Black Feminist and Womanist Theory

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Abstract

Consistent with the historical marginalization that has influenced our understanding of race, gender and class in America, Black feminist theory and womanist theory, both, have surfaced as leading doctrines in our conceptualization of these respective dimensions. Alike, Black feminist theory and womanist theory are rooted in Black identity development. While the frameworks differ in their inherent approach and alignment with Black men, their fundamental designs both highlight racial equity, advocacy and justice and subsequently yield a significant resemblance to one another. Black women have utilized their lived experiences and their collective voice to bring communities together and to engage with one another from a position of dialogical engagement. Social work practitioners have also been able to impart the constructs of these theories by applying them to assessment practices and examining the needs of clients from a sphere of individual and collective consciousness. Moreover, scholars have been able to apply the core tenets of Black Feminism in the classroom and its suitability to the field of pedagogy have been immense.

Keywords: black, feminism, womanism, feminist, womanist, theory, oppression, dialogical, praxis, pedagogy

Black Feminism & Womanism

At first glance, the ideas of Black feminism and Black womanism might appear to be the same concept with different words. Closer inspection of the development of these similar but separate concepts reveal where they align but also differ. Both are grown out of the Cross model of Black identity development (Cross, 1971 in Boisnier, 2003). Boisnier (2003) discusses the model of feminist identity, developed by Downing and Roush, as having five development stages, while the womanist model created by Helms has four similar development stages. Walker (1983, as cited in Collins, 1996) compared the difference between the two concepts to the colors purple for womanism and lavender for feminism. The comparison is open to interpretation, but it seems to indicate that womanism is everything that feminism is, but darker and stronger.

Walker (1983, as cited in Collins, 1996) discussed womanism in depth and determined that there is more than one definition of womanism and that the history of the word is rooted in Southern Black language that defined womanism as “outrageous, courageous, and willful ways” (Collins, 1996, p. 59). Collins determined that this definition of womanism allowed Black women to be unrestrained by the frail and genteel characteristics that bound the behavior of White women. While this interpretation of womanism advocates for a broad definition of inclusion, there is the sense of superiority related to the ability and tacit approval of young Black women to be daring, precocious and serious.

One facet of feminism that is not inclusive and not a part of womanism is the separation from men in the struggle for equity. Womanism is connected to Black nationalist concepts, and women are able to advocate for women in a way that does not connect them to White women and allows for Black women to be committed to aligning with Black men in pursuit of racial justice. At the same time, some Black women struggle to reconcile the community’s lean towards

homophobia with the fact that womanism that loves women wholly, including women that love women. What has developed is a spectrum of spirituality, love and creativity that flows back and forth from feminism to womanism, with the universal population of Black women welcome and positioning themselves at any and various points along the way. Boisnier (2003) finds that Black women identify more with womanism than with feminism, while White women identify more as feminist.

The concept of Black feminism was birthed by the Combahee River Collective, an organization developed in response to the understanding that the needs and concerns of Black women were being ignored by both Civil Rights and feminism, two large scale social justice movements of the time. Founders Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier began meeting at a 1973 conference for the National Black Feminist Organization and by 1974 had established the Collective to address the void in the social justice conversation that should have been Black lesbian feminism. The 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement solidified the development of Black feminist and womanist theory. The focus on Black feminism acknowledged the history of determined resistance and persistent struggle for Black women throughout the oppressive systems of slavery and beyond, into the post-slavery decades of institutionalized racism (Combahee River Collective, 2001).

The Collective recognized that Black women experience oppression from many directions at the same time. One level of that oppression was related to being Black, which necessitated a perspective of feminism that was different from that of the larger feminist movement dominated by White women. Additionally, it was important for Black feminists to rally for Civil Rights and to join with Black men to support the social justice activities that pursued equality on that front. However, the strong undercurrent of homophobia in the Black

community meant that in order to be for all flavors of Black womanhood, including women that sexually love other women, Black feminism meant addressing the socialization of Black men that led to rigid gender and sexual mores and stigmas. The Collective called out and rejected the idea of separating from Black men in order to unify with the strictly lesbian identity, finding that strict lesbianism "leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children" (Combahee River Collective, 2001, p. 296).

