

Epistemology, Learning, and Self-Development among Immigrant Women of Color: The Case of the British Caribbean Women in the United States

Mary V. Alfred

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Alfred, Mary V. (2001). "Epistemology, Learning, and Self-Development among Immigrant Women of Color: The Case of the British Caribbean Women in the United States," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/1>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Epistemology, Learning, and Self-Development among Immigrant Women of Color: The Case of the British Caribbean Women in the United States

Mary V. Alfred
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

Abstract: This study examined how British Caribbean women construct knowledge from their transcultural experiences and how they use their acquired knowledge to facilitate their learning and development. The women have endured the challenges of their cross cultural transitions because they learned how to work, how to learn, how to overcome silence and marginality, and how to negotiate their way through the American cultural systems.

Background of Study

America has always been recognized as a nation of immigrants. The majority of today's immigrants do not come from Europe, but from the developing nations of the third world. In the 1980s, for example, twice as many immigrants as in the previous decade migrated to the United States, and about 84 percent were from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America (Schuck, 1998). As a result, the American population is becoming more nonwhite and more diverse than ever before. The spillover of this population shift is being acutely felt in our nation's schools and colleges, and "the most fundamental change witnessed in the nation's educational system is in who the students are becoming" (Cetron & Davis, 1989, p. 10).

This dramatic shift in the composition of today's population speaks of an urgency to meet the educational needs of the ever-increasing number of new minorities in the United States (Rendon & Hope, 1996). As with higher education, adult education has an important role to play in providing education for immigrant people of color, particularly in their quest to make the transition from their culture of origin into the American culture. While adult educators have been involved in immigrant education, primarily through ESL and citizenship classes, they have done little theorizing about the learning and development experiences of the growing population of immigrant people of color whose learning they facilitate. Among the neglected immigrant population is the Caribbean Black woman whose experiences have remained absent from the social science literature.

Theoretical Framework and the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate, analyze, and describe how British Caribbean immigrant women in the United States construct knowledge from their transcultural experiences and how they use such knowledge in their learning and development in the host culture. One of the two theoretical constructs that informed this study is constructivist epistemology (Fosnot, 1996; Gergen, 1995; vonGlaserfeld, 1995). Constructivist epistemology is a theory of knowledge acquisition that focuses on how people learn and the nature of the knowledge. Constructivism,

therefore, is a theory about learning and integrates the cognitive, contextual, and cultural dimensions of the learning process.

To understand the role of culture in knowledge construction, adult learning, and self-development, this study also drew from the literature on bicultural life structure and cross-cultural transitions (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990; Dubois, 1903). The bicultural perspective focuses attention on the interplay between the two cultures and its effects on the lives of racial minority groups. According to Alfred (2001),

The bicultural perspective allows us to examine issues of biculturalism and the power dynamics that emerge from the contested terrain of difference. It also allows us to examine issues of identity and community, inclusion and exclusion, voice and representation, power and subordination, in the study of bicultural groups. (p. 114)

From the bicultural perspective, one can examine how bicultural individuals negotiate the multiple cultures of their lives and the strategies they use to manage a bicultural living condition.

Research Design

This qualitative study used an interpretive interactionist approach as proposed by Denzin (1989). The interpretive interactionist framework focuses on the subjective and everyday experiences of human beings from their own perspectives. It integrates, among other concepts, feminist theory and biography, and allows for the biography of the researcher to be part of the text (Denzin, 1989). As a British Caribbean immigrant, this study, therefore, stemmed from my own biographical experiences and sought to understand how immigrant women construct and acquire knowledge in the host country and how their early-lived experiences influenced learning and knowledge construction in adulthood. The following questions, therefore, guided this study:

How do British Caribbean immigrant women describe their learning and developmental experiences in their country of origin?

How do British Caribbean immigrant women describe their learning and developmental experiences in the host country?

How do social context and culture influence learning and development among British Caribbean immigrant women?

Data Collection and Analysis

The study used a sample of 10 participants from the British Caribbean islands who are residing in the Midwestern and the Southwestern United States. The participants had to have been a resident of the United States for at least five years, had participated in a formal education program, and had worked outside of the home.

Interviewing was the primary mode of data collection. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed in three ways. First, I constructed a case narrative, describing each woman's

experiences. Second, I identified each significant experience within each woman's story and situated it within the sociocultural context of family, community, institution (school, workplace) and the wider society. As Collins (1990) has suggested, the Black woman cannot be viewed outside the context of family, community, and culture. Finally, I concluded with a thematic analysis to discover the common themes in the participants' learning and developmental experiences.

Findings

Learning and Development in Country of Origin

The findings from the study suggest that the early learning and developmental activities in the Caribbean prepared participants for two significant life roles that would form a foundation for their successful participation in America's workplace and learning institutions. As members reported, they learned how to struggle through work and they learned how to learn.

