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Brandee Appling

Natoya Hill Haskins

Jolie Daigle

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RESEARCH

Adult Developmental Experiences of African American Doctoral Student Mothers: Illuminating Generativity Processes

Brandee Appling, Natoya Hill Haskins, and Jolie Daigle

This phenomenological study examined the developmental experiences of 8 African American doctoral student mothers. Findings and related themes indicate that identity and curriculum preparation influence African American doctoral student mothers' adult development. Implications for training and practice are included along with recommendations for future research.

Keywords: African American mothers, doctoral students, adult development, career development, identity

An abundance of literature exists documenting experiences of women in higher education as both students and members of academia (Allan, 2011; Bhat, Pillay, & Hudson, 2012; Offerman, 2011). Scholars indicate that mothers have distinct career development paths because of the competing demands of parenting and work responsibilities (Eversole, Harvey, & Zimmerman, 2007; Palladino Schultheiss, 2009). Researchers have discussed that mothers in various careers are constrained professionally and experience issues balancing work and life (Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012; Wattis, Standing, & Yerkes, 2013).

Furthermore, the concept of work–life balance is often infused in various programs (e.g., education, social work, counseling, psychology, human services) as a curriculum topic that focuses on helping students understand

Brandee Appling, Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling, Auburn University; Natoya Hill Haskins, Counselor Education, College of William and Mary; Jolie Daigle, Counseling and Human Development Services, University of Georgia. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brandee Appling, Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling, Auburn University, 2084 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849 (email: bma0027@auburn.edu).

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how to address the role of work–life balance, family, and systems in the professional experiences (Haskins et al., 2016). In addition, these foci are reflected in the curriculum values (e.g., wellness, self-care) and teaching strategies; however, scholars indicate that these constructs are often not personified by faculty and students (Shillingford, Trice-Black, & Butler, 2013). In response to the attention to work–life balance issues, there has been a surge in research centered on the experiences of mothers in social sciences and humanities (Haskins et al., 2016; Hermann, Ziomek-Daigle, & Dockery, 2014; Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010) and mothers who are doctoral students (Brown & Watson, 2010; Holm, Prosek, & Weisberger, 2015; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012). However, these studies are limited in their transferability to African American students because the majority of the participants were White women (Brown & Watson, 2010; Holm et al., 2015; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012), and several researchers have suggested that female African American students may experience their academic environment in vastly different ways than White women in the same environment (Haskins et al., 2016; Hermann et al., 2014; Perlow, 2013; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012). Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African American student mothers in doctoral training programs.

DOCTORAL STUDENT MOTHERS

Doctoral student mothers are constantly negotiating a commitment and obligation to children while also nurturing their own educational aspirations (Mason, Goulden, & Frasch, 2009; Trepal, Stinchfield, & Haiyasoso, 2014). Specifically, during their academic programs, doctoral student mothers face work and life challenges such as increasing financial instability, establishing a professional identity, and working full- and part-time jobs (Trepal et al., 2014). In professional programs related to the social sciences, humanities, and education, these challenges are compounded by the expectation of modeling and embodying professional values of self-care, healthy family systems, and emotional management (Holm et al., 2015; Trepal et al., 2014).

Recently, researchers examined the qualitative experiences of student mothers and expectant mothers in doctoral programs (Brown & Watson, 2010; Grant & Ghee, 2015; Holm et al., 2015; Trepal et al., 2014). Findings from these studies revealed that the participants experienced guilt and silence in relation to talking about motherhood, which influenced their program completion timeline. In addition, participants indicated they subscribed to the traditional or Anglo cultural expectations related to the role of mother (e.g., staying home and taking care of children), which negatively influenced their curricular experiences (e.g., creating feelings of isolation and anxiety). Lastly, the results illuminated the necessity of mentors and family support.

AFRICAN AMERICAN DOCTORAL STUDENTS WHO ARE MOTHERS

African American doctoral student mothers can experience more isolation as they are not only fusing families and careers with doctoral work but also with their racial and maternal identities (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013) while attempting to maintain a work–life balance (Collins, 2000; Perlow, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). Particularly, African American female doctoral students currently enrolled in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) experience isolation, poor interactions with professors and peers, and perceived race- and gender-based discrimination and prejudice (Bhat et al., 2012).

