
Integrating Black Consciousness and Critical Race Feminism Into Family Studies Research

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The author examines the advantages and challenges of using Black feminist theory and critical race feminist theory to study the lives of Black women and families in family studies. The author addresses the ways in which these perspectives, both of which are intentional in their analyses of intersectionality and the politics of location, are also distinct. She provides empirical examples from how family researchers have used Black feminist theory or a critical race feminist lens to examine the lives of Black women and families, and suggests ways for colleagues to embrace an explicit integration of Black consciousness and critical race feminist perspectives in family studies.

Keywords: *Black feminism; Black women; critical race feminism; intersectionality; theory*

Understanding race, ethnicity, and culture in family processes remains a difficult and precarious undertaking for family scholars. The infamous Moynihan Report of 1965, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, cast a long shadow on the viability of Black family studies and the credibility of Black family scholars. Against the backdrop of the Black Power Movement, blaxploitation films, the resurgence of political conservatism, and the dismantling of domestic social programs, Black family scholars in the 1970s and 1980s offered poignant critiques of the prevailing pathological cultural deviant models predominately being published in mainstream family studies and sociological journals (W. Allen, 1978;

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McAdoo, 1988; McAdoo & McAdoo, 1985; Peters, 1988; Stack, 1974; Staples, 1971). They also provided cultural relevance models to explore hidden resiliencies and strengths of Black communities. In the process, Black family scholars laid down a foundation for Afrocentric revisionist history in family studies while discrediting the normative standard posed by the Moynihan Report and carving out a political space in the National Council on Family Relations.

In this struggle to redefine the realities of Black women and families, Black family scholars found kindred allies in feminist family scholars who also were blazing a path to revolutionize how we think about family and the experiences of women. Through active collaboration, these groups strategized to establish sections, and thus political voice, in the National Council on Family Relations. In doing so, the beginning of an invigorating discourse that was cognizant of the interacting, sometimes-indivisible influences of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation on family dynamics occurred. Ethnic studies and women's studies were intersecting in family studies. Nearly 15 years later, in 2001, the *Journal of Marriage and Family* published a special section edition, "Race, Ethnicity, Culture, and Family Processes," that demonstrated how far family scholars have come in addressing race, ethnicity, and culture in our research. In 2005, DeReus, Few, and Blume provided an overview of the utility of multicultural and critical race feminist theoretical frameworks in family studies research methods and praxis.

This article serves as a tangible articulation of DeReus et al.'s (2005) argument for greater use of multiethnic and critical race theories in family studies. Black feminism and critical race feminism provide sociohistorical lenses to the experiences of Black women and their families in the United States. In applying these frameworks to family studies research, I enrich our analyses of intersectionality—the politics of location—that is negotiated from the standpoint of Black women. By lending this critical lens to my analyses, I give to Black women an authoritative voice about their experiences rather than impose a normative gaze (e.g., Western, White, male, middle-class lens is defined as normal and the standard to compare others; West, 1982) or positivist presumption (e.g., essentialized, uninterrogated notions of identity or difference). Critical race feminist theory is particularly useful in focusing the researcher on the examination of how various institutions with which Black women must interact daily reinforce social inequalities.

In this article, I examine how family scholars (including myself) have applied and incorporated Black feminism and critical race feminism into family studies research. I postulate that to conduct research that adequately

addresses how Black women negotiate interlocking social locations in their lives and in their relational and familial processes, there are two major factors to consider. First, as social scientists, we must examine how Black women come to understand themselves through the development of Black female subjectivities, as can be articulated through Black feminism and critical race feminism. Subjectivities are those identities that become most salient to an individual in different social contexts (hooks, 1984). Second, we must examine the tools—methods, methodologies, data interpretation styles—that we use to produce, reproduce, and disseminate knowledge in family studies research. In doing so, one is able to identify the compatibility of these theories with family theories and, thus, integrate a Black consciousness into family studies. Family scholars need to be more explicit about how they use and develop race-consciousness theory in their research processes.

As a Black woman scholar, I contemplate how family scholars represent the lives of Black women in family studies and how family scholars can manifest “conscious and inclusive family studies” (K. R. Allen, 2000). First, I describe the tenets of Black feminism and critical race feminism as frameworks falling within Black feminism. Second, I discuss the strengths and challenges of using Black feminism and critical race feminism as guiding frameworks in family studies. Finally, I provide examples from my own research using Black feminist theory to advance my understanding of the lives of Black women.