What resulted is the identity and theory of Black womanism that is multifaceted and fluid. It allows for the inclusion of the universal historical and ongoing experiences of Black women, the feminist struggle for nonconformist gender roles and practices, the persistent fight for racial equality, and the decision to practice love that transforms oppressive systems, beginning with Black women loving themselves first, then loving all other Black women and extending that love to the larger society for the purpose of creating social equity.

> Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension (Phillips, 2006, p. xx).

Theory and Practice

Historically in the United States, Black women have faced oppression in their various intersecting identities of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation that make up Black womanhood. Black women continue to be oppressed and to push back against the subjugation. Frequently, the discussion around the oppression of Black women is a dialectical one, attempting to resolve the experiences and concerns of Black women into a seamless, universal set of

expectations and roles. The practice of Black feminist theory represents the refusal to conform to any one set of roles exclusively, but to exist within and move fluidly between the ideas of what Black women should be, should look like, should behave, and should comport themselves.

Through activism, Black women have resisted the attempts to define and shape the identities of Black women into a one-dimensional representation. The original and individualized perspectives that contribute to the research, practice, and activism in a range of areas shows the complexities and multidimensional aspects of Black womanism. The breadth of experiences and ideas means that the Black woman experience does not have one size or experience that fits everyone. Despite these unique experiences, Black feminist theory recognizes that there are "recurring patterns" that produce a "shared struggle" against the various forms of violence perpetrated against Black women and sanctioned by the United States (Collins, 2002).

As to the theory and practice of this cohort of Black female scholars, our research and practice is diverse, reflecting the intention of capturing the range of Black women experience. Our efforts examine different sides/perspectives/concerns of the community and take different approaches to the oppressive system that we operate within. The development of Black feminist womanist theory indicates an activation of the power of Black women consumed by the feminist movement. Rather than conforming to the oppression of a static, pre-defined identity, Black womanism was created to encompass the entire being of Black womanhood. The activism of Black womanism will be necessary for as long as oppressive systems exist.

The practice of Black feminism involves an evolution and a progression of change from thought to consciousness. This dialogical practice encompasses the contributions of Black women intellectuals so that action and theory are merged to include diverse standpoints. Collins

(2002) points to a process of changed thinking that leads to changed actions, changed experiences and finally, changed consciousness.

Rather than a dialectical definition of Black womanism that attempts to condense everything into a flat definition, the practice of Black feminist and womanist theory establishes a dialogical relationship with the community of women that inform it. It includes the range of individual experiences and welcomes the fluidity of the ultimate definition and theory. The dynamic aspect of Black feminist theory means that it is cognizant of and sensitive to context and time. This perspective allows for periodic analysis of theory practices to ensure alignment and fidelity to the collective that comprise it.

Collins (2002) explains that "Black women's struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice" (p. 41). As we exist within a community, we share and validate our experiences, and fully embrace the pieces of each other that make us whole humans. The validation of experiences and acceptance of group identity and knowledge contributes to changed behavior and alternate responses to oppression, which are represented by a move to activism. The defiance against the norm and the resistance to conformity changes how we experience the world and ultimately changes how we understand the world around us.

As a critical social theory, Black feminism analyzes the injustices and provides a means to respond. The use of existing knowledge is crucial, as it reaffirms the voices and provides solutions that are grounded in practical lived experiences while validating the consciousness that has already been in existence within Black women (Collins, 2002).

As members of an oppressed group, Black women have generated alternative practices and knowledge that have been designed to foster the empowerment of their shared experience in the United States. In contrast to the dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism, a

dialogical relationship characterizes Black women's collective experiences and group knowledge. On both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness. For Black women in the United States as a collectivity, the struggle for a self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another.