Most development theorists posit that adulthood begins around age 20 and generally encompasses three distinct stages: early, middle, and late (Erikson, 1975; Kjellström & Stålné, 2017). The characteristics of each of these stages generally include the social and emotional aspects of aging, including social connectedness and the role of culture on individual development (Kjellström & Stålné, 2017). According to Erikson (1975), individuals need to have and continue to find meaning throughout their lives as they transition through each stage of development. Individuals in the early and middle adulthood stages often derive meaning from work and family life (Erikson, 1963, 1975). Erikson (1975) referred to these tasks as generativity and intimacy, which usually begin at age 35, although several researchers have indicated that generativity can occur as early as age 29 (Edelstein, 1997; Karacan, 2014). Sociocultural elements, such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, influence the development of all individuals during the generativity stage. However, as it relates specifically to gender, experts posit that women may experience tasks during this stage differently than their male counterparts (Edelstein, 1997). This may be especially true for African American doctoral student mothers because societal and cultural norms intersect with both their racial and mothering identities (Hermann et al., 2014), which affects their transition through adult development.

Research centering on African American female students in higher education indicates that this particular population experiences multiple layers of discrimination, such as racism and sexism, throughout their education (Hermann et al., 2014; Haskins et al., 2016). This affects not only their academic experiences, but also their personal development, which is influenced by the discrimination they receive within society (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009). Viewing the mothering and career adult development experiences of African American doctoral student mothers through a contextual/sociocultural lens considers the role that social inequities such as race and gender have on adult development (Kjellström & Stålné, 2017).

Although there are currently no known studies that examine the educational experiences of African American doctoral student mothers, several scholars cite that graduate students of color who are mothers combat systems of interlocking oppressions such as gender, race, and class (Haskins et al., 2016; Hermann

et al., 2014). The current study expands the understanding of how African American student mothers conceptualize their professional and personal lives as mothers in doctoral training programs. In addition, this study illuminates important middle adulthood developmental aspects that encompass generativity processes (e.g., biological generativity, parental generativity, work generativity, cultural generativity).

METHOD

This study used phenomenology qualitative methodology to develop an understanding of the experiences of African American doctoral student mothers. The phenomenological qualitative research approach used in the study illuminated the voices of African American doctoral students. In addition, this approach honored the interpretations of the life experiences of African American doctoral student mothers.

Participant Sampling and Participants

We used criterion sampling to identify eight to 10 African American doctoral student mothers enrolled doctoral programs in the United States. The primary researcher (first author) recruited participants through purposive sampling at national and regional conferences designed to support the development of doctoral students. As potential participants met selection criteria (i.e., identified as an African American and as a mother of at least one child under the age of 18), we contacted them to clarify the intent of the study and provide all information and forms related to the university internal review process.

This study included eight African American doctoral student mothers who were enrolled in counselor education programs across the Southeast, North Central, and Midwest United States. The participants ranged between 29 and 50 years of age, with a mean age of 36 years. Four out of the eight participants were enrolled full time in their programs and all of the women worked outside their home at least part time. The range in number of years of enrollment was 1 to 10 years, with a mean of 3.5 years. In addition, two of the participants were single and six were married. The participants' children ranged in ages from 1 to 18 years, with the mean age of 9 years.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process began with a questionnaire that collected the participant's demographic information. The demographic questionnaire confirmed ethnicity, gender orientation, number of children, university location, type of graduate degree program, and other pertinent data related to the study. Then, the primary researcher proceeded with the remainder of the interview, which took approximately 50 to 60 minutes each and consisted of approximately 10 open-ended questions. Some sample questions from the protocol include

“How does being a doctoral student influence your role as mother and how does your role as a mother influence your work as a doctoral student?” “What challenges have you experienced as an African American doctoral student mother enrolled in a doctoral program?” and “What successes have you experienced as an African American doctoral student mother enrolled in a doctoral program?”

On the basis of Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological data analysis process, we included six steps in the data analysis for our study. In the first step, we examined our interactions, values, and assumptions concerning our experiences. After the primary researcher transcribed the interviews, Moustakas’s second step of analysis—phenomenological reduction—was completed. First, we coded the statements and meanings, and we began with the process of horizontalization. During the horizontalization process, we assigned equal value to each segment of data (Moustakas, 1994).

