

**Refereed Article**

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***Learning-to-Learn to Live Through  
Struggle: A Bridge over Troubled  
Waters in the Lives of African  
American Women Political Leaders***

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to investigate interpretations of struggle in the lives of past and present African American women public officials. A qualitative research design utilizing phenomenology and Black feminist thought provided the theoretical framework. Twenty-two Black women were interviewed who had served in a governmental capacity on the local, state, and national level. While it is understood that African American women officials are not a monolithic group, five themes of struggle emerged which may serve to explain the value of informal education and experiential learning in the lives of these women.

**Multiple Realities of Struggle:  
Race, Class, and Gender**

The struggle of African American women is noted in the historical record of the United States. This historical struggle is characterized by exploitation, manipulation, and oppression on the basis of marginalized status (Davis, 1981; Lerner, 1972; Marable, 1983). The complex experiences and struggle of African American women have been characterized and described as multiple jeopardy—a term which recognizes the interlocking dimensions and nature of multiple oppression (King, 1988). The Black woman's struggle is shaped by her reality that commonality with

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white women is limited by the privilege that society in the United States has afforded white women and by the sexist practices found among some men with whom she shares a racial bond (King, 1988; Lorde, 2001). These multiple factors of race, class, and gender have an impact on the way Black women will experience, see, and view their life struggles as well as their overall worldview. When we begin to speak of a Black woman's experience and her struggle, it is understood that race, class, and gender are the ties that bind and, yet, are shackles that separate African American women (Johnson-Bailey, 1999).

African American women have a wide range of experiences that have been influenced by social, historical, political, and contextual influences. Such experiences reveal struggles that have been shaped by multiple factors that contribute to the ways that scholars have analyzed African American women and their contributions. Race, class, and gender provide the unit of analysis, or lens, employed by most African American scholars to interpret Black women's experiences and their life struggle (Brown, 2001). Hill Collins (1989) notes that Black women have acquired their own unique set of experiences, struggles, and/or personalized knowledge that equips Black women with the tools necessary to carve out their own perspective realities. These realities are indicative of individualized, unique experiences of consciousness distinctive of a reality based on race, class, and gender. Brewer (1992) emphasizes the importance of providing meaningful constructions of Black women's experiences and struggles by viewing their world rooted at the intersection of race, gender, and class.

### **Black Feminist Thought: A Framework for Interpreting the Knowledge, Experience, and Struggle of African American Women**

For African American women, race, class, and gender are learned social identities. There is never a time when the Black woman finds herself immersed in a total "race state," "class state," or "gendered state." The core of her social relationships, human-lived experience, and struggle is born out of race, class, and gender experiences. Ham Garth (1996) notes that African American women have a self-defined position on their own oppression. They have a distinctive set of experiences due to their political and economic status, these experiences provide them with a different set of experiences due to their political and economic status, and these experiences provide them with a different view of material reality than is available to most groups. African American women experience a

different world, a world that is unique only to them. In this sense African American women have a distinct feminist consciousness, one that has been structured by the intersection of race, class, and gender. Thus, Black feminism as a concept concerns itself with the simultaneity of race, class, and sexual oppression.

hooks (1984), Hill Collins (2000), and King (1988) each offer a distinct perspective on Black feminism juxtaposed with African American women's knowledge, experience, and struggle. hooks (1984) points out that Black women have an "oppositional world view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity" (p. ix). Hill Collins (2000) emphasizes that Black feminist thought is vital because it is a body of knowledge that recognizes the interlocking nature of oppressions as well as the connection among knowledge, experience, struggle, standpoint, practice, and consciousness.

Hill Collins (1988) also identifies the contours of a Black feminist thought as recognizing concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, emphasizing the use of dialogue and connectedness in making knowledge claims, fostering the ethic of caring, and acknowledging an ethic of personal accountability. King (1988) notes that Black feminist ideology is an oppositional knowledge which views African American women as subjects and not objects, challenges the hegemonic domains of power, and dismisses intersectional oppression inside movements for liberation. Black feminist scholars also have noted that Black feminism works continually to find ways in which African American women and men can embrace and envision a humanistic community, given the structural domains of power (Williams, 1996).

