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A Majestic Burden: Discovering the Untold Stories of Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) Women and Learning Through Narrative Analysis⁸

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Keywords: Leadership, African American women

Abstract: The purpose of this completed research investigation is to articulate three of four final research findings as part of a larger study that investigated diverse leadership among an under-represented group and to extend current research on African American women political leaders.

Introduction

In this investigation I explored diverse leadership among an under-represented group and, in this effort, I extend current research on African American political leaders. My investigation begins with a profile of The CBC in the 107th Congress and Women Trailblazers of the CBC. Second, I discuss methodology and theoretical framework and last, I address and discuss research findings.

The CBC In The 107th Congress and Women Trailblazers of The CBC

Over the course of 129 years of Black political participation in The U.S. Congress, a total of 109 African Americans have been elected to Congress, 5 in the Senate and 104 in the House of Representatives. Indeed, caucus members of The 107th Congress are as diverse as the constituents they represent. The 107th Congress is a coalition of 38 different personalities (15 women and 23 men-all Democrats) serving in the House of Representatives who emerged from a variety of professions including law, medicine, nursing, social work, higher education, and business. Representatives come from cities, small towns, and suburbs. As a result, CBC members represent a variety of political bases ranging from majority black districts, to white majority districts, to districts comprising Black, Latino, and Asian majority (Ruffin and Brown, 1984; The CBC Directory 107th Congress, 2001-2002; and Tate, 2003). African American members represent 8.5% of the overall House membership and about 14% of the Democratic membership in Congress thus, constituting a voting bloc which allows the CBC to strategize in: 1) placing its members on effective and powerful standing House Committees, 2) negotiating deals with special interest groups and, 3) supporting or stopping bills as they enter the legislative process (Ruffin and Brown, 1984; Lusane 1994; and The CBC Directory 107th Congress, 2001-2002).

The literature reveals that the structure of Congress is symbolic of the power structure of society as Congress has historically been dominated by well-educated, white males of middle-class or upper middle class status (Berg, 1994; Swain, 1997; Ragsdale and Treese, 1990; and Gill, 1997). Since 1789 Congress has changed in that it is beginning to look more like the American people. Such gradual change and diversity is evidenced by the entry of African Americans and women into Congress. Between 1869 and 1901 22 black men served in

⁸ Portions of this paper were presented at conferences, including the 45th Annual Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) held at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, and the 44th AERC held at San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA. This paper contains a completed research project that has been completed, revised and expanded by Rogers (Houle Scholars Program, August 2005, UGA).

Congress; 2 in the Senate and 20 in the House. Further, in the first fifty-years of the 20th century only 4 black men held seats in Congress. Jeannette Rankin (R-Montana) became the first woman to serve in Congress with her election to The House in 1917. According to the literature, current data reveals that white women represent 8.6% of the house, black women represent 3.4% of the house, black men represent 5.28% of the House, and white men represent 82.72% of the House (Tate, 2003 and The Congressional Black Caucus Directory, 2000-2001).

Black women would become visible in Congress, 50 years after the first white woman was elected and 100 years after the first black man was elected. The civil rights movement, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and redistricting ushered African American women into Congress (Gill, 1997; Tate, 2003; Ragsdale and Tree, 1990; and The Congressional Black Caucus Directory 2000-2001). 22 black women have been elected to Congress; Carol Moseley Braun became the first black woman to serve in the Senate in 1993, while 21 were elected to the House. A composite profile of these 22 women reveal that they were well educated: 86% acquired bachelor degrees, 50% hold graduate degrees, and 36% earned a law, doctorate, or medical degree. 86% are married, widowed, or divorced, 86% are mothers. Findings also indicate that out of the 22 African American women elected to Congress. Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm was the first black woman elected to Congress in 1969. In 1972, she became the first black woman to bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. Her contribution and work in Congress, paved the way for black women political leaders who would follow.

