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*Applying appropriate theoretical frameworks for black women is challenging because many theories are very general and do not consider multiple identities and roles. Critical race theory and black feminist thought are suggested as appropriate frameworks and applied to the needs of black women in higher education.*

## Theoretical Frameworks for African American Women

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Finding and applying theoretical constructs that are appropriate for explaining and understanding the experiences of African American women can be challenging. Traditional theories used in student affairs practice, for example, are very general and so might miss important issues encountered or attributes embodied by African American women.

Understanding why the experiences of African American women are different from those of other women and those of African American men is steeped in the historical progression and ideology of black people in the United States. In the early nineteenth century, African American women were viewed not as being financial contributors to the household but as being supportive of their spouses and dealing with domestic duties (Guy-Sheftall and Bell-Scott, 1989; Payton, 1985). Educational attainment was not intended for persons (particularly black women) who were considered to be less than human, slaves or not. During this time, blacks were concerned with uplifting their race—men and women—and thus were not focused on gender issues.

However, the egalitarian attitudes of black men diminished during the period following the Emancipation Proclamation. An influx of black men was educated after the Emancipation Proclamation in all academic disciplines; conversely, the women who did manage to attend college primarily became elementary and secondary school teachers. Double oppression—racism and sexism—was born for African American women when their subordinate status was assumed and enforced by white and black men as well as white women.

Female educators—for example Lucy Slowe, Howard University’s dean of students in the late 1930s—found that black women faced multiple challenges when entering college. First, they had little experience in public or community affairs; second, they had internalized traditional beliefs about women’s roles due to gender-bound upbringing; and third, they had adopted a self-defeating perspective on life (Slowe, cited in Guy-Sheftall and Bell-Scott, 1989). One can argue that very little has changed for African American women in higher education over the past two centuries. Stereotypes and inequities continue to exist and create formidable roadblocks for them as they attempt to gain educational and economic parity in this society.

Overall, the development and socialization of African American women have been molded and understood within the framework of perceptions and agendas of members of the dominant society. Selecting appropriate theories for understanding the needs of African American women should, however, be based on their cultural, personal, and social contexts, which clearly differ significantly from those of men and women who have not experienced racial and gender oppression. In the words of Carroll (1982), “the Black woman in higher education faces greater risks and problems now than in the past” because she is in a place previously occupied by the dominant group, and the numbers are growing on college campuses—she is becoming more “visible” (p. 115); it is up to faculty and administrators to ameliorate these issues. In this chapter, two theoretical frameworks are presented that delineate factors crucial to developing insight into the developmental and societal issues faced by African American women.

## **Student Development Theories**

Long-established student development theories have been the guiding paradigms for working with college students for over forty years (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). “Institutions have embraced and adopted theories developed by Chickering, Perry, Kohlberg, Holland, Super, Loevinger, and Sanford” (Howard-Hamilton, 1997, p. 18).

Within the past two decades, new theories or models have been created, researched, and published that have included the voices of women (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 1999; King and Kitchener, 1994), people of color (Wijeyesinghe and Jackson, 2001), and other groups who have been marginalized or oppressed (Torres, 1999; Torres and Phelps, 1997; Hardiman and Jackson, 1997). Valuing the cultural differences that students bring to our college campuses is important for their personal growth and development. However, the use of a single lens or perspective, even one including a “melting pot” view of diversity, cannot help all students, particularly African American women, to feel secure about immersing themselves in the university environment. When black women do not see themselves represented within the institutional structure or classroom environment and all

students seem to be treated from a “one size fits all” frame of reference, there is a loss of individualism as well as gender and cultural constructs. A strong ego and racial ethnic identity does not allow for self-blame and instead builds a strong black feminist ethic grounded in the belief that the personal is political and that social structures and systems can cause personal dysfunction.

Two of the theoretical frameworks that offer promise for understanding the intersecting identities of African American women and explaining ways in which their needs can be addressed effectively are black feminist thought and critical race theory.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Collins’s (1990, 1998, 2002) discussion of black feminist thought suggests that marginal positions in academic settings have been occupied by African American women for an extended period. This marginality is viewed as the “outsider within” status, in which black women have been invited into places where the dominant group has assembled, but they remain outsiders because they are still invisible and have no voice when dialogue commences. A sense of belonging can never exist because there is no personal or cultural fit between the experiences of African American women and the dominant group. Since there is no place, space, or stance provided for this cohort, Collins’s paradigm posits the importance of ideas “produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women” (Collins, 2002, p. 468).