### **Phenomenology: A Tool of Analysis for a Qualitative Research Design**

Phenomenology is concerned with structures of conscious thought. It is a science that is rooted in the essence and grasping of conscious thought. Phenomenology does not concern itself with empiricism but focuses, rather, on the constitutive process in people as subjects within consciousness. As subjects within consciousness, we are all governed by streams of essences which are not always apparent to us but are hidden in our everyday interactions with the world. Through reflection people have the capacity to describe and generate descriptions about what is essential to a particular experience. Further, phenomenology recognizes that dia-

logue is essential to the intuition of essences because it recognizes the interactive nature of humans as actors working in conjunction with others (Polkinghorne, 1983).

Stangne (1987) notes that a person is always consciousness and knowing about aspects of one's life world. Examples of such phenomena include hopes, problems, struggles, and experiencings of one's conscious life. Stangne also describes the phenomenological method as investigating particular phenomena, investigating general essences, apprehending essential relationships among essences, watching modes of appearing, watching the constitution of phenomena in consciousness, suspending belief in the existence of phenomena, and interpreting the meaning of phenomena. Additionally, Stangne identifies experiencing as a critical layer in the education of person, and he provides us with eight points resulting from his investigation of experience: "(1) Experience is an 'intentional' act in which an experiencer is directed toward an intentional object" (p. 186). "(2) A full experience is a synthesis of several intentional acts" (p. 188). "(3) The experience of an object refers beyond itself" (p. 189). "(4) Experience has no temporal structure" (p. 190). "(5) Experience extends to any type of individual objects" (p. 190). "(6) Experience forms the pre-predicative stage of our cognitive life" (p. 191). "(7) Experience constitutes the experienced" (p. 192). "(8) Experience is a combination of receptive and spontaneous processes" (p. 193).

### Methodology

The methodology for this research was dictated by the nature of the research questions and the need to engage in a more effective inquiry into the attributes of African American women public officials. A critical ethnographic case study was used in which themes were extracted from life stories. Critical ethnography is scientific and rigorous and allows the researcher to participate in the research process (Thomas, 1993). Case studies offer intensive descriptions of phenomena or social units and are concerned with many or all units of a variable. Case studies also offer large amounts of rich, detailed information and reveal variables that help structure further study (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). The participants selected for study were contacted initially by mail from among a population of 28 elected African American women (with the exception of judges) representing the city of Chicago on the local, state, and national level. Twenty-two African American women public officials responded to this mailing and agreed to a personal interview. The group included African

American women who served in elected positions, including city council, county commissioner, state representative, state senator, and U.S. Senator.

The interviews, ranging from one to three and one-half hours, consisted of six open-ended questions centered around issues that addressed the interviewee's experiences in family, school, work, community, and politics. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed the participants to tell their stories in their own words on their own terms in a non-threatening manner. The interview process was comprehensive and participatory. All 22 interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participants, who were allowed to ask questions on and off the record. All attempts were made to remain as close and as connected as possible to the data. Thus, the initial analysis of the collected transcriptions consisted of reviewing each interview, recording the responses of each interviewee question by question, and recording the responses.

### Findings

The following five struggle themes that emerged may serve to explain the value of informal education and experiential learning in the lives of these women.