Methodology

When we begin to address the theoretical base regarding diverse leadership development, we find that it is often the education and learning received outside the classroom which diverse adults, in the context of hegemony and power identify as providing great meaning in their lives (Goodman, 1990; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2000; Johnson-Bailey and Tisdell, 1998; and Peterson, 1991). The purpose of this investigation was to explore interpretations of learning in the lives of Women Congressional Black Caucus members. A qualitative research design utilizing life history, narrative analysis, and Black feminist thought provided the theoretical framework (Hill-Collins, 1986; Manning, P.K. & B. Cullum-Swan, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988; and Merriam and Simpson, 1989). Seven African American women were interviewed who had served, or are currently serving The Congressional Black Caucus. While, it is understood that African American women officials are not a monolithic group, three themes emerged which may serve to explain the value of informal education and experiential learning in the lives of these women. Traditional studies of leadership include Fiedler's contingency theory, Stogdill's trait theory, and the "great man" theory popularized by Sir Francis Galton (Steers and Black, 1994). These studies however do not consider cultural assumptions, cultural context, experiential learning nor, the impact of racism, classism, colorism, and hegemony in the lives of women (DeLany, 1999). My study of the Women of The Congressional Black Caucus began in the Fall of 2002, and commenced in the Spring of 2004. The accounts of experiences of women political leaders of *The Congressional Black Caucus* were selected from among a population of the most recent membership list as documented by *Members of the Congressional Black Caucus Listing*. Participants were initially contacted by mail from among a listing of 13 identified women of the Congressional Black Caucus (<http://www.house.gov/ebjohnson/cbcmembers4htm>).

Findings

An analysis of seven transcribed tapes revealed three themes 1)The majestic burden inherent with congressional service, 2) revealing secrets about leadership and power, and 3) the importance of learning beyond the classroom.

A Majestic Burden: The Truth About African American Women and Congressional Service

In their stories the data reveals that the women of the CBC hold positions that are highly visible, rewarding, powerful, and yet fraught with burden. Retired Congresswoman Carrie Meeks, (Democrat-17th District, Miami, Florida) shared her perspectives regarding the rewards and visibility associated with congressional life and the CBC:

So we all represent Black America, even though each one of us has a district. suffice to say we belong to Black America. So, my experience with them has been heart warming. We've gone to the president. We've gone to every country on the globe. We have been together to make points. We've stood, stepped on the last election. We lost but we stood stepped back...The Congressional Black Caucus helps to make the world and the United States understand the Black experience. It was a wonderful place for me!

Stephanie Tubbs Jones (Democrat-11th District, Cleveland, Ohio) noted the opportunities that Congress afforded her:

I have to say that public office...have given me opportunities to influence policy. as well as an opportunity to do some things that my parents never dreamed I would have an opportunity to do. And the best stories are having the chance to introduce my mother and father to the President.

Sheila Jackson Lee (Democrat, Houston, Texas) revealed the burden of being labeled a congressional agitator and trouble-maker; if a black woman brings to the table in a serious manner, issues and questions which the people want addressed and answered. She stated:

I think that the fact that I am here in the United States Congress is truly a gift to me and I am truly a beneficiary of people who never got a chance to get here and there are constituents of mine who have never left Houston, Texas. For that very reason and, I think that it's challenged me to do things beyond the norm. In addressing these challenges I am penalized for my views. Why should I be penalized and labeled an agitator for my views?" I believe people in Congress are good people.... one may face discrimination in attitudes and you will be labeled as tough, gritty, and uncompromising.

Revealing Secrets: Definitions of Leadership and Power

As a result of their experiences the women of the CBC openly shared their views and definitions of leadership and power based upon what they have learned in the course of their life's journey. Leadership and power were viewed as divine, competing against the odds, and lifting as one climbs.

Congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick (Democrat, Detroit, Michigan) described leadership as adhering to a higher moral divine contract:

...I think first of all think its an oath between you and your God, to represent, to speak out, to organize to build. To offer options and resources to people who have no way of accessing that...But the guide, the drive, the access, the coalitions that have to be built that's what power is."

Delegates Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) and Donna Christianson Christensen (D-Virgin Islands) talked about the importance of cultivating the ability to compete against the odds. Holmes Norton stated:

“Leaders have to take risks and go first. I work hard against and, despite the odds to make things happen

Christianson Christensen said, “sometimes it’s being willing to stand alone and, to take stands that are not always popular. I mean this is leadership. I think that it’s that you’re willing to chart new courses.

Life-world Experience: Learning Beyond the Classroom

The women interviewed in their personal recollections and stories assert that life-world experiences and learning beyond the classroom influenced their adult development as leaders. This finding is compelling given that a composite profile of the CBC women in this study indicated that they were well educated and exposed to learning in formal settings; as 86% acquired bachelor degrees, 50% hold graduate degrees, and 36% earned a law, doctorate, or medical degree. These formative influences on CBC women leaders address critical experiences, education, and learning acquired in family, in work or community activities, and influences emerging from the social, historical, economical, and political contexts of their times. Congresswoman Carrie Meek of Florida and the longest serving CBC woman in Congress shared how discrimination, segregation, and slavery impacted her life:

