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Market Women: Lessons Learned from Successful Black Women Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: The purpose of this research was to explore the learning and business strategies of successful Black women entrepreneurs. The fundamental assumption of the study was that the life experiences of this underresearched group has value and worth and can provide useful lessons for adult learners, educators and entrepreneurs regardless of race, ethnicity or gender.

Introduction

Learning, or making meaning of experience in order to function optimally in a changing world, can be thought of as a human universal. As an African-American adult educator and entrepreneur, I felt that illumination of the learning experiences of a group successful Black women, defined here as women of African descent, who have succeeded in business in spite of the double yoke of sexism and racism could be transformed into lessons for many, especially adult learners and entrepreneurs.

Having been an entrepreneur and having taught literally hundreds of entrepreneurs, many of whom were women of color, I was continually impressed by their strength, resiliency, integrity and will in the face of racism and sexism as it impacted their business ownership and management. As a scholar-practitioner in both entrepreneurship and adult education, I also knew that their stories were largely absent from the literature and research in both fields. Therefore I felt it was imperative to provide some baseline empirical data documenting their experiences, knowing that lessons learned from this heretofore underresearched group of women had the potential to guide and inspire adult learners and new and would-be entrepreneurs regardless of race, ethnicity or gender. Implications for practice include the provision of findings that could be of use to adult educators concerned with advancing educational and economic equity.

Common wisdom and traditional literature in history, social sciences and education has it that Black women have no entrepreneurial history, few if any role models and 'unsuccessful' and 'uninteresting' businesses (Butler, 1991; Mullins, 1994). Similarly, with a few notable exceptions (Peterson, 1994; Sheard & Sissel, 2001; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994), the history and contributions of Black women as adult learners and educators is largely absent from adult education literature. Therefore, to address the lack of awareness of the role of Black women as learners and entrepreneurs, the questions I explored were *what* were the learning strategies employed by Black women entrepreneurs, *what* did they learn and *how* did they think the reported learning impacted their success in business. Those questions are related to larger issues of inclusion, empowerment and the relationship of gender, race and ethnicity to money and power in US society.

Theoretical and Contextual Framework

The review of the literature used to frame the study focused on material that situated the research problem and purpose within existing theory and practice and provided a conceptual framework for later analysis and synthesis of data. The literature examined fell into three major

three areas: Entrepreneurship Education, African-American Woman's Studies/Black Feminist Theory and Cross-Cultural Aspects of Adult Learning.

Entrepreneurship education: Economic context

Given the structural economic changes over the past two decades that have been especially injurious to women and minorities (Feiner, 1994; Rivkin, 1995), it is not surprising that individuals in those groups continue to be impacted most by economic downturns. Black women, who are members of both groups, have faced unique economic challenges as a result of their distinct position in US society.

One common response to increased employment needs amid a shrinking job market has been the creation of jobs and the achievement of financial independence through education and entrepreneurship (Levinson, 1997). Statistical summaries indicate that number of women-owned businesses is increasing at a rapid rate (US Census Bureau, 1997). It was also found that among women, minority female business owners were the largest and fastest growing group of new entrepreneurs. Of that group, African-American women own the largest number of businesses and were more likely to have sought out training and advice than other groups of female entrepreneurs (National Foundation of Women Business Owners in Clarke, 1999).

African-American Women's Studies, Black Feminist theory: Historical context

It is theorized that many of the entrepreneurial skills, strategies and values used by African-Americans in the "New World" were in part brought from Africa and retained and adapted in the community in such a way as to enable them to survive and in some cases prosper under unimaginably oppressive conditions. Whitaker (1990) and Stubblefield and Keane (1994) adult education historians, concur that many of the Africans were highly intelligent people who brought with them skills they had already acquired in Africa and quickly began to learn new skills to manage their new roles in America. In fact, Walker (1997) points out that "'human capital' factors were those which made Africans "the most desired laborers in the plantation colonies of the Americas" (p.207); women were especially valued for their gender-specific skills.

