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Expanding the Conversation on Adult Learning Theories: Theorizing African American Women's Learning and Development in Predominantly White Organizations

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Abstract: This study is a qualitative, interpretative examination of nine African American women's (AAW's) experiences while working in a leadership position at a predominantly White organization and the learning experiences that emerged from these encounters. Black feminist theory (BFT) is used as a sociocultural framework to explain how the participants learned from these experiences. Three main learning themes emerged: learning from influential sources, learning through divine guidance, and learning through affirmation of self. We posit that sociocultural theories derived from AAW's ways of knowing is necessary to move the field of adult education toward more inclusive ways of theorizing learning.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines how AAW's experiences with intersectionality--while working in leadership positions in predominantly White organizations--inform their learning. For the purpose of this study, a predominantly White organization refers to a work environment where an African American woman enters and assumes a position of leadership. Race, gender, and social class converge to form an interdependent, interactive, dynamic, and interlocking system referred to as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality explains how individuals experience privilege and disadvantage based on their social identity markers of difference (Adams, Blumenfeld, Castañeda, Hackman, Peters, and Zúñiga, 2010). In this study, social class refers to the socially disadvantaged status of individuals who have been subjected to racial, ethnic, or cultural bias because of their identity as a member of a group without regard to their individual qualities (SBA, 2004).

The study responds to the call by adult education scholars for more socially and culturally informed theories to inform the field (Alfred, 2002; Fenwick, 2001; Guy, 1999). Rather than continuing to operate from a Eurocentric view of learning, this study contributes to the scholarly discussion by examining the learning perspectives of African American women (AAW). To this end, the following research questions were explored:

1. How have AAW learned to develop in their professional roles in predominantly White organizations given their positionality within an interlocking social system of race, gender, and social class (intersectionality)?
2. How do traditional learning theories explain, or not explain, the learning experiences of AAW emerging from intersectionality?

Theoretical Framework

Black feminist theory (BFT), a sociocultural framework, is used to frame the intersection of race, gender, and social class in the learning experiences of AAW. BFT acknowledges multiple realities and construction of knowledge that “holds promise for challenging the Eurocentric ideals that dominate the practice of adult education” (Alfred, 2002, p. 11). BFT is rooted in an Africentric feminist epistemology that embraces ideals of interconnectedness, humanity, and elements of the spiritual (Alfred, 2000). A critical social theory, BFT highlights power and privilege as forces that have maintained the marginalized status of AAW. The prevailing notion of BFT is that AAW cannot be empowered unless intersecting systems of oppression are eliminated (Collins, 1990).

Moreover, BFT explains the collective, lived experiences of AAW, the commonalities of these experiences, and the multiple contexts from which these experiences can be understood. Although the voices of AAW in contributing to knowledge construction is still largely unrecognized, BFT brings insight to the realities and perspectives of AAW and can be used to enhance the traditional theories of adult learning.

Research Design

A qualitative, interpretative research methodology was used in this study. This methodology is useful in learning how people make meaning of their experiences and how their interpretations influence their reactions (Seidman, 1991).

Data Sources

Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1999) was used to select the nine participants in this study. This sampling technique aims to discover, understand, and gain insight into individual experience. For this reason, it was necessary to select a sample from which the most could be learned. The participants in this study ranged from age 40 to mid-60s and represented a variety of occupations, professions, and sectors of society. Each participant had at least five years experience as an executive or senior level manager in a predominantly White organization. The participants were selected based on their affiliation with professional organizations with a large African American membership such as the National Black MBA Association.

Data Collection

The data were collected from conducting face-to-face interviews in a neutral, mutually agreeable site. The interviews consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that were informed by the research questions. The goal of the interview process was to engage the participants in a conversation about situations where race, gender, and social class might have been a factor and the learning experiences that resulted from those encounters.

Narrative Analysis

A narrative approach to inquiry was employed since collecting the professional experiences of AAW can produce a form of narrative that tells a story. Individual narrative is a powerful tool for studying AAW because it “allows the person to withdraw from an experience

in order to reflect upon it, then reenter active life with a new or deeper understanding of that experience” (Clark, 2001, p. 89). The narratives produced are grounded in encounters with race, gender, and social class biases and as such offers a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the learning experiences and the sociocultural realities of AAW.

