

African American Female Doctoral Students: Experiences, Motivation, and Perceptions of Hegemony in Preparation for Careers in Educational Leadership

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To understand the experiences of female doctoral students of color in preparation for careers in educational leadership, their intersected identities regarding race and gender must also be understood by institutions on the preK-12 and higher education levels. This study aimed to gain insight into the navigation experiences of women of color pursuing careers in educational leadership through doctoral study, as well as their motivation for pursuing a career in the field of educational leadership and perceptions of professional hegemony. Data were collected primarily through face-to-face and telephone interviews with each participant, as well as a final focus group interview. Findings indicate the emergence of several commonalities across participant experiences and implications for K-12 and institutions of higher education. Overall, the need still exists for more research on what motivates women of color, including and beyond African American women, to pursue and stay in positions of educational leadership in pre-K through 20.

Keywords: educational leadership, African American women, intersectionality

Much research has been conducted to investigate the lack of diversity in educational leadership. In the K-12 setting, administrative leadership teams within schools often reinforce a lack of attention to diversity, as most principals are from the majority culture (Goddard & Hart, 2007). Although members of ethnic minorities, especially ethnic minority women, have become more visible in teaching positions, in many institutions, they have been barred access to positions of educational administration (Hogg, 2001; Trujillo-Ball, 2003). For over three decades, the composition of educational administration graduate programs has shifted more focus on the lack of diversity in these programs and question whether or not best practices for supporting graduate students apply to all or only some. It is suggested that some strategies may transcend race, but graduate students of color need support for successful matriculation fundamentally different from their White counterparts (Young & Brooks, 2008). Although many educational benefits are directly connected to campus diversity, diverse women of color faculty encounter multiple forms of marginalization within the institutions of higher education (Benjamin, 1997; Garcia, 2005; John, 1997; Li & Beckett, 2006; McKay, 1997; Reyes, 2005; Sulé, 2011). Women of African American and Latin American backgrounds, in particular, are at risk for this marginalization.

Review of the Literature

To understand the experiences of women of color in preparation for careers in educational leadership, their intersected identities regarding race and gender must also be understood by institutions on the preK-12 and higher education levels. In *Silences and Serenades: The Journeys of Three Ethnic Minority Women School Leaders*, researcher Maenette K. P. Benham explores the lived experiences of an African American, a Latina, and an Indian woman in educational leadership using a narrative research approach. Each of the women, who were working at various levels in educational leadership positions, encountered experiences that helped to shape their professional identities as women of color. Four major themes emerged from the study: (1) forging identity against mass stereotypes that serve to oppress, (2)

experiences of marginalization leading each woman to re-construct boundaries associated with culture, (3) geography and institution to combat age-old institutional inequality, and (4) personal perceptions and reflections of the work they do to challenge school bureaucracy. This study illustrates how stories have the power to help school leaders navigate through multiple realities as they begin to understand how life experience shapes their professional work (Benham, 1997).

Second, in *Restructuring the Master's Tools: Black Female and Latina Faculty Navigating and Contributing in Classrooms through Opposition Positions*, researcher Venice Thandi Sulé explores how Black and Latina faculty at predominately White research institutions (PWIs) have learned to navigate the educational system and negotiate barriers as women of marginalized groups. This study illustrates how awareness of membership in marginalized groups can help its members break free of societal constraints and make the choice to move on toward success within mainstream-dominated educational institutions, rather than regress. Finally, in *Valuing Social Identity: Consequences for Motivation and Performance in Low-Status Groups*, researchers Colette van Laar, Belle Derks, Naomi Ellemers, and Dennis Bleeker look into how social identity influences the motivations and performance of individuals of marginalized groups and as they pursue upward mobility in traditionally white or male-dominated occupations. The study illustrates that societal treatment of an ostracized group can influence the stability and actions of its members (van Laar, Derks, Ellemers & Bleeker, 2010).

Problem Statement

As demonstrated, research exists, but more knowledge concerning the particular experiences and multidimensional identities of women of color in educational leadership is needed. The impetus for this study stems from the researcher's personal experiences as an educator, woman of color, and doctoral student pursuing a career in educational leadership. Over the years, many more women of color have held educational leadership positions on the higher education level than in K-12 education, but a large disparity in the number of women of color in positions of educational leadership overall persists (Hogg, 2001; Trujillo-Ball, 2003). Although much has been done to equal the playing field for women in various career preparations, women of color continue to encounter challenges, especially related to pursuing advanced study and careers in educational leadership (Benjamin, 1997; Garcia, 2005; John, 1997; Li & Beckett, 2006; McKay, 1997; Reyes, 2005; Sulé, 2011).

