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Recommended Citation

Hayes, Elisabeth and Way, Wendy (2001). "The Politics of Learning at Work: Experiences of African American Women in Entry-Level Jobs," *Adult Education Research Conference*.

<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/30>

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The Politics of Learning at Work: Experiences of African American Women in Entry-Level Jobs

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Abstract: This research was designed to investigate the on-the-job learning of low-income African American women in entry-level jobs, in particular the relationships between the social context of the workplace, the nature of these jobs, and the kind of skills and knowledge the women acquired. We draw implications for adult basic education research and practice, in which the provision of work-related education for low-income women has become increasingly important due to the effects of welfare reform.

Introduction

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 has required increasing numbers of low-income women receiving public assistance to enter the workforce with the ultimate goal of achieving "self-sufficiency." Although their initial employment typically is in jobs considered to be "low-skilled" and poorly paid, a key, but untested assumption, is that women will acquire basic abilities and knowledge through on-the-job learning that will enable them to move into increasingly more skilled and highly paid positions.

What women actually learn in these jobs-if anything-remains an object of debate. Some welfare-to-work advocates argue that even entry-level jobs provide opportunities for learning technical skills, and even more importantly, "soft skills," which include "appropriate" work-related attitudes, values, and beliefs, such as self-motivation and an orientation towards individual achievement. A lack of these attitudes and beliefs has been considered as significant a barrier to successful employment as a deficiency in basic skills. Others argue that these entry-level jobs require few skills, and offer limited chances for acquiring abilities useful in higher level employment. Few of these arguments-on either side-have been informed by studies of the actual on-the-job learning of this population. Some existing studies suggest that employers' and educators' beliefs about job skill demands and what employees need to learn differ from what employees themselves consider to be important, and what they actually learn (e.g, Hull, 1997)

A limitation of much previous literature and educational practice is its emphasis on discrete job skills without consideration of the broader social, cultural, and political context of the workplace in which those skills are embedded (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). For example, while the welfare-to-work population is disproportionately comprised of women of color, the effects of racism and sexism on their learning in the workplace have often been ignored in mainstream educational programs. However, some research has begun to identify the impact of this context on, for example, the functioning of work teams (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), production work

in computer manufacturing (Darrah, 1997) and literacy demands in a high-performance automobile factory (Hart-Landsberg & Reder, 1997).

We sought to contribute to this body of work by using critical theory as a framework for studying the on-the-job learning of low-income African American women in entry-level jobs. Critical theory is broadly concerned with how institutions, culture, and human interaction processes reflect and reproduce broader social systems such as patriarchy and capitalism. From this perspective, individuals' beliefs and actions must be understood in light of unequal power relationships, which shape the kinds of knowledge and opportunities that are available to different groups within society. We were particularly interested in how the women both accommodated and resisted these power relationships in their learning on the job.

Methodology

In this study we used a critical qualitative methodology, drawing on the work of Quantz (1992), Carspecken (1996), and Gee (1999). Critical qualitative research has been described by Quantz (1992) as an investigative approach designed to "represent the culture, the consciousness or the lived experiences of people living in asymmetrical power relations" (pp. 448-449). The findings described in this paper were drawn from a larger study of low-income African American women's beliefs about work, their transitions to work, and their work-related learning in the family and workplace, as well as in formal educational programs.

The location for our research was a large, Midwestern city with high rates of unemployment and poverty. Study participants were identified through referrals from community adult education programs (i.e., job training programs, a local technical college), as well as from other participants. A key criterion for selection was that the women had been employed full time at least six months in an entry-level job with presumably some future potential for a "living wage" or moving up a career ladder. These jobs ranged from positions such as printer's assistant and electrical assembler to dialysis technician and dietary aide. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 African-American women about their current jobs and on-the-job learning experiences, as well as related issues, with each interview lasting approximately two hours. The interview data were analyzed in several stages to identify common and contrasting experiences and perceptions of on-the-job learning.

Findings

Our findings suggest that the participants' jobs were not barren of learning experiences. The study participants reported that they had opportunities to participate in work-based training and that they learned in various ways while on the job. We have grouped our findings into two major themes: "learning how to get along" and "avoiding the pitfalls of education."

Learning to Get Along

The first theme, "learning how to get along," reflects the low status and lack of power inherent in the women's jobs. They learned how to respond to clients who verbally abused them, co-workers who were uncooperative, and supervisors who were racist and sexist - and to shape these responses in ways that did not threaten their jobs while preserving their dignity.

