Sister-to-Sister Talk: Transcending Boundaries and Challenges in Qualitative Research With Black Women*

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Our purpose is to discuss the challenges that Black women researchers face when doing qualitative research with Black women on sensitive topics. From a Black feminist perspective, we explore the dynamics of race, class, and gender in the informant-researcher relationship between Black women. We also share five recommendations for conducting ethical qualitative research with Black women: contextualizing research, contextualizing subjectivity, triangulating multiple sources, monitoring symbolic power, and caring in the research process.

In thinking about how to conduct ethical research with Black women that is empowering for the community and those involved in the research process, three Black family studies scholars came to terms with how research on Black women and families has been historically conducted and presented in family studies and similar disciplines. We identified five ways in which the experiences of Black women and families have been misrepresented, misappropriated, and/or misconstrued.

1. Deviance and negative developmental outcomes historically have been the dominant foci of studies on Black family life (Bell-Scott, 1982; McLoyd, 1998).
2. Researchers commonly have represented Black family life through comparative quantitative data collected mostly from Whites. Other racial-ethnic groups were included less often. Thus, Blackness or the experiences of Blacks was defined in terms of difference from Whiteness (Jones, 1991).
3. Although studies on sensitive topics with Blacks often are descriptive in nature, they lack within-group investigations and often are based on nonrepresentative groups of Blacks drawn from clinical, high-risk, and convenience samples (Murry, 1992, 1995; Staples, 1994; Wyatt, 1991).
4. Quantitative findings about the effect of race generally are by-products of statistical controls for race or ethnicity (McLoyd, 1998).
5. Researchers have used steadfastly traditional theories that do not reflect holistically Black women's experiences (Allen, 2000; Bell-Scott, 1982; Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Johnson, 1993; McAdoo, 1991; McLoyd, 1998; Staples, 1970).

In considering these five phenomena, we provide documentation of how stereotypes and myths about Black families in general and Black women specifically have been perpetuated. From this documentation, we strategized about how to avoid these pitfalls in research.

Our efforts reflect a series of conversations about approaching qualitative research that address sensitive topics with Black women among three Black family studies scholars. In coffee shops and each other's homes, we discussed what we were learning as we interacted with Black women informants from diverse backgrounds. We talked about the few published articles on the process of interviewing Black women (Johnson-Bailey, 1999) that could serve as a template for our own research endeavors. We wanted to know how other Black women scholars negotiated and transcended boundaries that emerge and dissipate between Black women in the researcher-informant relationship and how they were able to translate sister-to-sister talk into contributions to family studies literature. Sister-to-sister talk is Afrocentric slang to describe congenial conversation or positive relating in which life lessons might be shared between Black women. It is in the spirit of those conversations that we decided to share our experiences of this aspect of qualitative research and to encourage other women scholars, particularly Black women scholars, to write about overcoming challenges in our pursuit of truth and knowledge about, by, and for Black women.

Another revelation that emerged from our conversations was that although we came from diverse families of origin, linguistic traditions, geographical locations, and socioeconomic status and were at different phases of our academic career, we were bound by the commonalities of being both Black and female in academia and in American society, as well as identifying ourselves as Black feminist scholars. We found Black feminism useful as a guiding theoretical framework in our research projects and as an impetus to examine the dynamics of race, ethnicity, color, class, and gender in our informant-researcher relationships. Here we share examples from our individual research projects to illustrate issues of power and representation that emerged and persisted throughout the research process. Issues of power and representation are particularly salient for those involved in our research, given that our research interests focus on examining the most sensitive and personal aspects of some Black women's lives—intimate violence and sexual issues. Last, we offer five strategies for collaborating with Black women in the research process. These include contextualizing research, contextualizing subjectivity, triangulating multiple sources, monitoring symbolic power, and caring in the research process.

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Grounding Theory With Black Feminist Consciousness

Theory grounds how we identify, name, interpret, and write about experience. The theories we select to explain phenomenon results from our own personal experiences and how we understand our social location and that of others in the world. For two of us, our world views were shaped by Black studies, women's studies, and family studies scholarship. For one of us, the field of marriage and family therapy shed new light on family studies scholarship, compelling her to question the applicability of traditional theories to the lives of Black women clients. For all of us, Black feminist thought provided a context to examine the choices that Black women and their families make in order to survive and overcome obstacles.

Black feminism stems from critical scientific inquiry. Critical social scientists suggest that all men and women are potentially active agents in the construction of their social world and their personal lives. They analyze the meanings, social rules, values, and motives that govern action in a specific context (Comstock, 1982). Human action and interpretations are considered historical by-products of collective experience. As a field of inquiry that emerged from both feminist and critical race theories, Black feminist thought validates the experiences of Black women in the creation of knowledge.

Black feminists assert that Black women have a shared historical reality and, thus, a shared world view of historical resistance (Collins, 1991). The marginalization of Black women, as members of a specific group characterized by their gender and race, creates a shared experience. For example, for Black women race is the most salient construct centering both their individual and group identity (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Race is viewed as a sociopolitical term that distinguishes between true biological differences and also classifies people according to sociopolitical and economic categories where membership is determined by physical characteristics (Helms, 1995). Both as biological construct and as sociohistorical reality, ideas about race have placed Black women in America at a disadvantaged position as evidenced by interactions with others (Collins; Giddings, 1985; Lerner, 1972; Scales-Trent, 1993). Black feminists argue that there is a complex dual relationship in both Black culture and the dominant culture that Black women have to negotiate in their daily interactions (hooks, 1984).

