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There's No Place Like Home: Black Women's Activism and Knowledge Construction in the Environmental Justice Movement

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Keywords: Black women's learning; home/place; knowledge construction; social movements; environmental justice

Abstract: This qualitative study explored Black women's activism and their process of learning and constructing knowledge in the environmental justice movement. By conducting in-depth interviews with sixteen activists from three southeastern states, findings revealed that a passion for home/place energized Black women's activism and served as the epicenter for knowledge construction.

Introduction

Scores of studies have shown that people of color and low-income groups in the United States bear a disproportionate burden of environmental health hazards in their homes, neighborhoods, and places of employment (Bryant & Mohai, 1992; Bullard, 2005; Bullard & Wright, 1993; Institute of Medicine, 1999; United Church of Christ- Commission of Racial Justice, 1987). Recognizing these disparities, grassroots activists, lawyers, academicians, concerned citizens, community based organizations, and environmental justice networks, have joined together to comprise a social justice struggle widely known as the environmental justice (EJ) movement.

Although women of color, particularly Black women, represent significant numbers of the environmental justice movement (Di Chiro, 1998; Taylor, 2000), limited empirical research has been conducted on their activism, learning, and knowledge construction within the movement. The findings from this study help to fill this gap so that grassroots activists, adult educators, program developers, movement supporters, and policymakers can be well-informed in planning and decision-making processes. The purpose of this study was to understand Black women's activism and explore the process of learning and knowledge construction for Black women in the environmental justice movement. The research questions guiding this study were: 1) what motivates and sustains Black women's activism in the EJ movement; and, 2) how do Black women activists construct knowledge and negotiate that knowledge in their practices within the EJ movement? Using an interpretivist theoretical framework, this study brought together a bifocal analysis of the individual and collective levels of the movement.

Research Methods

For this study, the epistemological framework was social constructionism, which attends to "the meaning-making activity of the individual mind" and to "the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). Likewise, interpretivism served as the theoretical framework which "*looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world*" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67, emphasis in original). With careful attention to the research problem and the desire to honor the experiences of both the individual and the collective, a qualitative methodology, using narrative inquiry was selected.

A purposive sample was selected for this study based on the following dimensions: time, geography, type of involvement and level of involvement within the EJ movement. First, black women activists selected for this study had to be a member of the EJ movement for at least one year. Second, geographical region and location of activism was critical for this study: states within the southeastern United States. Third, different types of involvement were important (e.g., grassroots, academic, lawyer, and so forth). The final sample included 16 participants ranging from ages 36 to 78 at the time of the initial interview. The length of time a person considered herself to be an activist ranged from 6 to 22 years. Of the sixteen participants, nine were grassroots activists, two identified as grassroots/scholar activists, one identified as a grassroots/advocate, one identified as a scholar/advocate, and three were lawyer/activists. The level of education spanned from grade school to the doctorate. The marital/partner status included the following: six were single never married; one was widowed; six were divorced; and three were married. Ten of the activists had children. And, nine of the sixteen activists had previous social movement involvement (e.g., civil rights, women's, peace, indigenous, trade union, and the mainstream environmental movement.) before joining environmental justice causes.

Using a semi-structured format, initial face-to-face in-depth interviews in participants' settings ranging from one and one half to eight hours in length in addition to follow-up interviews were the primary sources of data for this study. Each interview session was recorded and then transcribed. Secondary data included participant observation during interviews and movement events, fieldnotes, and documents. Data were analyzed using narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 1993). Each narrative story was analyzed separately by fragmenting the data, as well as employing an analysis across the data set to identify recurring patterns, themes and concepts.

Findings

Data analysis yielded multiple themes for each research question; interestingly, an overlapping theme of home/place emerged as pivotal for both questions. Thus, when asked what motivated and sustained activism, participants identified a passion for home/place as a significant factor that sparked their activism. Similarly, participants reported multiple ways of learning, including learning from place, which significantly shaped their new knowledge creation.