I don't get treated with respect. A number of the women in the study were employed in healthcare occupations that required them to interact with patients. T. explained that in her job as a dialysis assistant, "You have to learn to like a lot a people . . . when I first came they [the patients] didn't want me to stick them but a lot of them are kinda rude." She learned to win them over and give them better care by getting to know them better and asking them about their preferences: "they might not think that I know what I'm doing but actually asking it's like better." K., who worked with welfare recipients, said: "By me being a data entry clerk you know some of [the clients] think I'm below them. I don't get treated with respect." K., and other women observed that there was a certain power in their positions, in their ability to create problems for their clients. K. went on to say: "I keep on doing my job because if I'm not there to do what I'm supposed to do they wouldn't be able to get their jobs." However, the women were also aware that their jobs could be jeopardized if they took the wrong action in response to clients' disrespect. K. acknowledged that she could be reprimanded if she did not "control" clients' behavior: "One day I got chewed out by the Director, the head because I needed to organize, coordinate, and control the flow of how everything was going." Q., a telemarketer, described how she handled racist comments on the phone: "He said you sound like a nigger. I just said okay thank you for your time and hung up the phone. Now I coulda let it git me down, I mean I got your address sittin on this screen, your phone number, I have everything about you sittin on this screen. . . . you gotta think of the consequences . . . if I'd a cussed that man out on the phone then I coulda lost my job."

Some people don't help you learn. Co-workers and supervisors were commonly cited by the women as important sources of information and guidance. However, the women had to negotiate sometimes challenging relationships of power and authority in order to learn from others. V., as employed in a printing company, explained that she learned a great deal from the lead printing operator: "He teaches me. He teaches me his job, you know. . . . I know what my expectations are and he shows me his job too." She felt that she would soon be qualified to apply for a job similar to his. But she noted that uncooperative operators could prevent their assistants from learning important tasks: "Because some people don't [help you learn], you know. Or the shift before me, the operator doesn't let the girl order, she does it." K., a dialysis technician, explained that she often relied on nurses to help her learn new procedures, and described how she learned to handle issues of status by asserting her own knowledge: "One of the nurses was using some medical terms to me and I responded to her in the same way and then kinda like, it appeared to have pissed her off I talk to them. I tell em I don't appreciate it. I'm not threatened, I let em know I'm not threatened by them." K. the data entry clerk in a social services office, described how she negotiated power relationships to get information from employees in other county agencies: "The county side and the W2 are in the same office. . . . I can go and talk to the counselor because we work side by side. . . [but] it is hard trying to find a good county worker to work with because at times they don't wanna work with you. . . ."

I'm a people person. In our analysis of the interviews, we were struck by how often the women constructed identities around their ways of interacting with people. Many of the women described themselves in words similar to K.'s: "I'm a people person all around" - identities that gave them a sense of self-respect based on how they dealt with the often difficult interpersonal relationships in the workplace: ". . . when someone comes in screaming, yelling, and hollering I'm able to deal with it and calm that client down. Hey, on a daily basis I deal with everybody

and I'm able to squeeze people in and out very good. That's one of my highs to be able to deal with people." They could use these identities to assert their worth in comparison to others who might have positions of greater status. K. contrasted her own "people skills" with those of her boss: "she knows her job in regards of paper work but she's not a people person. She does not know how to talk to people." Notably, few of the women attributed their interpersonal skills to formal education or training; instead, as K. stated, dealing with people was something she "was just born with."

Avoiding The Pitfalls Of Education

Typically workplace training is considered to be an asset to workers in enabling them to be more productive and efficient, and in helping them advance to positions with more status and income potential, as well as improved working conditions. While training did have these benefits for some women, these benefits were not uniform, and in some cases the women identified negative outcomes, or pitfalls, of training.

It's totally different at work. One such pitfall was that formal training did not always match the characteristics or demands of the work environment, and could even interfere with productivity. Y., who worked as an electronics technician at a large manufacturing company, stated that "they may teach us out of a text one way, but once you get to the actual work environment it's totally different. They taught us one way to tie a knot and ...when we got downstairs it was totally different...I don't know what type of knot the instructors taught us but it was wrong....we got downstairs they [other workers] taught us the Navy knot, for the Navy tie." V., the printing assistant, explained that she relied on the operator for guidance: "...he taught me to do that [run the printing press]. Before that I didn't know. When I was in my training course we were on a different printing press. . . . it's totally different." Q., the telemarketer, who achieved the status of 'plus rep' [top producing telemarketer], described how she was able to modify the sales script she was given in training to better suit her own style and particular calls. She learned to avoid the "help" of administrators who [unlike floor supervisors who were closer to the task] only told her to stick with the script: "if they're walkin around the floor and you're havin a problem and you don't see a floor supervisor, it's like 'read this, isn't this what you're supposed to be readin?' ...so it's like you want to stay away from them."

They don't pay you enough to be killed. Although many of the women felt workplace training provided opportunities to move into better paying jobs, they also described how training could lead to undesirable jobs, such as jobs with schedules that conflicted with caring for children and jobs with unsafe working conditions. An underlying fear related to this second point seemed to be that training might not prevent serious injury or harm from those jobs. Racism and sexism seemed to work against potential benefits of training. Y. described how a Black female co-worker at her electronics firm was trained for a more complex job that paid a higher salary, but was expected to move to a shift that made it impossible to find adequate child care. In contrast, a white male co-worker was given a similar position in a more desirable shift so that he could attend college: "T. had passed so she had got to 16 position, but see her childcare comes in to play there now she has four kids and childcare is a real issue okay. So, they made her go to second shift but yet okay, she tried to work around not having to go to second shift, so Keith who's Caucasian was in school so he got someway or another he got around havin to do second shift but they didnt do the same thing for her... she had to drop her title and go back to her

regular pay . . . she was back to \$12.49. I think she would have been at like \$13.79 or somethin like that but she was forced to either take second shift or drop the pay and go back to your old title, yeah."