Black feminists see research as being for Black women, rather than simply about Black women. Black feminists incorporate this activist perspective toward research through a three-phase process: knowledge, consciousness, and empowerment. The concept of knowledge begins with validating the individual's experience as an authoritative standpoint (hooks, 1984). For example, acknowledging abuse, naming it, and recognizing that it did happen are all examples of this phase. Consciousness is moving beyond knowing to understanding what factors influenced that experience. During this phase, the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies occur (Collins, 1991). Finally, Black feminists emphasize empowerment within the context of Black women's lives; this focus is the first step to social change. Empowering women requires a contextualized understanding of power in three dimensions: (a) personal power (i.e., experiencing oneself as an agent of change with the personal capability to effect change); (b) interpersonal power (i.e., having influence over others because of one's social location, interpersonal skills, or credibility); and (c) political power (i.e., effectively utilizing formal and informal means to allocate resources in an organization or community). (For an extensive discussion of empowerment theory, see Gutierrez, Joo Oh, & Gillmore, 2000.) For feminists, power is conceptualized not as a limited resource but that which is created, maintained, lost, and/or regained in the processes of social interaction. Through the use of Black feminism as a tool of analysis, the domains of power that constrain Black women, as well as how such domination can be resisted, are conceptualized into action (Collins). Black feminists strive to make research practical, accessible, and empowering for the informant, the researcher, and the communities of which both are a part.

Black Feminism and Family Studies Theories

Black feminist thought is suitable as a guiding theoretical framework for investigating Black women's lives. Although Black feminism could be used in addition to other family studies theories, it is compatible specifically with two theories: symbolic interactionism and ecological theory. Symbolic interaction is a frame of reference for understanding how humans, in concert with one another, create symbolic worlds, and how these worlds shape human behavior (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Symbolic interaction theorists assert that a shared set of goals, beliefs, values, and norms, framed within a unique racial and gender context, shape how Black women see themselves as human beings and thus influence their decision-making processes. Similarly, an implicit tenet of the ecosystemic perspective is that individuals' perceptions and beliefs of their reality do not develop in a vacuum, but are products of the larger ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) and are influenced by their position in the world (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996). According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), behavior is the result of the interplay between the psychological characteristics of the person and of a specific environment; this includes familial, immediate community, societal, generational, and sociobiological levels of influence. Thus, it can be hypothesized that Black female socialization takes place at multiple locations and that the degree of influence of these locations may differ as a function of various sources of influence. In addition, with its inclusion of within-group difference, this model illustrates what is unique in the interactions of gender, race, culture, ethnicity, age, and social class.

Whereas traditional family studies theories offer frameworks that are flexible enough to fit realities of any group's development, Black feminism is more specific in its integration, validation, and centering of Black women's unique realities. It rejects the notion of universal laws of behavior, favoring idiosyncratic approaches by focusing on individual functioning, goals, and meaning within Black and female realities. The historical, economic, political, and social experiences that have shaped others' and our own perspectives of who and what Black women represent are central in Black feminism.

The "Fit" of Black Feminism in Qualitative Methodology

As a theoretical framework, Black feminist thought supports the use of qualitative methods of inquiry. The questions that qualitative research best addresses are oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic (Patton, 1990). Qualitative methods enrich empirical data by highlighting the meanings behind the numbers as well as cultural distinctions between and

within groups. When studying Black women, it often has been a practice in the empirical research to characterize Black women as sexually experienced, high-risk behavior-seeking, and amoral, and these characteristics remain widely circulated, accepted, and used to frame ideas about Black women (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984, 1995; Wyatt, 1991, 1997). For example, researchers reinforce sexual stereotypes by failing to accurately differentiate Black women's sexuality identification processes from those of White women when they focus solely on behavioral outcomes. This is especially unfortunate, because meaningful conceptual distinctions across race and gender become either ignored or hidden when interpreting data (Benda & Corwyn, 1998).

The use of qualitative methods, particularly interviews or narrative documents, has been instrumental in informing researchers of the various dynamics that shape sexuality, race, and gender interactions. Qualitative research is rooted in a phenomenological paradigm, holding that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definition of the situation (Firestone, 1987). Thus the analysis of the phenomenon being studied (e.g., intimate violence or sexual assault) is not analyzed separately from the reality as it is experienced by Black women.

A Black feminist qualitative researcher, Bell-Scott (1994), highlighted the importance of nontraditional information sources, such as personal journals, to understand human experience. Nonliteral materials, such as oral folklore (Chevalier, 1995; Domina, 1997; Hurston & Kaplan, 2001), quilts (Benberry, 2000; Southwell Wahlman, 2001; Tobin & Dobard, 2000), music (Baker, 1992; Frith, 1996; Smitherman, 1977), or clothing (Bradley Foster, 1997; White & White, 1999) are examples of tools that researchers can use to reflect Black female knowledge. For Black women, their opinions, values, and resources (e.g., journals, writings, music, and other cultural expressive materials) become the frameworks of analysis. Sharing these resources of knowledge within a safe, informant-defined space is empowering and useful in providing Black women a space to process their experience in a systemic manner.

