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4-26-1996

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Marilyn Johnson-Farr
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A Fly in a Bowl of Milk: African American Female Educators In Isolation

Marilyn Johnson-Farr
Doane College

“Participants will be encouraged to look into their perceptual filters and see how they might become advocates for African American women who live this experience.”

The presenter of this session has experienced the isolated settings during much of her career. On that premise, she has become increasingly curious about the "lived experiences" of her African American female colleagues. Do they still feel that they have to have more qualifications than anyone else sitting in the room? Are they still plagued in the work place with the sense that if too much black pride is displayed, we are racist? If we support civil rights efforts are we considered a threat? If we commend and befriend our European American colleagues are we seen as sellouts? African American female educators have faced sexism and racism in their work settings for a long period of time. Some individuals have survived and others have not. The double jeopardy becomes even more challenging when you don't have an opportunity to "mirror" with someone who looks like you for support. The "fly in a bowl of milk" syndrome is very typical in the educational setting - in other words, we are often the only African Americans. Therefore, we build our support network outside the workplace. As a result of this session, participants will become aware of the survival skills that have historically enabled us to keep on keeping on. The researcher has identified perseverance, religiosity, resilience, interdependence, code switching, and racial identity as key elements in the development of one's ability to survive.

Participants will gain a clear understanding of how these skills impact African American educators' vision, job stability, professional advancement, management of people, and leadership styles.

Participants will view photographs and other artifacts that the researcher has collected about the "lived experiences" of her informants. There will also be dialogue on the researcher's observations, written narratives, and the study's impact thus far on the researcher.

I have selected critical ethnography as my research design. In this design, the informants are given voice. The participants will see, hear, and feel what the experience is like for educators from elementary school to college, and also will explore the administrative perspective.

Participants will be encouraged to look into their perceptual filters and see how they might become advocates for African American women who live this experience. The challenge will lie in one's ability to stand at another person's vantage point. The

participants will engage in conversation with the presenter at a level that will allow for collaboration, that is non-threatening, yet is empowered with new ideas for support to and interaction with African American female educators in isolation.

PRESENTER

Marilyn Johnson-Farr is a former elementary teacher in the Lincoln Public School System. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of education at Doane College, Crete, Nebraska. She is currently pursuing a doctorate at the University of Nebraska in multicultural education and women's studies.