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Education and Women's Resiliency:
Exploring the Experiences of Successful Women
from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

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While some research has explored the needs of minority women, very little research has focused on women who have faced other disadvantages beyond those associated with minority status.

A few years ago, I talked to a friend about hiring practices in academia. She had served on several search committees during her first year in a tenure track position. I was seeking a position in higher education and she was gave me advice as a result of her recent experiences. Although I was most interested in educational psychology and women's issues, I also had quite a bit of experience in other areas of education, for example, educational technology. I wondered if having interests, experiences and publications in other areas would seem a benefit (broad experience) or a detriment (unfocused). Much of my more current research was related to my true interests, but I was afraid of being judged by what I had done in the past. The response from her department was of particular interest to me since many of the women in her department considered themselves feminists. She responded that the search committee members had great sympathy for "people like me." They recognized the problem as being related to lack of mentorship as opposed to lack of focus or talent. Ultimately the results were the same. Candidates without a singular focus were overlooked.

In some ways these women were correct, I did not always have good mentoring, although this is a simplistic interpretation of my situation. Lack of mentoring is a common problem among women and nontraditional students. The questions then becomes, what are other problems and what should be done about them? In this situation a few academics understood the barriers to inclusion for women and nontraditional applicants, and were concerned about this issue, but could not find a way to put their moral beliefs into practice.

This paper is not a personal anedote, it is a research paper born out of my dissertation where I interviewed women who achieved highly in academics and who were also disadvantaged as children. In that study, stories such as the example described above were commonplace. The purpose of my dissertation was to understand how education assisted these women in their academic achievement or hindered them in their progress. In this paper, I would like to explore the barriers to education for women in higher education and report how some women have overcome these barriers.

Women and High Achievement

Other authors have addressed why some women achieve highly despite barriers to their success. In this area, most authors have solicited input from successful women in minority groups or in particular occupations (Flores, 1988; Furumoto, 1980; Gotwalt & Towns, 1986; Hobson-Smith, 1982; O'Connell & Russo, 1980; Wyche & Graves, 1992). For example, Hobson-Smith (1982) interviewed 12 African-American women who have achieved highly in academics and who also worked in higher education. The profiles in that research indicate that these women became aware of their potential in their formative years. Each was nurtured and encouraged by strong family members and occasionally by professionals, such as teachers. These high-achieving African American women possessed a keen awareness of their strengths and a commitment to better the lives of all people, especially African-Americans. The majority of them felt they had been victims of both race and sex discrimination and had to exert energy to fight both. This wasted time, which could have been better utilized doing other things. Hard work and preparation were believed to be the essential ingredients for career success.

While some research has explored the needs of minority women, very little research has focused on women who have faced other disadvantages beyond those associated with minority status. Specifically, few researchers have attempted to understand and describe the special needs of women who have faced multiple disadvantages, especially those who experienced traumatic stress as children.

Harrington and Boardman conducted a study that used biographical information to explain why some people from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve (in Wells, 1989). These investigators interviewed 30 men (15 Anglo and 15 African-American) and 30 women (15 Anglo and 15 African-American) whom they described as people who were disadvantaged as children and were now successful as adults. Subjects were considered disadvantaged if their parents did not graduate from high school or if their parents had low-status jobs. These investigators also interviewed 40 people whom they described as not being disadvantaged. Subjects were not disadvantaged if at least one of their parents had graduated from high school or held a higher-status job. According to their findings, men and women who were successful despite their disadvantage

- were willing to confront obstacles directly rather than indirectly
- were more likely to turn failure around to their advantage
- were better trained for failure
- had an internal locus of control
- were self-sufficient
- were strongly motivated to achieve
- were reward oriented

Some of their conclusions are similar to mine, even though Harrington and Boardman's project (in Wells, 1989) is different in many ways. For example, similar to Harrington and Boardman's results, the women in my study often turned their disadvantages to their advantage. Many recognized, for example, that although disadvantage made the education process more difficult, it also motivated them to achieve and gave them a better understanding of different perspectives. Other similarities and differences are described in the findings section of this article. Harrington and Boardman's study is different than mine

mainly because their definition of disadvantage is very different. Although parent education level has been recognized as an important achievement factor, it is not the only source of disadvantage.

