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Black Women Returning to RN Completion Programs

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to explain factors that affect the participation of Black women in RN completion programs.*

Understanding why adults participate in education and how to structure educational programs to optimize their retention in and completion of these programs has been a longstanding research interest in the field (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). With the increasing accessibility of higher education in the past 20 years, adults over 25 now constitute nearly half of the U.S. students in post-secondary institutions (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Alongside this growth in participation has developed an impressive body of literature that seeks to explain adults' participation in undergraduate education (Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 1999; Kasworm, 1990). One stream of this research, which has examined barriers to participation, has identified situational, institutional, dispositional, and informational factors (Cookson, 1989; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). However, an emerging body of literature has suggested that these factors do not recognize that the experiences of Black and White adults returning to higher education are different (Briscoe & Ross, 1989; Fleming 1984; Moses, 1989). In fact, the studies on Black women in college classrooms (Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996) have found that these factors, while relevant, do not account for the primary issues faced by these women. Rather, it has been argued, Black women's participation in college is uniquely affected by struggles around race, class, and gender in the wider society (Hayes & Colin, 1994).

The problem this study seeks to address is that the research literature on the participation of adults in higher education has rarely focused on factors affecting Black women. The few studies that have examined the experiences of Black women have not addressed the participation of these women in programs in which nearly all of the participants are women, such as in a nursing program (Sokoloff, 1992). Some studies have focused on their classroom experiences only, while others have examined the participation of Black women, but in generic undergraduate programs. Thus, an undergraduate nursing program for adults provides a unique context in which to more clearly isolate the effects of race from gender on the college experience. The purpose of this study was to explain the factors that encouraged and discouraged the participation of Black women in RN completion programs.

Background and Methodology

During the 1990s several comprehensive reviews of the literature were published (Donaldson, et al, 1999; Kasworm, 1990; Hayes & Flannery, 1995; Spanard, 1990). This literature generally focuses on the uniqueness of adults' experience in comparison to the traditional 18-22 year old student. Thus, issues of race have received little to no treatment in the studies covered in these systematic reviews. Kasworm (1990) provided a comprehensive review of research published between 1940 and 1986 on adult undergraduate learners in higher education. Forty-six years of research studies did not include the race of the learners and, race was not mentioned in the review. Hayes and Flannery (1995) provided a systematic review regarding adult women's learning in higher education. They found that only six articles referenced race or ethnic groups of women and only three devoted significant attention to racial or ethnic differences among women. Black women were not the focus of any study. Hayes and Flannery (1995) concluded that most research continues to focus on White middle class women. Spanard's (1990) review of factors that motivate and barriers that hinder participation of adults in higher education found that institutional barriers include location (place), schedules (time), fee structures (cost) and campus friendliness. Again, however, issues of race never surfaced as a factor in the participation of adults in higher education. The most recent review of the research literature by

Donaldson, et al (1999) presents a comprehensive model of six major elements of adults' college experiences that can "explain adult student involvement in higher education"(p. 2). Even with the continued expansion of racial and ethnic diversity of adult learners in the 1990s, this review continued the trend of previous reviews in its lack of attention to how issues of race affect the participation of adults in higher education. Research that has specifically examined the experiences of Black women returning to college have found that the issues of participation for these women "are different and exist in the long shadow cast by a society driven by race, gender, and class hierarchies" (Johnson-Bailey, 1999, p. 29). Although reentry Black women experience some of the same situational, psycho-social, and institutional barriers as White women, such as doubts about ability, program scheduling, and lack of financial aid, they considered these issues as secondary to other barriers (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Johnson-Bailey, 1999).

The purpose of this study required an approach that would not objectify the Black woman's voice while recording her experiences. Thus, a qualitative design and a Black feminist theoretical framework guided this study (Hill Collins, 1995). A constant comparative methodological design was used to analyze the data. The process involved grouping and categorizing the interview data that had similar units of meaning. Three criteria guided the purposeful sample selection. The first was that the women had to self identify as being Black because the women shared an African descent and a history of oppression. The second was that the Black women had to be registered as a nurse and have received an associate degree or a diploma in nursing. The success of an initial degree or diploma would have been behind the participants. The last criterion was the Black women had to be currently enrolled in or had graduated from a RN completion program within the last three years. Seven of the ten women were attending RN completion programs and three women had graduated from a program. All programs were located in the Southeastern U.S.

Findings

The factors that encouraged the participation of Black women in RN completion programs were internal and external to the women.

