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Low-income African American Women's Cultural Models of Work: Implications for Adult Education

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Abstract: *This study investigated how African American women from low-income, single-parent female-headed households conceptualize work and transitions to work, and how these conceptualizations relate to the dominant discourse of work underlying policies and practices in adult education. The findings challenge some prevalent assumptions and approaches in work-related education for low-income women.*

Background and Theoretical Perspectives

Recent sweeping changes in welfare legislation have had a significant impact on the provision of adult education and training for former welfare recipients. This population is disproportionately comprised of low-income single mothers of color, particularly African Americans. Adult education for this population has become increasingly job-focused, geared primarily towards preparing participants for immediate employment and providing training simultaneously with work experience. There continues to be controversy over the most appropriate content for such education and training but in general the emphasis is on job specific skills as well as more general employability skills. Many employers and educators stress the need to help participants develop "soft skills," which include "appropriate" work-related attitudes, values, and beliefs, such as self-motivation and an orientation towards individual achievement. A lack of these attitudes and beliefs has been considered as significant a barrier to successful employment as a deficiency in basic skills.

There have been few investigations of the actual work-related beliefs and attitudes of this population and their relation to work readiness or job success. Furthermore, there has been little attention given to how such beliefs are acquired or challenged in the context of women's lived experiences and life situations. In the past, scholars argued that a "culture of poverty" fostered negative attitudes among economically disadvantaged people of color towards so-called mainstream values and beliefs, including attitudes towards work and education. This culture of poverty perspective seems implicit in many of the directives for adult education provision for this population. However, this deficit perspec-

tive has been widely challenged in recent years by other scholars, particularly those informed by critical and feminist theories. From the perspective of these theories, individuals' beliefs and actions must be understood in light of unequal power relationships, which shape the knowledge and opportunities available to different groups within society (Carspecken & Apple, 1992). We were particularly interested in how the women in our study accommodated and resisted dominant cultural models associated with preparation for and enactment of work roles.

Research Design

In this study we used a critical qualitative methodology, drawing on the work of Quantz (1992), Carspecken (1996), Carspecken and Apple (1992), and Gee (1999). Critical qualitative research has been described by Quantz (1992) as an investigative approach designed to "represent the culture, the consciousness or the lived experiences of people living in asymmetrical power relations" (pp. 448-449). In particular, we drew on Gee's (1999) discussion of cultural models and discourse theory as a source of conceptual tools for our analysis.

The location for our research was a large, Midwestern city with high rates of unemployment and poverty. Study participants were identified through referrals from community adult education programs (i.e., job training programs, a local technical college) as well as from other participants. To collect data, we conducted semi-structured interviews with young African American women and their mothers. We interviewed both daughters and mothers in an attempt to explore similarities and differences in cultural models across generations in the same families. Daughters had to meet the following crite-

ria for inclusion in the study: (a) African American, (b) raised primarily in a single female-headed household (c) that was defined as low income (e.g., the family was eligible for some kind of public assistance such as welfare, food stamps, housing assistance), (d) between 18 and 30 years of age (to ensure a relatively recent post high school transition to work), and (e) employed full time at least six months in a job with a “living wage” or with potential for a self-supporting income. We used employment as a criterion because we wished to explore how the women’s actual work experiences might affect their cultural models of work. We completed interviews with 18 mother-daughter pairs and two daughters alone, resulting in a total of 38 women who participated in the study. The daughters and mothers were interviewed separately, typically in their homes, with each interview lasting approximately two hours. The interviews were broad in scope, addressing experiences within the family, school, and workplace. The interview data were analyzed in several stages to identify common and contrasting cultural models of work and the transition to work with particular relevance to work readiness, career choices, and actual employment.

Findings

As Gee (1999) explains, cultural models can be thought of as “images or storylines or descriptions of simplified worlds in which prototypical events unfold. They are our first thoughts or taken-for-granted assumptions about what is ‘typical’ or ‘normal’” (p. 59). Simply put, cultural models comprise people’s everyday “theories” about their world. These theories are shaped by and vary according to the socio-cultural groups to which we belong. Our cultural models are typically partial and inconsistent, since we each belong to different groups and are also influenced by diverse institutions, media, and other experiences. Cultural models espoused by dominant groups, as they comprise broader discourses linked to power and privilege, can be used to influence groups with less power in society.

In our study, we identified a variety of cultural models concerning work and transitions to work that had the potential to affect the women’s work-related learning and successful employment. Here we will describe three common models or sets of beliefs. Perhaps most striking is how the models reflect – and do not reflect – mainstream beliefs about

work and preparation for work. Also striking were the contradictions between the women’s espoused beliefs and their actual experience; i.e., what really helped them prepare for work and be successful on the job.