Finally, in another study, Gandara (1982) interviewed 17 Mexican-American women who were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and who also succeeded in completing a J.D., M.D., or Ph.D. degree. Although the author did not focus on her participants' childhood stress, they could easily be labeled disadvantaged not only because of their race and economic status, but also because they were first generation (in this country) and most of their families spoke only Spanish in the home. In her study, Gandara emphasized family influences. Specifically, her findings showed that a mother's encouragement to persist, a strong work ethic in the family, a nonauthoritarian style of parenting, and equal treatment for girls and boys were all important factors in promoting success. Although it was reported that a large percentage of these women lived in homes where they spoke Spanish, the women also attributed some of their success to the fact that they were comfortable with both Hispanic and Anglo culture. The investigator credited their comfort to the fact that most of these women had attended highly integrated schools. Finally, one last relevant finding was that the women in Gandara's study most often credited their successes to their families, while men most often attribute their success to inner strength. This was also a characteristic of the women who were interviewed for this study. They often blamed themselves for their failures and credited their families with their successes.

Method

Participants

In this project, in-depth interviews were conducted with 21 academically high achieving women who were also disadvantaged as children. Qualitative measures were used to explore how education assisted these women in their academic achievement or set up barriers to their success. To qualify as disadvantaged, the participants had to have these experiences in common, 1) they lived in either a poor working class or lower class family as a child, 2) they were first generation college students, 3) they experienced at least one type of familial dysfunction or traumatic childhood stress (physical and or sexual abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse, mental illness, severe illness and, or other stress). This identified women as disadvantaged if they did not have access to resources in three categories: financial, informational and social/emotional.

To qualify as high achievers, the participants had to have an advanced degree or currently be enrolled as an advanced graduate student with at least two years of graduate work completed. Women were recruited from all disciplines including, but not limited to, education, law, medicine, engineering, business, literature and psychology. The group of resilient participants included representatives from different ethnic groups including, African-American, European-American and Hispanic.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Data were collected in three ways, through in-depth interviews, questionnaires and historical records. When appropriate, information from one source was used to enrich information provided from another.

Interviews. In-depth personal interviews were used to describe and explain the educational experiences of each participant. These interviews provided the opportunity to explore in detail each participant's ideas and feelings about her education. The interviews were open-ended; the interviewer guided the inquiry, but the participants were allowed to discuss in detail what they considered important about their lives and their educational experiences. The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis.

Questionnaire. After the interview was completed, an experience questionnaire was administered to each participant. The design of this questionnaire was guided by pilot study findings. The questionnaire provided a second opportunity for the participants to express their attitudes about education in a completely different format. The answers from the questionnaires were compared to the interview data to ensure that consistent answers were provided by each participant.

Transcripts. Historical records were also used as a third and final check for consistency. Participants were asked to sign a letter of permission so that the investigator could send away for transcripts from high schools, colleges and graduate schools. By analyzing transcripts, not only was the investigator able to compare actual records with self-report data, but these records were also used to identify the types of classes taken by individual students, grade levels in certain subjects, patterns of class enrollment and elements of transition from high school to college.

Data Analysis

The challenge of qualitative data analysis is to make sense of massive amounts of data, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal (Patton, 1990). Transcripts were made from each interview and descriptive data were presented in a way that people could draw their own conclusions. For example, dialog quotes were coded and listed as evidence, and demographic information was presented in tables.

Interviews were analyzed with an inductive cross-case analysis. Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes and categories emerged out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis. A cross-case analysis means that the information was grouped together according to different people, themes, perspectives or issues. In this project, data was organized topically. In the final step, the data was interpreted. Interpretation, by definition, goes beyond description. Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, imposing order and dealing with rival explanations.

Rigor

Within the positivist paradigm, a study's rigor is judged through measures of reliability and validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have offered the following four alternative terms which are more applicable in determining the rigor of a study conducted within an interpretivistic paradigm including, credibility, comfirmability, dependability and transferability.