Passion for Home/place

All of the sixteen participants in this study passionately shared that their homes, neighborhoods and communities were of value and importance to them. An exemplary example is from Vashti, a 46-year-old grassroots activist and scholar, who spoke fondly of the place where she born, raised and has worked as an activist for almost forty years. She recalled,

And I have a deep, deep, deep, deep passion about that place. And all that is good, although all the things I'm most passionate about are trying to right some of the historical wrongs as well as the contemporary problems that face and challenge the [Name] community. But I would say for the most part everything that I have received from that community were some extraordinary gifts. And of course, one wouldn't often think that given the public perception of [my] community which for too very long has been about all kinds of social malaise and poverty and crime, crime and more crime and drugs.

Vashti's passion for her place of birth was a motivating factor in her environmental justice activism. She was among the first to organize and establish an environmental justice organization, which actually includes the name of her community in its title.

Mahalia, a 63-year-old-activist and retired school teacher, shared that for generations her community's property has been encroached upon by different industries and the importance of history in initiating an environmental justice campaign on behalf of her community, which sits on a parcel of land given to freed slaves following emancipation. She explained,

You start where you are and use what you got in the environmental justice movement. I started in my front yard. What do I have? I have a facility in front of me making noise. I'm four generation complaining about the ills [of] what happened. Guess what? I got information from oral history.

The rootedness of Black women in this study to their homes and communities is echoed by Janice, a 61-year-old activist and retired school teacher. With tremendous frustration, Janice declared:

Well, put it like this. This community [Name] is over 100 years old. In fact, my church I attend is 104 [years old]. So we were here before industry even thought about coming into our community. THEY INVADED US, we did not invade them! That's what I say in some of my speeches. I say, "you invaded us" because we were here. Industry came here in the fifties and we have not been the same. This was a rural area where people fish, hunt, swim, everything...that's our livelihood for some of us. Now, it's been polluted. It's polluted by [Name of Company], it's polluted from the Superfund site where 11 companies dump their waste materials in an open pit and bury it...

Hence, one's passionate commitment to place is a significant factor for prompting environmental justice activism. Many of the women in this study talked about how significant and historical their local communities are – some communities dating back to slavery and others remaining in tact for a good hundred years or so.

Learning from Home/place

For the majority of participants in this study, their local place and/or places of others posed environmental challenges resulting in their acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary to remedy those problems. For example, Vashti exhibited the scientific aspect of her learning by understanding and questioning the policies and practices of a sewage treatment plant in her community. She exclaimed, "We learned everything there was to know about these sewage treatment plants, so that the [City Department of Environmental Conservation] couldn't continue to sit in our faces and lie to us about what was going on at the sewage treatment plant." She continued, "Not only did we have to learn about sewage treatment plants, we had to learn about asthma, we had to learn ambient air pollution, we had to learn about the impact of ambient air pollution on human physiology and the possible adverse public outcomes."

Likewise, Deborah, a fifty-one-year-old environmental lawyer, learned the political system and the public policy process from her current place of dwelling, which she has lived in since the early 1970s. In her narrative, she affectionately says,

And, I've been [here]. [This city] is my beat. I know [this city]. I know the players --been a player, I understand the workings of government and the executive branch of Congress and it was a good match because you had people out in the field who were rallying around local and regional issues but had very little understanding of how you operate in

the federal or the international level to make change. And, this is where my career is built. I understand this universe very well.

Since law school, Deborah has built her career in this city. She has learned its inner workings and has used that knowledge to help other activists engage the public policy process.

Recognizing Fredericka's (a thirty-nine-year-old grassroots activist/advocate) frequent use and reference to "the community" in our conversation, I asked her if she would define community. She replied:

I think community is the place where you live locally. It is also, for some, an identifier of who you are in terms of your ethnicity and your racial heritage. But I think as we are becoming the global village, community is the world! And so I am just as concerned about what is happening in [the place where she lives] as well I'm concerned about what is happening in Ghana and Black people are all over the world. We're in Mexico, we're in Africa, we're in Europe, and so we have to embrace all of our people wherever they are. And if someone is hurting in Africa, that's the same as my family member who maybe hurting here. So, as people of color, and particularly of Black people living in America, we have to understand that [we are all] around the world and we are all hurting, all going through the same thing. And as... our world becomes smaller, because of the advent of technology, we are able to communicate with each other in ways that we have never been able to communicate before, it's very important that we keep those lines of information and communication open and be able to assist anyone who is hurting and particularly of the human family.

