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Challenges, Choices and Change: Towards a Theoretical Model of African Diasporan Women's Educational Decision Making

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Keywords: Decision process, African Diaspora

Abstract: The decision to participate in adult learning programs is often triggered by life-challenges. The choice for this diverse sample of African diasporan women was adult learning. Components of the decision process, the relationship to ego development level, and resulting changes are examined and a proposed theoretical model is discussed.

There has been much discussion of women returning to higher education in the past 20 years, with some authors focusing more recently on black women returning to higher education (Aiken, Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 2001; Cohen & Nee (2000). There is indeed a challenge inherent in African diasporan women's deciding to participate in adult or higher education programs. These challenges can serve as triggers, pushing the women to make choices. One of those choices is to pursue an education. The result of this choice is a fundamental disconcerting (often unanticipated) change created in the relational, cultural and societal systems of which these women are a part. The multifaceted educational decision making process that can ensue is quite complex when scrutinized from socio-cultural, decision making, and adult development theoretical perspectives. What then fuels or drives the process for decision-making that brings them to the metaphorical gates of higher adult education programs? The relatively unknown phenomenon of this decision making process in the literature is problematic, in that critical concerns of these adult learners are not utilized to inform adult/higher education program planning, recruitment, and policy making. This paper examines the components of the decision process of a sample of African diasporan women, places it within a theoretical framework; and describes a theoretical conceptual model of the decision process as they participate in adult degree programs.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study included literature from socio-cultural, adult development, and decision making. An extensive body of literature exists on the socio-cultural history of African diasporan women's experiences with access to, value of and challenges inherent in their educational pursuit (Gregory, 1995; Kett, 1994; Ladson Billings, 1997; Peterson, 1996). The sociocultural context of the decision maker (governmental, societal, and educational) often exists in dichotomous relationship with the decision-maker: simultaneously they represent both the opportunity to participate and the challenges that must be overcome for them to achieve successful participation (Colin, 1994; Burgess, 1992; Washington, 1995). The link between education and generational, racial, and socio-economic advancement as a histo-cultural and contemporary motivator for these women is clear (Alfred, 2003; Allridge, 1999; Brice-Baker, 1994; Gregory, 1995; Nanton, 2005a; Peterson, 1996). Yet, contemporary under-representation and exclusion still create a marginality syndrome that embodies a feeling of alienation and wearisome attempts to relate and operate in the higher education context (Aiken, Johnson-Bailey,

& Cervero, 2001; Johnson Bailey, 1999; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2002). The socio-cultural aspect of adult development for African diasporan women includes the need to have a positive racial (Cross 1995) and cultural identity (Freeman, 1992). This decision making context presents implicit and explicit challenges, yet, African diasporan women are participating as adult learners in large numbers today.

Decision Making

The educational decision making process of African diasporan women has rarely been examined or written about, though these women make up a significant part of the adult learner population. Decision making literature discusses cultural influences primarily focusing on decision making from management (Griffin, 2006; Loke, 1996; Radford, 1996), career (Light, 1982; Pruitt, 1992), and Asian women's perspectives (Saluja, 1999): again scarcely, if ever, examining the African diasporan women's decision making process; this study examined that process. Educational decision making for women involves a tactical choice to address a life-challenge that connotes a change: the acquisition of an education is considered a means to facilitate the required change (Nanton 2005b). Making decisions involves the selection from among alternatives, based on information that is available (Griffin, 2006; Robbins 2005). The alternative that is finally chosen is not always the best; it often is the most convenient and incorporates the situation, the responsibilities, and the decision maker's motivation level.

Ego Development

The literature on adult development, including those with a theoretical focus on women such as Loevinger's (1976) ego development and Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger and Tarule's (1997) women's ways of knowing, does not adequately address the African diasporan women's development. According to Manners and Durkin (2001, p. 542), "the concept of a "developing ego" refers to the progressive redefinition or reorganization of the self in relation to the social and physical environment ... conceptualized in terms of developmental change..." The Sentence Completion test (SCT) (Hy and Loevinger, 1996, 1998) was incorporated because a significant empirical advantage to this theory is the ability to use the analysis of projective test responses that are associated with each stage. (Loevinger, 1976; Hy and Loevinger, 1996).