Findings and Conclusions

Selected passages from the participants’ narratives will be presented to reflect the three major learning themes that emerged: *learning from influential sources*, *learning through divine guidance*, and *learning through affirmation of self*. These themes relate to ways the participants learned to develop in their professional roles in predominantly White organizations given their positionality within an interlocking social system of race, gender, and social class. Moreover, the themes represent life orientations (relationships, community, and spiritual values) as guiding forces that direct and determine how a woman arranges her life and represent the values and interests that direct her toward certain goals and opportunities (Bell, 1990).

This study found that AAW use culturally informed strategies for addressing issues that emerge from intersectionality in predominantly White organizations. These strategies add a different perspective of adult learning that challenges the traditional assumptions about the ways adults learn. For instance, while some aspects of the women’s experiences were explained by traditional adult learning theories (e.g. social learning, motivation) some of their experiences were more adequately addressed by an Africentric, sociocultural philosophy.

This study also found that emancipatory learning, a philosophical learning approach rooted in transformational learning, has strong philosophical links to sociocultural frameworks. The challenge is for scholars and educators to acknowledge the benefits of emancipatory learning and promote its principles and assumptions in their research and teaching.

Learning from Influential Sources

Terhune (2008) found that AAW in predominantly White environments often experience feelings of social and cultural isolation, creating a need for connections to social support networks that can provide psychosocial buffers against disempowering situations. Furthermore, access to formal and informal social support networks often increase opportunities for learning and skill development (Combs, 2003). However informal social networks are more likely to represent access to power and authority and the development of social relationships that can positively influence enhance career development. Kezia (all names are pseudonyms), corporate executive, says AAW are locked out of these types of social networking opportunities. She offers this perspective.

The thing that happens with a lot of AAW is that we’re on the peripheral of the social circles and we can be locked out in many instances. Although my title is CIO, I am not a part of the executive management team--which is kind of funny in and of itself. And I know that from a socialization perspective I’m not on the dinner invitation list--have never been.

An important aspect of the socialization process is mentoring. Mentoring plays a crucial role in the psychosocial development of individuals, providing the interconnectedness and support needed to negotiate the challenges that are associated with entering new work environments (Mott, 2002). Because AAW entering predominantly White environments often

experience isolation, they often find themselves assimilating with the dominant culture in order to find support systems (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

In the absence of mentors, AAW may be subjected to the worldviews of the dominant culture and therefore expected to act in accordance to worldviews that are contradictory to their cultural beliefs and background (Collins, 1990). Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000) acknowledge that cross-cultural mentoring relationships are sites of struggle for learning and power because individuals are located in different social hierarchies of race and gender.

Identifying the learning theories. A traditional learning theory that is consistent with learning from influential sources is social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). Social learning describes how people learn by interacting with and observing others. In this study, social learning applies to ways that the participants learned or received support from influential sources or mentors. However, social learning theory does not adequately explain how AAW's socially disadvantaged status, or social class, creates a form of oppression that maintains exclusion in predominantly White organizations.

There are several limitations to social learning in respect to ways that AAW learn in predominantly White organizations. As AAW progress to higher levels in an organization's structure, the opportunities to form mentoring relationships with other AAW are limited. Moreover, mentoring relationships with White men or White women do not offer the same opportunity for AAW to share, reflect upon, and learn from experiences that emerge from the intersectionalities of being a Black woman. On the other hand, engaging in dialogue, sharing stories, and interacting with others similarly positioned is a primary source of knowing that is hallmark to an Africentric epistemology (Alfred, 2000).

Learning from Divine Guidance

AAW draw upon faith and divine guidance when facing challenges by transforming those challenges into meaningful experiences that will move them towards a higher purpose (Mattis, 2002). Hannah, school district administrator, shared how she learned to cope with these types of challenges in predominantly White organizations.

To successfully lead in these types of environments you have to trust God. Otherwise you'll spend a lot of energy trying to make things right that really you don't have the ability to make right. You cannot control how people feel about you or how they react towards you. But you can know that God will level the playing field. When we are in the middle of adversities, trying to work out our frustration and stress, we simply need to walk it out through faith.

Because an African American woman is often the only person of color in her work setting, faith in God has provided a source of inspiration and strength to endure challenges that stem from intersecting levels of oppression (Walker, 2009).

