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Making visible the invisible

Cultural scripts that inform relationships among African American women

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Introduction

Despite the large body of literature illustrating their adaptivity and resilience (Collins 1990; McLanahan and Garfinkel 1989), African American women are a unique demographic group due to their double jeopardy status with regard to race and gender (Collins 1990). However, King (1988) contends that the concept of double jeopardy is limited and argues that African American women experience multiple forms of oppression that also include classism. Class, gender, and race represent salient cultural group memberships in the United States which become the lenses through which all experiences are lived and interpreted (Constantine 2002). The intersection of these cultural identities influences and shapes one's realities because of their dynamic pervasiveness in one's private and public spheres. Publically, these cultural identities are situated within societal hierarchies of power that in turn are embedded within institutions. Privately or individually, one's identity is developed in concert with these cultural identities which entails the way they are viewed and valued by others as well as the self.

One cannot escape the pervasiveness or the impact of these cultural identities because they are engrained in the ideology and fabric of the United States. Attempts to partial out these cultural identities as separate and distinct have resulted in overgeneralizations and over-simplified categories that mask the threat of the domination enacted by one group versus the oppression experienced by another group (Constantine 2002). King (1988: 47) argues that instead of viewing the relationship among these oppressions in simplistic, dichotomous, independent, and additive forms, they should be conceptualized as "interdependent control systems." King (1988) proposes the use of the term *multiple jeopardy* because it captures the essence of the dynamic and multiplicative relationship among the various oppressions experienced by many African American women. Jones (2000) identifies three levels of racism or forms of oppression that African American women have to encounter: institutional racism, personally mediated racism, and internalized racism. Institutional racism entails the inequitable distribution of resources based on race; personally mediated racism involves the prejudice and discrimination enacted by various sources; and, finally, internalized racism is the acceptance of the negative messages/stereotypes inflicted on one's racial group.

As a result of their multiple jeopardy status, many African American women endure a barrage of microaggressions, defined as brief and normalized verbal, behavioral, and environmental insults that are targeted towards marginalized groups (Collins 1990; Sue 2010). When such groups experience these chronic microaggressions, their self-esteem is often attacked and they can experience lower feelings of subjective well-being and worthiness that often produce frustration and depletion of psychic energy (Sue 2010). Microaggressions contain damaging cultural norms and stereotypes that are often internalized and, in some cases, actualized by some minority groups. These stereotypes are referred to as *controlling images* that reflect the intersection of race, gender, and class and attempt to make discrimination and oppression acceptable (Collins 1990). These stereotypical portrayals of African American women have resulted in forms of self-hatred, self-devaluation, social isolation, and the weight of attempting to fulfill unrealistic expectations. Despite their proactive attempts to combat microaggressions and their associated negative outcomes, society's perpetuation of them can inform the relational dynamics of many African American women. If they internalize these various forms of oppressive stereotypes, some African American women may live in a perpetual state of distrust that may lead to the following: a focus on self-sufficiency that rejects assistance and support from others; leeriness in relationships; isolation; and, ultimately, the tendency to suffer in silence. Although these coping and adaptive strategies serve as protection, they also tend to undermine accessing much needed social support systems such as the counseling profession.

This chapter will attempt to answer the following questions: What types of microaggressions do contemporary African American women experience? How do they make sense of them? In what ways do class, gender, and race intersect to inform as well as perpetuate these microaggressions not only from out-group members, but also in-group members? What types of cultural scripts or ways of explaining and framing their experiences emerge as response strategies? How do microaggressions and the resulting cultural scripts influence African American women's relationships? This chapter answers these questions by investigating African American women's understanding of their relational experiences as well as coping strategies that influence the possible development and maintenance of intimate, authentic, and mutually supportive relationships. Moreover, the analysis suggests implementation of relational cultural theory (RCT), a theoretical counseling approach that centers the experiences of African American women.

RCT provides a theoretical framework to explore and explicate African American women's relational dynamics because it identifies the sources and functions of controlling images that undermine relationships with others and with self as well as some of the ways they can shape lived experiences. RCT provides a therapeutic approach that recognizes the cultural uniqueness of African American women's experiences instead of diagnosing them as pathological or deviant. The integration of these cultural messages, stereotypes, and microaggressions within the framework of RCT has the potential to provide a viable theoretical foundation that authentically explicates the relational experiences of African American women.

