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# The Dimensions of Black Women's Learning in the Environmental Justice Movement in the Southeastern U.S.

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**Abstract:** This qualitative research study explored black women's learning in social action. Data analysis revealed that black women's informal learning in the environmental justice movement, specifically, is shaped by: mentoring relationships, individual and collective experiences, and intergenerational learning.

Political power within our society often shifts in and among the following entities: civil society, the state, and the political economy. Social movements, historically and currently, play an important role in civil society to bring about democratic social change. This is particularly evident in the environmental justice (EJ) movement. Grassroots activists and scholars in the environmental justice movement broadly define the environment as places where we live, work, play, learn and worship in addition to the physical and natural world. Further, activists embrace the principle that all people and communities, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income, should enjoy access to a safe and healthy environment.

In redressing environmental (in)justices, grassroots activists, local community groups, networks, lawyers and academicians primarily constitute the environmental justice movement. The demographics of the environmental justice movement are quite compelling and diverse. Although it is seemingly obvious and widely known among movement adherents, women of color, particularly of blue-collar/low-income status, predominate within the overall grassroots of the EJ movement. Yet, there has been relatively sparse research on women's experiences and involvement in the EJ movement (Di Chiro, 1998; Taylor, 2000).

The field of education, particularly adult education, has strong historical ties to democratic social change via the educative and informal learning dimensions of social movements. For example, early progressive thinkers and writers, such as Lindeman and Dewey, in the 1920s and 1930s contributed to the philosophical underpinnings of education as an instrument for social change. In more recent times there has been a resurgence of interest the educative and learning dimensions of social movements (Finger, 1989; Foley, 1999; Hill, 2002; Holford, 1995; Holst, 2002; Spencer, 1995; Welton, 1993). Yet, there is limited research that explores women's learning, specifically black women's learning and activism, in the environmental justice movement.

Eyerman and Jamison (1991), key proponents of cognitive praxis, posit that social movements are producers of knowledge and that the knowledge creation process occurs by the collective. It is their belief that movements should be analyzed in terms of the processes by which ideas and issues are formulated. In tandem with the idea of cognitive praxis, the proponents argue that "all activists in social movements are, in some sense, 'movement intellectuals,' because through their activism they contribute to the formation of the movement's collective identity, to making the movement what it is" (p. 94). Thus,

social movements create spaces for intellectuals to develop and emerge through social learning.

### **Method**

A qualitative methodology using narrative inquiry was chosen for this study. Based on the following elements a purposive sample was selected: time, geography, type of involvement and level of involvement within the EJ movement. 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 (Charmaz, 2002), as well as employing an analysis across the data set to identify recurring patterns, themes and concepts.

### **Findings**

Black women in this study reported multiple ways of learning in the environmental justice movement. Two main findings emerged upon which this section is divided: learning from context and learning through self-directed efforts.

#### *Learning from Context*

All participants identified learning from context as vital for them. Context included *learning from mentors, others in the movement, and experts*. From the aforementioned sources, women learned primarily by observing, listening, questioning, dialoguing, studying and researching. The content upon which they cloaked their learning and knowledge construction included a wide spectrum of subject areas; for example, chemicals, pollution, community development, public policy, proposal writing, media campaigns, historical issues, places and events, and so forth.

*Learning from mentors.* The first theme under learning from context is learning from mentors. Barbara, Deborah, Emily, Fredericka, LaTanya and Malaika all referenced the role of mentors who were helpful in providing technical expertise, guiding their activist work, and/or generally coaching them on the ins and outs of the EJ movement. At times, these mentors served as teachers, role models, and friends.

Malaika, a lawyer-activist who identifies herself as a "resource person to communities," definitively said, "I owe it to two people, [John Doe] and [Dr. Jane Doe]"

who helped to guide and mentor her in the EJ movement. She pointed to those two particularly because they taught her how to be "accountable and responsible to communities." Likewise, Deborah named a host of folks who mentored her. Affectionately, she called her mentors "compatriots" and "friends" who, especially in the early days of her activism, provided her with wisdom and an understanding of "movement politics and political maneuvering and power positioning and a lot of things you have to know when you're working for the people in a political environment." Following our interview, Deborah e-mailed me to share additional names of persons who mentored her in the movement that she failed to mention during our interview at her home. Likewise, LaTanya called one of her mentors, [John], "another transformative person in my life."