It’s Their Choice

“It’s their choice” is our term for a cultural model of career decision-making evident in many of the women’s interviews, and one that is widespread in career development literature and work-related education. This model was overtly espoused by some women in the interviews and reflected implicitly in the actions of the mothers as well as the young women as they made decisions about their futures. A key belief in this model is that youth and adults can and should make their own decisions about what job or career they wish to pursue. For example, when asked if she ever talked with her daughter about the kinds of work she might do, Elvira responded: “Well, I’m the type of mother that basically likes to let the children decide on their own, you know. I don’t think we should make up their minds for them . . . all they got to do is get out there and make their own decisions. And be their own self. That’s what I want them to be.” Another belief evident in the women’s comments is that people should find work that they “like” and that suits their particular talents. Presumably freedom of choice allows individuals to select jobs based on their personal preferences as well as abilities. Lakisha explained that her family wasn’t involved in her career decisions “ . . . because it was my life. And I had to make sure that I was comfortable in what I wanted to do. This had nothing to do with them . . . I wanted to make sure it was something that I liked.”

In general, the women’s beliefs were quite consistent with the dominant model of career choice that underlies many education for work programs. According to this model, individuals select their ideal occupation from a seemingly limitless range of alternatives, based on personal preferences, values, and abilities. An implicit assumption in this model is that individuals make independent decisions about work, have access to information about potential occupations, and have opportunities to pursue whatever type of career they desire. Of course, this model is rarely fully realized. The actual work experiences of the young women in our study reflect a reality of limited choices. Typically

the women's first work experiences were in whatever jobs became readily available to them, such as fast food restaurants, retail, child care, and custodial positions. Out of economic necessity, some women continued this pattern of taking the first available job after periods of unemployment while raising children or pursuing further education. While the women tended to espouse a model of individual choice, families exerted considerable influence on the daughters' decisions about work, by encouraging them to stay in school, helping them find jobs, and serving as occupational role models. The young women's choices about work were clearly limited by class, race, and gender, though few articulated these limitations. In discussions with their daughters about racism, sexism, and career choices, mothers acknowledged that being African American women might make it harder for their daughters to get the jobs they might want, but they balanced this with strong encouragement for their daughters to believe in their ability to overcome any obstacles. One mother told her daughter "It's all in what she wants to do and you know in her believing in herself that she can do it. Cause I let all of them know that whatever they wanted to do they could do it you know if they wanted to be president of the United States you know they could do that too you know." While this mother's apparent belief in her children's potential might seem wildly unrealistic, it can be understood as a means of instilling in her children a strong belief in their own self-efficacy, motivating them to overcome racist and sexist obstacles to their success in the workplace.

Planning for Life

Many women we interviewed espoused a belief in the value of defining future goals and making plans to achieve them, according to a cultural model we have named "planning for life." When asked if her mother ever talked to her about the importance of making plans for their future, Patricia, a daughter, replied "Yeah, all the time as far as plans about your life, you know. And to make sure we have a good future. You know she wanted us to go to college, you to know to get a good education, to get a good job". In contrast to dominant models of career development that typically give scant attention to the simultaneous enactment of family and other life roles, in the women's conception of "planning for life," career planning was inseparable from plans for family life. Starting a family frequently became

a basis for career planning, rather than something postponed until a career direction was well established. Rather than following a sequential pattern, many women lived out a cultural model of raising children simultaneously with working and/or going to school. The combined demands of work and family placed a number of constraints on the women's choices to pursue further education and on the types of jobs they sought.

The dominant model of career development includes the concept of climbing a "career ladder." A number of women in the study espoused a belief in this concept, typically by stressing the process of "working your way up" as a means of career advancement. Layla explained, "You gotta start some place and work your way up, that's like you just don't automatically grow up and graduate from high school. . . you gotta work your way up to graduate and you know take it from there." However, "working your way up" often is dependent on a life situation in which you can put "work first," making family and other life roles subordinate to work. The women in our study typically did not perceive this to be possible or desirable, given their roles as primary caregivers for children. Furthermore, they did not have the economic resources often needed to relocate or obtain transportation to move into better jobs. As a result, the more typical pattern of job mobility among these women was moving from one entry level job to another – lateral moves – rather than upward progress in the same type of occupation. Clearly, linear models of career development do not accommodate the complexity of these women's lives, in which family played a prominent role.

