

# African American Women, Education, and Self-Actualization: Confronting Gender and Racial Barriers in Religious Institutions

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Americans cling to the mythology that education is the great social equalizer with the power to lift members of society out of poverty and to overcome gender and racial discrimination. In turn, American society becomes more harmonious, more equitable, and more democratic as a result of having an educated citizenry. The experiences of two African American women in higher education, particularly in religious institutions, offer a counter-narrative to the persisting mythology. Using a combination of secondary research and personal narrative, the authors posit that American education embodies ongoing institutionalized political, social, and economic injustices. The chapter presents through vignettes, the African American women's first-hand experiences, which potentially are representative of a broader constituency of American academics whose life and work experiences have been affected by their race and gender.*

## INTRODUCTION

Confucius noted the need and value of education as a means to develop an enlightened and harmonious society. Others asserted the power of education to civilize humans (Cooney, Cross, & Trunk, 1993). With education holding out such great societal promises we use this paper to examine the realities of education in America as it relates to African American women. Historically, American education was and is a system intended to benefit European Americans generally and wealthy European American males specifically. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson proposed limited education for most citizens (Spring, 2010). This chapter is the reflective and reflexive account of the authors' journey to be educated and to be educators in academia. Through these reflections we witness to the failure of religious educational institutions to observe and promote gender and racial equity, and thereby inhibit self-actualization. Further, we posit the experience of African American women in higher education is in many ways the ongoing manifestation of America's historic political, social, and economic injustices. The focus of this chapter is on African American women in academia. Throughout this chapter recurring themes will emerge (e.g. *cultural capital*, *social reproduction*, *feminized professions*, and *meritocracy*) which support the premise that education while holding such great potential to afford African American females more equitable economic and social outcomes, especially within the higher education sphere, has not done so in the cases described herein.

Not surprisingly, such an initial philosophy toward education in America produced an ongoing struggle for the poor, females, and people of color, to obtain educational opportunities. This ongoing discrepancy is apparent in their income levels in the general workforce and ironically, within the higher education setting as well. For example, in 2011, women's median weekly earnings as a percentage of men's, was approximately 89% for cooks; 92% for elementary and middle school teachers; and 65% for financial managers. The overall wage gap between males' and females' weekly earnings was approximately 82% (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2011).

The fact that a few females and some people of color manage to achieve or surpass European American males in their economic and social status, merely allows the perpetuation of the myth that America is a meritocracy. The authors present the story of their work as teacher educators in religious higher education institutions, which service predominately European American students. An examination of the psychosocial adjustment and coping strategies needed to become successful and effective educators while functioning on the margins of such institutions that exhibit institutionalized racism and sexism is presented.

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