Across the spectrum of US history, Black women engaged in entrepreneurial and learning activities that at many times were informal and often clandestine, as learning and making money were dangerous and life-threatening, especially during the Antebellum era of US history. "Habits of survival" were retained informally as "people teach these habits to each other, often by example" (Scott, 1991, p. 9). Thus, historical contexts contributed to a tradition of informal learning and teaching in the Black community in addition to the many formal learning activities developed and conducted by Black women for the purposes of "uplifting the race" (Humber-Faison, 1988). These historical traditions identified by Walker (1993) and White (1985) are also reflected in the core themes posited by Black feminist theory. These themes, as defined by Collins (1990), Peterson (1992) and Scott (1991), are spirituality, sisterhood, the mother-daughter bond, connection with community, and a "warrior's will" necessary to survive in a society in which they were and are marginalized, ignored and maligned.

Cross-cultural Aspects of Adult Learning

Brookfield (1994) and Ross-Gordon (1991) agree that cross-cultural aspects of adult learning is an important emerging trend in adult learning literature that needs to be taken seriously as it impacts many of the types of learning thought to be distinctive to adults. However, both feel that the literature base on the impact of culture on adult education and research, while

still sparse, is growing and being taken more seriously. In discussing unique aspects of adult learning, Brookfield asserts that "...differences of class, culture, ethnicity, personality, cognitive style, learning patterns, life experiences and gender among adults are far more significant than the fact that they are not children..." (1994, p. 10).

Ross-Gordon (1991) recalls that both women and minorities demonstrate definite preferences for distinct learning styles or "ways of knowing" (p. 7) that include collaborative, connected learning, often in informal and nonformal settings. Additionally, in considering the role of culture in teaching and learning, Brown (1997) cautions against believing the "myth of the universal adult educator" in that it does not take into account the power issues involved when persons not privileged by White race or male gender teach. Power and position are determined to a large extent by cultural traditions and social prescriptives based on race and gender.

Research Design

This exploratory, qualitative study, guided by the constructivist or interpretive paradigm, investigated the phenomenon of success in entrepreneurship from the standpoint of Black women entrepreneurs. The rationale for this research approach was its appropriateness in investigating the *process* of entrepreneurship and the phenomenon of successful entrepreneurship within a specific setting and context. This exploratory case study, defined as an exploration of a "bounded system" or case through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information did provide data rich in context (Creswell, 1998).

The tools used were interviewing to obtain life and business experience information, focus groups and critical incident to obtain participants' perceptions of business success and learning experiences and document review or analysis to gather demographic and statistical information. The purposeful sample group of 19 women graduates who were nominated as being successful in 11 Entrepreneurship Assistance Program centers in New York State were interviewed, using a semi-structured interview guide. Clients of three New York entrepreneurship training and support organizations participated in the focus groups. The organizations were Black Women Enterprises, Inc, The American Women's Economic Development Corporation and the York College Small Business Development Center. The "rich, thick" data obtained by the qualitative tools was triangulated with each other as well as with traditional quantitative statistical data used to measure entrepreneurial success, resulting in culturally-sensitive, reliable and valid findings.

Findings

Eleven indigenous or participant-generated themes emerged from analysis of the rich, thick data related to learning, business, success and their intersection. The emergent themes were balance, sense of self, excellence, time poverty, respect and recognition, gifts from the margin, spirituality, human, social and financial capital accumulations and relationship with others. The themes were found to be consistent with those identified in the literature. In addition, six learning strategies employed by this successful group of learners and business owners were identified by their own descriptions, as were their perceptions of the connections between their learning and success (Smith, 1999). Those strategies were

(1.) observation/listening	(2.) role models/modeling:
(3.) apprenticeship	(4.) collaborative or communicative learning:
(5.) mentoring	(6.) transfer of learning

Representative words of the women themselves, presented below, provide clear and compelling evidence of the use of these learning strategies and their felt impact, in their own voices.