Driven by these research-based realizations, the purpose of the study was to examine the personal and professional experiences of women of color, and their motivations to pursue advanced graduate degrees and careers in educational leadership to contribute to the larger body of knowledge on the subject. This study investigated the lived experiences of the participants, specifically African American women, adding to existing research on women of color pursuing doctoral degrees and positions of leadership in education. By highlighting their motivations and experiences in pursuance of an advanced graduate degree and career in the field, perceptions of professional hegemony and microaggressions (everyday negative messages directed toward marginalized groups) relevant to pursuing, entering and maintaining a career in educational leadership were also investigated. Professional hegemony is defined as the dominance of one social group or another, notably the domination that is found in the workplace (Sulé, 2011).

Method

A qualitative research approach was chosen to investigate the lived experiences of African American women pursuing doctoral degrees in educational leadership. In particular, phenomenological methodology was chosen. Historically, phenomenology seeks to define and attribute meaning to the general essence of a common lived experience shared by several

individuals. The researcher using this approach seeks to articulate meaning and gain a deeper understanding of the everyday shared experiences of groups of humans, otherwise known as phenomena. Often, these phenomena are explained through reflection of awareness and insightful descriptions (van Manen, 1990). According to Moustakas (1994), through open-ended interview questioning, the essence of “what” the participants experienced as well as “how” they experienced it is described in rich detail, with sufficient description to provide an understanding of the essence of the shared experience (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 61). Phenomenology is a relevant qualitative approach for this study as it enables the researcher to provide a rich description of the lived experiences of these women regarding educational leadership from their own perspectives.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants were selected purposively by email, informing them of the study purpose and procedures, as well as risks, benefits, and confidentiality measures. Purposive criteria included the following: status as a woman of color (of a minority ethnicity), currently in the process of completing a doctoral degree in educational leadership, and either pursuing or in the first year of employment as an educational leader on the preK-12 or higher education level. Upon receiving signed letters of consent, five study participants pursuing doctoral degrees in various preparations within educational leadership agreed to participate in the study; three of the participants are African American. The findings regarding these participants will be discussed.

To learn the essence of the lived experiences of the participants, interviews were conducted. Approximately 15 total hours of phenomenological inquiry data were collected primarily through two semi-structured, open-ended interviews with each participant and a final focus group interview with all of the participants at once. During the first interview, the personal background of all participants was investigated, as well as professional experience and motivation in pursuance of a career in educational leadership. Participants were asked individual background, professional experience and career motivation questions related to traits of an educational leader; decisions to pursue a career in educational leadership; influences related to pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership; and the role of gender, ethnicity, and cultural background in choosing educational leadership as a profession. Preparation, professional goals, and influences related to pursuing an educational leadership position were also addressed.

During the second interview, participants were asked questions about experiences, if any, related to professional hegemony in pursuance of a career in educational leadership. Topics such as challenges and microaggressions in the educational setting, as well as societal views of female educational leaders of color and personal perceptions of what it is like to be a woman of color were explored. During the third and final interview, all participants were arranged as a focus group and asked to reflect on both individual interview experiences and reveal any new perspectives or knowledge gained in the process with the group members. Generational challenges most pertinent to women of color, as well as final perspectives and suggestions for other women of color interested in pursuing a career in educational leadership were discussed.

Data Analysis and Coding

All interviews were audio recorded and word-for-word transcripts were generated for ease of data analysis. As each transcript was read, notes were written for preliminary coding based on emergent patterns in the data. The notes captured the statements related to the themes in paragraph form (van Manen, 1990). The statements or utterance summaries helped to interpret the data and express the essence of meaning of the phenomena. The summaries were later coded using the selective reading and line-by-line or unitized coding approach. Selective reading involves listening to or reading text several times to determine and isolate essential phrases and/or statements from participant interviews. The line-by-line approach involves reviewing

every sentence transcribed to find out what is revealed regarding the experience of interest being described among the participants (van Manen, 1990).