Identifying the learning theories. A traditional learning theory that is consistent with learning from divine sources is Maslow's (1970) theory of motivation. Being successful fulfills an innate drive for self-actualization, the primary goal of learning and a basic principle of motivation theory. While Maslow's theory is exemplified through the participants' persistence to overcome their adverse experiences, this theory does not adequately address the higher order of need that these women called upon to find relief from issues stemming from the intersectionalities of their social locations. Africentric perspectives, however, speak from a

sociocultural paradigm that provides a positive framework for AAW to connect to a Higher Power or life force (Jackson & Sears, 1992).

Learning through Affirmation of Self

Culturally informed learning strategies that provide affirmation of self often provide the only solution to dynamic, complex, and disempowering problems that are often difficult for AAW to resolve (Collins, 1990). Hannah talked about a reaction strategy she learned that not only empowered her, but granted her peace of mind when dealing with a problematic boss. She called the strategy stop, drop, and roll.

I had a boss who operated in a crisis mode all the time. She was also racist and tried to turn everybody against me. Every time she came into my office--it was a problem. Then the Lord gave me a strategy...it was stop, drop, and roll. Stop and know that God is in control. Drop my personal investment in the outcome because God has promised to take care of me. Roll and cast my cares on God. Once I learned that strategy I carried it over into other areas of my life. Strategies for overcoming disempowering experiences means affirming sources of power that emanates from a common heritage, allowing that power to flow freely, and rejecting the structures of power that seek to define one's self (Lorde, 1984).

Identifying the learning theories. Culturally informed learning strategies and the liberating empowerment that can be produced is linked to Freire's (1970) emancipatory learning philosophy. Emancipatory learning is a learning philosophy that has strong roots in transformational learning. The goal of emancipatory learning is to liberate individuals from oppressive forces that may control opportunities to reach a desired goal or that control individual autonomy to perform at the level to which that individual is capable. Being personally empowered even when conditions limit and restrict an individual's ability to act is necessary for a changed consciousness. Changed consciousness refers to AAW's ability to reach another level in their way of thinking about a situation because change has occurred from within (Collins, 1990). Rather than internalizing actions that are perceived as oppressive, AAW have developed strategies that reject the assumed power of others.

Another key element of emancipatory learning is the concept of critical reflection. The cycle of reflecting, acting on one's new understanding and then critically reflecting is praxis (Freire, 1970). Through praxis one may become empowered to develop capacities to act successfully and challenge systems of power, such as corporations and organizations. These type systems can threaten to dis-empower marginalized groups who have the capacity and agency to be otherwise empowered and reflective (Welton, 1993).

Emancipatory learning can lead to transformative learning experiences that empower and motivate individuals to act as change agents towards a more just society. While empowerment is liberating, emancipation involves deconstructing, resisting, and challenging structures of power (Inglis, 1997). AAW's cultural ways of learning can produce an affirmation of self that is liberating with the potential to empower the larger group to advocate against social injustice. In this regard, emancipatory learning and sociocultural frameworks support similar goals of emancipation, empowerment, and social change.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study is significant to the field of adult learning and education because AAW's position within interlocking social systems may result in learning experiences that are different from their White counterparts. Since AAW are part of a larger body that has experienced

historical oppression, their experiences cannot be and should not be generalized with the experiences of others. Race, gender, and social class are intersecting social constructions that order and influence the rights, privileges, and tribulations that AAW face every day. The effects of these social constructions cannot be separated from the daily experiences of this group of women. Given the multiple perspectives that inform adult learning, there is a growing need to embrace a knowledge base that captures more cultural and contextualized ways of learning and knowing (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Merriam, 2007). Consequently, a general, universalized theory of adult learning is unrealistic given the multiple meanings and contexts of learning (Burns, 2002). Therefore, scholars in the field of adult education should challenge the universality of learning theories emanating from a Eurocentric epistemological orientation and embrace sociocultural frameworks that explain intersectionality and positionality as detriments to learning and development (Tisdell, 2001). This study brings to the scholarly discourse the learning experiences of AAW as a move towards more inclusive ways of theorizing adult learning derived from AAW's ways of knowing. It is hoped that the findings unveiled continue to advance conversations for more sociocultural theories of learning.

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