I feel if it weren’t for segregation and discrimination, we would have many black women in Congress. My father’s name was Willie Pittman, and his father was a slave. And of course, what they went through in those days is hard for me to tell you, except what was told to me. And my sister told me that it was very hard times, but my father escaped and he got away. And he settled in Georgia. And that’s where he met my mother. I was born and raised in the town of Tallahassee, Florida. It’s now the capitol of Florida. During that time it was mostly, it was very, very segregated. That is, there was no question that there was a clean line drawn between blacks and whites. And it was very well known. Your fountains were marked “black.” And the other water fountain was marked “white.” You couldn’t try on a hat downtown. Many times, my mother who was a very smart woman in my opinion would tell us to move off the sidewalk when we saw white people coming. Because she knew what would happen. But it just filled me with rage, I mean the rage that even to this date is hard to eliminate. So it’s still there and it can come to the surface when I’m pushed or when I get in a situation where I see people being treated unfairly. So that’s what shaped me. All of this strong black history shaped my life, and to this day, I am that kind of an activist.

Eleanor Holmes Norton (D.C.) described the influences of the civil rights movement in her life:

My early years began as a movement person. I consider myself a movement person. I did not plan a formal career in politics as many do. D.C. has always been a progressive place to be, even in times of segregation, in terms of political activity. D.C. was a race conscious, very civil rights community. There was no fear of being inferior as most blacks were a very race conscious, civil rights middle-class community. D.C. has always been on the “cutting-edge,” if you will, when it comes to people’s issues. As a former full-time professor at Georgetown University, and NPR commentator, in my early years I was most concerned about how I could serve as a native Washingtonian and bring a worldview into a collective body such as Congress.

Sheila Jackson Lee (Texas) articulated the importance and role that her family has in shaping her life as well as the impact of the Civil Rights Movement:

Well, I had a very strong and loving close family. We had sort of a typical fifties history, in that aunts and mothers and fathers and grandmothers lived together. In particular my grandmother, the mother of my father, she shared her time on occasion when I was growing up between another set of cousins, helping that family out while it was a two parent working family. And I had very strong and supportive women around me. And of course my father was in essence every girl's buddy. So I was very fortunate. The stereotypes of not having a father at home-I did. But the attitude was "never say, never." The attitude was "yes I can." And the joy of my experience was that I was a product of the civil rights movement. I soaked it up. I looked in awe at people like Dr. King Hosea Williams and Andrew Young and Malcom and Julian Bond and SNCC. And even today I get teary eyed about the sacrifices they made. So my life was pretty much crafted and carved and sensitized.

Summary and Implications for Adult Education

Participants emphasized life-world experiences, specifically learning beyond the classroom as instrumental to their adult development and influential in their rise as political leaders. It is the informal, non-formal, and experiential learning that provided these women with the skills that they needed. Communal, familial, and learning in social movements were cited as significant in the lives of these adult women political leaders as well. These women were greatly influenced by the social, historical, economical and political contexts of their times. Influences include the civil rights movement, segregation, racism, sexism, discrimination, the civil rights act of 1965, the women's movement, as well as the changing roles of women. Additionally, I noted that the core of what constitutes the congresswomen's social relationships and human experiences are born out of race, class, and gender experiences. And I witnessed through their stories, through their experiences, and through their voices that race, class, and gender are an integral part of their learned social identity. This is evidenced by their detailed accounts of how racism, sexism, segregation, and discrimination has affected their lives. These diverse aspects of lived experience have greatly influenced as well how these women managed to rise to positions of political leadership. Moreover, it is through experiential learning that a "black woman's way of knowing" emerges. This way of knowing is a critical construct as it informs how black women learn, negotiate, and navigate dominant culture to achieve leadership positions within the larger community. These women who grace our national and international stage have achieved leadership, power, fame, and celebrity; rewards that came with hard work and success as a public official.

Although these women operate in the context of power and privilege on a daily basis they are humbled in their position to serve and it is through an account of their own experiences they have learned that power does not always work for the betterment of all and they have learned to use their celebrity, politics, leadership, and power to promote the potential of the powerless. Leadership and power were interpreted by the participants as divine, competing against the odds, and lifting as one climbs. Their concerns and commitments are to improve the lives of the people they represent in their district and in so doing, to work to foster a better domestic community and a better global community. With this diverse leadership we begin to see African American women leaders, as knowledge producers, employ a new kind of leadership that defies conventional views of leadership. Such a finding suggests that we as educators should pay

attention to what gets counted as knowledge in a particular learning situation and to broaden our understanding as to who has the capacity to become knowledge producers and to place value on knowing about life's struggle among adult leaders and learners at the intersection rooted in human experience (Hayes and Flannery, 2001).

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