Implications on the Field of Social Work

Black feminist and womanist theory are applied to the field of Social Work through a framework that establishes the interconnectedness of race, class and gender that is experienced by Black women in social, political and economic arenas (Chafets, 2014 & Nayak, 2015). As Social Work researchers, feminist theory provides a research methodology and theoretical framework that grounds our work in issues of systemic oppression based on race, sexual orientation, gender, and class (Saulnier & Seifert, 2013). Utilizing Black feminist theories as researchers guides us in creating knowledge that is empowering and that resists oppressive systems (Collins, 1990). That knowledge can then be used to further the growth and progress in the very communities that are most affected by these systems.

Black feminist theory embraces the knowledge and experiences of minority groups, where that knowledge had long been based on a White male perspective that tends to ignore racism and the systems of oppression that are fundamental in shaping the lives of Black people (Thompson, 1998). Utilizing Black feminist theory allows researchers to observe from the perspectives of minority groups, and to conduct research that seeks to understand inequalities, disparities, and the role of gender among Blacks. Through this lens new knowledge is created

and understood, knowledge that is reflective of Black women's experiences and considers gender, social class, and race (Chafets, 2004).

As academics, Black feminist pedagogy prepares us to think in ways that inquires and challenges the "western intellectual" ideologies, and to develop a mindset that acknowledges and nurtures the equality of Black women (Omolade, 1993). hooks (1994) and Omolade (1993) discuss power dynamics and the authority between a teacher and student in a classroom setting and challenge us as future educators to create a learning environment that is open to different perspectives and encourages sharing. From her experiences in academia, hooks (1994) provides real encounters that speak on how to think outside the box in ways that challenge racial and gender oppression and create an environment that is conducive to learning. hooks (1994) encourages a method of thinking and teaching that promotes a free expression of ideas.

When used in Social Work practice, Black feminist theory empowers clients to actively participate in the process of defining their problems and the course of action that is taken to resolve them (Bryson & Lawrence-Webb, 2000). Through a feminist lens a client can be led to the self-identification of new realities that are inclusive of the client's experiences. Through this inclusiveness clients are able to identify solutions and develop survival strategies (Collins, 1991).

Influence on Praxis & Pedagogy

Rationale

Woven throughout the foundation of Black feminist theory and womanist theory are tenets of solidarity and community. In fact, some of the primary themes that are already illustrated in this piece have been that of equity, empowerment, and liberation. Scholars that position themselves as Black feminists or womanist embody many of these same characteristics. Anecdotally, observations support a notion that when pedagogical practitioners undergird

themselves in these interrelated philosophies, they do so with intention and with care. However, a number of qualitative studies and examinations have been conducted in recent years to highlight the influence of Black feminist and womanist practice, in the learning environment and classroom from a more systematic lens (McArthur and Lane, 2018).

For example, researchers have begun to interrogate the rational that educators, particularly those that identify as Black feminist educators, have when they embrace the role of scholar, instructor, professor, and preceptor. Although researchers have ascertained characteristics of affection, reverence, nurturance, and dedication, in practice it is known as pedagogical love (hooks, 2014). More specifically, McArthur asserts that this dynamic is essential in caring for those oppressed groups, particularly Black women, that have historically been marginalized in the classroom (2018). Central to the many attributes of this pedagogical love is the focus on equity and cultural congruence (Irvine, 1990, as cited in McArthur and Lane, 2018). As with bell hooks' conceptualization of transformative pedagogy, this equity exists to facilitate learning while also paying homage to the differences in identity, both among the students, and among the student(s) and educator (hooks, 2014). Activism for subjugated groups are prioritized in these educational spaces and when aligned with Black feminist theory, this pedagogical love can be personified even more.