There are three key themes in black feminist thought (Collins, 2002). First, the framework is shaped and produced by the experiences black women have encountered in their lives, even though others have documented their stories. Second, although the stories and experiences of each woman are unique, there are intersections of experiences between and among black women. Third, although commonalities do exist among black women, the diversity of class, religion, age, and sexual orientation of black women as a group are multiple contexts from which their experiences can be revealed and understood. These themes may not become apparent to African American women initially, so one role of “Black female intellectuals is to produce facts and theories about the Black female experience that will clarify a Black woman’s standpoint for Black women” (Collins, 2002, p. 469).

Further delineation of the themes of black feminist thought provides greater insight into the paradigm and how the concepts were formed. The first theme implies that many people besides African American women have shaped their identity. The theme also implies that the ways in which others have shaped black women’s identity have been erroneous and stereotypical. These “externally defined images have been designed to control assertive Black female behavior” (Collins, 2002, p. 469). Therefore, it is important

that self-valuation, self-definition, and knowledge validation replace the negative images of self in the minds of these women. Oppressive images are difficult to erase, however, when they been reinforced over a long period.

The multiple identities of race, gender, and class are interlocking components of most African American women's identities. Furthermore, these multifaceted identities are immersed in oppression and subordinate their "status in an array of either/or dualities" (Collins, 2002, p. 472). Placement at the inferior end of the status continuum because of these dualities has been the pivotal reason for the perpetual domination of black women.

The lives of African American women have been shaped by so many outside influences that the third theme encourages them to develop, redefine, and explain their own stories based on the importance of black women's culture. These new stories have come in song, dance, literature, film, and other media, helping to share the culture and experiences of black women from their own personal points of view. The philosophy of black feminist thought has not been entertained by many women of color because they do not view themselves as feminists based on the mainstream definition. But Collins's perspectives certainly provide a deeper context and meaning for African American women who have been searching for a voice within rather than one heard from the outside.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that was generated by scholars of color who study law and legal policies and who are concerned about racial subjugation in society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Smith, Altbach, and Lomotey, 2002; Villalpando and Bernal, 2002). Research by these scholars revealed that persons in power designed laws and policies that were supposed to be race-neutral but still perpetuated racial and ethnic oppression. "This framework emphasizes the importance of viewing policies and policy making in the proper historical and cultural context to deconstruct their racialized content" (Villalpando and Bernal, 2002, pp. 244–245). According to critical race theorists, ideas such as color blindness and meritocracy systematically disadvantage people of color and further advantage whites. Avoiding the issue of race allows individuals to "redress only extremely egregious racial harms, ones that everyone should notice and condemn" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 22). Thus, other types of covert racial atrocities are avoided, neglected, and excused. There should be an overt color-conscious effort to reduce racist acts in our society.

- Recognizes that racism is endemic to American life
- Expresses skepticism toward dominant claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy
- Challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual and historical analysis of institutional policies

- Insists on recognizing the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing society
- Is interdisciplinary and crosses epistemological and methodological boundaries
- Works toward eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Villalpando and Bernal, 2002, p. 245)

Critical race theory as applied to education differs slightly from its legal applications “because it attempts to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact on communities of color” (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000, p. 63). Moreover, there is a focus on a liberating and transformative experience for persons of color by exploring multiple cultural and personal contexts that make up their identity, such as race, gender, class, and socioeconomic status. The origins of racial oppression are explored in ethnic studies, women’s studies, law, psychology, sociology, and history, then discourse is established so that the common themes and threads can be shared.

Methods used to awaken the consciousness of disadvantaged groups are exposure to microaggressions, creation of counterstories, and development of counterspaces. Conscious, unconscious, verbal, nonverbal, and visual forms of insults directed toward people of color are called microaggressions (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000). These diatribes are pervasive, often covert, innocuous, and nebulous and thus are difficult to investigate. This causes tremendous anxiety for those who experience this racist psychological battering.

Critical race theory uses counterstories in the form of discussion, archives, and personal testimonies because it acknowledges that some members of marginalized groups, by virtue of their marginal status, tell previously untold or different stories based on experiences that challenge the discourse and beliefs of the dominant group (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Villalpando and Bernal, 2002). Counterstorytelling is used to cast doubt on existing ideas or myths held by majority group members. A safe place and space, known as a counterspace, should be provided when marginalized groups share their counterstories.

Students of color establish academic and social counterspaces on campus by finding people who look like themselves and establishing a space that is comfortable and hospitable for them (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000). These counterspaces may be in a physical structure such as a cultural center, or may be simply the presence of participants in an organization that espouses Africentric values such as a black fraternity or sorority, or a study group. The primary emphasis of the counterspace is on finding shelter from the daily torrent of microaggressions and to be in a place that is validating and supportive. “When the ideology of racism is examined and

racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice. Further, those injured by racism discover that they are not alone in their marginality. They become empowered participants, hearing their own stories of others, listening to how the arguments are framed, and learning to make the arguments themselves” (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000, p. 64).