Black Feminism: A Standpoint of Black Consciousness

Black feminism is a standpoint theory. It is, however, a standpoint theory that transcends the arguments of mere identity politics and actively examines the politics of location in the lives of Black women and the groups of which they are a part. In other words, Black feminism allows a creative space where according to one’s own social location or station in life, Black women can “legitimately” place a foot in two or more realities—what one individually and/or collectively may perceive of what it is to be “Black” and what it is to be a “woman” simultaneously (Martin, 1993). Black women exist within an intersectionality matrix. An intersectionality matrix is a specific location where multiple systems of oppressions simultaneously corroborate and subjugate to conceal deliberate, marginalizing ideological maneuvers that define “Otherness.” In this unique location within the matrix, specific “historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative

boundaries” (Mohanty, 1992, p. 75) influence how Black women have come to define their shared and diverse experiences. The strategies that Black women use to politicize their specific situatedness in respect to unjust hierarchal social relationality are the politics of location. Black women “do” identity politics out of necessity for survival. In *Yearning*, hooks (1990) argued that marginality is not necessarily an imposed existence but rather a dynamic, multivocal, and transformative space that is self-determined and self-defined in the language and memories of diverse groups. Such a multifaceted analysis of identity and the politics of location within the framework of Black feminism enables family scholars to move away from narrow or essentialized definitions of Black subjectivity (i.e., generalization of Black experience).

Black feminist theory resulted from Black feminist activists and scholars feeling far removed from White, middle-class, liberal feminist discourses. As articulated by the Combahee River Collective (1977) and Patricia Hill Collins (1991), Black feminists (a) acknowledge Black women’s historical struggle against multiple oppressions; (b) examine how Black women and their families negotiate the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class; (c) eradicate malignant images of Black womanhood; and (d) incorporate an activist perspective into their research through the cocreation of knowledge with informants, consciousness raising, and empowerment within the context of Black women’s lives. Black feminism is also about acknowledging the common struggles that Black women have with Black men—institutional racism and classism—and that Black men and women can work together in liberating ways to meet the criteria of Black feminism’s tenets. Doing Black feminism is to balance a gender consciousness with race consciousness (e.g., race identification, power politics, system blame, and collective action orientation; see Gurin, 1985). Methodologically, Black feminists and womanists use a variety of traditional (e.g., interviews, surveys, ethnographies) and nontraditional (e.g., poetry, diaries, creative art, photography) data to examine the lives of Black women and their families (Bell-Scott, 1995).

Black feminism is also the birthmother of *womanism*, coined by Alice Walker. Walker (1983) defined a *womanist* as a “Black feminist or feminist of color” (p. xi) and as a Black woman “committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, both male and female” (p. i). Walker also coined the phrase: “Womanist is to [Black] feminist as purple to lavender” (p. xii). Some womanists, like Hudson-Weems (1993), would prefer to sever the feminist–womanist tie by locating womanism in the words of Sojourner Truth (i.e., *Ain’t I A Woman*) and Afrocentric cultural values. In

her book, *Fighting Words*, Collins (1998) discussed the multiple meanings and uses of the terms *Black feminism* and *womanism*. Significantly, Collins argued that the politics of labeling draw critical attention away from the very circumstances that undermine Black women's struggle to overcome multiple oppressions.

How Critical Race Feminist Theory Intersects Black Feminism

Before examining how family scholars can incorporate critical race feminist theoretical perspectives in their research, I must first discuss critical race theory, an influence on the development of critical race feminism. According to legal scholar Adrien Wing (1997), critical race theory, as a theoretical genre, officially emerged as a self-conscious entity in 1989. The basic tenets of critical race theory that are pertinent to understanding the genesis of critical race feminism are: (a) (racial and/or ethnic) identity is a product of social thought and is not objective, inherent, fixed, or necessarily biological; (b) individuals have potentially conflicting overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances; (c) racial and/or ethnic individuals and groups negotiate intersectionality simultaneously in their lives in relation to other groups and within the groups with which individuals are affiliated; and (d) minority status presumes a competence for minority writers and theorists to speak about race and the experiences of multiple oppressions without essentializing those experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Critical race feminist theory emerged from critical race theory as a result of racial and/or ethnic legal women scholars feeling excluded by their male peers and White feminist legal scholars. It should be noted that critical race feminists depart from some critical race theorists by rejecting blanket essentialization of all minorities (Wing, 2000). As Wing stated, "our anti-essentialist premise is that identity is *not* additive. In other words, Black women are not white women plus color, or Black men, plus gender" (p. 7). They are antiessentialists in that they recognize the multiple locations and identities that women inhabit (DeReus et al., 2005; Wing, 2000). Renowned critical race feminists include Adrien K. Wing, Kimberle Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, Angela Harris, Lani Guinier, and Berta Esperanza Hernández Truyol.