Learning how to work, learning how to struggle. Much of the early learning was facilitated by members of the family lifeworld. The definition of family among Caribbean cultures extends beyond the definition of the White American nuclear family. The Caribbean family includes parents, grandparents, siblings, children of siblings, aunts, uncles, as well as other community members, all of whom contribute to the knowledge base of the developing individual. As Greek explains, "Family for us was not just blood relatives; it included extended family members; even good friends were considered family; the neighborhood, the people in church, the older women, they were all considered family."

The learning that took place among this network of kinfolks was informal and self-directed and it was the direct result of the economic difficulties and life's struggles that were prevalent during the women's early development experiences. There was a high degree of collaboration and innovation as citizens found ways to manage their difficult living conditions. Chris, who grew up in a family of 12 children, describes her experiences with informal and self-directed learning projects in response to life's struggles:

As a child growing up in Jamaica, life was hard and our parents could not afford to give us the things we wanted. We learned to do a lot of things on our own; . . . no one showed us; we just figured it out. A lot of what we did was self-taught or we learned by watching the adults. . . . We learned a lot from our parents, too. They taught us the economics of a dollar. They taught us if you have a dollar, you could go out and use the dollar for a loaf of bread or something that was not important. We learned to spend the dollar on something important. Informally, you were learning how to spend that dollar and make it worthwhile. We worked hard as kids growing up. I guess there was some adventure to it all, but then, when I look back and compare it with the US, it was kind of hard for a child to grow up in those conditions; but it gave me the benefit that I gained from all that. It helped me to learn how to work. It helped me to learn how to struggle.

The participants agreed that the lessons learned from these early struggles prepared them to partake of life in America. Most importantly, as Chris echoed, the early developmental experiences and challenges taught them how to work and struggle, a Protestant ethic that would

sustain them in their later life as they participate in the American organizational work cultures.

Learning how to learn. All of the participants in the study completed post-secondary education in their country of origin. This is very significant when one considers the limited opportunities available for secondary education during these women's early developmental experiences. During that era, secondary education was a competitive process, and it was reserved for the top academic achievers on the islands. Therefore, education was very highly regarded, and the family's identity was partly determined by the educational level of the children.

Because of the competitive nature of secondary schooling, the elementary school structure was very rigidly organized to maximize an objective pedagogy. Teachers were expected to impart factual knowledge and to prepare students to pass the high school common entrance exam. Since family prestige was associated with secondary education, parents, church, and community members placed great emphasis on striving towards that accomplishment. Commenting on the academic support and preparation she received during her early school socialization in the Caribbean, Yvonne explained,

I grew up, influenced by the people around me, and for most of them, what was important was education. Because the society was supportive, the friends were supportive; there were lots of things in society that helped. You were always reminded by members of the community and family members of what could happen if you do not do well in school. . . . No one had to ask us to do our homework; no one had to ask us to study. These habits came naturally. It was all a part of our lives as children. We learned how to study; we knew how to learn.

Participants described the seriousness associated with learning, their rigorous study habits, and the emphasis placed on objective knowledge. However, they agree that the rigid school structure and the emphasis on objective knowing prepared them for schooling in America.

Learning Within the Host Culture

When the women arrived in the United States, they were initially met with culture shock, ridicule, aloneness, and a lost sense of self. All of them had graduated high school with several ordinary and advanced level certifications (a symbol of accomplishment during their school era) and held reputable jobs in their country. These women were quite visible as leaders and professionals in their country of origin. However, upon entry into the United States, they had to learn to transform themselves into marginal and invisible entities.

Learning to be marginal. The transformation from a position of power to marginality, and hence invisibility, was a painful process for some of the study participants. Rita, for example, describes her experiences of becoming marginal:

When I came here at 24, I was emerging as a potential leader on my island. As a young leader, I was highly respected by my community, and I was visible. When I arrived here, my world collapsed. I had few social contacts because I did not work. . . . The first few African American contacts I made would constantly correct me at the way I spoke and at the way I pronounced my words. I guess they

were telling me that my way of speaking was wrong and their way was right. Therefore, my husband became my world, and I became dependent on him for my early socialization into American life.

Rita's marginality was compounded because she did not belong to any social world. She was isolated from her extended family, her community, and her professional networks. She was an outsider in an alien world. The only safe place for her was the home she created with her husband. Other members spoke of negative experiences they endured during their early experiences in America. They talked about the ridicule they encountered from American citizens because of their unfamiliarity with the cultural norms and practices. Such ridicule caused members to retreat to a position of marginality.

Silent knowers in American classrooms. The participants arrived into the United States with the message that career opportunities came with education. Consequently, they all embarked on a learning venture in their quest for a better life. Accessing post-secondary institutions was a self-directed process, facilitated by family members and friends.

Speaking in class and articulating one's ideas were challenges that the women faced in the American classroom. Their early school experiences did not promote classroom dialog, and the experiences they encountered in the larger society as a result of their Caribbean accent made it particularly difficult for them to regain their voice to articulate their thoughts and ideas. Consequently, they became silent knowers in an academic culture where silence led to invisibility and marginalization. Genna describes one of her experiences with silence:

When I first started school, I was nervous and I was afraid to speak because of the experiences I had with other people telling me that they did not understand me. I was afraid that they would not understand me and so I didn't speak, even though I wanted to participate in the discussion. I knew the information, but I was afraid to speak. . . . The teacher and the students started to come around when they found that I was a bright student because I always did well on my exams. Since I would not talk in class, they thought I was stupid.