Fredericka's definition of community captures the understanding of community for the women who participated in this study. It was quite evident that Black women saw community as local but also made connections to the global community.

Primarily through foundation funding and support, thirteen of the sixteen Black women activists in this study were afforded numerous opportunities to travel nationally and internationally in order to learn from and with other EJ activists across the globe. The women in this study reported, collectively, travels to the following places: Europe, India, Indonesia, Geneva, Ghana, Israel, Japan, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, Rio de Janeiro, South Africa and Turkey.

Reviewing maps that Georgianna (a seventy-eight-year-old grassroots activist) created, she commented on the importance of traveling as a form of education. She said, "Traveling is an education in itself and the people you meet and the places you go that you've never seen—that was a wonderful opportunity." Toward the end of my interview with Esther (a fifty-three-year old grassroots activist), I commented on her posters from international environmental justice conferences and her beautiful artwork from the continent of Africa. I told her that I assumed that she had traveled to Africa and asked if she could comment on those travels. She replied:

Several times. Would love to go back. I'd do so in a heartbeat. There are people just like us, they have the same values that we do, they are treated ten times worse. What we fought in the sixties during the times when it was integration is what they're fighting now. The struggle is just unbelievable! They fight for the simplest things that we take for granted. One of the highlights of my life was [participating] in one of the largest marches they had in South Africa. That was the march that was held so that people could have just drinking water in some of the communities. We take it for granted, the water we have is not good to drink but at least you have running water. These people don't have running water and so I protested and marched beside them. I love the works and the handmade things from Africa. From the heart, it is just so important to me that these people are

gifted and talented with their hands and can do so much and so that's why I brought back a lot of the pieces. And the gifts that they had, I admire. [They] have a lot of work to do. It is evident that women connect their local environmental issues to issues abroad. In sum, Black women in this study reported the significance of learning from place both local home/place and external places which helped to shape and inform participant's thinking and worldview. These examples exemplify how home/place is also the epicenter of Black women's learning and knowledge construction in the environmental justice movement.

Discussion

Home/place, expanding upon hooks' (1990) conceptualization, is understood by Black women activists in this study as a passionate attachment to home and radical communities of resistance (physical and boundless). In addition, the experiences and life lessons from home/place provide a means of understanding self and the world, inscribe a sense of history and engender a connectedness to the natural and physical environment. For participants of this study, their home/place is shaped and informed by their gender and race consciousness. Thus, home/place is the physical location that Black women activists identify as safe, sacred and attach rich meaning. Yet, it is the intellectual, emotional and spiritual place where Black women are affirmed, secure their psyche and create oppositional knowledge to oppose outside oppressive forces.

Home/place extends beyond the structure and setting of the home to the local community and kinship networks (e.g., churches, organizations). Within the social movement studies literature and research, a central theme is the concept of *affective ties*, which stresses the relationships of friends and strong communities. Furthermore, the home/place for Black women environmental justice activists in this study also includes the natural and physical environment of linked places where they live, work, worship and recreate. Specifically, Black women learn and construct knowledge within their home/places in order to protect themselves from intrusions of the lifeworld (Welton, 1993), such as degradation of the environment, environmental health hazards, and unfair policies and practices. It is within the home/place that Black women activists learn how to identify the enemy and fight back (e.g., launch media campaigns, plan organizing strategies and tactics, initiate public policy processes, etc.). Home/place, a radical place of resistance, is where they learn and construct knowledge.

Knowledge construction with home/place as the epicenter, therefore, is a means to survive and thrive individually and collectively in the face of deleterious force. In other words, the findings of this study confirm that knowledge for Black women activists is not an abstract, philosophical, aloof, and/or detached exercise. It is not "knowledge for knowledge's sake." Rather, knowledge is used to protect home/place and to bring forth a more just, noble and equitable social structure.

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