Critical race feminists are also multidisciplinary scholars, pulling from a variety of feminist theoretical scholarship. For example, critical race feminist theory has been informed by the writings of Black feminists and multicultural feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Chandra

Talpade Mohanty, M. Jacqui Alexander, Angela Davis, Cherri Moraga, Gloria Anzuldúa, and Audre Lorde. Most critical race feminists, however, will not readily identify themselves in the mainstream feminist movement. Their reasons resonate with some womanists and third-wave Black feminists, who believe that second-wave Black feminism is compromised by its association with White, middle-class mainstream feminists. Critical race feminists are interested in how domestic and international legal and social policies (e.g., welfare, education, health, child care and custodial rights, domestic violence, immigration, and other aspects of family policy) assist or oppress racial and/or ethnic women and their families (Crenshaw, 1993; DeReus et al., 2005). Indeed, these topics are researched within family studies and can be expounded on using a critical, revisionist lens.

Critical race feminists are also interested in conducting activist research that has a social justice agenda. Thus, they choose methods that foster some kind of political, social, or economic transformation that benefits the people they study. Methodologically, they use nontraditional data such as life narratives, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories in their research (Wing, 2000). Although critical race feminism is a distinct theoretical perspective, in its evolving form, it can be considered a theoretical extension of Black feminism when examining Black experiences.

Making Distinctions in the Two Critical Approaches

There are similarities and differences in how scholars use Black feminism and critical race feminism to interpret informant experience. The similarities between Black feminism and critical race feminism outnumber the differences. For instance, both theories emphasize that identity politics and the politics of location are contingent on difference and that differences can have strategic value to empower or marginalize individuals and groups. Identity needs difference to be “identity.” Both theories emphasize the intrinsic and authentic value of racial and/or ethnic scholarship in representing the lives of groups of which researchers are a part. Black feminists and critical race feminists contribute to the ongoing process of revisionist histories or herstories. They do not merely offer a “story” that depathologizes the experiences and choices of their informants, for in doing so, they would misrepresent experience by hiding “dirty laundry” or validating unhealthy behaviors. Instead, Black feminists and critical race feminists offer multiple “partial truths” from within-group experience with the intent of accurately contextualizing choices and outcomes while balancing the ability of informants to tell their experiences.

There are dissimilarities between the theories. One difference between critical race feminism and Black feminism is one of disciplinary “birth-place.” Critical race feminism emerged specifically out of legal studies and critical race theory, whereas Black feminism emerged as a product of grass-roots activism and social science and humanities scholarship. Black feminism represents an enmeshment of efforts by community activists and an articulation of those efforts by scholars for a diverse audience. Critical race feminists may not identify themselves as being Black feminists (or any multicultural feminists). Black feminists specifically speak to the experiences of African American women and women of the African diaspora. Critical race feminists contextualize the sociohistorical experiences of any racial and/or ethnic group and tackle global legal and economic problems for those racial and/or ethnic groups. Another noted difference as evidenced by the scholarship of critical race feminists is the extensive examination of legislation and case law while interweaving personal stories of their informants or documented testimonials (Wing, 2000).

In summary, both theoretical trajectories constitute a particular orientation and belief system to approaching family studies research. To claim the identity of a Black feminist or a critical race feminist is to commit to a specific worldview and social justice agenda when designing a study, interpreting results, and developing implications that make sense to members of a community who are studied. Both theories offer critical lenses that place not only behavior under scrutiny but also the sociohistorical context of a specified group or community.

Doing Critical Theory

In the *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*, edited by Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, and Klein (2005), the editors postulated that family scholars must recognize the contextual limits of traditional family theory and research knowledge. The editors validated contextual approaches, including multicultural and critical theories in family studies research. A question that surfaces for family scholars is: If we should consider these theories, what are the advantages and challenges of using critical race feminism and Black feminism in family research?

Advantages of Using Critical Theories

Eliminating marginalization while centering experience. One advantage that critical race feminism and Black feminism bring to family research

is a context to center authentic voices or standpoint through the process of contextual critical thinking. Both theories demand that the research cocreated by informants be centered, critical, and empowering for the informants. Both standpoint theories focus on how individuals and groups negotiate the politics of location and the complexity of interlocking institutional oppressions. Politics of location enable us to examine “the specificities of the ‘partial story’ without losing sight of the macro structures which locate and illuminate those details” (Sudbury, 1998, p. 32). When we focus on location (i.e., those historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative boundaries and axes of self-definition), we emphasize the standpoint of our informants without essentializing experience or privileging one voice above others within and outside of the margins (Sudbury, 1998). Critical race feminism and Black feminism inform us that “truth” of experience is multiple, contingent, partial, and situated. By using critical race feminism and Black feminism, we examine the politics of decision-making processes to reveal hidden agendas and power centers (Thomas, 1993) as well as hidden and emergent mediating and moderating variables not captured fully by surveys.

