felt their progression was dependent on certain individuals (for example senior managers) and the organisation as a whole (for example policies). Figure 1 summarises these findings.
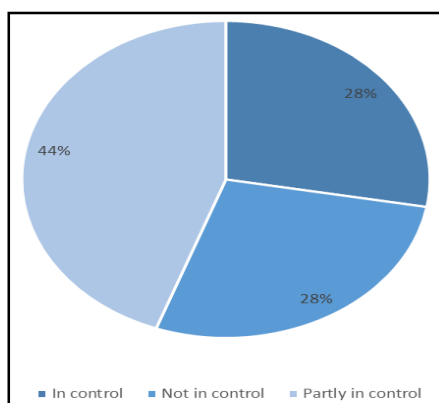
Figure 1. Control of own career advancement

Source: Research findings

5.6. Equal Opportunity

A question was posed in order to ascertain if participants believed that the policies of their respective banks afforded all racial groups equal opportunities for career advancement. An overwhelming 66% of participants indicated that, compared to other ethnic groups in their current organisation, they did not perceive to enjoy equal career advancement opportunities. These participants attributed this hindrance to various reasons, such as perceived lack of social capital, deeply entrenched corporate politics, as well as a lack of fairness in the implementation of recruitment and promotion policies. Structural issues were also discovered other studies (Goel & Lehal, 2014; Ibrat, 2015). Selected opinions of participants about these barriers are portrayed in Table 6.

Table 6. Equal opportunity

Participants	Responses
Participant 9	"Myself, personally, I have had a fair opportunity to move up the ladder but, I do not think it is the norm or equal."
Participant 1	"There are certain positions that it looks like they are reserved for particular race groups and there are those that seem acceptable to be headed by certain race groups, because the company will not fall over if it is managed by that race group."
Participant 15	"No. I do not think corporate believes that Africans have what it takes to succeed in any sphere of business and there is a ceiling. If you get to middle management at the bank, you have overachieved actually."

Source: Research findings

5.7. Demographic Composition of Senior Management

According to most participants in this study, the current demographic composition of senior management in the South African banking sector appear to be a relevant factor affecting progression into senior management positions. Eighty-three percent of participants in this study indicated that their prospects of progression into senior roles were affected by demographic factors, mainly on the basis of race.

5.8. Other General Barriers to Career Progression

Participants in the study indicated not being exposed to daily responsibilities of senior managers, thus lacking exposure to strategic duties, which can prepare them for senior management roles in the future. Participants indicated that senior management often does not seem eager to facilitate career progression. Other participants also indicated a lack of camaraderie and support.

In reputable and established organisations such as major financial institutions, shareholders are tasked with the responsibility of appointing board members, who in turn hire the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The CEO is afforded latitude to

assemble the executive team. Based on the participant's statements, it is in this process that bias in the appointment of key senior positions is introduced, in order to preserve the interests of shareholders. Lastly, participants also indicated the presence of bias on racial grounds during performance appraisals, with these appraisals normally conducted by business unit managers.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Transformation in the South African labour market, private sector and specifically in the banking sector has been a topical issue for a number of years. Despite best efforts by legislators and industry-specific associations, the rate of transformation has remained painfully slow. The South African banking sector pioneered such efforts, evidenced by most banks meeting, and some even exceeding, employment equity targets at junior management levels. While an improvement in representation at middle management level has been noted, the same cannot be stated for senior managerial roles. The purpose of this study was therefore to determine the perceptions of black African middle managers on the barrier to their progression into senior managerial roles. Findings revealed that demographic make-up at senior management level, lack of exposure to senior managerial duties, a lack of support amongst colleagues, existing ownership structures, as well as biased performance appraisal systems contribute to the barriers experienced by black African middle managers when seeking promotion. Collectively, participants in the study noted possessing the appropriate skill set for senior managerial positions. Those that did not possess the requisite skills were enrolled in appropriate training programs.

Based on the findings of the study, a set of practical recommendations can be developed. Firstly, it is recommended that bank-led initiatives be undertaken to address the identified barriers. Such initiatives can include improved training and development programs. Training programs relevant to each management level need to be introduced, focusing on building requisite skills such as analytical thinking, relationship management, strategy development, leadership and advanced report writing skills. Development and implementation of such programs would therefore require an internal skills audit. Further, participation in such training programs can be subsidised by the employer. Secondly, to reduce attrition rates in the sector, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of a succession planning tool is recommended. Implementation of such a tool can assist in strategically charting the career trajectory of junior and middle managers. Thirdly, the introduction of diversity management training is recommended in order to sensitise managers at all levels to cultural and language differences amongst their employees. Fourthly, the establishment of a transformation committee at each bank is recommended. The committee would be tasked with the setting and monitoring of transformation targets.

Lastly, stricter implementation of the Employment Equity Act and Financial Sector Charter is necessary to ensure compliance by industry.

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