#### *Struggle: A Shared Collective Experience*

The participants offered what they knew and had learned about struggle by providing interpretations of struggle (Rogers, 1997). A former Congresswoman stated that her struggle involved the expression of her own humanity and rising to the level of her greatest potential:

It's very much a struggle to express my own humanity, in the sense that my folks never gave me a sense of limitations based on my gender or race. and they gave me the notion that my duty was to be all that I could be and do the best job I could where I was planted and those kinds of things and that then neither race nor gender would stand in the way. (Rogers, 1997, p. 128)

A Chicago city council member characterized her experience as part of a collective, developing and acting on one's personal vision:

Well, it's been a struggle to recognize who and what I am and what I can do as a human being. . . . Once you place the power within

yourself and not out there you have the capacity to make changes. (Rogers, 1997, p. 126)

Another public official discussed her struggle to be taken seriously:

Child, life for me ain't been no crystal stairs. I have had great challenges as an African American woman in public service, and the greatest challenge I have has been not being taken seriously. (Rogers, 1997, p. 128)

### ***Struggle: A Balance Between Private and Public Spheres***

Many of the participants cited the interrelationship between public and private roles. Participants also revealed that the public arena is not completely independent of their private roles that involve personal matters relating to the self, marriage, and/or family. One Chicago representative revealed how news of her first husband's death was leaked to the public and used against her in her second campaign for city council:

The last campaign, I really—because at that time is when my oldest daughter's father was executed along with another gentlemen, that they did a lethal injection—so this last campaign I almost gave up because when my opponent felt like he had to stoop that low, to involve a situation that was totally not in the realm of the campaign. This was something that I had been toiling with for 17 years, and when he decided that he was going to make that a campaign issue, it just did something to me as far as politics is concerned. It was—I thought, politics is not worth this. To try and be up everyday and help other people and have this happen. It was again a trying time for me. (Rogers, 1997, p. 140)

A representative at the state level described how the birth of her child intersected with her role as a public official:

My daughter brought excitement; because of her, I was in the newspapers all across the United States because I gave birth—I was standing at the podium and my water broke, and I continued my speech, and when I finished I said, "You'll have to excuse me because I'm gonna have to go and have my baby delivered," and they thought I was kidding, you know, until they saw all the water there, and I just kinda walked away. . . . The Speaker of the House sent an airplane to

Chicago to pick up my husband. . . . Springfield will always be special to me for no other reason, because she [her daughter] was born there. (Rogers, 1997, p. 138)

### ***Racism and Sexism: A Persistent Struggle***

The participants characterized and described their struggle with racism and sexism. Participants provided vivid accounts of the actions, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with racist and sexist practices. A Chicago city council member described the racism and sexism she experienced as a public official:

I've experienced the whole gamut of discrimination. I was in a committee—a White alderman; it became obvious that this alderman thought I was another Black alderwoman. The old “they-all-look-alike” kind of thing. I am saying that he didn't even recognize what he was doing. He didn't recognize it, but I needed to bring it to his attention so that he's aware now. He can react defensively or whatever. Maybe somebody else is—you know what I'm saying? So that he doesn't feel threatened, but we have to talk about it, and that's what I always do. Get it out there on the table and not sweep it under the rug. (Rogers, 1997, pp. 130-131)

Another city council member depicted the struggle of African American women in political office by stating: “As a Black woman though, you have two struggles. One is being Black and one is being a woman; so you're in double jeopardy as a Black woman” (Rogers, 1997, p. 132). A former Illinois State Representative recalled the racist practices she experienced:

When I was there in Springfield, my biggest disappointment was that I was seated in the back row, which was called “catfish row.” At the time that's where all the Blacks sat. And, I was so disappointed; I thought, “Here, I'm representing a new thought, . . . and, boy, I am tossed in the back of ‘catfish row.’” I was very disappointed; I was disgusted; I may have even wanted to cry. (Rogers, 1997, p. 132)

### ***Spirituality and God: A Strategy to Combat Struggle***

Participants reported that they sought comfort, peace, and strength by maintaining a strong spiritual belief. One Chicago city councilwoman described how her spiritual belief has helped her as a public official:

Buddhism starts at a different point: that you are worthy. I mean there are causes and effects, so we make causes by our thoughts, words, intentions, actions, and we realize the effects. . . . People say, "How can you deal with the madness of city council?" Well, that's how you deal with it. My philosophy is that we're in situations to change them. So, rather than—or a lot of times we see ourselves as not having the power to make a difference. I would never think that way again. (Rogers, 1997, p. 142)