Compatibility with family theories. Another advantage is that Black feminism and critical race feminism fit well with several family theories. For the purposes of this discussion, I discuss fitness with symbolic interactionism and ecological theory. For symbolic interactionists, individuals are pragmatic actors and creative informants who construct their social worlds (see LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, for extensive discussion). Society is a linguistic or symbolic construct arising out of meaningful social processes. These processes include the continuous negotiation of identities, roles, and privileges at the intra- and interpersonal levels in contexts. As people interpret events and contexts, they confer meaning to their situations and then react according to that interpretation. Examining these interactions requires getting at language and cocreated meanings concerning the social locations of individuals (Herman & Reynolds, 1994). It is within these premises of symbolic interaction that Black feminist and critical race feminist theories are compatible. Black feminism and critical race feminism presume a standpoint that is informed by a group’s shared history; these theories explicate the parameters that influence the ontologies, epistemologies, and worldview of individuals. Using a critical lens, researchers are able to scrutinize the subjective world of informants and the normative gaze, the symbolic context for reproduction of heteronormativity (Ingraham, 1996) and Eurocentrism. Heteronormativity is a dualistic ideological framework that privileges patriarchal systems of social organization over egalitarian gender relations, heterosexuality over other forms of nonreproductive sexual

expression, and family relationships formed through biological ties over those resulting from fictive kinship (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). In other words, systems that are androcentric, heterosexual, and biological are considered to be the “natural” state of being and most authentic among other variations. Eurocentrism is also a type of ideology and worldview that includes practices that privilege Western historical and cultural experiences, values, and concerns of peoples of European descent at the expense of others (e.g., minority groups; West, 1993).

Ecological theories emphasize that the interaction between factors in relationships among the individual (i.e., microsystem), the individual’s immediate family and community environment (i.e., mesosystem), and the societal landscape (i.e., macrosystem) fuels and steers an individual’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). Changes or conflict in any one system will ripple throughout other layers. To study an individual’s development, a researcher must look not only at the individual and her immediate environment but also at the interaction of the larger cultural environment. Black feminism and critical race feminism require a critical analysis of these multiple layers as they relate to the individual and to the groups of which individuals are a part. An examination of the mesosystemic and macrosystemic levels may reveal not only historical institutional discrimination but also, to an extent, the evolution of collective identity development (i.e., standpoint) and adaptative group response. Thus, the utilization of ecological theories helps researchers to place into historical context individual and group standpoints, a vital component of critical race feminism and Black feminism.

Whereas most critical race feminists and Black feminists purport that racial and/or ethnic researchers have unique competencies to speak about the negotiation of intersectionality, I also recognize critical interpretive jumps can be successfully made by “cultural outsiders” who integrate an Afrocentric critical race lens into their work. In using a Black feminist or critical race feminist theoretical lens, how the standpoint is articulated matters more than the color of the researcher. I do not advocate epistemological appropriation but rather explicit integration of unique standpoint when majority family scholars study racial and/or ethnic families. I see this integration as particularly valuable when it increases the visibility of minority scholarship in a field where we are just beginning to value ethnic feminisms. As an example of this possibility, Brown, Brody, and Stoneman (2000), non-Black researchers, carefully incorporated a Black feminist lens to ground their investigation and interpret their findings with depressed rural Black women. In their literature review, the researchers identified stereotyping in the literature on depression as it relates to Black women and

ethnic families. Ecological theory, with its flexibility to multiple methods and additional theoretical approaches, allowed the researchers to examine how rural Black women negotiate contextual factors at the microsystemic, mesosystemic, and macrosystemic levels. In their discussion, Brown et al. brought to our attention how larger socioeconomic processes as they relate to depression affect familial factors and dynamics.

Creative culturally sensitive intervention approaches. A third advantage of Black feminist and critical race feminist theories for family studies is that they are particularly helpful in developing interventions or prevention strategies that are culturally accessible and relevant to targeted informants or communities. Two studies by family scholars provide examples of the integration of cultural nuances to inform intervention approaches. My first example is the use of African American female sexual scripts in sex education programs and reproductive policies that target African American youth and communities. Stephens and Phillips (2003) identified eight African American female sexual scripts that appear in African American Hip Hop youth culture: the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama. As schema used to categorize norms regarding appropriate sexual beliefs and behaviors, sexual scripts may be useful for identifying the ways in which this population gives meanings to and values race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and interpersonal relationships in the context of sexuality.