The process of focusing primarily on Black women's experiences provides the researcher with knowledge and also affords the informant the opportunity to revisit the phenomena at her own pace and in her own words. That is, the researcher brings the knowledge back to the informants for discussion and clarification through member-checking (i.e., reviewing transcripts or other sources of data through follow-up interviews). This research strategy is used in action research approaches common in applied family science research processes. Referred to as participatory action research (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999), this approach validates the involvement of all informants as equal partners in the research process. Participatory action researchers provide stakeholders or informants with the skills to carry out their own evaluations (or research) in the future (Rossi et al.). Through this empowerment, informants are integrated in the planning and operation of the research, so they will have a say and learn the skills for future replication. Weiss (1998) suggested that purpose of empowerment evaluation is to ''legitimize community members' experiential knowledge, acknowledge the role of values in research, empower community members, democratize research inquiry, and enhance the relevance of evaluation data for communities'' (p. 99). Sharing tools and knowledge is essential in Black feminist approaches to research design and execution. It reinforces the need to link actual experiences with the research experience, rather than seeing one as exclusive from the other, while validating both sites as resources for knowledge, albeit resources generated differently. Equality in approaches to research is essential to ensure that efforts are made to acknowledge and minimize the imbalances in power that exist.

By integrating Black feminist themes into our qualitative research designs in family studies, we allow Black women to be directly involved in the research process through the sharing of our analyses and through frankly discussing their experiences. As informants, Black women are no longer simply talked to, but talk for themselves. Black feminists emphasize the absolute necessity of Black women to be empowered to speak from and about their own experiential location (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). The fundamental question of who is the authoritative ''knower'' is consistently interrogated as a means of consciousness-raising for the researcher throughout the research process (Olesen, 1994). Therefore, good qualitative feminist research must not only be able to assist the researcher in gathering accurate and useful data, but, more importantly, the researcher must ensure that the informant is central in the research process.

''Sisterfolk'': Negotiating Insider Status in Qualitative Research

From conversations with seasoned Black women researchers and Black female faculty about interviewing Black women, we became aware of issues of color, class, gender, linguistics, nationality, sexuality, and physical attractiveness, and of how these issues would affect our interactions with informants. We surmised that one of our foremost challenges in conducting interviews on sensitive topics with Black women would be gaining some measure of insider status with our informants. Despite the fact that we are all Black women studying Black women, we never assumed that we would be granted unmitigated ''insider'' status. We share our experiences and the lessons learned related to the dynamics of the informant-researcher interactions. Issues of race, color, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and power were at work from the moment we engaged them.

From Nelson (1996), we considered the concept of ''gradations of endogeny'' (the psychological and emotional extent to which we would be considered as legitimate insiders to our informants). As Black women researchers, we share race and gender with our informants, but barriers are possible because of differences in class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or nationality. In other words, the ''isms'' of daily life—racism, sexism, and classism, for instance—must be negotiated with informants throughout the research process. Sharing certain identities is not enough to presume an insider status. Idiosyncrasies are embedded in our identities that inevitably create moments of intimacy and distance between the informant and researcher.

Black feminist researchers are conscious of the ongoing, unspoken discourse with informants and how dynamically power shifts in a hierarchal informant-researcher relationship (Foucault, 1979; Sampson, 1993). During the interview process, we were aware of the possibility that our color, speech, and body language could affect how we were accepted as trustworthy confidants. As a result, in addition to technical preparations for data collection, we made personal preparations. We consciously dressed according to the social location of our informants to downplay possible differences in our social locations. Clothing, hairstyles, makeup, and personal adornment make political statements that are deeply rooted in the African American experience, as these are cultural expressions, artifacts, and cues that influence the tempo of the informant-researcher relationship (Few & Bell-

Scott, 2002). The sincerity and genuine understanding of their relevance to the Black experience is evident through how they are used, the context in which they are used, and the understanding of their use as expressed through verbal and nonverbal language. Cultural competence involves the adaptation of approaches that reflect and respect the values, expectations, and preferences of those who the researcher is engaging. Researchers must choose from a variety of strategies that are useful for the range of cultural groups and social classes, levels of education, and even levels of acculturation (for those Blacks who do not identify as African American) that exists among informants (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 163).

An example that illustrates how understanding the multiple layers of diverse Black experience in the United States may affect the informant-researcher relationship is colorism. Colorism, a divisive and destructive legacy of American racism, is a social hierarchal system of preferences based on skin color within an ethnic or racial group (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). In the following example, the informant and researcher differed in skin complexion. The informant was intrigued about the differences in texture of hair. The informant departed from the discussion on her experiences of intimate violence, spending nearly 20 minutes discussing the politics of Black hair and attractiveness. She invited the researcher to discuss an aspect of colorism, as she pulled *The Color Complex* (Russell et al.) off of her bookshelf. The informant was incensed that standards of American beauty were based on Caucasian physical features and that those features such as longer hair and lighter skin were valued more in our society.