The study implemented a phenomenological approach via the use of focus group discussions to capture some of the ways African American women collectively construct meaning of their lived experiences. Twenty African American women were selected to participate. Several themes emerged from these discussions, such as: identity salience; early aged encounters with racism; educational attainment—a form of masked classism, standards of beauty—colorism; strong Black woman motif as a coping mechanism; self-in-relation motif that describes various ways these women view themselves in relation to their communities, families, and African American men; backlash of success; strategies of disconnection; obligation to social action;

and spirituality and faith. These themes were utilized to identify and illustrate African American women's relational experiences and to construct and propose culturally sensitive and relevant therapeutic interventions.

RCT research agenda for African American women

RCT proposes that women carry the basic need for connection for all people throughout the life span and there is active participation in the development of other people, and a person engages others in such a manner as to foster their psychological development (Jordan 2010). These basic tenets of the theory propose that humans are "hard-wired" to desire connection and that this growth occurs in connection with others (Duffey and Somody 2011: 226). Connection within the context of RCT entails the ability to "participate in a relationship that invites exposure, curiosity, and openness to possibility." There are eight concepts that inform the basic tenets of the theory: growth fostering relationships, mutual empathy, authenticity, strategies of disconnection, the central relational paradox, relational images, relational resilience, and relational competency (Duffey and Somody 2011).

Jenkins (2000) advocates applying RCT to African American women, and some primary reasons include RCT's ability to address the ways that power, domination, cultural oppression, marginalization, various forms of social injustice, etc., affect connection and disconnections within relationships as well as one's mental health. Walker (2008: 90) asserts the movement toward connection is mediated by various relational contexts that have been "raced, engendered, sexualized, situated along dimensions of class, physical ability, religion, or whatever constructions that carry ontological significance in the culture." One premise of RCT is that experiences such as racism, sexism, classism, isolation, shame, humiliation, and microaggressions are relational violations and traumas that produce suffering. RCT explicates the aspects of relational connectedness of African American women in creating and maintaining viable support systems.

These social systems of support can also prove to be problematic to the psychological well-being of African American women because of their embeddedness within these systems. Support systems can become problematic when they are negative, harmful, or nonexistent. These problems can be correlated to the disconnections that occur within these interactions.

These negative stereotypes have destructive effects on social relationships. These stereotypes influence the ways in which information is encoded and interpreted, which also informs the individual's behavior as well as power dynamics within the relationship. The internalization of these stereotypes may lead to behavior that induces disconnections in the form of discriminatory practices towards the very social support systems they desperately need. Turner (1997) exclaims African American women will sometimes discriminate against one another based on such variables as skin color, physical appearance, socioeconomic status, and hair type. She refers to this type of in-group discriminatory behavior as a reflection of "self-hatred, insecurity, and sometimes superiority" (Turner 1997: 79). They also may develop a self-defensive and protective stance based on a fear of being hurt by other African American women. These protective strategies also influence African American women's interactions with other support systems such as the mental health profession. The goal is to enhance African American women's relational connections within the various social support systems as well as the mental health profession to improve their quality and quantity of life. Controlling images and stereotypes will be termed as cultural scripts as well as the familial messages that influence relationship connections and disconnections.

The research study presented five research questions to examine and investigate various aspects of the relational dynamics of African American women:

R1: In what ways do African American women conceptualize and define Black womanhood?
R2: What are some of the multiple oppressive themes (relational or cultural images) present within the narratives presented by African American women?
R3: What are some of the cultural messages learned and internalized through society as well as interaction with the family or with the significant caregiver(s)?
R4: What are the interpretations, resistances, coping strategies constructed by African American women to combat the multiple oppressions they experience?
R5: What aspects of relational cultural theory moderate or are congruent with these strategies?

The primary method of investigation entailed a phenomenological approach that focuses on describing the lived experiences of the respondents. The research study utilized focus groups as a viable method of gathering phenomenological data because such a setting allows for the occurrence of a dynamic process that allows the researcher to observe the ways meaning of experiences is constructed among a group of individuals. Focus groups are a viable method to investigate how African American women actively contribute to the negotiation and construction of meanings regarding their lived experiences. Utilizing focus groups to investigate the impact of these cultural and family scripts on the relational dynamics among African American women makes it possible to observe the interactive and interpretive processes that occur among a group of African American women. An RCT research agenda that implements groups to examine these relational dynamics may provide insightful data that may stop the hemorrhaging of African American clients from the services offered by the mental health profession.