Stephens and Phillips's (2003) findings were applied to Stephens and Few's (in press) research on African American adolescents' attitudes about physical attractiveness and sexual behaviors in interpersonal relationships. Using a Black feminist–womanist lens, we discussed the influence of Hip Hop sexual scripts on adolescents to provide a framework for understanding the tensions between Afrocentric and Eurocentric values on African American female adolescent sexuality. We deconstructed historical stereotypical depictions of Black womanhood to contextualize contemporary Hip Hop female sexual scripts. Using readily accessible, culturally relevant symbols (i.e., images found in Hip Hop), we observed that female and male adolescents were able to articulate their experience of how social constructions of race and gender simultaneously intersected to maintain expectations of sexual identity and behaviors. In the current study, we identified Hip Hop sexual scripts (and role models) that fostered healthy self-image and sexual behaviors as well as scripts that promoted self-denigration, internalized sexism, and/or high-risk sexual activities. Finally, we argued that programs (i.e., sexual education or ethnic health programs) seeking to achieve changes in interpersonal scripts that are not inclusive of the unique cultural messages that influence these processes are likely to fail.

Viable culturally sensitive family policy approaches. Given its birthplace in legal studies, critical race feminism may offer to family scholars an integration of family studies methods and methods typically used by law scholars. Using a critical race feminist framework, family scholars must incorporate the evolution of a specific law(s) in contextualizing the impact of policy decisions on racial and/or ethnic families and/or groups. A critical race feminist lens directs scholars to consider culturally variant perspectives in their analysis. Although not explicitly stated, Henderson and Cook (2005) used a critical race feminist lens to examine how grandmothers who are rearing grandchildren negotiate Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) regulations. In this study, the authors discussed the historical background and relevant criteria of TANF while placing the experience of Black families at the center of their analysis. They deconstructed the social meanings of poverty and race in the context of welfare to expose economic and institutional inequalities. They also pinpointed the intersection of contemporary family policies with TANF to layer evidence of institutional inequalities and the resiliencies of Black women to counter oppositional policies and “work the system.” Henderson and Cook integrated revisionist scholarship by Hill, Allen, and Harriette Pipes McAdoo, a Black feminist. Case studies, commonly used in legal studies, were used to highlight shortcomings of the present TANF system and provide further evidence that current welfare policies are, in fact, discouraging intact Black family structures and penalizing relative caregivers. The authors also revealed that the grandmothers “welcomed the opportunity to express their views and wisdom” (p. 15) about welfare. Thus, we can infer that the grandmothers found their participation as liberatory and empowering, a goal of critical race feminists. The authors made choices that reflect a culturally sensitive acknowledgment of intersectionality and a “Black consciousness” by centering Black women’s voices. This article applies family theory and critical race feminist frameworks. This article is noteworthy for elucidating the complexity of institutional interaction with family and group historical choices.

Active self-reflexivity throughout the research process. Black feminist and critical race feminist theories challenge researchers to be aware of and reflexive about why we participate in the process (e.g., for what means and gains), and the ways we are exploitive versus foster emancipation or liberation for our informants. Why is this important? Self-reflexivity uncovers and unveils theoretical blind spots—internalized and subconscious racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ethnocentrism, ableism, and xenophobia. Before embarking on the research process, a researcher should ask why he

or she selects certain groups to study. If we are “cultural outsiders,” then what are our motivations for studying certain groups? Motivations may be governed by the desire to change, to empower, to satisfy intellectual curiosity, or to perpetuate mainstream theories. Motivations influence how we choose to engage our informants and how we construct boundaries between researcher and participant.

In thinking about motivations, I think about “guilt” stories told to me at conferences and in hallways by White female and male colleagues who studied high-risk racial and/or ethnic populations. They seemed to agonize truly about how they located themselves in relation to poor ethnic women and whether they were conducting feminist research that was empowering for their informants or exploitive to further their own careers. Not one of my White colleagues used a Black feminist or critical race feminist lens to interpret their findings. When confronted with alternative explanations for outcomes that are grounded in historical, economic, and social experience (and research), my colleagues merely shrugged their shoulders and admitted such alternatives were not considered for the racial group they were studying. Black feminist and critical race feminist frameworks require the researcher to ask: “How am I as the ‘Other’ contributing to the perpetuation of racial and/or ethnic stereotypes in my research?”

Researchers must be aware that theoretical frameworks devoid of cultural nuances can be misrepresentative of experience. Conducting research on Black women that does not acknowledge our intersecting subjectivities results in rendering invisible their diverse within-group experiences and substituting the researchers’ stories instead. The choices researchers make in filtering, editing, and representing the stories gathered from surveys or interviews reflect our personal mind-sets or worldviews. Researchers must observe how much they write themselves into the text or the informants’ stories. Black feminist and critical race feminist theorizing allows an intellectual space to contemplate these questions as we put surveys together, prepare interview protocols, translate interviews given in foreign languages, and interpret our findings. The tenets of Black feminism and critical race feminism require that we name culturally relevant concepts, assumptions, and orientations attributed to and expressed by specific racial and/or ethnic groups in our quantitative and qualitative research. In doing so, “undercover theorizing” is avoided (Sprey, 1988). Undercover theorizing inevitably leads to theoretical misappropriations and misrepresentations of knowledges produced by racial and/or ethnic individuals and groups.