> Informant: So back to the Black woman thing and the hair thing. I notice how you are treated differently. It's like, you need to look like this, not that. Or you need to have *long hair* . . . like yours, for instance. *It really irritates me.* I don't know what to do about it. Maybe you can help me break through this. [Both nervously laugh] It really *irritates me about the whole hair thing.* That you can't be seen as attractive if you have the short and natural hair . . . *it just really irritates me how you're treated differently* if you have long hair or if you have short hair. Light skin, you're prettier. Dark skin, you're uglier. I mean, I can't even put it to where how much that really irritates me. What do you think?
>
> Researcher: Well . . . [long pause] It keeps us divided, you know. All Black women are beautiful. It's the world that tells us we're not beautiful. The old ''divide and conquer'' trap.
>
> Informant: Why can't Black women say that we're attractive as natural? We are trying to live up to the dominant culture, which is basically *White!*
>
> Researcher: You're right! You're right.
>
> Informant: I really want to grow dreadlocks. And I tried to grow them before . . . I'll show you photos later. But then I know there's a part of me that really, I don't know, I guess that wants to please . . . I don't know if it's pleasing and approval are the same thing. But there's some sort of approval that I want. And I don't like it. It goes back to the *pleasing and approval of my father and my ex-boyfriend* . . . They don't like short hair. [Relaxes, places book down, and leans toward researcher.]
>
> Researcher: Well, let's think about this together. Tell me what role you think that pleasing and approval-seeking played in your last abusive relationship?

During the long pause, the tension in the room grew as the researcher scrambled to determine the meaning of this issue to the informant. This excerpt indicates that the researcher's insider status was threatened, and the wrong decision could have abruptly ended the informant-researcher relationship. The researcher decided not to fully engage the informant in this conversation but to allow the informant to critically deconstruct colorism (and racism) uninterrupted and to assign a public meaning to it herself. Importantly, by keeping her comments short and by listening, the researcher was able to ascertain why this conversation arose. The researcher's appearance may have represented a trigger to the informant, but her appearance was not the primary underlying issue. After rereading the informant's poetry and interview transcripts, the researcher realized that this impromptu monologue was deeply rooted in the informant's painful family life experiences and her struggles with body image and being coerced into the commercial sex industry by a violent dating partner who exposed her to how Black women are specifically eroticized and hypersexualized. This interchange was far more complex than simple hair texture, reflecting a piece that contributed to her involvement in several abusive relationships.

The informant's departure from the interview guide marked her power in the informant-researcher relationship, highlighting a genuinely critical part of her life narrative. The fact that she talked about it with such power and conviction was a step toward emancipatory liberation. Katie G. Cannon (1995), a womanist ethicist, referred to emancipatory liberation as a self-reflexive process in which a person examines and interrogates the systems and/or logic that perpetuates multiple oppressions. This interrogation leads to a norm clarification (Cannon) to uncover and to affirm subjugated truths of experience or partial knowledge (Collins, 1994).

Also, it is important to note that this example was the informant's attempt to uncover truths and knowledge about the researcher and the research process. Researchers must be willing to engage similarly in the self-reflexive process through the sharing of power. Black female researchers who reveal little information about themselves run the risk of being mistrusted by Black women informants. This informant was not only checking-out or sizing up the researcher, assessing her ''realness'' and ''belongingness,'' but she also was seeking signs of judgmental or hypercritical behaviors. By respecting the informant's need to articulate her anger and by joining the conversation at a point that emphasized commonalities of experience, the researcher established mutual trust and redirected the conversation to the topic while following the informant's lead and her needs. The informant tested the researcher's reactions to a number of high-risk behaviors. Each test was met with a sincere, honest response, as the researcher did not pretend to know all of the answers, but she emphasized how each exchange was a learning experience. Thus, the informant became a teacher. After passing these tests, the informant shared many artifacts—journal excerpts, poetry, unmailed letters to the abuser, and even homework assignments from women's studies courses—from her experience of being in an abusive relationship.

Another example that demonstrates the challenges of achieving insider status and trust with Black women involved an interview with a working-class, single Black mother that touched upon her daughter's premarital sexual activity. The informant

Table 1
Recommendations for Interviewing Black Women on Sensitive Topics

Contextualizing Research	Contextualizing Self in the Research Process	Monitoring our Symbolic Power in the Representation Process	Triangulating Multiple Sources	Caring for Our Informants in the Research Process
Educate self about the history and culture of the informant	Monitor one's own position (subjectivity)	Validate the informants' experiences	Be creative	Explain boundaries of relationship
Intersectionality	Self-reflexivity	Refrain from interruptions or personal citations	Ask the same question in multiple ways	Provide referrals
Integrate informants into the planning of the research	Allow informants to share their stories in creative forms	Be reflexive in use of language	Collect nontraditional sources of data	Suggest activities that encourage self-reflection
Validate the involvement of informants as partners	Maintain researcher journal		Genogram	Provide some closure at the end of the interview
Empower women to speak from and about their own experience	Member checking			Confirmability audits
Make research practical, accessible, and empowering	Self-disclosure			
	Personal preparation			
	Follow-up interviews			
	Accountability			

had a history of drug abuse and was incarcerated for a short time. Also, there was a history of teenage pregnancy in the informant's family. When the researcher attempted to explore this issue systematically, the informant sharply replied, ‘‘I may not have as much money as you, but I am a good mother.’’ The researcher was silenced by this accusation and struggled to compose herself, blindsided by the unexpected comment. In her research journal, the researcher suspected the differences in language and clothing triggered the reaction. However, after meticulous reflection, the researcher identified another possible factor: although a struggling graduate student in clinical training, the informant perceived the researcher's education as a privileged socioeconomic marker to be challenged for self-affirmation.