Greek, a Grenadian immigrant, similarly commented on the Western concept of silence as an indication of stupidity. She noted, "I think there is a perception that people have in that if you don't sound like them, you must not be smart. There is a feeling among them that because you are different, you are a foreigner, you are quiet, certainly, you cannot be as good as they." These experiences speak to that of many foreign born students in American higher education who perceive language and voice to be barriers to their socialization in American higher education.

Development of Voice. The women had to resolve the tension between the cultural norms of their country of origin where knowledge is something acquired, not something constructed, and the American culture where personal authority and independent thought are sanctioned and valued in the construction of knowledge. Because of the power of voice in the acquisition, construction, and demonstration of knowledge, participants felt compelled to regain their voice to meet the expectations they had for career development in the host country. In order to fully participate in the educational process, it was, therefore, important for the women to learn how to speak and be

heard. When Chris was faced with the problem of language as a barrier to her progress, she decided to learn how to speak so that she would sound more like an American and less like a Jamaican. She also decided that she would use her voice to find her way in the milieu of American cultural systems.

When I first got to America, language was a barrier for me. I had to learn to speak so that people would understand me. I had to learn how to speak softer and clearer. I made a conscious effort to do that. I was the one who had to challenge myself to learn to fit in with the other people around me so I could survive. I learned to speak out. I asked questions because no one would know I have a problem unless I tell them I had a problem. I had to make my way in this country, and I could not do it by being silent.

The development of voice from a position of silence was facilitated by a strong desire to find one's way. The participants came with a strong ambition to succeed, and to them success could only be attained through education. The findings indicate that these British Caribbean women have endured the challenges of their cross-cultural experiences through learning how to struggle through work, learning how to learn, learning to overcome silence and marginality, and learning how to make one's way through the milieu of American cultural systems.

Summary

The findings of this study suggest that culture and early school socialization in their country of origin influenced the women's learning and development experiences in the US. They were found to be silent knowers (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1986) in formal educational settings, which transcends from their Caribbean socialization, where dialog and critical reflection were absent from the teaching and early learning process. However, the notion of silence, as articulated in the classic book, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, does not fit the silence that engulfed the Caribbean women. Their silence can be attributed to their early socialization where voice was not the vehicle through which knowledge was demonstrated in academic settings. While the participants identified themselves as falling within the top of their classes within the US educational system, they initially did not use their voice to articulate and share their acquired knowledge. Their expert knowledge was, therefore, validated through their written work

The findings also indicate that learning in isolation is the preferred method by which these women manage academic expectations. While they see the value of group learning, they value it as a way to validate the knowledge acquired through individual efforts. The findings also suggest that many of the women made a conscious effort to renegotiate their identity by reconstructing their language patterns. They changed their enunciation patterns and practiced speaking in slower notes and softer tones "to soften the harsh Caribbean accent," as such ways of speaking identify them as being an outsider, and an uneducated, lower class citizens. Softening the harshness of Caribbeanization to a more acceptable blend of American identity was found to be important to their socialization and acculturation within the American culture.

Informal ways of knowing were the primary methods by which participants learned acceptable norms of behavior and practices of members of the host culture. When they arrived in the United

States, they were greeted, for the most part, by members of their culture of origin who were instrumental in teaching the novice participants the ways of the culture. Consequently, from knowledge acquired through their interactions with their Caribbean networks, from observations of behaviors in the wider society, and from their own constructed knowledge of best behaviors and practices, participants were able to anticipate and meet expectations of America's core institutions-the school and the workplace.

References

- Alfred, M. V. (2001). Expanding theories of career development: Adding the voices of African American women in the white academy. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 51(2), 108-127.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R. & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Bell, E. L. (1990). The bicultural life experience of career-oriented black women. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 11(2). 459-478.
- Cetron, M & Davies, O. (1989). *American Renaissance*. New York: St. Martin Press.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Du Bois (1903). *The souls of black folks*. Chicago: University Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive Interactionism*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications
- Fosnot, C. (1996). Constructivism: A psychological theory of learning. In C. Fosnot (Ed.), *Constructivism: Theory, perspectives, and practice* (pp. 8-33). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gergen, K. (1995). Social construction and the educational process. In L. Steffe & J. Gale (Eds). *Constructivism in education*, (pp. 17-39). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Rendon, L. I. & Hope, R. O. (1996). *Educating a New Majority: Transforming America's Educational System for Diversity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Schuck, P. H. (1998). *Citizens, strangers, and in-betweens: Essays on immigration and citizenship*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- VonGlaserfeld, E. (1995). A constructivist approach to teaching. In L. Steffe & J. Gale, (Eds.) *Constructivism in education*, (pp. 3-16). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.