Protection of Data Quality

Creswell's (2013) criteria for the quality of phenomenological research were employed to verify data quality, and the accuracy of participant responses was evaluated through member checking. For this method, each participant was provided with a descriptive summary of their participant responses to ensure accurate data were generated and engaged in appropriate peer-debriefing practices to maintain authenticity of the data. Participants were asked to revise any data that they determined incomplete or inaccurate (Creswell, 2013). Also, the collection of multiple data points was established to aid in discovering themes among participant perspectives and to obtain a deeper understanding of the collectively experienced phenomenon. Also important was the articulation of the phenomenon accurately using correct participant data and later detailed interpretations of generated data in the form of utterance summaries and codes.

Findings

Findings from the study reveal four major themes regarding participant motivations and experiences: social justice impetus for career change and motivation toward educational leadership, supports for women of color in pursuance of careers in educational leadership, supports for women of color in pursuance of careers in educational leadership, and perception of hegemony in professional interactions.

Social Justice Impetus for Career Change and Motivation Toward Educational Leadership

Overall, participants expressed the desire to become an educational leader arose out of a social justice orientation, feeling obligated to someone (family, friends, those who lent support) or something (society) to do well and bring about changes to the current broken educational systems with which they are affiliated. Each participant felt that obtaining a doctoral degree in educational leadership will help to give them credibility, and hope to advocate as a positive influence in ensuring those changes surface for the greater good and to help members of their own ethnic groups succeed. The participants also expressed the desire to build relationships and communication networks to empower the forgotten members of society and help them to reach beyond the achievement gap toward a successful college and work life.

Sasha. Sasha frequently referenced her previous career in the juvenile justice system as a social justice impetus for her desire to become an educational leader. She expressed her feelings about the achievement gap and wanting to make a difference in her own community:

“If I wanna develop programs, I have to be within leadership to do that. That's where the societal piece comes in because I can't expect for someone else to do it for my group. If there's someone who doesn't do well and isn't successful, that's gonna impact my community more than anything.”

Supports for Women of Color in Pursuance of Careers in Educational Leadership

All participants identified personal identity, family, mentors, and available knowledge as supports. They expressed the need for family and mentors of mixed-race and gender as an area of support to bring multiple professional perspectives to shape their views of education and leadership. Sasha referenced the support of the 'unspoken coalition' or network of unified people of color working in the same capacity. She explained that the group has inherent rules and codes to live by and people in the network help each other by providing opportunities for members of the same ethnic group. Sasha also referenced her 'board of directors' or mentors as a source of

support. Having multiple male and female mentors of varied ethnicity within and outside of the field of education offered her broader perspectives, guidance and invaluable insight.

Supports for Women of Color in Pursuance of Careers in Educational Leadership

All participants highlighted personal feelings of inadequacy, structural oppositional factors, work-life balance, working with people that aren't culturally sensitive and challenging the deficit thinking of colleagues working with students of color as major obstacles in preparation for careers in educational leadership.

Elizabeth. Regarding personal feelings of inadequacy in pursuing a career in educational leadership, Elizabeth described her first year of doctoral study and how she felt as if she was an 'other' or outsider for several reasons: having a background in sports administration and switching to a career in education; pursuing an EdD while classmates were pursuing a PhD; feeling as if she lacked the skills to converse with classmates and discuss readings in class, asking herself "can I do this?" often; not knowing who she could go to for help. She later realized that she actually 'othered' herself in the process by placing self-imposed barriers in her own process because she felt that people perceived her as inferior because she is a Black woman.

"I think in the back of your mind, you think that they could be thinking those things or interact with people that believe that way, and you are cognizant of that...then you always feel like you have to disprove it, in some way."

Perception of Hegemony in Professional Interactions

Finally, participants expressed encountering instances of discrimination in professional situations that they later found out were examples of microaggressions.

Jennifer. Similar to Sasha, Jennifer also worked previously in the juvenile justice system as well as faith-based non-profit work before entering the field of education. She described her feelings toward microaggressions encountered and examples of professional hegemony she experienced. Jennifer admitted that she reasoned between choosing to acknowledge the microaggressions witnessed or not confront the ignorance of others. In reference to confronting microaggressions in the current educational climate, Jennifer had this to say: "Some days I just don't feel like it. I don't feel like being the educator of the people, I just get tired of it."

In addition, Sasha expressed her frustration toward the word usage of educators toward students of color using the following example: "Theyisms": "they" need remediation, "they" have single parent households, "they" don't have this and "they" don't have that – who are "they"? Additionally, participants have witnessed the reactions of others as they challenge societal views of women and step outside of their own comfort zones to bring about change. Elizabeth also provided an account of the sexism she experienced in a conversation with one of her former male colleagues and peers who was surprised by her choice to become an educational leader through doctoral study. She remembered that he was not a champion for women in leadership roles. He made it clear that he was okay with women being in subservient, traditional roles and very vocal in what he thought the roles of men and women should be.