One way that the researcher could have dealt with this tension while simultaneously empowering the informant is through the use of self-disclosure. This technique requires the researcher to let the informant lead the discussion to explore the themes and issues focused on in the research. It also is a way of equalizing the relationship, by assuming a nonpower, nonhierarchical stance (Pinderhughes, 1989). This is particularly important among populations who are distrustful of others and who fear being used or exploited both on a macro- and microlevel. The historical abuses that marginalized populations have endured in research has resulted in distrust of the process (Hardin, 1993), as in the case of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments (e.g., Jones, 1993; Reverby, 2000); sterilization abuses (e.g., Briggs, 1998; Gould, 2002; Torpy, 2000); and, most recently, the testing and treatment of HIV (e.g., Corea, 1992; Sosnowitz, 1995). Further, Black women who have been victimized or are otherwise vulnerable need reassurances that their participation in this process will not be disempowering. Equalizing the relationship and adopting a nonhierarchical, nonpower stance through self-disclosure accomplishes such a purpose (Pinderhughes, p. 168). The process begins with an effort to find a point of mutual interest on which to focus in order to build the relationship. This could be through the sharing of something about their background, work, family, or values in an effort to facilitate engagement (Pinderhughes, p. 167).

Although there are challenges in achieving insider status with Black female informants, there are rewarding experiences. Racial congruity between informant and researcher can facilitate the position of insider status. For example, at an upstate New York women's prison, one of us led a workshop on sexuality and sexual health. Discussions inevitably moved from preventative measures against risk taking to how these risks take place in contexts unique to Black women. The discussions smoothly flowed into other daily issues that Black women experience—how we style our hair, what foods we love, music we listen to—all of which are embedded in a specific racial/ethnic culture. By integrating a clear knowledge of the multiple layers of varying Black female experiences and the use of self-disclosure techniques, a genuine relationship of trust and mutual empowerment resulted. Even within this physical context that can be psychologically and physically deprived of safety, the centering and integrating of shared experiences was pivotal for raising mutual knowledge about the self, consciousness of experiences, and personal senses of empowerment. Informants openly expressed their comfort in speaking freely about their own experiences. This reality was evident when one informant reported that these discussions could occur because she believed that the researcher had a deeper understanding of the Black female sexual experience, which is shaped by forces including racism, socioeconomic status, community expectations, and partner options. The researcher's unspoken understanding of cultural norms as expressed through verbal and body language and clothing styles helped to create an environment that was safe and comfortable for open, honest, and mutual exploration. The informants uniformly reported that this type of environment was never achieved with previous non-Black researchers. The researcher's insider status as a Black woman allowed the informants to see past her different life experience and to recognize the racial, social, and gender commonalities that bond Black women living in America.

From these examples, we see that perceptions of gradations of endogeny (Nelson, 1996) are seen to reinforce the notion that insider status is not an unchallenged location even after the researcher was granted accessibility by the informant. Both researcher and informant are making active observations of behavior and identity cues during the interview process. Although there were differences between the informants and the researchers, we experienced an emotional connection growing as we talked about the most intimate details of their lives.

Suggestions for Conducting Qualitative Research With Black Women

In summarizing our experiences of interviewing Black women on sensitive topics, we offer five suggestions for practice: (a) contextualizing research, (b) contextualizing self in the research process, (c) monitoring our symbolic power in the representation process, (d) triangulating multiple sources, and (e) caring for our informants in the research process (see Table 1). These suggestions are informed by the tenets of Black feminist

theory. Although our recommendations are made with the qualitative researcher in mind, quantitative researchers could incorporate our suggestions into their own research designs and data interpretations.

Contextualizing Research

It cannot be overstated that educating oneself about the history and culture of informants is crucial to gaining insider status. Displaying ignorance of history and culture can close doors quickly when tackling sensitive topics with Black women. For instance, are there numerous cultural idiosyncrasies (i.e., family or community rituals, regional differences, religion, norms, belief systems) that should be observed before the interviewing process begins? A Black female researcher is not necessarily deemed a homegirl by Black female informants because of the many ''isms'' that come into play throughout their interactions. Without a comprehensive understanding of the history and culture of the informant, one risks inaccurately interpreting the collected data and contributing to the silence, distortion, generalization, and/or marginalization of the diversity of Black women's experiences (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1989).

In using a Black feminist theoretical framework to design interview protocols and to code data, the diversity of Black women's experiences are analyzed within a dynamic matrix of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1993) or multiple jeopardy that informs and manifests itself as a multiple consciousness (King, 1995) individually and collectively for Black women. Issues of race, gender, class, and national identity matter because they inform the choices Black women make. Including interview questions that tap these issues allows for a more in-depth analysis of Black women's realities.

Contextualizing Self in the Process

Qualitative researchers must take care to develop and maintain an ''informed reflexive consciousness'' (Allen, 2000, p. 7) to contextualize skillfully their own subjectivity in data interpretation and the re/presentation of metanarratives in the research process. Feminist qualitative research requires the researcher to be reflexively attuned to dynamics of the informant-researcher relationship, with the goal of minimizing the hierarchal constellation of power in this relationship (Collins, 1998). The researcher journal is the site for self-reflexivity (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983) where the unconscious and conscious processes of academic colonialism (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1994; Fox & Murry, 2000) and the politics of location (hooks, 1990) can be examined. Self-reflexivity promotes the reconciliation of personal motivations for conducting research with a specific population and the extent of accountability owed to the population studied. As Black women who study Black women, we must remember that our informants are not mere subjects of research but active agents in defining who we are and have been and why we do things the way we do as a diverse yet collective group.