Components

In consideration of its applicability to the classroom, Black Feminist praxis is both complex and efficacious. Marked by the anti-deficit and anti-pathological constructs, educators that ascribe themselves to this school of thought, engage with their students by providing affirmation, extending compassion, offering space for reciprocal scholarship and modeling activism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). McArthur and Lane argue that these characteristics thus

position students to become change agents and exercise freedom in the creation of their own learning experience (2018). Additionally, Black feminist praxis includes another crucial component and that is one of transcendence. Specifically, Black educators aim to situate students on platforms where they will not only survive, but that they will also thrive (McArthur and Lane, 2018). The bearing of this construct weighs heavy on the shoulders of Black feminist educators and can easily go unnoticed when not examined through a critical lens.

One might beg the question, "why has the role of Black feminism in pedagogy been largely unrecognized?" Several scholars suggest that the disregard is inadvertently grounded in mirroring roles and functions of the Black female educator. More specifically and after primary consideration of the intersection between race and gender, the concept of over-mothering has prevailed for Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Both roles, matriarch and pedagogue, reflect sentiments of love, protectiveness, community and sacrifice. These shared identities can naturally and simultaneously exist within a setting, at any one given point in time. However, the result is that when viewed independently, one of these distinct roles and functions gets neglected in its mentioning and its regard.

In addition, this historical lack of acknowledgement concerning the influence of Black feminist educators in the classroom has been connected to another function, and that is one that encourages a politicized ethic of care. This principal invokes students to take initiative and design their own framework for scholarship. This tenet also aligns with those educators that embolden their students to engage in activism in order to further advancements towards social justice, individual and communal (Lane, 2018 as cited in McArthur and Lane, 2018). Collectively, these characteristics lend to the ethical and ethnic responsibility that so many pedagogues defend (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). From grade school to the vast landscape of the

academy, educators that interrogate the educational system from this lens and sow the seeds for inquiry, equity, affirmation and advocacy, have all imparted a great on Black feminist praxis as we have come to know it today.

Applications and Implications for Future Research

Ultimately, Black feminist and womanist theory will be a significant part of the work that each of us as researchers and scholars produce, despite disparate interests. One example is a critical examination of how religion affects the Black community, particularly young people in relation to their satisfaction and identification with traditional religious practices. Day (2014) highlights that Black women are the backbone of the Black church, accounting for the significance of the church in Black homes, and the practices that are carried from one generation to the next.

Research on student health centers on college campuses, and how their availability affects the students of those campuses, particularly the students from poorer communities, will likely benefit from the perspective of Black womanism and the concept of self-care, as well as the acknowledgement of the ways that trauma is normalized in frenzied situations (Ricks, 2018). On those very same college campuses, there may be a study of the student mental health counseling centers and the way that the diversity of the clinicians affects the utilization of services. This will be particularly applicable to students of color that may have difficulty believing that their clinician understands their experience and might include the Black feminist and womanist concept of what Ricks (2018) calls normalized chaos, a defense employed by Black women.

Working with women in jail and in prison to understand their coping mechanisms and how they might develop new and healthier ones may be difficult to accomplish without applying the concepts of a politicized ethic of care and creating a space and place for healing studied by

McArthur and Lane (2018). The research that develops new and effective methods of preventing young women and men from ever reaching those correctional facilities will be greatly assisted by employing other-mothering techniques (McArthur & Lane, 2018).

Conclusion

As Black female Social Work researchers, educators, and practitioners, we will frequently utilize Black womanist and feminist concepts to heal communities that are composed of Black women and girls, Black men and boys, and as Stephens (2016) quotes Phillips (2006) "but also all humanity" (Stephens, 2016, p. 3). Black feminist pedagogy begins from a place of love for Black women and girls (Collins, 1996; McArthur & Lane, 2018) and the research and practical care of Social Work spreads it to the larger community. Stephens (2016) describes womanism as a lens for developing understanding among diverse cultures. As researchers and practitioners, Black feminism and womanism provides spaces to connect our phenomenological orientations as Black women to critique and challenge systems of oppression for all of society. There is certainly room for Black feminist and womanist theory to benefit those that are neither female nor Black. This theoretical framework is not exclusionary but is necessary in order to ensure that liberation is possible for all.

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