*Learning from others.* The second theme under learning from context is learning from others. All women in the study reported that they learned from and with others in environmental justice struggles, particularly movement comrades, elders and members of local communities, and so forth. Again, this learning occurred through observing, asking questions, engaging in dialogue and listening, for example, in local community group gatherings and national conferences.

Esther stressed the value of learning from others, especially over the last twenty years that she has been involved in the EJ movement, when she said:

*The best thing that could have happened to me was time because I've absorbed a lot, from others. I've learned so much from other women in the movement who are my senior and who are younger than me and who are knowledgeable, just so much.*

Without a doubt, women in this study pointed to other people as significant sources for their learning. In addition to learning directly from others, many learn by watching and observing others in the EJ movement. For example, Mahalia commented, "I watch and I observe, I'm a people person and the reason I know it is because I can relate to all." Thus, significant learning occurred from other activists, particularly for those who did not have a mentor to initiate them into the environmental justice movement.

*Learning from professional experts.* The third theme under learning from context is learning from professional experts. Additionally, several women in the study reported that they learn from experts in the EJ field. Though there has been tension on the roles of professionals and grassroots activist within the wider EJ movement, the women in this study spoke of professionals as being useful in the overall struggle. Thus, learning from professionals varied as to how one is positioned within the movement. In many cases, the response depended if one self-identified as a grassroots activist, lawyer activist or scholar activist/advocate. Many grassroots folks, who didn't identify mentors as significant in their learning process, identified a host of formal experts or professionals that helped them and members of their community in the learning process.

An exemplary excerpt comes from Esther's recounting of how she learned to wade through all of the technical and scientific information she previously referenced. Esther enthusiastically replied:

*We had a lot of help and a lot of support. We learned how to do things ourselves and I mean, we, the board, primarily people on the board, [Jane Doe], who was the past president prior to me becoming president. She has since moved out of the community and left her home and bought in a clean, safe neighborhood. But we learned to do it ourselves. We learned to use the Internet, we learned to call and*

*ask and get the support of other people. The most important organization to our successes, the two most important organizations has been [John Doe] with the [environmental justice network] and [Dr. Jane Doe] with the [research center] and I need to add [Dr. John Doe] with [research center]. ...Those three people, had it not been for them we would not be on the front pages of many, many issues when it's related to environmental racism, environmental justice, we would not be there. They gave us the tools, things that we didn't know – classes, teaching, readings, information, Internet.*

### **Learning through Self-Directed Efforts**

In addition to learning from context, women also reported that they learned through self-directed efforts in the environmental justice movement: *independent study* and *learning by doing*.

*Learning by independent study.* The first theme for learning through self-directed efforts is learning by independent study. Women in this study reported that they supplemented their learning with independent study. Typically, independent study included reading and researching very dense and complex material, which was often scientific in nature. In doing so, women reported a sense of being "forced to learn" and that they had "no choice or option" but to learn complicated and scientific material.

Barbara, Emily, Frances, Fredericka, Johnnie, LaTanya, Mahalia and Vashti all mention the importance of reading as invaluable to their learning, as well. Frances concluded that she learned best from reading. She remarked,

*I like to read about it. Just the way I'm constructed, I'm sure it is from years of my [biology] training. I do better if I can read it. I can listen, I can hear and take notes but usually what I do is, for example, when I go to a conference I hear stuff and write it down and then go back and research it. So, it is a strange thing about me. And learning Spanish, like when I go down to Mexico, I can't really learn it just from hearing it. I see it [in terms of reading] and I learn it. And of course, there is nothing like experience.*

*Learning by doing.* The final theme under learning through self-directed efforts is learning by doing. As activists, all women have to engage in struggle and many learn in the process of doing so. Thus, many women identified this process as learning "by doing," or "from trial and error," or "by baptism by fire." The narrative excerpts that follow best illustrate this process.