S., who worked as a welder at a steel manufacturing plant, said she went into that 'nontraditional' line of work because "I want some of that man's money they're making out there. I want some. I want a piece of that pie too." When she started, she "wanted to quit the first couple of days" because "eyes was all over me. I was nervous. I couldn't hardly weld like I wanted to." S. welcomed opportunities to learn on the job because it helped give her confidence that she would be able to "hang in there." Eventually, fellow co-workers welcomed her presence and even told her 'you're gonna be the best woman welder we got.' Today, she said, "There's not a day goes past I don't learn" [something new]. Unfortunately, one thing S. learned was that her 'piece of the pie' job might be harming her health: "They [coworkers] tell me about the different metals. And the oil that be on the metal is really a gassy [material]. It's really toxic. It's smoky so I wear a mask over my face...I'm trying not to inhale it [the oily smoke] but my mask being on, I can see all the black stuff on my mask. I can imagine how my lungs are." A., who worked at a printing and binding company, expressed a similar concern about the possible consequences of additional training. "This supposed to be actually my year to train...[but] I'm gonna ask him [her boss], can I have an agreement...can somebody else hook the machines up for me cause I don't know nothin' about nothin' bout them blades. And even 'do they supposed to train me to do all dat. [But] there's a man out there who lost his hand, lost his whole hand. Right here, he wearin a hook now cause ...the machines smashed his whole hand."

They're training to take your job. Training other workers, while potentially an opportunity for greater status and "learning by teaching," was just as often viewed as inherently risky by the women in our study. T., who worked as a renal dialysis technician, described her anxieties about being responsible for the mistakes of a new co-worker who did not learn what she tried to teach him: "...you know, a year and a half I'd been there. I got you know what it takes. [The new male employee came on the PM shift] and my preceptor told my supervisor that she thought maybe I would be good you know to train him. And I was sorta nervous when my supervisor axe me to train, sweating, you know, it's like man, okay I was like okay, I'll give it a try, what if he do this, what if he get air into a line, I'm saying all this what-ifs in my head....he's not my clone at all, he's terrible!" Implying potential sexism in hiring, T. observed that her dialysis training program was comprised of all women, while this man had not been through a formal training program: "he was like kinda off the street." A., who worked at the printing company, observed that temporary Black line supervisors were often replaced with permanent white supervisors the Black men trained. "But there ain't about too many [Black supervisors] and see... they'd git another person in and have that person [a Black line worker, often with many years of experience] stick with, train him [a new white person] and [the white person would] take his job. [They should really give jobs] to somebody that's been here longer. Why would I take a job that [should rightfully belong to] people that have been there 15 years, 16 years?"

Implications for Adult Education Theory & Practice

Initially, our findings suggested that the women were not learning particularly sophisticated or important skills in these entry-level jobs. On the surface, it might appear that the women were

developing relatively basic "soft skills" such as "getting along with others." Closer analysis of their experiences suggests that they often learned to employ rather sophisticated strategies for negotiating the often unacknowledged and specific demands of low-status jobs. "Learning how to get along," for example, required the negotiation of power relationships not typically addressed in most classroom discussions of "how to develop good relationships with colleagues." Perhaps the most important implication of our findings is the need to reconceptualize our understanding of the abilities required and learned in these jobs, as a basis for educational practice that can more directly address the "politics" of learning in the workplace. Recent scholars of workplace learning (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Engestrom, 2001) have stressed that "skills" are embedded in a social context that mediates their acquisition as well as their use. However, most basic education and training programs continue to treat skills as discrete and generic across contexts.

Our findings support Guile and Griffith's (2001) assertion that an important element of workplace learning is "the negotiation of learning" (p. 127) which involves, among other things, developing social interactions that support problem-solving and shared understanding. As Guile and Griffith point out, workplaces are not "stable and transparent environments in which students can easily learn and develop" (p. 115). Even in the entry level jobs held by the women in our study, it was clear that learning in workplaces requires different approaches and abilities than learning in formal education. Mismatches of training and work run deeper than training on the wrong equipment. What seemed most important to the women's workplace learning - yet neglected in formal training - was a critical understanding of the workplace culture and using this understanding to construct their own learning opportunities. By suggesting that the women's workplace learning was more complex than commonly assumed, we do not wish to overly romanticize their agency in learning or exaggerate the potential for this learning to help them move into more desirable jobs. Many of the women had histories of sporadic education alternating with lateral moves in the job market, rather than climbs up a "career ladder." Workplace education should provide workers with conceptual tools for understanding organizational culture and strategies for leveraging this knowledge to gain more power and opportunity. Some women in our study, for example, were able to use their understanding of workplace politics to obtain better jobs, while such politics continued to marginalize others.

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