Another city council member discussed how her spiritual beliefs have shaped her life as a public official:

I believe there is a God who is all knowing and who is always there, you know, who can take care of anything and everything, who can make us bigger than we are, who can elevate me wherever I want to go. (Rogers, 1997, p. 143)

### *Lifting As They Climb: A Struggle to Service Humanity*

The participants expressed an interest in the infinite process of interactions based upon what is good for the collective. Also, they appeared to pay special attention to the issues evolving from those on the bottom, and they were highly concerned with the eradication of social inequalities. This perspective is demonstrated by one elected official's commitment to service:

One particular movement I recalled is when Dr. Martin Luther King came to the West Side to live. There was a group called SNCC who sponsored him, and although I was not an active member when he came to Stone Temple church for the big rally they had for him, one of the SNCC members asked me to usher that night, and of course, I accepted. My responsibility was to bring in Mahalia Jackson, and after that I walked Mahalia to the pulpit where Dr. King was sitting. I shook his hand, and it was an electrifying experience. And I guess that must have been the turning point in my life to commit myself to give back to my community something and to participate in bringing more people into the knowledge of how government really operates. (Rogers, 1997, p. 85)

Another elected official offered her interpretation of what it means to serve the people:



I love people. I love service. I've never charged a person for anything that I've ever done. I was elected to serve people and that's my hallmark. . . . It's not what you do, but it's what you leave here—legacy, people, people. We get out here and we try to make a big name for ourselves. It's not what we do but what we leave here for somebody else. (Rogers, 1997, p. 90)

### **Experiential Learning, Informal Education, and Implications for Adult and Community Education**

The participants reveal in their struggle themes that there are lessons in the world that adults gain from life experiences and that “every experience is a moving force” (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 38). Further, these participants bear testimony to the fact that adults will face adversity, struggles, and challenges that never can be duplicated or explained fully in a formal setting. Through these struggle experiences participants share a knowledge that produces a wisdom essential for survival. This wisdom acquired through struggle serves as a bridge over troubled waters for many African American women. “Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 257).

Moreover, the findings reveal that we as educators should pay particular attention to what gets counted as knowledge in a particular learning situation, broaden our understanding as to who has the capacity to become knowledge producers, and place value on knowing about life's struggle among adult leaders and learners at the intersection that is rooted in experience (Flannery & Hayes, 2001). The “real knowledge” that the participants acquired came as a result of their struggle via experiential learning and deserves to be included in the front row next to formal learning. Experiential learning also reveals that the diverse reality of lived experience will generate a different worldview and frame of reference as compared to the dominant view found in adult education. As with these other perspectives we must welcome and entertain diverse realities and knowledge because we “are all knowledge makers, not just those in academe. We have different experiences and we have our own ways of making sense of life” (Flannery, 1994, p. 23). The participants also emphasized the importance of informal education and learning. Gyant (1990) describes the importance of informal and nonformal education in the African American community. She notes that informal education has been

the primary avenue to becoming educated and is more valued because it is the kind of learning that is directly applicable and useful in the world in which the participants find themselves.

In our effort properly to conceptualize and respect individuals, groups, and people in an attempt toward fostering a more humane community, we must work to ensure that diverse perspectives are taken seriously and counted as knowledge. We must understand that there are other perspectives in understanding the diverse nature of adults as leaders and learners in society in the United States. Finally, we must recognize that experiential learning and informal education teaches us that, as marginalized adults move through history, we cannot attempt to separate their personal interpretation of phenomena, nor their biography, from their interaction with social or systemic structures and the continued struggle for more equal power relationships (Cunningham, 1992; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Finally, the struggle themes as revealed by African American women public officials challenge us to think about how our own struggle as practitioners informs who we are, what we are, and how we have come to terms with our own politics inside our organizations in an attempt to serve adults.

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