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Giving Voice to African American Women’s Authentic Lived Experiences with Public Assistance

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Keywords: African Americans, women, public assistance, womanist perspective

Abstract: African American women, welfare, and education and training are the focus of this research. Narrative Inquiry methodology was used to explore this qualitative study and it is grounded in the Africentric paradigm (Colin, III, 2010) utilizing the Womanist Epistemological Perspective (Sheared, 1994, 2010) for the unit of analysis. This study “gives voice” (Sheared 1994) to African American women *authentic* lived experiences (Colin, III, 2007) who have used the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Their stories highlight marginalization and oppression in access and utilization of the education and training activities in the temporary assistance program, capturing the women’s experiences from a polyrhythmic standpoint. In order for social welfare programs to be effective, women need personal development and quality adult education and training programs.

Research Findings

The “Call and Response” discourse method is embedded within the Womanist Epistemological Perspective as articulated by Sheared. The “call” is asking the research questions that guided this study and the “responses” are the results from my analysis of the data.

Call

What are the *authentic* lived experiences of African American women in the Temporary Assistance of Needy Families (TANF) Program?

Response

The data supported that these women remain in poverty for the lack of employment and educational opportunities. Therefore, it seems they remain on public assistance until they have either completed school or obtained employment to supplement the low cash payment. These women experienced multiple margins and multiple centers, which demonstrated the polyrhythmic realities of the women experiences as mothers, students, workers, job seekers, members of the community, and TANF recipients.

Call

How do labels influence how African American women begin to think and understand their worth?

Response

Many of the women made the statement, “They not talking about me” and it is implied they are determined not to allow any stereotypes to negatively influence how they perceive themselves. Furthermore, the data results reflected that many of the women appeared to have good self-esteem, positive self-worth, and high self-confidence being enrolled in school has influenced them greatly and they see themselves on the pathway to success.

Call

What kind of choices do these women have with regard to whether or not they are to seek employment or education and training programs?

Response

The data revealed that all of the women are forced to participate in program activities in order to keep their cash benefits and are not given the opportunity to choose the type of work, education or training programs they would like to participate in because the choice has been made for them. The women are being referred to inadequate training programs regardless of skill set and goals and referred to employment partners who never hire many of the women permanently. The results of the data supports that the policy is good on paper but not in practice for example, the TANF program incentivizes the recipients when they participate in the work activities or find a job on their own. Unfortunately, the Gatekeepers are not sharing the information with the women in order for them to access the additional financial resources.

Call

How are the women being informed about the access to education and training programs and especially its utilization?

Response

Many of the women cited they are not being informed on how to access or utilize the postsecondary education or vocational training that counts as participation activity. Some women revealed there are very few caseworkers who provide information for the woman to gain access to education and training. The data suggests that the women are constantly being marginalized and subjected to oppressive behaviors of the Gatekeepers and the result is they remain in the loop of welfare by limiting there opportunities with lack of information and sharing of resources.

The findings were about the giving voice to the *authentic* lived experiences of the women, however, after completion of the data analysis my study goes beyond the experiences and seven themes emerged of what matters to them: Woman Matter, Choices Matter, Hope Matters, Education and Training Matters, Labels Matter, and Gatekeepers Matter. The focus of this AERC roundtable is to discuss the main themes and findings of the research, which will be demonstrated through a group activity where each participant can select and discuss the themes, and findings that are most significant and meaningful to them.

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