## **Discussion**

The major conclusion of this study is that Black women's informal learning in the environmental justice movement is multifaceted and shaped by individual and collective experiences and mentoring relationships. An additional manifestation of Black women's learning in this study was the phenomenon of intergenerational learning.

Black women activists in this study described their learning to be both communal and self-directed in nature. The two approaches are mutually constitutive. By engaging in movement activities, Black women learn environmental science and technology, environmental laws, planning, decision-making, coalition building, organizing, and so forth. Thus, it is within these communities of resistance that Black women learn by listening to other activists' bear witness and give testimony and by sharing their own experiences of lessons learned. Storytelling and dialogue are critical in the communal

learning aspect of social movements, as it was in this study. The communal nature of learning is reflected in the African American Adult Education literature and research, particularly with regards to Africentric (Alfred, 2000) and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000). Also, Black women activists are energized through communal learning engagements. The use of music, song, dance and prayers served as several mechanism for maintaining commitment and culture. Learning in the collective, therefore, is embodied, kinesthetic and affective.

Communal learning is coupled with self-direction for Black women activists in this study. Study participants reported engaging in autonomous study (e.g., reading, researching) as another means to increase their learning and enhance their activism. Following participation in national planning and movement organizing, Black women activists then take what they learned from those national gatherings and make connections and applications to their local context. To aid in their independent study, Black women activists in this study often relied on access to information from local libraries or the Internet. In rural areas, however, Black women activists reported having limited access to libraries (usually due to the travel distance involved) and computer technology.

Most often, however, Black women in this study reported being mentored in the movement by male comrades, and in some instances these relationships were cross cultural. Notwithstanding early mentoring from men in the movement, Black women in this study often reported that unequal power relations would later sever those initial mentoring ties. This phenomenon supports recent work by Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) who contend, "[T]he learning dimensions of the cross-cultural mentoring relationship are enacted within the political and social hierarchies in which both people live" (p. 16). In lieu of one-on-one mentoring relationships, Black women activists in this study reported developing peer "sister support" networks that they relied upon for encouragement, exchange of information and the creation of new ideas and strategies. Examples of women's support networks are evident in the women's studies and adult education literature bases.

Intergenerational learning, as the findings in this study indicate, is a reciprocal experience for Black women activists in the environmental justice movement. Black women activists deemed it important and urgent that as elders they transmit valuable knowledge to the younger generation. Transmitting knowledge, as viewed by activists in this study, is a means of sustaining the movement. Activists frequently mentioned their concern for "the next generation" and "who would carry the torch" once they were no longer able. As the recent literature indicates, intergenerational learning is a form of systematically transmitting social capital. This is most evident in that Black women activists in this study often developed environmental training programs for youth in their local communities and schools. Youth also are actively engaged with their parents and grandparents in the work of the movement (e.g., attended movement meetings, rallies, marches, passed out leaflets).

Theoretically, this study furthers the research on Black women's learning and knowledge construction in social movements. In terms of increasing the body of knowledge on learning in social movements, Foley (1999) asserts: "Much remains to be discovered about the characteristics, determinants, dynamics and effects of learning in popular movements and struggles. The potential field of study is huge and almost

untouched” (p. 140). Recognizing Black women’s long history of participation and leadership in social justice struggles, the study provides valuable insights into Black women’s learning and knowledge construction in social movements. The study also has practical significance for the following stakeholders: Black women activists, adult educators and policy makers. For Black women activists, this study serves as a means for reflective practice. Also, this study provides an avenue for new Black women activists joining the environmental justice movement to learn from the contributions of their predecessors. Adult educators benefit from this study in terms of identifying proper content and pedagogy for Black women activists participating in social movements, particularly the EJ movement. Finally, this study is beneficial to policy makers in terms of understanding and valuing the process of Black women’s knowledge construction about environmental justice issues and policies.

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