Being a member of a racial and/or ethnic group that one is studying does not excuse one from asking herself the same questions about personal motivations. Few, Stephens, and Rouse Arnett (2003) shared how to use Black

feminism as a guiding theoretical framework in research and as a foundation for exploring the dynamics of the researcher–informant relationship. We argued that because insider status could not be automatically assumed by Black researchers studying Black women, Black feminist researchers must read and write Black women’s experiences while being aware of their own difference (e.g., ethnicity, class, religion, education, sexual orientation, nationality) in the process. Researchers should tap into a “Black consciousness” to depict experience that is recognizable by the people they study. In addition, we noted research journals, theoretical memos, interview debriefing forms, peer auditing of coding processes, and member checking (i.e., confirming with the informant if your interpretation is accurate; informant feedback) as various checkpoints to attend to power differentials in the researcher–informant relationship. Finally, we implied that researchers did not have to be Black to study Black women and families. However, “cultural outsiders” must acknowledge a critical relationship between the interpretative framework in empirical and qualitative studies and the validity or trustworthiness of the data gathered (Nobles, 1978). In addition, I believe that non-Black researchers who study other racial and/or ethnic populations must take care not to reinvent and claim “the wheel”—or appropriate—previously articulated theoretical thought grounded in racial and/or ethnic group experience.

Challenges of Using Feminist and Critical Theories

From the start, proponents of feminist and critical theories have traveled on a bumpy road in family studies. Thompson and Walker (1995) conducted a content analyses of feminist-oriented articles published between 1984 and 1993 in the three top-tier family science journals—*Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Family Relations*, and *Journal of Family Issues*. In 1995, they concluded that feminism now has a legitimate place in mainstream family studies. They also acknowledged, however, that explicitly feminist articles are often placed in special issues of these journals, placed in a different “frontier” than mainstream articles. Eleven years later, in a postpositivist family studies, the utility of feminist and critical theories to assist in understanding the complexities and politics of difference is still scrutinized (Bengtson, Allen, et al., 2005). Criticisms lodged against feminist and critical theory consist of two general claims: (a) it is difficult to measure feminist concepts and (b) such theories cannot help researchers to predict individual or group behavior.

Difficulty in operationalizing concepts. Pioneering feminist family scholars have successfully integrated feminism into family studies despite

critiques that feminism is a theory that cannot be operationalized empirically. Critics ask how does one measure a feminist consciousness, intersectionality, emancipatory historiography, empowerment, or liberation—all key tenets of these theories? Feminist researchers have addressed this question empirically. For instance, scholars such as Cook (1989) and Conover (1988) developed feminist consciousness measures; however, these measures tapped feminist concerns of primarily White, middle-class women.

Simien and Clawson (2004) examined the structure of Black feminist consciousness and its relationship to race consciousness and policy attitudes. Confirmatory factor analysis allowed them to specify a detailed theoretical model in advance and then compare that model to the data. Intersectionality was measured by asking informants whether they believed problems of racism, poverty, and sexual discrimination are linked and whether Black women suffered from sexism within the Black movement (race consciousness) and racism within the women's movement. To assess benefits of feminism, informants were asked whether Black feminist groups help or divide the Black community, and whether Black women should share in the political leadership of the Black community. Simien and Clawson specified a model with four latent variables: Black feminist consciousness, race identity, system blame, and power discontent. They found that a Black feminist consciousness was widespread among Black men and women.

Empowerment is a concept that is not only a desired outcome that researchers have for their informants but also a fundamental tenet of feminism. Gutiérrez, Oh, and Gillmore (2000) studied the degree to which intrapersonal and interpersonal power dynamics in heterosexual relationships have an impact on contraception choices among high-risk female late adolescents. More important, their study provided a framework to operationalize the elusive concept of *empowerment*. Gutiérrez et al. described empowerment in terms of understanding 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). Black feminist Edith Lewis, in her coauthored edited book, *Empowering Women of Color* (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1999), described specific techniques for engaging the empowerment approach and included articles on client education, participatory practice processes while focusing on client and community strengths. Both of these examples demonstrate how ethnic women utilize and maximize their own influence over the circumstances of their lives.