Analysis of the data

The discussions were audio taped via a digital recorder, which resulted in transcripts. The transcripts served as the data for analysis. The systematic processes included a coding scheme, which primarily consisted of a content analysis of the transcripts. These transcripts were analyzed and coded into appropriate and common themes. The themes offered a more thorough understanding of African American women's psychological experience of self and other, as well as coping strategies used to either engage in or disengage from mutually intimate and empowering relationships.

RQ1: In what ways do African American women conceptualize and define Black womanhood?

The first research question addressed the various ways the participants identified themselves and framed their experiences. African American women have multiple identities and it was within this context that several themes emerged such as identity salience, strength and resilience, and educational attainment—a form of masked classism.

Identity salience. The intersection of these women's identities can present challenges for identity salience as well as the maintenance of congruency among these identities. The women

elaborated extensively on aspects of their racial and gendered identity. The racial and gendered aspects were two very prominent and relevant aspects of their self-concept. The salience of these two identities contains ideological influences that in turn define the ways in which these women make meaning of their lives, themselves, and their interactions with others. The meaning making process of identity for African American women often entail the entanglement of stereotypes, messages from authorities, and the approval of others. Their individual narratives contained aspects of their personal identity that are intricately connected to their social identities and collective histories as African American women.

Strength and resilience. Many women described strength as the display of resilience and connected the concept to generations of modeling and narratives from which they were exposed by their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Although the women emphasized the gendered and racial aspects of their identity, the aspect of class was subtle yet profound in how the women responded to the issue of identity. One of the ways class distinctions emerged was through education.

Educational attainment: masked classism. Education was viewed as a vehicle for upward mobility on the socioeconomic ladder. Some women expressed that educational attainment becomes a degree of affirmation or shaming among women in the African American community. The aspect of class was masked in the form of educational attainment. Many women were well educated and had attained bachelors, masters, and terminal degrees. When the conversation shifted towards expectations of African American women, educational attainment was very prominent in how these women defined themselves and the ways they defined and interacted with others. One woman expressed that even as some African American women greet one another for the first time, these class distinctions are brought to bear because one question that is always asked is what college did one attend?

Class has been reduced into primarily two classes on a continuum, the oppresser/oppressed, the powerful/powerless, or the have/have nots. Class is viewed as a relational system of opposition with one side opposed against the other that informs the various perceptions these groups have of not only one another, but of themselves. Unfortunately, these perceptions are informed by problematic connotations of class that in turn informs these controlling images that are internalized by African American women. These controlling images become the filters by which one's lived experience and reality is interpreted. Some African American women impose a hierarchal system of stratification within their own minority/ethnic group based on these controlling images. The controlling images of the Welfare queen and even the Sapphire stereotypes are heavily steeped in connotations of class. Relationally, some African American women view and value one another via these cultural connotations of class because unfortunately many have come to believe the myths that America purports concerning the issue of class.

RQ2: What are some of the multiple oppressive themes (relational or cultural images) present within the narratives presented by African American women?

The second research question addressed the oppression that often accompanies many African American women's experiences. Several oppressive themes emerged: early-aged traumatic encounters with racism and discrimination, struggles with Eurocentric standards of beauty that entail gendered stereotypes and the concept of colorism, and relational dynamics with African American women. Several of the women provided detailed accounts of several

traumatic racial experiences that took place during their childhood. As the women recalled these stories, although the word traumatic was not used, this is the very word that should describe their experiences.

The narratives presented within the focus groups should be examined within a context of their personal and collective histories; especially within a socio-cultural context that has entailed historical trauma that for African Americans included slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the struggle to obtain civil rights in a nation that viewed and treated this ethnic group as objects and property for functionary purposes. It is no surprise that these narratives consist of oppressive themes but just because one is removed from a historical context does not mean that this context is removed from them, especially since these forms of oppressions via microaggressions, racism, and discrimination still persist. It becomes crucial to connect the experiences of African American women to a historical context that often includes historical trauma.