Collins (1989, 1991) identified *experience*, the use of *dialogue*, and *sisterhood* as fundamental epistemological resources for African American women's construction of knowledge and as means for assessing new knowledge claims, illustrating connectedness as opposed to isolation, requiring the participation of others, and highlighting the significance of referent groups. Collins' (1991) discussions do not describe specific stage-related processes for developing, she clearly identifies the various means by which these alternative epistemologies are established, such as mentoring by older women, the contexts of culture, church, and family, and the methods by which they operate and shape these women's conception and value of knowledge: these can be conceptualized as growing or developing as the women mature and as age-appropriate epistemological dimensions and methods are imparted to them by their experiences or their 'teachers' and or mentors (see Collins, 1989, 1991 for further detailed discussion).

According to Collins (1991), these dimensions are the outcome of historical, socio-cultural experiences and epistemological conditions: the use of dialogue is shared with women's traditions; the wisdom and knowledge, experience and the sisterhood dimensions are unique to

Black women; the experience dimension is fundamental to African American thought –systems; It also is one of the adult learning foundational tenets.

Research Methods

28 volunteers were selected by stratified purposeful, criterion based sampling (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Seeking to capture the diversity of African diasporan women, the women were from African, American, and Caribbean nationalities and cultures (Alfred, 2003; Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994). The Christian Liberal Arts higher education adult evening program context constituted the study's physical boundary; a common African heritage comprised the ethno-cultural boundary. The women had to be fulltime degree seekers, willing to complete all aspects of the study. The researcher met with the women twice: the first meeting explanations/instructions were given for completing the demographic survey, including marital status and cultural heritage; the critical incident (Russ-Eft, Berrey, Boone, & Winkle, 2000); the in-depth interview (Seidman, 1998); and the SCT sentence stems. The Sentence Completion Test (SCT) instrument (Loevinger, 1996), comprised of 36 sentence stems was incorporated because it originated from studying the way women dealt with life's problems its potential linking of ego development level and pursuing an education. This aspect of the research involved quantification: the women's responses to the sentence stems were converted to the corresponding ego development level. At the second meeting the women brought completed documents, the semi-structured in-depth interview was tape recorded, subsequently transcribed and analyzed from a qualitative, interpretivist, case study standpoint (Yin, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Callahan, 2000). This methodology was chosen to create narratives of the stories and to preserve the social nature of decision-making for these women (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Research questions examined the steps of the decision process, influential factors/challenges of decision making, and decision outcomes and resulting changes. Findings were analyzed by constant comparative method (Cresswell, 1994) that enabled the researcher to weave together the data from the in-depth interviews and critical incidents that captured the women's experiences (Miller and Crabtree, 1998). Interview transcripts and critical incidents were read to understand the woman's story, followed by thematic identification, then a cross-case analysis was done for all transcripts to identify common patterns. Finally, the researcher used triangulation (Daley, 1999), peer reviewers, member checks (Marshall and Rossman, 1999) with a focus group of participants; all re-entry women that examined and discussed data, findings and analysis with the researcher.

Findings and Conclusions

Development level

Identification of the women's ego development level was to ascertain whether a relationship between the women's ego development level and the components utilized in the decision process. Four ego development levels were identified (E5 – E8) in the sample of women, with the largest percentage falling in the E5 (29%) and E6 (46%) levels. The graph in figure 1.1 below depicts the frequency of the steps utilized in the decision making process across the four E- levels. Seven steps were identified in the decision process: *consultation* with others, seeking out *information*, *weighing* the factors and or dimensions of self, utilization of *faith* in the process, documentation of *pros/cons*, *writing* the various options down, and *reflection*. All of the decision steps were not taken by everyone, nor were they taken in the same sequence. Cross case analysis indicated that the majority of the women (85%) consulted with others in their decision

making. The E6 group of women utilized all seven identified decision steps. However, ego development level was relevant for steps *not* utilized in the decision process. At the E5 level the women did not include the writing or reflection steps; at the E7 level the weighing of options step was not included; and at the E8 level the information gathering and writing steps were not included in the described decision making process. This sample however, at the E8 level in particular, was too small for generalizing. The impact of ego development level on the decision process would perhaps be clearer if replicated with a larger sample and as such represents a focus of future research.