Observation/listening: "I'm just the kind that grew up listening. And there are preachers in my family and stuff like that. It's from that tradition I grew my art. I preach from a different pulpit..." Susan

Role Models: "My professor – she loved what she was doing and she really made me believe I could make beautiful (things) that people would want." Jean

Apprenticeship: "She taught me everything I know (about the craft). And she taught me a lot about business too." Maria

Mentors: "I think the person who teaches to you, to touch you and move you and make you believe in yourself. The guide up in the B. She made a big change in my life after um showing me how you approach people and speak to people and ask for what help you need." Willene

Collaborative and cooperative learning: "...you were part of the group (in the EAP class) and (had) the opportunity to learn from others in the group. There was more one-to-one guidance, even though you were part of the group. And the opportunity to learn from other people even though we were all in different businesses." Dara

Transfer of Learning: "When I was going to school I was studying, I was taking, I was doing a lot of biology and chemistry and I thought I might utilize it somewhere down the line but I didn't realize it would be here (in the business)." Maria

The overarching finding of the research was the breadth and depth of social capital possessed by the participants. A strong network of support seemed to be a thread interwoven throughout both their learning and successful business activities. Relationship with others, that is, the manner in which people accumulated social capital, was key in the acquisition of human capital necessary to enhance financial capital accumulations. The findings agreed with yet went beyond the literature reviewed in that the most effective learning experiences reported by the participants were a combination of strategies, often used simultaneously, both formally and informally, a difference from a traditional description of learning as occurring linearly in discrete settings.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

The study findings suggested themes that might be distinctive to Black women based on their distinctive position at the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender in US society. It was concluded that significant social capital accumulations derived from nurturing as well as bridging networks, continual use of formal and informal learning strategies, a "warrior's" will, a spiritual base, the valuing of balance in life and the use of humor might be those distinctive activities of these successful Black women entrepreneurs that enabled their success. Those activities and strategies provide lessons learned from those individuals who have succeeded against all odds. For example, advice given by Tamika to new and would-be entrepreneurs could be applied by those seeking success in a variety of endeavors, including educational:

"Network. Work with other people who share the same vision. Have a (business) plan. Learn as much as you possibly can about the your industry. Be resourceful. Build relationships."

The study group participants, all of whom acknowledged that race and gender influenced their learning and business experiences, felt these impacts were more positive than negative. Negative experiences only served to strengthen their resolve to succeed, both in learning and in business.

Spirituality, defined as faith in themselves as well as in a higher being, was felt to be a major factor in their ability to survive and prevail (Smith, 1999). Spirituality or faith was felt to give some women an advantage, a base of support and a source of guidance, strength and inspiration that enabled them to get through difficult times in business as well as life. The women also connected spirituality and balance, evidenced by their view that the achievement of balance of mind, body and spirit as well as life and work was a need, a goal and a measure of success.

Implications for Practice

While acknowledging the limitations of the study cited, including the small sample size, regional restrictions and retrospective recall, suggestions can be made for areas of future research as well as recommendations for practice. Based on the empirical results provided by this admittedly exploratory qualitative study, the following suggestions are made, grounded in lessons learned from the study group.

An overarching recommendation is that, we, as adult educators working with an increasingly diverse group of learners, access the learning needs, cultural worldviews and philosophies of our students. By including the contributions, both past and present, of those considered to be on the “margins” of society and the Academy in their programs, curricula and research, we can provide more inclusive and respectful programs. Based on the major lessons identified as being important for success, it is also recommended that we continue to consciously and deliberately: utilize informal and incidental learning that occurs both outside and inside classroom settings; *consciously* model good teaching and learning practices both with our students and within the learning community as a whole; maintain a “holistic” view of students and their need for balance; reflect our own sense of spirituality in our values and ethics; build on naturally occurring connections and collaborative ways of learning, including using technology to build, sustain and link learning communities, both face-to-face and virtual, across disciplines, institutions and places.

A final lesson can be taken from this group of women who defined *themselves* as women, as learners and as entrepreneurs, re-shaping the concepts of success, wealth and power, and challenging the prevailing negative views of Black women, and by extension, other marginalized groups in US society. By re-defining themselves and their successes, they empower themselves and others.

Black women are a prism through which the searing rays of race, class and sex are first focused and, then refracted. The creative among us transform these rays into a spectrum of brilliant color, a rainbow which illuminates the experience of all mankind (Margaret B. Wilkerson in Hine & Thompson, 1998).

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