Factors Encouraging Participation
A belief in God and/or Spirituality was identified as the major internal factor. Most women in the study spoke of God or a spiritual journey while participating in RN completion programs. Black women said they shared experiences with God and that God played a motivating force in their educational experiences. Betty stated that, "I think it all goes back to the grace of God. He watches over me day to day." Shelly agreed that "My biggest support is God. He shows me who I can depend on... He really wants me to be a nurse or that's in the plans for me. Mary identified God as her motivator and protector, saying, "God was just pulling me through. It's just God and I believe this program came along at the right time, you know."

All of the women shared stories of *determination*, the second internal factor. Some women stated they were determined to complete the program while others stated the importance of being goal driven or self motivated. For example, Betty stated that, "I had looked at the curriculum but I was determined. I came in with the attitude that I was going to graduate."

Eight of the ten Black women attached *social mobility* to the educational success of earning a BSN. As Betty explained, "I got overlooked for jobs because I didn't have the title BSN." Sara claimed that, "This degree will help me get a better position..." Joyce views the BSN as a "stepping stone" to where she really wants to be. Sharon shared these sentiments and stated, "My purpose was to get my BSN and move forward." Mary concluded that "Blacks study to better themselves and need the BSN to move into other health related professions..."

Having *previous experience* as a RN was a factor that encouraged participation. Eight of the ten women found that successful completion of an accredited nursing program and having the experience of being a practicing RN gave Black women courage to participate in RN completion programs. Betty explained it this way, "diploma graduates are the best, even though we have to go back to school for life...Mary said that her attitude was different when she returned for the BSN because of her previous nursing experience. "I didn't have the fear like, I am not going to let you graduate. And they can't really hurt you because you are already a nurse. The degree can't be taken back. So your attitude is different. You are more confident."

Factors Discouraging Participation

The factor of the *experience of being other* was prevalent throughout these women's experiences. Black women were able to live in the two worlds, the Black world and the White world (Hill Collins, 1995). These women were aware that they were the other, and it was just a fact of life. When being the other could not be tolerated by the women, it was viewed as discrimination. The experience of being the other did not stop the participation of Black women in RN completion programs although it did discourage such participation. Black women in the study noted a difference in the ways they were treated in the classroom and in the clinical areas as compared with their White colleagues. Of particular interest in this category, all women in the study used code language. This type of code language was synonymous with Hill Collins' (1995) insider/outsider language. For example, Melissa's code language was vivid throughout her experiences. Words such as "their," "they," and "White women" were used in reference to White people while "I," "we," and "Black women" were used in reference to Black people. Melissa stated, "we [Black students] tried having study groups but with only two of us [Black students] because nobody else showed up." Sara's code words were "we," "us," "they," and "them." Sara stated, "Sometimes you want to talk about your background which is all right. It's as if we aren't as important or intelligent as they are. . It's because she grew up different [from White Americans]." Joyce shared a story that exemplified the concept of the experience of being other and the story was told using code language. Joyce stated, "Once we were doing a presentation and she (the teacher) said she wanted it to be fifteen minutes. They [White students] got up and went on and on and on... It was like, they just thought they [White students] knew everything and did not follow the rules." The Black women saw themselves as the other in the classroom and in the clinical arena. This is significant for this study because it allows readers to understand the magnitude of the sense of other in the lives' of Black women. Hill Collins (1995) would analyze this factor as Black women being on the margins versus being at the center in the classroom and clinical practice.

Racism was manifested throughout the educational processes of the Black women. The *culture of racism* was a major factor that discouraged participation of Black women in RN completion programs. Properties that emerged from the culture of racism included injustice, psychological distress, and denial. These properties supported the culture of racism because they aided in the maintenance and perpetuation of the status quo.

The concept of *injustice* was noted throughout the educational experiences of the Black women in the study. Injustices were manifested by way of intimidation, difference in treatment, silence, misdiagnosis, ignoring, and humiliation. Shelly stated that injustices were carried out in her practicum setting in covert ways. She shared her perspective on dealing with injustice as it relates to differences in treatment afforded Black nurses because of race.

The way I look at it is some things need to be left unsaid. The reason I get in trouble all the time is because I speak out against what I feel are injustices. If you're Black and you seem to have a decent [level of] intelligence, they are going to get rid of you...or you are going be isolated.

The culture of racism was maintained through a property called *psychological distress*. Psychological distress occurred over injustices. Joyce's example shows this.

She [the teacher] would tell them [White students] that they [White students] could do extra things for credit like their e-mail and web pages. You know, we [Black students] didn't know a thing about it. We could have made our own web page. When we came to class, they had set up their web page and were showing it to us and everything. We knew nothing about a web page for extra credit.