Discussion

One of several positive attributes of conducting various forms of qualitative research includes the capacity to hear voices of individuals within oppressed groups (Creswell, 2013). A critical lens was utilized to frame participant experiences and perceptions of hegemony as the study participants represent two facets of marginalization, being individuals of both female and minority group status. Critical Race Feminism or CRF was chosen to undergird this study.

Critical Race Feminism

As an emergent theory, CRF is a derivative from critical legal studies and critical race theory, encouraging understandings of the multifaceted nature of identification as a woman of color, or intersectionality. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's term "intersectionality" is the metaphorical meeting of race, gender, and class used to conceptualize individual identity while combating marginalization (Nash, 2008). To address inequalities and disparities and understand the circumstances and experiences of people at the intersections of race, gender, and class, a multiplicative intersectional analysis is required that examines the ways in which marginalization affects their experiences, considerations, practices (Berry, Jay & Lynn, 2010; Wing, 1997).

The CRF lens uses a multidisciplinary approach to uncover and reflect on the connections between gender and race, while recognizing that women of color hold multifaceted identities. This aids in understanding individuals and groups of individuals, especially those who have experiences with social and political marginalization (Berry, 2010). CRF theory takes a deeper look into how individuals view themselves within the broader context of society, as well as institutions within society (Sulé, 2011). By placing importance on the stories of women encountering multiple components of their own identity, it is acknowledged that these women bring their experiences and personal identities into educational leadership. At the same time, these women recognize that identifying with a particular race does not equal the common or shared identity of its members (Berry, 2010). Pinpointing how identity influences access to power as exhibited in the everyday experiences of women of color, CRF was used to frame the connections these women make across multiple aspects of their identities as women and persons of color, and their perceptions of professional hegemony (Sulé, 2011).

Supported by Critical Race Feminism, the study findings reveal the intersectionality of women of color, shared by all participants, that influences the way these women view, interpret, and respond to personal and professional experiences in society. The findings of this study further reveal themes among the participants to include career switcher status, social justice implications that influenced a desire to work as educational leaders, support systems that include multiple mentors, feelings of isolation, and the true perspective or awareness of what they are up against as African American women pursuing leadership positions through doctoral study.

These themes and findings support two of the four themes as mentioned earlier regarding Benham's (1997) narrative study: (2) experiences of marginalization leading each woman to reconstruct boundaries associated with culture, and (4) personal perceptions and reflections of the work they do to challenge school bureaucracy. The interview conversations revealed that each of these women previously worked in careers outside of education and later, as a result of noticing the changes that needed to be made, decided to pursue careers as educational leaders. Each of these women also revealed the adjustments they had to make in their personal and professional lives throughout the process because of societal perceptions. The findings of this study also support Sule's (2011) study and van Laar, Derks, Ellemers, and Bleeker's (2010) study, reinforcing how awareness of membership in marginalized groups allows these women to break free of societal constraints and motivates them to choose educational and career paths toward success within mainstream-dominated educational institutions.

Implications

The purpose of the study was to examine the personal and professional experiences of the women of color, and their motivations to pursue advanced graduate degrees and careers in educational leadership. Using the theoretical framework of Critical Race Feminism and the phenomenological research approach, the lived experiences of women in this study were formed into important narrative accounts of their lives as influenced by the marginalization and

oppression they have faced directly and indirectly, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of their collective identities (Berry, 2010). The data reveal findings that bring awareness to similar experiences between women of color preparing for careers in educational leadership.

In this particular study, the use of a purposive criterion sampling technique actually yielded a participant sample varied by age, educational careers, preparations prior to doctoral study, and field of interest in education. In future studies, investigating the lived experiences of African American women pursuing careers in educational leadership through doctoral study in particular age ranges and emphasis areas may provide more data to inform the study purpose. Gaining insight into the perceptions and experiences of particular groups of African American women may also help other women of color in educational leadership preparation programs. Overall, the need exists to know more concerning what motivates women of color to pursue and stay in positions of educational leadership pre-K through 20. Having a better understanding of the motivation behind career choice for women of color working or aspiring to work in positions of educational leadership, as well as their perceptions and experiences in doing so, is also needed. Such research may inform practitioners, women of color in general, mainstream colleagues of women of color in education, and researchers in preparing similar future educational leaders.

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