These accounts of racism have been deemed as a form of "reality-based and repetitive trauma" in the lives of African American women (Daniel 2000: 126). Daniel (2000) asserts that the literature concerning trauma fails to be inclusive of the racist traumatic experiences that African American women encounter on a consistent basis such as: distorted images of African American women as a form of trauma and specific traumatic racial memories. Daniel (2000) notes that within the highly acclaimed book by Herman (1992), *Trauma and Recovery*, there was a failure to discuss racism as psychological trauma or the civil rights movement. The memories recounted by these women certainly demonstrated the vividness of their recollection, which, as Yvette exclaimed, she has only begun to deconstruct at the age of twenty-four. Traumatic memories and their cumulative effects represent very painful microaggressions that these women have and continue to endure.

Relational dynamics of African American women. When asked to describe how they perceived other African American women, the responses entailed some hurtful experiences and some prevalent myths. Shay provided some insight into this oppressive theme by explaining why she maintains boundaries with African American women.

> Shay: [Now] "I do have some boundaries or you get hurt. And I'm hopping around like a victim because XYZ has made me feel bad because they're perpetuating that stereotype that we can't get along, we fight, we're constantly competing against each other. . . . How does it become a competition? I'm just trying to be your friend. And all of a sudden we get to that and I'm like where did this come from? And so for me I have to now maintain my boundaries."

Other women articulated similar themes of competition and even frustration with the behavior exhibited by African American women towards one another. Some women mentioned negative aspects of jealously, aggressiveness, and cattiness in some of their perceptions and interactions with African American women. The women recalled stories of how they were hurt or wounded by these interactions and how it seemed that African American women just had all of these issues that they projected upon others. This type of interaction could be identified as a relational violation. Banks' (2006) definition of relational violation within the context of trauma includes aspects such as childhood physical and sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, assault, and terrorism, but similar to Daniel's (2000) assertion that aspects of trauma should be extended to include the context of racial trauma, these women have experienced relational violation. The very ones with whom these women have shared

history, shared interest, shared context, shared culture, and at times shared institutions are the very ones who have wounded or betrayed them.

The problem with these women's assessment and interpretation of the interactions is that oftentimes there is a failure to make a connection or correlate the behavior to the impact of the internalization of oppressive messages, to sources beyond that individual, or even beyond that particular minority group. One's actions and interactions with others occur as a result of experiencing these oppressive themes. The problem this presents is that instead of identifying the impact that these oppressive themes have on the individual, it becomes more accessible and attainable to pinpoint the problem with the individual. This results in perpetuating a "blame the victim" mentality when in actuality there is an ideological system that goes unnoticed, untouched, and in essence acquitted of any adverse influence. The third research question addressed how these women articulated their experiences relative to the messages they received from external sources.

RQ3: What are some of the cultural messages learned and internalized through society as well as interaction with family or with the significant caregiver(s)?

Some of the oppressive themes articulated by these women included the stereotypes or controlling images such as the Welfare queen, Jezebel motif, and Sapphire, which was also referred to as the aggressive or angry Black woman. The themes that emerged were those that entailed stereotypes and controlling images, strong Black woman and role strain, and backlash of success. Examples from two participants articulate their experiences regarding society's expectations in relation to these stereotypes.

> LaToya: [Society expects that] "I'm gonna be on welfare. I'm gonna have children out of wedlock. And I'm going to like other people said like be their mother and father and the head of my household without any male presence. Or I'm going to be emasculating to men if there is no male presence in the home which is bad but a stereotype. It's not my reality at all."
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> Donna: "I was in the grocery store line and the guy behind the counter asked me if I'm paying with my card, EBT card."

Strong Black woman and role strain. Another stereotype mentioned within these focus group discussions was that of the strong Black woman. When asked to describe the term Black woman, many used the word strength. A focus group addressed the origin of this expectation as well as the role strain.

> Shay: "I want to say when you talk about all expectations in terms of society's expectations of Black women. I think they are all negative. And then I want to highlight in particular, Black women being strong. In here we use it as being positive, right. But I think it's sort of a negative expectation as well. Like you're the bridge that everybody else walks on. You're validating everyone else and you just get stuck. Sometimes being the strong Black woman is negative because you're taking your husband's nonsense, you're taking society's nonsense, and it's a negative expectation to even be a strong Black woman. It's so negative. Like all the expectations, all the stereotypes are negative, even though we may not operate our lives in a negative scenario but I think the expectations and what society puts on us is always negative."

She continues, "How is that helpful to my own well-being if I'm taking everybody else's [stuff]? I mean, what time do I have for myself to develop myself? You know, that's not positive at all."