Don't Look at Color

"Don't look at color" reflects a theme that pervaded the women's discussions of racism. While they identified examples of racism and its effects on their work and family, many of the women advocated the strategy of "not looking at color;" in other words, they tried to minimize the effects of racism in their lives by not dwelling on its impact, not confronting it directly in the workplace, and teaching their children a sense of dignity and self-worth. They tended to describe racism as "ignorance." For example, Clara stated that if a "person is that ignorant, to judge a person on the color of their skin, then that person needs to see somebody, cause they have a problem." The women's models of racism as

“ignorance” were linked to their beliefs about how to respond to racism in the workplace. They made racism “not a problem” by ignoring it or taking for granted its existence. Clara explained that “. . . it makes me more ignorant to reply to [racist] statements that are made, sometimes you have to overlook them.”

The women’s stance toward not making racism a “problem” were connected to beliefs that confronting racism in the workplace would likely be ineffective and have negative consequences for themselves and their families. Those women who did feel that racism should be confronted tended to espouse a model that relied on the use of “proof” and the power of higher authorities. Krystal stated that to overcome racism, employees should “do your job, do it to the best of your ability and keep documentation. This is why we git misled and hassled, we don’t write things down.” Maxine explained “you talk to your boss you don’t git the treatment you deserve you need to remember your boss has a boss and you keep going over dere head, over dere head until you feel you git the treatment you deserve or if not den you should choose to leave.” However, the women tended to be skeptical about the use of legal procedures to change racist practices. They concentrated on developing a sense of personal worth and dignity within themselves and their daughters, as protection from the destructive attitudes they might encounter.

Conclusions and Implications

Adult education for work programs are typically informed by dominant beliefs that individuals can and should have the freedom to choose jobs and occupations according to their abilities and preferences; that “you can be anything you want to be;” the concept of moving up a “career ladder” by accepting poorly paid, entry level jobs and gradually moving into better positions as a result of good job performance and acquiring new skills; following an “appropriate” sequence of completing a high school or preferably a college education and obtaining employment in a chosen career, and for women, postponing pregnancy and childbirth. The women in our study tended to espouse beliefs consistent with dominant models of career transition, though these models were rarely enacted in the women’s lived experiences. While this might be interpreted as a deficiency in the women’s ability or motivation to engage in career planning, we argue that career de-

velopment models themselves are biased towards the life situations of privileged white males. For the women in this study, the combined effects of race, class, and gender inequities rendered such models inappropriate as a basis for explaining or guiding their transitions into desirable jobs and careers.

Our findings suggest that women in the low income African American families we studied have models of life planning and career development that are typically unrecognized or considered deficient. Indeed, comments by the women, such as “things just kinda happened,” suggested that their own efforts to set a direction for their lives and careers remained invisible and undervalued by them as well. Far from being passive in light of life circumstances, the women made many efforts to investigate different occupations through education and employment, took advantage of opportunities to develop their work-related skills, and managed their family lives in a way to accommodate work as well as schooling. The women’s life patterns tended to be influenced by their desire to be responsive to the needs of other people. In contrast, dominant career development models are based on a very “self-centered” approach to future planning, that assumes individuals give priority to their own needs and career interests. Numerous other authors have pointed out that women, particularly women of color, often eschew this individualistic approach (e.g., Caffarella & Olsen, 1993; Deyhle & Margonis, 1995). Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) suggests that the metaphor of “improvisation” might be more applicable to women’s career and family experiences than the dominant metaphor of a linear trajectory towards a predetermined goal. Building on Bateson, we suggest that the women’s ability to engage in “critical improvisation” – to continually adapt to changing life circumstances while negotiating the constraints imposed by race, gender, and class inequities – was a strength in enabling the women to combine work and family roles. While some more recent theories have begun to account for the influence of contextual factors on individual’s career development [e.g., social learning theory (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990), social cognitive theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1996)], their influence has yet to be felt in most work-related adult education.

Our findings suggest that adult educators should adopt a more critical stance towards the provision of education for work, particularly education linked

with welfare reform efforts. The assumption that participants are not cognizant of mainstream cultural beliefs and values regarding work should be questioned. We need a better understanding of how these beliefs and values do or do not serve the best interests of participants and contribute to their successful employment. The notion of “rational” and linear career planning cannot accommodate the complexity of balancing multiple commitments and confronting the effects of social inequities associated with race, class, and gender. Viewing career development as “critical improvisation” might enable educators to broaden their vision of appropriate ways to assist individuals in negotiating this complexity as an evolving, lifelong process. Education for work programs need to give more explicit attention to racism and sexism in efforts to more effectively prepare low income African American women for potential inequities. Rather than placing the burden on individuals to engage in often risky confrontational actions, adult educators, employers and policy makers need to take leadership in creating more equitable educational programs and work environments.

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