Emergent Theoretical Model

Research data indicated that the decision making occurred along the following general sequence for the women of the study. 1) Decision Stimuli that were role related, relational (spouse or dependents; referent groups) and cultural factors, coming in the form of experiences and or events, challenged the women. 2) This challenge initiated the steps in the decision process, causing the women to *consult* others; utilize their *faith* (or pray); *weigh* the various decision factors; define the *pros and cons*; *write* down options; seek *information*; and *reflect* on the situation. 3) After critical reflection the decision to participate was made. The initial conceptualization that describes the decision process is discussed below. This diagrammatic depiction of the decision process model (Nanton 2005a) warrants further study and examination of the interactions and inter-relationships of the components currently identified.

The Elements of the model

The following observations are important considerations for the decision process 1) the reflective process begins with the decision stimuli and continues through to the actual making of the decision. 2) the connecting arrows are double edged, indicating a responsive reflective process, and the interrelation of all aspects of/for decision making. 3) faith as relational and knowing functions as a decision process enabler and or facilitator: the permeable line depicts the women's articulated use of 'faith' to inform their decision making *and* as a way of dealing with the decision factors. The articulated use of 'faith' in the decision process can be attributed to a cultural orientation to spirituality, with the church as a religious entity historically functioning as a site of both religious and secular adult education. Aiken, Johnson-Bailey, and Cervero (2001, p. 318) in a study of Black women in a professional degree program identified faith as a component of the decision for participation and that "the factor that most strongly encourages these women's participation... was a belief in God and/or a spiritual being."

Consultation is significant in that many of these women are heads of household and potentially dependent on a support system for accomplishing their educational goals without a reduction of role responsibility and confirms the dialogical dimension of their ways of knowing (Bielby & Bielby, 1988); Burgess, 1992; Collins, 1991, 1998). Furthermore, a cultural orientation to extended family structures Burgess (1992) and exemplifies Collin's (1991) sisterhood and dialogically derived knowledge structures.

The researcher proposes that the women approach and enter the decision making process in two phases. The first phase, exemplified on the left side of the diagram includes the external stimuli or decision triggers and the decision steps described by the women. This is action oriented, characterized by something that has occurred or has been done.

The second phase as exemplified on the right hand side of the diagram (not shown) represents the multiple dimensions of self or internal factors of the decision process as identified

in the data. Conceptualized as a composite of integrated filters that move from the socio-cultural involvements of work responsibility, cultural heritage, referent groups and education; inward to individual socio-economic status, knowledge bases, identity, and ego-development level, to the perspective lenses of worldview, race, gender, life experiences, and faith, through which the information and contextual situation is processed and the decision to participate is made.

As they made the decision, a majority of the women in some way raised the importance of history as an influencing factor in their decision to return to school: their families' history, or their own. The women also raised a pervasively recurrent theme of using education as agency for resistance to societal, cultural, and relational norms that included experiential precedents for issues of race, gender, power, and socio-economic status. Lastly, the researcher speculated that the women's articulated worldview was comprised of at least a tripartite composite lens: their construct of faith, socio-cultural history, and their life-experiences. This worldview was used to filter or assist in processing decision making information and was changed as a result of the overall experience.

Faith (relational and knowing), is found across both sides as the women described its use throughout the process. It should be noted that in this study the women described it as faith in God. It is acknowledged and recognized that people's spirituality and or faith is not always within a religious context, nor is the object of that faith always God. The various instrumental uses attributed to faith by the women require further examination as to its potential extent and function in the decision process. Because the women also described faith as a way of dealing with their multiple dimensions and challenges during the completion of the degree program it gives rise to further speculation as to its relationship to the concept of resilience, and or whether faith is merely a form of cognitive coping, and thus provides opportunity for further research.

The women's choice for education was to impact the challenges inherent in their socio-cultural history as much as their personal and family history. The women all believed that they were free to make the decision, though several exercised that freedom with relational resistance. Decision outcomes included increased self-esteem, self-worth, and self-efficacy; independence and enhancement of relational negotiations; realization of goals set, a more positive view of their own racial identity on both an individual and a broader socio-cultural basis (Cross 1995; Freeman 1992).

Implications for Adult Education

Completion of this project is with the desire to make a unique, timely contribution to the current literature for this discipline. Knowledge of this decision making process has value for adult education discipline because of the influential role that program information and recruiters had as the 'deciding factors'; it illuminates sociocultural, ego development level and attitudinal challenges of these adult learners brought into the learning environment. Finally, African diasporan women's decision making process as a better known phenomenon can be utilized to inform adult/higher education program planning, recruitment, and policy making. This in turn potentially will reduce some of the challenges inherent in participation for these women, and increase the success and retention of this group of adult learners.

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