Success backlash. Another prevalent theme emerged regarding conformity to these expectations that entailed experiencing some backlash within their families and at times their communities as a result of their success. One participant told the story about strides she made to improve her life that entailed moving away from family. Kim states, "I moved to the South with nothing but my daughter and my car, searching for a better life. I didn't want to stay up there in Detroit. I believe my sisters; my family put me in the position where I'm just too good for them. But I'm not." Another form of backlash entailed the contradictory messages or expectations the women received from their families.

It is important to note that the internalization of these oppressive messages and themes are maintained because of stigmatic and systemic external sources. These external sources construct, maintain, and perpetuate some of the oppressive themes experienced by these African American women. The women spoke at great lengths about the distorted and controlling images produced and perpetuated by society. Many of them articulated instances where they had to contend with fending off the controlling images of the emasculating Sapphire or angry Black woman, the promiscuous Jezebel, and the Welfare queen. Daniel (2000) exclaims these distorted images are a source of trauma for African American women. These women insisted they experienced the pressure not only by society, but also by their families to excel and become the bearer for the race. Some women experienced difficulties when they failed to conform to these role expectations communicated by society, family, friends, and within their social relationships, which begs the question of how they cope with these oppressive themes.

RQ4: What are the interpretations, resistances, coping strategies constructed by African American women to combat the multiple oppressions they experience?

As some women articulated their experiences regarding these multiple oppressions, it was evident these experiences seemed to be a very consistent and almost natural form of existence. These women had constructed various methods and strategies for navigating these oppressive themes. The coping strategies that emerged included the following: stereotype resistance/strong Black woman motif as a coping mechanism; obligation to social action; and spirituality and faith.

Stereotype resistance. Some mentioned they did not agree with the stereotypes perpetuated by society concerning African American women; in fact, one participant claimed she would go out of her way to destroy the stereotype that African American women cannot form viable and supportive relationships. The women demonstrated an awareness of these stereotypes and vowed that they themselves would not adhere to the stereotypes perpetuated by society. African Americans are not just passive victims of these various forms of oppression, but many have challenged and fought these various forms of oppression. Phyllis expressed her willingness and efforts to debunk the stereotype that African American women cannot connect or relate to one another.

Strong Black woman as coping mechanism. The enactment and embodiment of the strong Black woman was also another coping strategy employed by the participants. Interwoven throughout

these discussions was the affirmation that Black women have to be strong, vigilant, and resilient in order to not only survive the various oppressions they encounter, but also to thrive. Many women utilized the strong Black woman motif. This motif served as a double-edged sword because on one hand it was oppressive, but on the other hand it assisted these women with the drive and motivation to keep moving despite the adversity. These women were almost braggadocios regarding their ability, versus other cultures, to not only withstand the heat, stay in the kitchen, but own the kitchen at the end of the day. They viewed it as a testament to their strength, to their character, and to their race.

Obligation to social action. The aspect of resilience coincided with the motif of collective responsibility that entailed some form of social action. Ericka stated that her educational experience often involved filling a quota, but did not view it as totally negative because she was able to use that position to her advantage in order to assist others.

> "I said okay, I'll be the token. I'll be the quota leader and I'll do my best because I know I can go back and get some more. I'll be the token so that was the positive connotation to it. But it was a benefit. So the positive of being a token was that I can reach back and get somebody else. I can enter into this institution, you have to have a quota meter, I'm gonna meet that quota. I'm gonna come in here, get this degree, and go back and help others."

Some women were actively involved in mentoring youth whether in the position as teachers, or ministers within their churches. The women spoke with a sense of urgency and compassion in order to uplift and engage their communities to bring forth a form of unity and activism.

Spirituality and faith. There is one more strategy that emerged during these discussions that proved to be integral to how many of these women interpreted and coped with their experiences. Spirituality or faith was a very essential component in many of the narratives. Yvette stated, "I think spirituality plays a large role when I think of Black women. I'm a divinity student so I think about this a lot." Many participants echoed this sentiment.

The women mentioned spirituality as an integral aspect of their lives and how in many cases it helped them to survive some of their traumatic experiences. Spirituality has been deemed as a core component of African American identity. Williams, Frame, and Green (1999: 262) assert, "Spirituality [for African Americans] is not compartmentalized into systemized beliefs and practices but woven into everyday experience." Their relationship with God was perceived as a major source of strength and they expressed how it was in essence embedded within their DNA to seek a higher power. This concept of liberation and freedom and connectedness to God resembles aspects of liberation theology where, in spite of the adversity, deliverance is possible through an almighty God.