Psychological distress was evident when Joyce concluded, "we [Black women] were sitting there looking stupid. We surely could have used the extra credit."

An example shared by Marie was in regard to being touched by the teacher in a physical health assessment class. Marie experienced psychological distress when the teacher made it obvious that she did not want to touch her and that the information in class was not meant for her.

Some of the other students did have some problems. She (the teacher) did seem a little distant but I could tell that she was more willing to touch, you know one on one, with some of the other [White] students, in terms of touching body parts... Her [the

White teacher's] distance didn't make me feel good at all....

Denial of racism was used as a strategy that protected Black women from their reactions to racism in the classroom and in the clinical areas. To deny racism included the realization that Blacks were treated different from Whites in a system that supports racism. Usually the resulting denial of racism causes one to mask the truth, which will lead to further oppression. Denial of racism was a barrier to participation in RN completion programs because the Black women justified injustices. The denial of racism was obvious as Melissa shared her experiences in the classroom. According to Melissa, she has never experienced a confrontation in the classroom with classmates. "In fact, they [White women] always ask me, "Why you so quiet?" You know around that situation [racist situations] there, I just know how to be when you are in a situation like that. You are just quiet and you just say what you have to say and that's it. You don't say any more. You don't say no less, no more than what you need to say. I don't know if that's a hindrance or what." When Melissa was asked if she could have spoken out in class, she answered, "No, I never said anything. It was just like that's the way it is, no one really said anything. I didn't feel comfortable enough to speak out against it. I didn't because when people are brought up that way you can't really change them." Melissa experienced denial and feelings of powerlessness, yet she denied racism and offered justifications for racist actions by stating that people will not and can not change if raised in a racist community.

Mary maintained that she has not experienced racism while in the program. She shared the following incident which analysis highlights as a racist experience. Mary posited, "I have had no problems, and I am not experiencing racism." However, she told stories of attendance policies that were enforced by Black teachers and followed by Black students but not White teachers or White students. When the attendance policy is not followed by White students, Mary stated,

I am just not going to try it.... And I think that is just a general thing being Black. Just like your mama told you, "You can't do what the White people do." You understand. See the rules apply to who they want them too. I mean if they clearly say that *you can't miss any more than one class, well, if you do, what do you have to stand by? Whereas, we have had White people who have missed several and it's just kinda, okay.*

At the conclusion of this story Mary further stated that "I am not experiencing racism. It just works out for me."

Discussion

Participation has probably been the most studied phenomenon in the field of adult education. However, the vast majority of this literature does not offer an understanding of how the basic interlocking structural characteristics of race and gender affect adults' decisions to participate and remain in higher education. The results of this study differ most dramatically from the research summarized by the comprehensive reviews (Donaldson, et al., 1999; Kasworm,1990) in the factors that discourage Black women from participating in higher education. Whereas previous research cites barriers such as inconvenient scheduling, lack of confidence in academic abilities, and conflicting life roles (Donaldson, et al., 1999), this study found that issues of race (Experience of Being Other) and racism (Culture of Racism) were the strongest barriers to participation. The women shared stories of injustice in their individual stories and explained how the course content of their respective programs supported a culture of racism. They also reported that Black women were treated differently in classes as compared to their White classmates. My conclusion is that being a Black women in society is such a fundamental marker of experience that it overwhelms other issues and becomes the central defining factor in their decision to participate and remain in higher education. Given that race strongly predicts participation in adult education, the results of this study should not be surprising. This study does not discount those variables found in earlier studies that used White women (Hayes & Flannery, 1995) or all adults (Kasworm, 1990), nor does it contend that those findings are not applicable. However, I suggest that those factors are played out in the long shadow of being a Black woman in American society. Another example of barriers being understood differently are the psycho-social factors cited in the literature that include self-esteem issues and past experiences as a student. Black women experience these factors as psycho-

logical distress, resulting from the Culture of Racism and the Experience of Being the Other.

Finally, this study has implications for all research on participation in higher education and adult education, more generally. By studying Black women as reentry students from the perspective of Black feminist thought, we can develop a more complete understanding of the college experience for all adults. This study both widens and sharpens the research lens so that for the first time, we can also see the advantages of being an adult White woman in higher education. By universalizing the college experience so that issues specific to Black women were not accounted for, prior research has largely taken whiteness to be the normative experience for all adults (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, in press). The literature has not done this for gender and according to Hayes & Flannery (1995) even as the literature seeks to make visible the gendered experience of reentry women, it has so largely for white women. Hopefully, this research can open up new avenues for research about adults in college that takes account of the factors that both privilege and disadvantage them as they seek to negotiate and complete this important educational degree.

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