### **Theory to Practice**

These theories address the plights faced by African American women, specifically racism, sexism, classism, loneliness, microaggressions, marginality syndrome, and the status of outsider within (Collins, 1990, 1998, 2002; Robinson and Howard-Hamilton, 2000). One must ask, then, how African American women can address these challenges during college. In the following paragraphs, I offer some suggestions for persons who work with African American women and for the women themselves. Individuals such as black men, other people of color, or people from differing religions or sexual orientations who have experienced the outsider-within syndrome also may benefit from the lessons on how to become empowered, identifying one’s own cultural context, and renaming history.

Faculty and administrators should maintain a concerted effort to provide course materials and programming that are relevant to African American women. In the classroom, counteracting the outsider-within syndrome can be accomplished by selecting course materials and designing assignments that allow students the flexibility and freedom to find themselves in the canon. This book, for example, is written in a form of black feminist thought because the researchers have decided to move black women’s voices to the center of attention and analysis (Collins, 2002).

Faculty who teach from an inclusive feminist framework should also design classroom experiences to facilitate continual dialogue, assign journal writing so that students can create counterstories, engage in creative projects that are group-oriented, and encourage opportunities to shift environments and move outside of one’s comfort zone.

Evaluation of student projects is important to efforts to recreate or improve on the assignments in the future. “Post-assessments, summary papers, student-faculty conferences, and teaching-evaluation instruments are ways to obtain information on the effectiveness of the assignments and strategies used in class and their impact upon students’ learning and lives” (Dawson-Threat, 1997, p. 37). Collins (2002) does warn facilitators of this process that helping students recognize the outsider-within mindset “is bound to generate tension, for people who become outsiders within are forever changed by their new status” (p. 480). Therein lies the reason that this must be a joint curricular-cocurricular endeavor: when students come to the realization that they have been viewed as peripheral participants by others, they may become angry and unsure about how they are to gain the respect of others once they move into the inner circle of the conversations.

The facilitator should continue to educate the student about the new status and how to manage the continual tension that arises when one's consciousness has been raised.

When the reawakening process begins for black women, it is often helpful to refer them to the campus counseling center or cultural center. In these places, a black woman can connect with a person or persons who can support and validate the microaggressions or other insidious forms of racism and sexism she has identified.

More information on counseling, programming, and mentoring is given in following chapters, but one example deserves attention here. The "Waiting to Exhale" retreat at Indiana University has been tremendously successful. The retreat brought African American and white women together to share their stories, similarities, and differences. The program was an overnight activity held at a sorority house on campus, and more than sixty women participated. The retreat facilitator was a member of a black sorority on campus, and she enlisted other organizations and administrators to lead get-acquainted activities; group discussions about male-female relationships and coping and survival strategies; and goal setting to bridge the gap between white women and women of color on campus. Feminist thought and critical race theory intersect in the description of this program: counterstories were developed, a common space was discovered and shared, and the outsider-within status was clearly named and addressed when all voices were heard. All of the participants saw a new way to become united in their struggle against oppression.

Racial microaggressions that occur within academic and social spaces have been studied by Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000). The researchers found microaggressions have a direct impact on the academic and social lives of students, which in turn lead to the formation of academic and social common spaces and counterspaces. "These counter-spaces serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000, p. 70). The researchers also found that African American students create academic and social racial or gender counterspaces in response to their marginality on campus. Specifically, "in separating themselves from racially or gender-uncomfortable situations, this group of African American college students appeared to be utilizing their counter-spaces on their own terms" (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000, p. 71).

In other words, survival for black women is contingent on their ability to find a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves. Thus, the university community should be prepared to support African American women when they seek a safe haven within predominantly black student associations, black sororities, and black female support groups. Faculty and administrators must be comfortable with black women establishing these spaces, or a vicious oppressive cycle in which the dominant group maintains the status quo on campus and all others remain outsiders within will persist.

## Summary

Throughout this monograph, the authors agree unequivocally that “there is no more isolated subgroup in academe than Black women. They have neither race nor sex in common with White males who dominate the decision making stratum of academe; Black males in academe at least share with the White males their predominance over women” (Carroll, 1982, p. 118). Although this quote is over two decades old, it illuminates for the reader that even though we see the world changing, a traditional state of mind still prevails. The African American woman “has been called upon to create herself without model or precedent” (Carroll, 1982, p. 126). The information in this chapter paves the way for a framework that highlights the benefits and support systems for black women that can be created on college and university campuses. Using a theory-to-practice approach integrated with traditional student affairs theories, black feminist thought, and critical race frameworks should allow higher education faculty and staff to enhance the chances for career, academic, personal, and professional success for African American women.

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