To check for credibilty, the interview data was supplemented with information provided in the questionnaires and in other historical documentation (transcripts). As an additional check for credibility, the women in this study were given a copy of the final report and asked to provide feedback on whether or not the results accurately reflected their voices. The women's response were very positive.

To check for confirmability, two outside observers (in addition to the dissertation committee members) were asked to evaluate the interpretations. Both outside observers were men. One outside observer is a psychologist who has ten years of clinical experience. The second outside observer has a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering. By allowing the interpretations to be analyzed by two people with perspectives other than that of the researcher, additional objectivity was added to the evaluation process.

Dependability refers to the researchers attempts to account for changes in the design created by a refined understanding of the setting, This represents assumptions different from those shaping the concept of reliability. Positivists assume an unchanging universe where an inquiry could be replicated. Interpretivists believe that the social world is always changing and replication is itself problematic (Marshall &

Rossmanm, 1989) It was not necessary to make changes during this investigation.

Finally, transferability refers to the applicability of the findings to other settings, contexts and groups. The results of this study cannot be generalized to other women who have achieved highly in academics and who were also disadvantaged as children. However, by using detailed information that was gathered through multiple methods, other researchers can explore the data and the results and determine the applicability of the findings to their specific situations. Triangulation of methods through the use of multiple cases, multiple outside observers, multiple sources of data and multiple theories strengthen the transferability of the results.

Results

The results of this study are organized into five sections . These five sections include, 1) relationship to disadvantage, 2) personalities of resilient women 3) what women want from schools 4) patterns of achievement and development, and 5) family and community influences. In the original report, the results of this study were described in two hundred pages. The results have been condensed for readability.

Relationship with Disadvantage

Many of the participants questioned their status as disadvantaged. When women volunteered for this study, they often wondered whether they were qualified. This was interesting since most of these women had experienced serious difficulties as children including poverty, sexual and physical abuse, mental illness, alcoholism, family discord, racism and sexism and many other stressors. Still, some participants had difficulty categorizing themselves as disadvantaged. Obviously, the word "disadvantage" had different meanings to various people.

There are many reasons why the women in this study may have been hesitant to adopt the label of disadvantage. First, disadvantage is often defined according to some type of imaginary scale. It is inevitable that someone else is more disadvantaged than you. It can seem pretentious to claim that you have faced adversity. And, the participants were extremely modest.

Also, some definitions of disadvantage are associated with functioning. In other words, some believe that a person can only be disadvantaged if the stress they endure negatively affects another part of their life. Schools often adopt this definition and label students "disadvantaged" if they do poorly in school.

In the late 70's and early 80's it became unpopular to describe children as disadvantaged because of family functioning because this classification was considered racist (Wilson, 1987). In the past, the word disadvantage has been associated with deficiencies in the child-rearing practices of African-American families (Ford, 1993, Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The women of color were most cautious about claiming they were disadvantaged. Yet, they were less reticent to claim that they had been oppressed or discriminated against. In fact, none of the women who were ethnic minorities claimed to be disadvantaged because of their race. However, all agreed that they had experienced some type of discrimination because of their ethnicity. This is an interesting contradiction since most would agree that discrimination puts people, especially children, at a disadvantage. Nonetheless, because of their personal feelings about the word disadvantage, women were uncomfortable describing themselves in that way.

How women define and experience disadvantage and race can be important, especially if people achieve at higher levels when they are not aware, or do not acknowledge, their disadvantages. In this study, women blamed themselves, rather than the system, for their difficulties. Yet, they attributed their success to family members or school interventions. These women had extremely high standards for themselves

and saw achievement as completely dependent on their own abilities, not on the school and not on their family. Also, most of the women believed they achieved at a higher level because professionals in educational settings did not know who they were as individuals. They actively hid their nontraditional histories. One participant said:

> I've never told anybody about my life. I think if people knew, they'd be shocked because I certainly don't give the appearance of someone that grew up totally abused like I did. When I was at Harvard, going to school full-time and working full-time, I got really good grades and a couple of friends at the time would say, gee, we're not working, we live on campus and it's hard for us. How are you doing this? So I did get some peer support in that way, but I've never told any person about my background. They didn't know.