The third step was the identification of a structural description, including verbatim examples from the interview to identify relationships among the meanings. We coded the first transcript independently, then came together to reach agreement on the codes—a process termed *consensus coding*. The next step encompassed categorizing these phrases and then clustering the phrases into themes or meaning units. In the fifth step in the analysis process, we reviewed the themes and the meaning units and listed textured descriptions of the students’ experiences. Lastly, we synthesized the data into results that provided a description of the experiences of the African American doctoral student mothers enrolled in counselor education preparation programs (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness of the Data

The strategies employed to assess the accuracy of findings included member checking, triangulating among the investigators, triangulating among sources, maintaining an audit trail, and practicing reflexivity. We used member checking by allowing the participants to review the codes and their transcripts. Investigator triangulation and peer review were implemented to cross check and corroborate the interpretation of the transcriptions to ensure that the participants’ subjective experiences, thoughts, and viewpoints were authentically and accurately portrayed in the results (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, an audit trail containing all documents of the research process was included in a locked file cabinet. The primary researcher also maintained a reflexivity journal to engage in self-reflection and understand personal experiences with the phenomenon.

RESULTS

Six themes represented the experiences of the African American doctoral student mothers: increasing personal pride, viewing motherhood as a priority, modeling new ways of being an African American mother, persevering through adapta-

tion and resilience, managing a multitude of work–life balance challenges, and experiencing marginalization based on race.

Increasing Personal Pride

All participants discussed personal pride, describing feelings of “self-worth,” “acceptance of self,” “security in being an African American woman,” “taking pleasure in my racial identity,” “internalized success,” “pride in self as a mother and doctoral student,” and “strength.” The participants acknowledged that they were proud to be African American women. One participant shared, “I am very proud of who I am. I think I have overcome so many obstacles as a Black woman. I am very secure in who I am. . . . I love being a Black woman.”

Another participant echoed this perspective, stating, “Being an African American woman means it is being proud, being proud of my background, my heritage, and being thankful for my family and humble.” Similarly, other participants shared, “I am juggling career, motherhood, and being a wife, and I am very proud to be an African American woman.” Two of the participants described personal pride as a strength that African American women have displayed historically. One participant shared, “When I think of an African American woman, I think of strength . . . to deal with sexism and racism. . . . I do not know where it comes from but it might come from our mothers.” The other participant also attributed being an African American woman to being strong, stating, “Being an African American woman means that I am a strong woman who has overcome a lot historically and in my personal life.”

Viewing Motherhood as a Priority

As a result of intersectionality and the myriad of challenges faced by African American doctoral student mothers, all eight of the women acknowledged their commitment to motherhood as their first priority. For example, one participant stated, “It is the hardest job I have ever had, but it is the most important job I will ever have. Being a mother to me is everything, my kids come first.” One of the participants, a single parent, shared how occupying the roles of mother and father had influenced her experiences:

I am never not a mom, so when I come home I cannot be a doctoral student. . . . I can’t walk into the classroom and say I’m not a parent. . . . I am a mom, 24 hours a day. I am never not a mom.

Being a mother extended beyond the participants’ homes and into their community and doctoral programs. For instance, one participant defined her mothering role in the community, sharing, “I’m a constant support for not only my family but for others in my community. I am a mother to many.” Likewise, another participant noted that she held a mothering role within her cohort, stating, “I see myself taking on that motherly role with my classmates,

I'm nurturing, I'm supportive, I'm doing check-ins and just trying to give people words of encouragement to keep moving." In addition, the theme of motherhood as a priority transcended the natural bond and relationship with the children to whom the women physically gave birth to include stepchildren, community members, and classmates.

Modeling New Ways of Being an African American Mother

Although motherhood was a priority to the participants in the study, each participant had an "intense desire" to attain her doctoral degree. One participant explained her commitment to her doctoral studies and to being a role model:

It presents an opportunity to do something that no one else in my family has been able to do, and I want to be a role model and set an example for my nieces, my own child, and any other African American women who aspire to obtain their doctoral degree.

Similarly, another participant shared her hope to become a role model for her peers and other African American students: "I feel that my graduation could help other Black students accomplish goals and dreams in their life. I want to be that person they look up to and say, 'She did it. This lady did it.'"

Participants also talked about acquiring privilege and modeling new ways of being as African American women. For example, one participant expressed, "As Black women, we have not always had privilege and power so this is a way to gain more privilege and power in the workplace by obtaining this doctorate degree." Attaining a doctorate degree allowed each participant to model new ways of being an African American mother. As stated by participants, "African American mothers with doctoral degrees serve as role models for other African American mothers, African American women, and their own children."

Persevering Through Adaptation and Resilience

All African American doctoral student mothers in this study connected their Black identity with academia through adaptation and resilience (Phillips, 2006). Participants encountered some obstacles in their doctoral experience, which they described as being "not very inviting," "torture," and "traumatic." Several of the mothers responded that one of the factors that related to their persistence in the program was "internal motivation" or "internal persistence." For example, one participant described her determination during pregnancy: "I was in the hospital using the computer doing classwork, and I was determined to get it done."