We ask our informants to engage in similar self-reflexivity processes by answering our questions during interviews; participating in follow-up interviews (member-checking exercises); and sharing their stories through creative art, music, quilting, poetry, and writings. For example, unsolicited, a majority of informants sent extensive electronic mail to further elaborate upon things they believed were significant turning points in their abusive relationships, because they needed more time to reflect upon their behavior and frame of mind. This action indicates that certain informants thought intensively about the interview questions after the interview ended, ruminated about what was left unspoken, felt compelled to examine their own behavior and standpoint, and made the decision to share more information with the researcher. In this way, the informant remained an active agent in re/presenting herself. In the research process, self-reflexivity is engaged in by the researcher as well as the informant.

As we observe our informants proceeding through these processes, our attention is directed toward how we are accountable to our informants. Accountability is a critical issue for Black women researchers conducting research on sensitive topics with Black women. Those of us who are privileged to be the conduits of Black women's experiences—not necessarily the authors of such experiences—and who are accountable to Black communities, are also responsible for debunking racist and sexist stereotypes of Black women while being careful not to perpetuate multiple oppressions in their own works. As Black women, we are conscious of the image of Black women we present to academic and nonacademic communities. We are ever conscious of concern over how to resist the fear of ''airing dirty laundry'' to those outside of our communities when the outcome of what can be learned from tribulations and sufferings could save the physical lives and psychological well-being of other Black women and girls—a concern shared by others (e.g., Collins, 1994; Etter-Lewis, 1996).

The answer may be found in how we choose to represent the wisdom or knowledge that we receive. For example, intimate violence among Black couples is the research topic of one of us, and she chooses to focus on the positive coping strategies and resiliencies—the strength within—of abused Black women, rather than the frequency or extent of abuse suffered (Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). This decision was not made in denial that there are Black women who are abused. Instead it was to present Black women who are empowered by themselves or through the help of other women (e.g., mothers, sisters, relatives, community mothers). This information is shared with shelters, the professional community, and Black social organizations. Another author focuses on the need for greater consideration of the association between sexual behavior and sexual meanings as expressed through African American female sexual scripts. How individuals view themselves as sexual beings and the exhibition of sexual behavior in terms of where, when, how often, with whom, and why are manifestations of what has been learned and the meaning associated with this learning. This approach challenges the deficit perspective traditionally used in sexuality research, which typically addresses behavioral outcomes and ignores the larger sociohistorical, political, and racial constructs that inform sexual behaviors while normalizing and validating only dominant culture experiences.

Careful monitoring of one's own position (i.e., subjectivity) in the research process (e.g., in particular, reviewing theoretical memos and researcher journals), as well as one's relationship with the informants, is a critical component for maintaining a focus on a research agenda. A self-reflexive researcher maintains a research agenda to secure a forum for informants to express, be accountable to, defend, and validate knowledge claims that contribute to Black women's collective experience. In other words, our research methods center Black feminism as an identity politic for Black women in the research process for both researcher and informants.

Monitoring Symbolic Power

Before embarking on our own research, we heard many stories from seasoned Black faculty women about losing partici-

pants because of overt differences in color, class, or in language. A qualitative researcher must be attentive to her use of language throughout the interview process. Like personal appearance and body movements, language is a social status marker. It connotes a privilege—education or socialization—that can drive a wedge in or cement the informant-researcher relationship. Because certain slang words or regional phrases can be misinterpreted or misheard, the credibility—whether the research accurately represents the multiple realities of the informant—of interpretations of oral narratives must be scrutinized through self-reflexivity exercises and by peer auditors (Krefting, 1991). Whether in written or oral form, representations of language play crucial roles in perpetuating the operations of hegemony (Bakhtin, 1981); specifically, this observation is critical in interracial or cross-cultural informant-researcher relationships. Taking the interview data back to the informant to review is helpful in addressing language barriers.

Black feminists recognize that language is a site of political struggle for marginalized groups because the alternatives are either to be silenced by hegemonic forces or to speak truth to power (i.e., those forces that oppress; hooks, 1990). Black women struggle to recover, to reconcile, to reunite, and to renew written and visual symbols that represent their experiences. Language is symbolic power that defines and validates experience. Throughout the research process (e.g., sampling, design, theory, analysis, interpretation, and representation), the decisions made enhance or suppress the language of our informants, and subsequently, reaffirm or deny their account of experience.

Triangulating Multiple Sources

Black feminist researchers recommend being creative in devising multiple strategies to assist the informant in uncovering and confronting unarticulated meanings or subjugated knowledge instinctively hidden for survival and political purposes (Collins, 1991, 1998; Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982). When Black women share their experiences in violent relationships or the intimate details of their sexuality, it is important to recognize that their narratives are inherently political narratives. Black women's narratives historically have been distorted, maligned, appropriated, and rendered invisible in the interpretation and re/presentation processes (Hull et al.). To increase dependability of data, two recommended techniques are to ask the same question in multiple ways and to collect multiple nontraditional data sources.

By approaching a specific question in multiple ways, an informant reflects upon her experience for a longer period. We are not implying that a researcher ask the same question verbatim three times in an interview. However, we are suggesting that a researcher be creative in asking about a specific topic, especially sensitive topics, without leading the informant. For example, although some abused women have difficulty answering a question about what coping strategies they used during their violent relationships, those same women could provide lengthy answers if the researcher provided cues or simply rephrased the question in such a way as to tap into coping strategies (e.g., Did you pray "to get by" every day with your partner? What other things would you do when he was not around? How did you fill in those times when you were not fighting with your partner?). In addition, issues of saliency (Alexander, 1988)—those themes or emotions that dominate a person's narrative—can be identified and explored when the researcher is attentive and proactive in the interview. Another benefit from using this technique is that an informant may systematically and introspectively consider unresolved issues from multiple angles, thus promoting self-empowerment for her through the self-reflexive processes of emancipatory liberation, norm clarification, and conscientization (Cannon, 1995) occurring within and outside of the research process. This technique is a useful method for triangulating data and increasing dependability and credibility.