Did these attitudes allow the women to achieve at the level they now enjoy? or did they drain their energy, making academic achievement a difficult challenge? The data in this study suggest that these women faced consequences from hiding their true identity. For example, these women felt they were different and ultimately believed they did not belong in positions historically reserved for the privileged majority. Also, these women were not able to seek help or promote themselves and were often misevaluated as a result. So, although these women were independent, and able to achieve, they had to struggle to reach their full potential.

Personalities of Resilient Women

Some of the participants' common personality traits were explored in detail. Often, investigators ignore the influence of personality and focus on family functioning. This is unfortunate since high achieving children often have siblings who do not achieve highly. In this study, personality, and individual responses to environment, were considered important. The common personality traits discussed include, maturity, confidence, benevolence, perfectionism and perseverance.

These women were independent and mature for their age which made them more interested in an independent (adult-like) style of education. Unfortunately, it also caused educators and counselors to believe these women did not need help. So, often they did not receive adequate counseling in high school and college.

Most of these women grew up as good girls and later became women who cared about making the world a better place to live. This is important because many girls act nice to gain the teacher's attention which causes the teacher to respond positively to their behavior and pay less attention to their academic needs (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). This may provide some explanation as to why girls often do well in elementary school and do less well in high school.

The women in this study were ambivalent about their confidence. Sometimes they were confident to the point of arrogance and at other times they were afraid to talk to professors because they felt unworthy. Ultimately, they found enough confidence to try even when they faced rejection.

The women were also perfectionists. Although this trait helped them achieve at a high level, it also made the educational process more unpleasant because their style was at odds with instructional methods that focus on what students do wrong. The participants were dependent on positive feedback from school. Criticism was intolerable.

Finally, the women were persistent, but in a way that precluded them from recognizing the difference between the level of work they demanded of themselves compared to that required of other students. For example, many believed that working full-time during school was a normal way to support themselves

through college. There was no recognition that many other students did not work full-time during their undergraduate experience.

What Did Women Want from Schools?

What women need from teachers. With 21 participants, it was possible to recognize some common educational needs and experiences. First, teachers' personalities were more important than their teaching style. Participants claimed they could easily adapt to different styles, but it was important for them to have teachers who were caring and attentive. Participants were also interested in teachers who were somehow different. They connected with radical teachers who were nontraditional in their teaching style. One participant commented:

> What stands out for me are the radicals, the people who weren't behaving as they were supposed to, but somehow held up in this system. Their nontraditional behavior was somehow excused because their students were learning and they were doing good. And that's who I thought I was going to be.

Participants also mentioned their disappointment in female professors. Although these professors were role models, they were not as supportive as was expected. Many of the participants felt that female professors acted like men (e.g., competitive and ambitious) to compete successfully in a educational system developed by and for men. Also, the participants not only wanted women teachers, they wanted women who were like them. For example, they wanted to see women of color and women from disadvantaged backgrounds in positions of power. Many thought that women who achieved highly were all Caucasian women who had come from privileged backgrounds.

Guidance and mentors. Only a few of the participants had any guidance in high school. There is some evidence of discrimination. For example, some students received bad counseling. In these cases, the participants were told they should pursue careers as secretaries or grocery clerks even though their grades were high and they were interested in college. In most cases however, the participants believed that professionals in the schools did not know, or were not fully aware, of their disadvantage. Results suggest that the participants' disadvantages affected them in a way that made it difficult for them to take advantage of the counseling opportunities that were available. These women did not know how to seek advice or were too scared to ask for help. One participant suggested:

> I think this business of mentorship, I think you have to be receptive and seek someone out, and I didn't do that, and that's one of the things I learned how to do. I think there might be problems with people who have experienced trauma to the extent that they can't reach out to other people. They're really handicapped in the mentorship area.

Guidance in college was also important. Those who had mentors were aware of the importance of that guidance. The women who did not have the proper guidance chose the wrong majors, attended the wrong schools and expended extra energy to accomplish at levels comparable to those with mentors. Not only did each woman need academic guidance, it was also important for each women to be validated for being smart or special. In fact, it was important for these women to get validation for being above average. When the participants were considered average or below average, they often felt as though they should quit or change directions. Success in school strengthened their self-esteem, when often it was being weakened at home.

