Chapter 3
Theorizing African American Women's Learning and Development:
Leveraging Workforce Diversity through Socio-Cultural Adult Learning Theories

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ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative, interpretative examination of nine African American women's encounters with race, gender, and social class (intersectionality) in predominantly white organizations and the learning experiences that emerged from these encounters. Rather than continuing to operate from a Eurocentric view of learning, this study contributes to the scholarly discussion the learning perspectives of African American Women (AAW). Black feminist theory is used as a socio-cultural framework to explain how AAW learn from issues emerging from intersectionality. A narrative approach to inquiry was the research strategy employed. Three major learning orientations emerged from the women's narratives: learning from influential sources, learning through divine guidance, and learning through affirmation of self. The authors contend that expanding the conversation of adult learning theories to include socio-cultural theories derived from black women's scholarship may be necessary to move the field of adult education toward more inclusive ways of theorizing adult learning. Implications for the field of adult education and the emerging workforce diversity paradigm are provided.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of race, gender, and social class are interlocking systems forming mutually constructing forms of social dominance (Collins, 1998). In North American society, constructions of race, gender, and social class reproduce hierarchical systems that privilege some while denying others. The workplace, like other areas of society, can play an important role in reproducing and maintaining the status quo. Together, perspectives and constructions of race, gender, and social class may work to the disadvantage of African American Women (AAW) in predominantly White organizations. For the purpose of this study, a predominantly White organization refers to an environment where an AAW enters and assumes a position of leadership.

In this study, we pursue the notion that adult learning theories should consider socio-cultural theoretical perspectives that address intersectionality in the learning and development process of AAW. Socio-cultural refers to theoretical perspectives that consider race, gender, and social class in analyzing power dynamics within bureaucratic and other systems where power can be used to oppress (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). While scholars and educators in the field of adult education have addressed women's learning and development in terms of gender (Barr, 1999; Bierema, 2001, 1999; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, 1998; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; McLaren, 1985; Thompson, 1983, 1995) there is a lack of studies which have addressed the intersection of race, gender, and social class and AAW's learning and development in predominantly White organizations. For this reason, there is a lack of research in the field that has used socio-cultural theoretical frameworks, such as black feminist theory, to examine the nexus between socio-cultural theories and traditional learning theories. The narratives of the AAW in this study shifts the discussion of learning and development from independent, separate categories of disadvantage to one that focuses on the constructions of race, gender, and social class as an interactive, dynamic, and interlocking system of oppression.

For the purposes of this study, an African American woman is one who self-identifies as black and whose national origin of birth is the United States of America. Race is a socially constructed category that denotes differences among people and is politically sustained to assign people to categories (Banton, 2000). Gender is not only a social construct, it is a "set of assumptions and beliefs on both individual and societal levels that affect the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, resources, and treatment of women and men" (Bell & Nkomo, 2001, p. 16). Social class distinguishes the powerful from the powerless and can be one way of maintaining exclusion and sustaining oppression. In predominantly white settings, social class generally determines one's access to formal and informal social networks that grants social privilege and career success (Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Race, gender, and social class converge to form an interdependent, interactive, dynamic, and interlocking system referred to as intersectionality. While varying perspectives of intersectionality are emerging (Alcoff, 2006; Zack, 2005), the term "intersectionality" initially referred to the experiences of Black women whose experiences and struggles were not adequately captured in the feminist and anti-racist discourse. According to Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality denotes the various ways in which race, gender, and social class interact to shape the multiple dimensions in which AAW experience the world.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

According to Parker (2005), silencing the experiences of certain groups from the study of a phenomenon grants privilege to others and consequently produces the dominant, theoretical perspective that frames our understanding of

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