Difficulty in predicting behavioral outcomes. Critics may ask whether Black feminism and critical race feminism can predict behavioral outcomes for targeted groups. Cause and effect of specific individual behaviors cannot be predicted by these theories; these theories, however, provide a context for an individual's or group's behaviors or parameters of possible choices based on the historical social locations of individuals and groups. These theories reject the notion of universal laws of behavior, favoring contextual approaches by focusing on individual and group functioning, goals, and meaning within raced, classed, and gendered realities (DeReus et al., 2005). In fact, most critical race feminist writings are descriptive and ethnographic in nature. Black feminist and critical race feminist theories are keys to understanding cultural nuances within and across groups. In addition, these theories can be applied to the study of the influence of large-scale social structures (i.e., institutions, marketplace) on women and families.

I am not suggesting that Black feminist and critical race feminist theories be the only theories to study observable phenomenon. Rather, they should be used to accompany and broaden the explanatory power of traditional family theories (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Klein, 2005). These theories give us a different language to express and talk about difference and experience. There should be conceptual, not merely additive, integration of these theories with traditional family studies. These theories help researchers to frame the definition of what and who family is. Postpositivist family research is beyond simple binary contestations of qualitative and quantitative methods. These theories are suitable for qualitative and quantitative researchers to apply to their research.

Excerpts From My Journey: Integrating Black Consciousness

I provided examples of family studies scholarship while discussing the strengths and challenges of using Black feminist and critical race feminist theories. In defining myself as a Black feminist, there is a commitment to be self-reflexive throughout the research process and to make visible my own privileges in the representation of lives. In doing so, I recognize that I am an inextricable part of the research process. Black women, as the researched or as researchers, offer a situated, partial, and alternative knowledge that rejects the authority of the "master's tools" (Lorde, 1993). I am compelled to be cognizant of how the self enters and merges with the subject. Intersectionality must be attended to at all levels of the research

process. In this section, I am explicit as to how I have used Black feminism in my research.

As a graduate student, I wanted to conduct research on Black women in abusive relationships. Claiming the label of Black feminist, I had a responsibility to represent accurately what Black women shared with me during interviews. I needed a theoretical framework to examine the configuration of choices that they made, the stories they chose to tell, and the lessons they chose to pass on. Black feminism is a framework deeply rooted in history and culture to inform a collective knowledge, a Black consciousness. As a budding family scholar, I also needed to use the tools of my discipline. I selected symbolic interactionism as a theory to ground my work and to help me make sense of how my informants assigned meaning to the experience of abuse and their reactions. My informants were college-educated, working-class to high-income women who attended a predominantly White southern university. I could relate to these women because many instances in their lives resembled my own. My interview protocol was designed to capture memories of their abuse, their coping strategies, and their decision-making processes to leave the relationship. It also was informed by literature from family studies, Africana studies, psychology, and women's studies.

As a qualitative researcher, I kept meticulous theoretical memos. Theoretical memos were key to theory development and helped me make sense of negative cases, coding schemes, and the thematic relationship among and between codes (Strauss, 1987). In theoretical memos, I recorded my ideas, thoughts, feelings, and insights about relationships in the emerging theory. I included my reactions to the dynamics of the researcher–informant relationship in my theoretical memos. I did this as a system of providing tangible evidence of my attempts to identify personal biases (Few et al., 2003) and to streamline open codes into manageable themes or axial coding during the constant-comparison process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Theory selection is an intellectual and political choice influenced by the extent of formal training a researcher has or to the extent that a theory resonates with the researcher's personal experiences.

In my memos, I worked the theories—symbolic interactionism and Black feminism. First, symbolic interaction theory helped me to determine patterns of proactive and reactive behaviors in the context of interpersonal violence and leaving. For example, when a partner performed Action A (e.g., verbal abuse), the informant typically responded by Action B (e.g., withdrawal). For the informant, Action A carried a specific meaning to her (e.g., loss of personal power, self-worthlessness), and together, the couple engaged in daily routines. The routine was part of “the language” of the relationship. In the same memo, I wrote down empirical research to support or negate my analysis of this type

of interaction. Symbolic interaction theory was crucial in identifying individual turning points, those symbolic and meaningful incidents that compelled these women to deviate from their usual courses of action or interaction with their partners. Those complex interpretative processes are grounded in the cultural world, and identities are represented in terms of salient cultural categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation; DuGay, 1997). However, symbolic interactionism theory alone does not indicate which cultural lens is appropriate to represent experience. For my research on the decision-making processes of Black women, I needed a theory that specifically addressed the diversity of Black experience and consciousness. Black feminism was the theory that I could seamlessly interweave into the framework provided by symbolic interactionism.