All of the women also spoke of their "faith in God" as a key factor in their persistence and ability to succeed. Three participants spoke at length about their spirituality and relationship with God throughout their doctoral process. Additionally, two participants shared that they credited God with strength and

resolve to continue in their program despite the challenges, stating, “My God is going to give me the strength to get things done” and “I cannot do anything without God. I would not be where I am without God in my life.” Collectively, the participants cited that “resiliency”; their ability to “adapt to change”; and their multiple roles as student, mother, and partner fostered their persistence within their doctoral programs.

Managing a Multitude of Work–Life Balance Challenges

One of the recurring themes of the women in the study was the intersectionality of their identities as mothers, doctoral students, and African American women, which increased the challenges they faced throughout their doctoral experiences. The work–life challenges noted were “internal conflict,” “lack of support,” “lack of time for self,” and “negative impact on children,” and all intersected to increase feelings of “isolation,” “guilt,” and “regret” within the women. Participants noted this intersectionality augmented their “internal conflict.” One participant shared how she experienced the “constant struggle” with role negotiation: “Being in this program and being a mother I feel like at times I have to choose between the two. . . . It’s a constant struggle. . . . I don’t want to make a decision and regret even more.”

Participants also shared that their work–life balance was “a challenge,” “hard,” “horrible,” and “tough.” For example, one participant stated, “It is hard because I am always sacrificing . . . sacrificing my health sometimes, sacrificing my personal time, time with my family.” Similarly, another participant noted, “I’m always struggling with my time, and I have four kids and doctoral studies.” In addition, many of the participants in the study indicated that in at least some area (e.g., personal, professional, doctoral program), the lack of support they received from their “husband,” “family,” “parents,” and “doctoral cohort members” made their experiences much more challenging. The participants explained that because these individuals did not understand how their role as a mother was affecting their experience, they often dealt with feelings of “isolation,” “anxiety,” “guilt,” and “loneliness.”

Experiencing Marginalization Based on Race

The role of race in their experiences as African American doctoral student mothers was one theme perceived similarly by all of the participants. The theme of marginalization based on race encompassed “questioning competence,” “disproving stereotypes,” “judgment,” and the desire to be “treated fairly.” Each participant spoke candidly about these issues and the salience of race in motherhood, life, and the pursuit of a doctoral degree. For instance, one participant spoke about the impact of race at her PWI, sharing, “You automatically go into an experience thinking that you’re going to be outnumbered. Being a Black person or a Black female . . . I have to try 10 times as hard to show that I am worthy of this degree and I am worthy of being here.” Similarly, another par-

ticipant shared, “I would be the only Black person in several of my classes and, if race or ethnicity were discussed, I was asked to speak for all Black people.”

Participants also indicated that they believed their race contributed to the isolation, microaggressions, and lack of support they experienced. One participant illustrated this, stating, “[White students] either had a teaching fellowship or graduate assistantship or something like that and seemed to fly through [the program] a lot faster than I did . . . so maybe [race] had something to do with it.” Participants also indicated that they had to “work harder” than their White colleagues to prove themselves and compensate for society’s views of African American women. For example, one participant expressed, “It means working extra hard to prove myself. That double standard of working twice as hard to get the same achievements as someone else and constantly proving myself worthy whether it’s academically or professionally.”

DISCUSSION

The complexities involved in the developmental processes of adulthood and mothering framed how the African American doctoral student mothers navigated their educational environment. According to Erikson (1975), the participants embodied the generativity phase of life, and they were biologically (e.g., having children), parentally (e.g., raising children), careerwise (e.g., passing on skills and knowledge to those in their academic community), and culturally (e.g., modeling an aspect of navigating doctoral education that can live on as cultural capital) generating a legacy and fostering a means to give to others and society. As noted in previous studies, the priority of mothering was critical not only in motivating the students toward success but also in structuring the participants’ time and professional responsibilities (Holm et al., 2015; Trepal et al., 2014).

Findings related to feelings of isolation and unfair treatment support prior criticisms that doctoral programs are not family-friendly or attentive to the needs of their African American students (Bhat et al., 2012; Grant & Ghee, 2015; Henfield, Owens, & Witherspoon, 2011; Henfield, Woo, & Washington, 2013). Additionally, consistent with previous studies that detail African American doctoral students’ frustration over lack of support and direction from faculty members (Henfield et al., 2013; Protivnak & Foss, 2009), findings from the current study suggest that the respondents experienced both race- and gender-based prejudice and discrimination. Similar to Haskins and colleagues’ (2016) study, which illuminated the impact of the intersections of marginalized identities of African American faculty who were mothers, in this study all of the participants noted that this combination, or triple oppression, exacerbated their challenges. These systemic challenges can influence an individual’s generativity process.