Collecting multiple nontraditional sources of data is another way to empower the informant. Because the informant is the gatekeeper of her narrative, controlling the extent of access to sensitive areas in her life, journals, poetry, classroom assignments, letters, blues songs, quilts, creative arts, and pictures that are meaningful to her can speak volumes for an informant who is struggling to find her voice (her power of authorship) within her own story (Bell-Scott, 1994; Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1998). These nontraditional sources of data are physical archival evidence of intangible, dynamic states of mind—emotional, spiritual, sexual, rational, maniacal, oppressed, oppressive, and resilient. Such sources indicate how an informant may have understood the self and her relationships to others on a certain day, during a specific event, or at a significant time.

Another technique that may provide multiple sources for effective triangulation is the genogram (Hof & Berman, 1986; McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999). This technique is especially helpful when talking with women about issues that may be anxiety-provoking, such as issues of sexuality and domestic violence. Typically, the genogram is a three-generational diagram of the family of origin that gives insight into the broader family system. Births, deaths, marriages, feelings, family myths, contexts of relationships, and addictions are some of the items that may be included. The genogram may reveal severed relationships, family secrets, coalitions, and alliances. It enables the informant and the researcher to explore previously hidden information and study family patterns of interaction and individual decision-making processes concerning sensitive topics (Fossum & Mason, 1986). Researchers find this model particularly useful with Black women experiencing feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, or self-doubt about sexuality because of their adherence to religious doctrine (e.g., Brown Douglas, 1999; Rouse, 2001). We offer an example of sexual genogram of an informant, "Mary," that was created by the researcher to inform follow-up questions for a second interview and to confirm themes present in other interviews and collected data (see Figure 1). In this genogram, we see a family history of sexual promiscuity, alcoholism, sexually transmitted disease, and unplanned pregnancy. By allowing the informant to recount the sexual histories of relatives, both the informant and the researcher are able to determine how family sexual meanings have influenced the informant's positive and negative feelings toward her own sexuality and sexual behaviors.

Caring in the Research Process

In examining these political narratives, we uncover preexisting or festering wounds. The interview session does not end for the informant once the audio tape or video recorder is turned off. We advise that a peer with clinical training review the interview protocol and transcripts for evidence of psychological distress. At the end of the interview, we suggest activities to the informant to encourage active processing and self-reflection. A relevant reading list and contact list of local therapists, hotlines, crisis centers, and battered women's shelters should be given to the informant either early in the research process, at intake, or after the first interview. Do not end an interview with questions