Black feminism helped me to explicate behavioral motivations rooted in unique cultural factors while examining the “collective voice” of Black women. For instance, the informants stated that they desired to date Black men because they felt Black men would understand best how racism affects their lives. These educated women stayed with abusive partners because they wanted to prove to their White peers and society in general that Black relationships were not inherently dysfunctional. They expressed a strong race consciousness about how the images of Black life were observed. A few informants revealed that they refused to report Black abusive partners because of the historical distrust of police that many Black communities have as a result of police brutality or abuse of power (Richie, 1996). Some informants felt that their partners were attracted to them because of their skin color. A few admitted that skin color was a hurtful part of their routine dialogue (i.e., colorism; see Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). As a Black woman, I could resonate with their explanations while being careful not to insert myself into their stories. Using a Black feminist lens, I could observe that the women were influenced indirectly by the historical experience of Blacks in the United States in terms of relationship choices, relationship maintenance, and interactions with institutions. For these women, their intimate relationships existed in a private and public sphere. They equated successful intimate relationships with contributing positive images of Black womanhood to society. They fought against the normative gaze. Their stories revealed how the women balanced a gender consciousness (e.g., awareness of sexism on an interpersonal and institutional level) with racial consciousness in the context of violence, found agency, and developed a will to pass on lessons learned to other Black women. These choices embody the tenets of Black feminism and are centered in Black history.

I also used Alexander's (1988) principles of salience to determine primary, frequencies, uniqueness, negations, emphases, omissions, and distortions in the informants' responses to the interview protocol. As my codes became more focused, I used different colors to distinguish core codes that should be flushed out using symbolic interactionism and Black feminism. After identifying salient issues in the transcriptions, I began developing a secondary interview protocol. I returned to the informants to confirm my interpretation of their experiences (Borland, 2003). Through summaries of interview transcripts, the informants could evaluate how I contextualized their decision-making processes. The informants also could edit my interpretation of their experience by answering questions from the secondary interview protocol. At this point in the research process, a feminist researcher must be aware of how she writes herself into the text and in which ways she has merged with the subject to cocreate knowledge and theory.

The next step required a triangulation of multiple sources of data (e.g., transcripts, theoretical memos, diary excerpts, poetry) and the drawing of a conceptual map for how these Black women left abusive relationships. The conceptual map was transformed into a phasic representation of the decision to leave within a table format. Using symbolic interaction theory, I recognized that women moved back and forth among stages and phases in the process of leaving as the meaning of leaving and staying shifted over the course of time and context. All of these methodological activities are a vital part of theory building about Black women's lives.

In contrast, a critical race feminist would have approached the current study a little differently. Personal narratives and interviews could have been used as data to explore Black women's experience in abusive relationships. However, research questions would have been written differently to reflect a larger sociological scale of analysis. For instance, instead of restricting the telling of the experience at the interpersonal level, a critical race feminist would want to know how institutions legally and economically interact with Black women in abusive relationships. A critical race feminist would trace the evolution of specific legislation or institutional policies related to intimate violence, deconstruct cases of racial and sex discrimination in how policy is executed or enforced, and delineate options for policy change. Instead of focusing on coping strategies, a critical race feminist would be more interested in help-seeking processes and at what points in the process did institutions (e.g., social services, battered women's shelters, police, mental health facilities, hospitals, judicial system) fail or assist abused Black women. Although the phenomenon is approached differently, the subtleties and diversity of Black women's experience are still being deconstructed, interrogated, and represented.

Conclusion

Black feminism and critical race feminism are viable theoretical tools to extend Black family studies beyond mainstream ideologies and practices. The theoretical frameworks of Black feminism and critical race feminism create spaces to accommodate a multiplicity of locations that script the experiences of Black women and their families as marginalized groups. In doing so, these frameworks open up for family studies a fruitful dialogue with Black women's studies scholarship.

In this article, I provided qualitative and quantitative examples where forays have been made to integrate a Black consciousness into family studies. These examples include research that has used traditional and nontraditional methods of qualitative and quantitative research. What distinguishes Black feminist and critical race feminist approaches from a general qualitative or quantitative approach is a unique perspective and standpoint that historicizes context and defines meaning. In this case, the standpoint is an expression of Black experience in the United States, and it is a standpoint that may be personally engaged in by the researcher herself. Black feminist family scholars and critical race feminists are usually a part of the communities they study. Black feminist family scholars and critical race feminists measure their authenticity and accountability to the groups they study by (a) debunking stereotypes of Black women's lives, (b) identifying gaps or misrepresentations of Black subjectivities in the literature of respective disciplines, (c) interjecting a Black consciousness into family studies that represents the unique experiences of Black women and families in the United States, and (d) transforming their work into a social justice agenda that improves the well-being of Black women and families.

In summary, it is my position that to conduct research on Black women and families without viewing their experiences or choices through a Black feminist or critical race feminist lens is to risk enforcing an essentialized normativity of whiteness and to slight the integrity of possibilities for Black family studies. I encourage non-Black family scholars to use these theories to contextualize their findings of Black women and families and to acknowledge the legacy of Black feminist and critical race feminist scholars in their research.

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