However, participants found ways to embrace generativity in their developmental experience. Specifically, we gleaned two unique generativity developmental findings from this study: persevering through adaptation and resilience and

experiencing an increase in personal pride. Persevering through adaption and resilience suggested that the participants engaged in a developmental process that allowed them to reject the negative images of African American womanhood that saturate western society and, instead, adapt strength, self-reliance, and fearlessness as they moved through middle adulthood (Collins, 2000). This experience specifically demonstrated how the participants worked through experiences that could have caused stagnation by focusing on their successes and strengths (Erikson, 1975).

In addition, the participants indicated increased feelings of pride, which is in direct juxtaposition with literature denoting that Black women are plagued with feelings of discontent and self-hatred because of internalized negative images in society of Black women and Black mothers that can impede progressive adult development (Perlow, 2013). Consequently, feelings of pride and resilience seemed to influence the participants' generativity parental, work, and cultural processes, specifically allowing the participants to take pride in their academic accomplishments, parental influences, and being an exemplar for their cultural group. These processes appeared to help participants feel as if they were "making their mark" (Erikson, 1975).

Implications

The implications of our study encompass both career development and personal development domains. In terms of career development support, African American women would benefit from the implementation of a family-friendly culture that is responsive to their needs. A family-friendly culture may include valuing the mothering identity and exploring the ways in which the career development experiences of African American mothers may become marginalized. Specifically, scholars may examine how current career development models conceptualize the mothering identity of African American women in relation with personal, cultural, and career constraints and needs; identify how cultural expectations and racial pride intersect with dominant culture career and professional demands; and train administrators and faculty in these cross-cultural differences.

An additional implication that resonated in the discussion with these participants involves mentoring and support. For the participants in this study, mentoring could serve as role modeling (professional and personal) and providing support. The participants discussed having a mentor to "check in" with who can provide encouragement as well as resources as these can be contributing factors of academic persistence. The creation of these support networks or "safe spaces" would provide an opportunity for African American mothers to discuss issues they do not speak about for fear of further marginalization as well as to share parenting resources (Hermann et al., 2014; Tauriac, Kim, Sarinana, Tawa, & Kahn, 2013). These support networks could be both physical and virtual to include individuals from different careers or

professions, given that several participants reported being the only African American mother in their cohort or program.

Those engaged in working with African American mothers in academic or professional capacities should be versed in the developmental needs of this population to effectively provide intervention and support. On the basis of the findings in this study and in previous research, we recommend that institutions of higher education be intentional in developing procedures that allow mothers to connect with individuals who either share similar identities or have experience working with the developmental issues related to combining motherhood with other identities (Haskins et al., 2016). Developing and implementing affinity group (i.e., a group that brings together people who have something in common for a sustained period of time; Tauriac et al., 2013) opportunities and classroom curricula specifically for African American mothers may be useful to enhance their educational experiences as they navigate a new profession and career path. Furthermore, participating in an affinity group allows individuals on similar developmental trajectories the space to acknowledge and negate stereotypes, increase inclusivity, and decrease feelings of isolation and tokenism. In this regard, mirroring affinity group content in the classroom centers pedagogy on the lives of marginalized individuals and acknowledges their status in higher education (Lyons et al., 2013).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations of this study involve the type of university the participants attended. Although the participants varied in age, years enrolled in a doctoral program, number and age of children, marital status, and geographic location, all eight attended PWIs, which may limit this study in reflecting the scope of the developmental experiences African American student mothers encounter as they move through their doctoral programs. Participants attending other doctoral programs at historically Black colleges and/or universities (HBCUs) may have different developmental experiences than those at PWIs.

A number of studies could build upon the findings of this study. Future researchers could examine the effect of other intersections of identity on the experiences of doctoral student mothers, such as sexual identity or disability status. In addition, future research could explore the experiences of African American doctoral student mothers attending HBCUs and those attending PWIs, as this would provide greater understanding of the experiences of mothers in academia across various academic settings. Finally, quantitative research would also be useful in studying whether the experiences of African American doctoral student mothers affect persistence and graduation rates in a large sample of African American doctoral student mothers.

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