Ingrained structure and attitudes that discourage learning. The participants provided examples of the norms and structures within the school system that discouraged their progress. Many problems stemmed from a hierarchical system that encourages certain behaviors and attitudes. For example, people on the

bottom of a hierarchy are often expected to be compliant and to show deference to those in positions above them. This structure is offensive to these women because they want to be valued as an equal. These women believed they have had more life experiences than their privileged counterparts and therefore had difficulty accepting the traditional role of a student or as a low level professor who is considered inexperienced and less knowledgeable. Another reason that women have difficulty accepting a hierarchical structure is because they were often at the bottom of an abusive hierarchy associated with their families. In these situations, they had no control or recourse for unfair treatment. For this reason, they were uncomfortable when they found this structure replicated in the school system. Some of the structures that are in place to support the hierarchical school system are the elitist way colleges are stratified, traditional testing methods that misevaluate nontraditional students, and competitive, rather than cooperative, methods of teaching and learning.

Patterns of Academic Achievement and Intellectual Development

It was found that these women did very well in elementary and graduate school and did less well in high school and college. The data suggest that these women enjoyed the individualized attention in elementary and graduate school, and they were more comfortable in graduate school when they were given the opportunity to decide what was important for them to learn.

The data also suggest that these women developed higher level thinking skills at an early age. Many of the women seemed to develop what has been described as inter-and intra personal intelligence (Gardner, 1983), or emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Unfortunately, since they did not always present themselves well, they were evaluated inaccurately and provided with educational opportunities that bored them. Later, these women often felt they had special abilities and were disappointed when these abilities were never (or seldom) recognized. One woman said:

> I know so many women who have always wanted someone to say, "I can tell you're gifted, and I want you to stay in my class because you're really good in this particular area." I know so many women who have wanted that to happen. They all have this seed of awareness that they've got something really great to offer, they just don't know which direction to go. I never had that. I had a couple of people that I sort of poked at enough and they finally helped me work things out, that kind of thing.

Family and Community Influence

It is surprising that even those participants who faced an enormous amount of childhood stress described at least one member of their family as influential. In fact, many participants listed family members (especially mothers) as the one factor in their lives that was most important in helping them achieve.

When the women spoke about significant others, usually they described them as helpful and encouraging. However, some were not, especially when the women had experienced traumatic divorces during their school experience. None of the women credited their husbands, boyfriends or significant others for their achievement. However, many claimed that their children motivated them to continue because they wanted to provide something better for them.

Women also mentioned the importance of the community. Although their experiences were most affected by their family of origin, their extended family, friends and neighbors were also helpful at various times.

Conclusions

So why did these women achieve? Whether positive or negative, they adapted and assimilated to the majority culture. They hid who they were because they believed their backgrounds reflected on them

negatively. Their circumstances at home motivated them to seek out reinforcement in other places, and they sought reinforcement in the only way they knew how, by being good girls and excelling in school. Since most girls develop faster in elementary school than boys, elementary school was easy for them. This was especially true for this group, since they acquired higher-level thinking skills early to protect themselves from childhood stress. Later, in high school, academics were not as easy, because in elementary school these girls had concentrated on gaining reinforcement through behaviors rather than through learning. Still, since these women were convinced in elementary school that they were smart and special, they never gave up the idea that they had something special to offer. And although it was difficult, they adjusted in high school and especially in college to the amount of effort needed to compensate for the changes in expectations. As adults, they continued to attract some attention and some rewards for their accomplishments, so their belief that they could earn rewards (money, status, etc.) continued to motivate them on their difficult journey. Their motivation was enhanced by the fact that they were drawn toward something (e.g., graduate school, positions at work, etc.) where they could use their intellectual abilities. They were never satisfied with jobs that did not challenge their intellect. Although these women achieved highly, the process of being educated was not always enjoyable, because often they lacked confidence, felt out of place, and clashed with an educational system that is often still more suited to traditional students. Still, these women persevered because they were motivated to change their lives and prove they were capable.

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