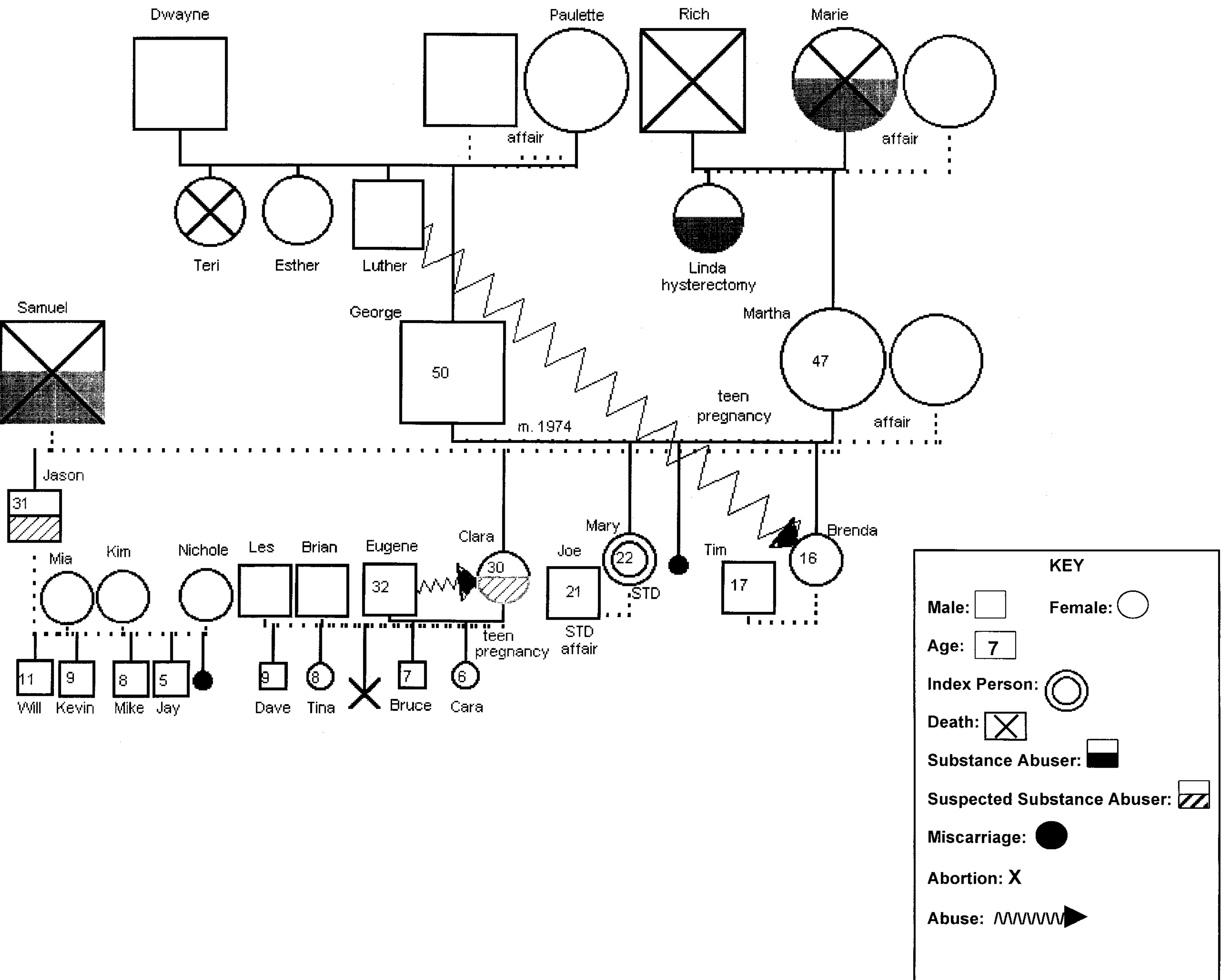

Figure 1. Sample genogram for "Mary," an informant with a family history of sexual promiscuity, alcoholism, sexually transmitted disease, and unplanned pregnancy.

that tap into painful recollections. Importantly, the qualitative researcher must recognize her own limitations in caring for the psychological well-being of possibly vulnerable informants. The close bond that may develop in the informant-researcher relationship does not license the researcher to interact with the informant as a therapist (Cartwright & Limandri, 1997; Kleist & Gompertz, 1997).

A request for information or advice is an expected part of the research process. For researchers who are members of the helping professions, we must identify our limitations to informants upfront or during the process and explain that giving information or advice during the research process is stepping outside of our professional boundaries. In doing qualitative research, we consciously work toward maintaining a collaborative, empowering relationship with informants by blurring the boundaries that may artificially separate us. However, by reducing these boundaries, we face many emergent ethical issues. For example, there is a risk of confusing the role of researcher with ‘‘expert helper’’ (Kleist & Gompertz, 1997). When an informant is experiencing a personal issue that may be related to the research question, the informant may expect a clinical opinion from the researcher as part of the research process. With this informant request, the researcher must consider the consequences of beginning a dual relationship with an informant.

Dual relationships are those in which therapists assume two roles—clinician and researcher—simultaneously or sequentially. Dual relationships are problematic because they are difficult to recognize; are either harmful or beneficial (Etherington, 2001); and may impair a therapist's professional judgment (McGrath, Browning, Martinek, Beck, & Culkin, 1995). The code of ethics of most mental health professions warn of the potential hazards of dual relationships. It is written in Section 1 of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) Code of Ethics (2001) that

> Marriage and family therapists are aware of their influential positions with respect to clients, and they avoid exploiting the trust and dependency of such persons. Therapists, therefore, make every effort to avoid multiple relationships with clients that could impair professional judgment or increase the risk of exploitation. When a dual relationship cannot be avoided, therapists should take appropriate professional precautions to ensure judgment is not impaired and no exploitation occurs. (http://www.aamft.org)

Thus there are situations in which dual relationships are difficult to avoid. Professionals who live and work in small or rural communities have unique challenges with dual relationships (Gladding, Remley, & Huber, 2001). For example, when there is only one therapist of color in a community with only one shopping mall or an informant lives in a community in which the informant is a part of a small racial/ethnic minority isolated from a more diverse community, a dual relationship may be difficult to avoid.

We believe that potential dual relationships should be handled on a case by case basis. If an informant asks a researcher to serve as her therapist during or after the research process, the researcher should assess the situation and first suggest that the client see another therapist due to the potential dangers of dual relationships. However, if the informant insists upon beginning a therapeutic relationship, we recommend that the researcher immediately terminate the research relationship to meet the therapeutic needs of the informant. Overall, the researcher must make the best decision to protect the well-being of the informant.

Conclusion

Black feminists not only serve as agents of social change for their communities, but they also are held accountable for how they represent and validate the knowledge claims of those communities in their research and creative writings (Collins, 1991, 1998; hooks, 1984). Black feminist theory is a critical race theory that should be incorporated into family studies research. In a time of changing population demographics and an increasing awareness among family studies scholars of the processes by which the diversity of Black experience has been misrepresented, distorted, or marginalized into nonexistence by generalization, the need to be truly interdisciplinary in our methods and in how we conceptualize Black families in general and Black women specifically should not be ignored or minimalized.

When addressing sensitive topics such as intimate violence and sexual issues, family studies researchers are accountable for representing as closely to the truth as possible the diversity of Black experiences in the United States. As Black feminist qualitative researchers, we are particularly attuned to how we become the research instruments and the primary sieves of re/presentation in our exploration of Black womanhood. Traditional family studies orientations cannot wholly address the persistent matrix of intersectionality that Black women endure, succumb, and overcome if we as family studies researchers debate and deconstruct out of existence the ‘‘critical essences’’ (i.e., race, class, and gender) that matter to Black women's existence and survival in this world. The complexity of Black women deserves a place in our analyses of family life and dynamics, and the time has come for our field to embrace critical race theories as the families we study become more diversified.

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