The Negro spirituals resound with this reliance on a God that enables one to enter into a space of transcendence beyond the mundane, the seemingly improbable, the microaggressions, and the racial trauma that saturates their lived experiences. Spirituality is a core aspect of African American identity and is considered as a powerful resource for personal growth and empowerment with African American women (Williams et al. 1999). Although these coping strategies and forms of resistance have been sources of survival and resiliency in navigating their lived experiences in the public sphere, it would be interesting to discover the ways these strategies impacted their private sphere; namely, their relational experiences with self and with others.

RQ5: What aspects of relational cultural theory moderate or are congruent with these strategies?

One oppressive theme that emerged was that some African American women had issues relating to one another. Relational cultural theory may provide some insight into these relational dynamics. Several RCT themes that emerged included: self-in-relation motif, desire for connection, strategies of disconnection, fear and resistance of vulnerability, and marginalization. One basic premise of RCT is the concept of self-in-relation to others which describes various ways these women view themselves in relation to their communities, families, and more specifically African American men.

Self-in-relation motif: community, family, and African American men. One of the often mentioned aspects concerning this self-in-relation concept was of African American women's relationships with African American men. As the women discussed aspects of their identity many of the comments focused on the various ways they are perceived by African American men. For instance, one participant spoke of the ways in which her identity was tied to that of African American men. This confirmed another aspect of the Afrocentric view regarding the expectations of African American women in relation to African American men. Collins (1990) states that African American women are often relegated to the role of the silent supporter of all African American men. This notion is often an unwritten rule that Black women are supposed to relentlessly support Black men (Collins 1990). This notion has seemingly been connected into the very fabric of these women's identity, which may explain why it pierces to the very core of the construction of their identity.

Goodman (1990: 4) asserts a paradox that often occurs in the identity development of African American women, "She is socialized to define her existence in relationship to Black men while simultaneously seeing herself as an independent being . . . which makes African American women's process of self-development additionally complicated." The very ones with whom their identity is tied meaning the Black man; they are also the very ones who espouse and project these controlling images onto their personhood. These women often experience rejection and a sense that they do not measure up in warranting the attention and acceptance of Black men. Within RCT, the self-in-relation concept is one that promotes a positive exchange of growth in relation to others, which promotes a sense of interdependence and to some degree collectivism. However, the self-in-relation within the context of an Afrocentric approach presents some problems for African American women. One problem with this embedded Afrocentric approach is that it negates other aspects of their identity where there is an inability to self-author their own identities.

The identities of many women are inextricably tied to relationships via community, family, and African American men that have been informed by oppressive themes, ideologies, and stereotypes. As a result, African American women's internal identities are informed by oppressive and contaminated social constructions of their identities.

Desire for connection. These women expressed their desire and at times their struggles in connecting with one another. In some instances this presumed solidarity was not the case. Regardless of these challenges, there were definitely instances where themes of relational resiliency and connections with other African American women were evident.

Sisterhood is a term coined from the feminist movement in which women subscribed to the notion as inspiration towards activism. The terminology is important regarding the relational dynamics of African American women. Sisterhood symbolizes sorority and fraternity and

functions as a form of protection, self-help, and survival. It is often within sisterhood that African American women can preserve their sanity from the traumatic experiences. Although these women have a desire to connect and recognize the value and the necessity of connecting with other African American women, parallel to this desire for connection were also some fears of being wounded that produced some protective mechanisms or strategies of disconnections.

Strategies of disconnection. Shay disclosed information concerning her strained relationships with some African American women and she provided some rationale regarding the protective mechanisms she employed in these relational dynamics. Shay has attempted connection but was wounded in the process, but still insisted on trying to push through the pain to connect. Despite attempts to achieve relational resiliency, disconnections do occur. The central relational paradox is the RCT concept that provides a rationale for these disconnections. This concept entails a drive towards connection along with a fear of connection because vulnerability has been punished or ignored. There is a fear of being vulnerable that leads to limited disclosure, masking of self, protection of self, and, ultimately, inauthentic interactions. Many women expressed ways in which they guarded themselves from potential wounding interactions with other African American women. While the women expressed their desire for connection, they also expressed the necessity to construct barriers of protection to avoid being hurt or rejected. The women spoke of guarding themselves even in the midst of attempting to make connections. Some women described painful experiences they encountered in the presence of other African American women and, as a result, these encounters continued to inform their relational experiences with one another, which leads to another tenet of RCT—relational images.

