

## TALES FROM THE SCRIPT

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### INTERVIEWER



**Ricky Burgess**  
PhD Student, Management  
University of North Carolina  
Kenan-Flagler Business  
School  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

### AUTHORS



**Marla Baskerville Watkins**  
Chief Diversity Officer  
Associate Professor,  
Management and  
Organizational Development  
Northeastern University  
D'Amore-McKim School of  
Business  
Boston, Massachusetts



**Lex Washington**  
Associate Professor,  
Management  
Oklahoma State University  
Spears School of Business  
Stillwater, Oklahoma

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## INTERVIEW

**RICHARD:** Thanks for coming and talking to me about your amazing paper, **making the invisible visible: Paradoxical effects of intersectional invisibility on the career experiences of executive Black women in the workplace.** I'm really excited to talk to you more about the paper. Can you talk to me a little bit about how this project started? I saw in the paper the initial interviews actually happened in 2007.

**MARLA:** There was this professor at Tulane who said I have some consulting work for Pam Carlton, and she's looking for a research assistant on this project to investigate the experiences of senior level Black women. So I interviewed with Pam, and we were a great fit.

**LEX:** I thought she was completely crazy. I said Marla, "We are not trained for qualitative research. Everybody says don't do it, you know it takes a million years."

**MARLA:** The project was for the ELC, the Executive Leadership Council, and we produced a report based on our findings, and the report was all about the challenges that senior level Black women face in the workplace. What did we do with this nice executive report? We gave it to the ELC. We gave a presentation about our findings in New York City, and then that was the end of it, right? I really wasn't in touch with Pam.

**LEX:** In 2012, Marla said, "Hey, guess what, Pam reached out. She is starting it up again to revisit these people." So we were doing work with multiple consultancies, multiple leadership development organizations and multiple corporate partners who wanted this follow up. We collaborated with these entities to collect the data. The first rounds of analysis were entirely for the questions that the Executive Leadership Council (ELC; an affinity group for Black executives) wanted, what the corporations wanted, and the report was written as a white paper, not for AMJ. For corporate audiences. We spent a good amount of time just doing that.

And one thing that I think is worth noting... Like, I said, neither of us are qualitative, so we had to go and reskill ourselves. We really leaned into, "How do we really do this work effectively?" We have great data. We have a good foundation, but the review process of the high quality journals does require putting together a team that understands the ins and outs of not only the method or the data, but the ins and outs of that particular journal.

I think this project just taught me a lot about the importance of building a team with diverse skills and interests. Pam was not an academic, is not an academic, but also had all of the knowledge and insight about industry that we did not have. And we needed that to really understand the context and the subtleties of what all of those women were going through.

**RICHARD:** Yeah, to follow up on that, having that great team of people with diverse perspectives is really important. But also, you had some feedback from various co-authors and people in the field that this research stream may not be very promising. So how do you decide what to do after? **What made you keep pushing and trying to land this paper into a leading outlet in spite of the negative feedback you got?**

**LEX:** We had a special issue, and the call just sounded so right. We had written up quite a few drafts, and it was different from the corporate paper. When we got positive feedback about our initial draft, and by positive feedback I mean, they said this won't work at all, but start over. They literally said, "Start over. This tiny little corner... dig around there some more." So we went back to the drawing board, and we literally started all over. No old writing, only new writing. No old analyses, only new analyses. We upskilled ourselves again.

**MARLA:** I put in a lot of time, energy, and effort. **But the other reason why I persevered even in the face of all this negative feedback was the value and importance I saw in this work. People in our field don't look at or study Black women. They just don't. I think there's an assumption that all these findings can be applied to all these different groups.** I had this vision that one day I was going to put our work on every single syllabus, and I have! Every syllabus. I find a reason to put it on there. I want these White folks to read and learn about Black women. What is intersectionality? I want all of my students to think about the importance of this, and how our experiences can be connected to not just one identity, but a number of identities.

The few Black women I had as students... one told me that she cried. She said, "I've never read a paper about people who look like me." She was in graduate school! "I'm used to reading cases and articles about either White men or White women. This is the first time I've read about the experiences of someone like me." I saw the value of that.

**RICHARD:** You're able to come up with really, really amazing insights around intersectional and visibility, particularly around the experience of Black executive women. **The executive Black women you interviewed experienced being an outsider within. Their identity and role also led to paradoxical effects in the workplace, giving them both some challenges and some opportunities.** Can you talk a little bit about what you found was the experience of these executive Black women at work?

**LEX:** Yeah, and of course, there is no way this work would have happened without the foundational insights from Collins' work 20 years before ours that uses the terms inside outsiders within. It gave me so much direction. It was such a model for how to do research in a way that is generative, right? I'm not just answering questions that are meaningful to me. But I'm really trying to draw out insights that help us understand that our experiences are always multifaceted. And so, even as a researcher studying Black women, I'm still sort of an insider, but because I'm a researcher, I'm an outsider.

In the period in which she [Collins] was writing, **she talks about the sort of paradoxical freedom of being on the bottom of everybody's list, because if nobody is expecting anything of you, you get to do what you want. If nobody knows you and they can't see you coming, then you can do what you want. Nobody has the playbook, so you can decide. And I just thought that that was such a critical part of what so many of these women told us. "They see us for being different. But that's all they see. So they're so busy focusing on this, you could do whatever you want."** So that part was just so motivating to me, and I felt like we were living that, that with this paper nobody expected anything from it. I think the women in our sample, along with the existing literature, drove us to tell their stories. We didn't so much develop an insight as we just amplified what was already there.

**RICHARD:** Awesome, to follow up that insight, let's talk more about the women you interviewed., As you said, these Black Executives were both invisible in some ways, but also did not have a clear playbook for how to operate, giving them flexibility for how to engage in their careers. It seems like you found some strategies that these women were more likely to use to be able to be successful. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**MARLA:** Let's mention the first paper we wrote. We pretty much scrapped most of it, but we did retain a section of it about the Glass Cliff and the writings that have been done in that area. Most of the work looks at it as a very negative thing. The sample is mostly White women, oh, it's horrible! They're sort of put into these precarious positions where the risk of failure is high, and it's the idea that other people are placing them here. This is like a form of sexism; it hurts women. **But we found that in our sample that a lot of the senior level Black women were looking for these kinds of positions, and I just thought that was fascinating, that they weren't looking at risk the way that it had been perceived. The academic literature suggests it's thrust upon women, and they have no choice. But these women were looking for and leaning into risk. They wanted these assignments to help increase their visibility, give them more credibility.** I just thought that was fascinating in terms of one of the many strategies that these women engaged in.

**LEX:** Yeah, I think the risk part was definitely important for us. I think also there was again, you know, the paradoxical part about the visibility and invisibility meant that they spent a lot of time sort of unpacking what was happening in their interactions with people predicting, making sense of, and then responding to. That required them to be very focused on, "How do I build relationships?" And so at first we thought, maybe it'll be harder for them, and maybe they'll be more excluded. But in reality, many of them seemed to develop skills around really consciously developing relationships, finding ways to find points of connection, but also finding ways to figure out, "What kind of relationship is this going to be? Am I going to be able to think about this person as a mentor or a sponsor? Is this person going to be somebody that's going to get in my way, and do I have to manage this relationship?" And so they really were very intentional about reducing any barriers between them and others, but also making sure that they actively manage those relationships, because if they didn't, people would fill in the blanks with all kinds of counterproductive, stereotypical insertions and assumptions about them. And so, in order to head that off, **they were really very intentional about how they displayed, how they engaged, what they showed, and how often they showed parts of themselves. They always were very intentional about it. And that's really what struck me: the ones that weren't intentional, the ones that weren't thoughtful, it really showed, not only in their network, but in their well-being and in the outcomes that happen to them over those intervening 7 years between the interviews.**

**RICHARD:** That makes sense. And I think it is interesting to see that these intentional and seemingly agentic behaviors were effective for Executive Black women. Few papers have been published in management looking specifically at the experiences of Black women, but your paper, along with work by Rebecca Ponce de Leon, Angelica Leigh, and Ashleigh Rosette, provides initial evidence of the unique intersectional experiences of Black women at work.

Thank you so much. It's been great!