Relational images entail the formation of expectations regarding how individuals will be treated within relationships that in turn inform their interpretations of relational interactions with others. These relational images also inform one's conception of self. These women interpreted the outcome of these relational interactions as a reflection of themselves. They internalized these interactions and, if these interactions were negative, that induced a negative perception of self-in-relation that was wounding to one's self concept. The wounded individual disconnects from the relationship and drives toward self-preservation as a survivalist strategy. Controlling images and racist stereotypes are two of the major processes added to the formation of these relational images. These elements that have been enacted upon and internalized by these women undergird, intermingle, and inform these relational images. There seemed to be a reciprocal relationship between these dynamics where controlling images are informing and reinforcing the relational image and the relational image informed the women's relational dynamics.

Disconnections persist because these relational images have become the truth mechanism by which all relationships are defined. Erica admitted that in her various attempts to connect with some African American women, she experienced their suspicion regarding her motives and as a result she just did not bother to connect. Erica carried these notions along with her as relational images and her present and future interactions with African American women were informed by these past experiences. In articulating their experiences, many women expressed the surface emotion of anger; however, they were really shielding themselves from the deeper emotion of hurt. Hurt signifies an aspect of vulnerability that according to many of these women should be avoided at all costs.

Fear and resistance of vulnerability. Claudette mentioned the word vulnerability, which is another theme that emerged during these discussions regarding the relational experiences of

African American women. Time and time again, these women expressed the inability to display vulnerability, inexperience of witnessing vulnerability within their social relationships, and the adverse consequences of displaying vulnerability. Within another focus group, two participants spoke of the consequences of being vulnerable. RCT explains that one main reason disconnections occur is the fear of being vulnerable. Within RCT, vulnerability is an essential element in making intimate and deep connections. The strong Black woman persona does not permit displays of vulnerability because such displays signify weaknesses and incompetence. Many women expressed strategies of suppression and the shutting down of emotions from self and others in order to preserve the controlling image of the strong Black woman.

Marginalization. These women were considered as the other and are often pushed towards the margins of society. The racial and gendered identity of these women automatically places these women at the margins of society. Some of their responses such as having a lack of trust towards others, being on guard, and experiencing shame are the vestiges of the marginalization they encounter on a consistent basis. Jordan (2008: 191) states, "The pain and woundedness of being pushed to the margin, excluded, devalued, stigmatized, or oppressed are nothing to celebrate. Marginalization poses a major threat to our sense of connection, to our authenticity, and often to our physical well-being." Many women operated and fought from a position of marginalization that had profound implications on the ways they viewed themselves and interpreted their relational encounters. When the lens from which they internally view themselves is one of stigmatization, the ones with whom they encounter may either serve as a reflection that affirms that characterization or ones that not only assist in deconstructing the characterization, but also assist in co-constructing aspects of self and self-in-relation from a place of authenticity and self-authorship. The therapeutic relationship has the opportunity to provide a safe space where relational competency may be accomplished.

Implications for therapeutic interventions

African American women have the ability to identify and discern the ideological influences of stereotypes, controlling images, and societal expectations on their lived experiences. Although many could identify the ideologies, there remained some form of disconnect regarding the ways these aspects informed definitions of self, definitions of others, and definitions of self-in-relation to others. These women have devised coping strategies to survive in a world that places them at the margins and so, although they fight from this position, they often maintain this posture in relating to others; especially one another. Some women enacted certain behaviors as a result of these coping strategies; however, when the behavior is not connected to a context, the individual is to blame or the woman is to blame instead of the oppressive ideologies and traumatic experiences of oppressive acts of racism, sexism, classism, and discrimination that may inform the behavior. Regardless of the strength that many African American women exhibit, they are not impenetrable, some of these oppressive experiences and messages do manage to seep into one's conscious where they are internalized as a part of one's socially constructed identity that informs the ways they interact with others and with themselves. For this reason, it becomes even more important to make visible these invisible cultural scripts that inform the relational dynamics of African American women.

The therapeutic relationship can serve as that space and holding environment where African American women begin to experience a process of healing from the traumas that have polluted their identities. Walker (2008) explains the many ways in which the individual selves that present within this therapeutic context are informed by multiple identities that

have been formed by multiple socio-cultural contexts. Because these multiple identities carry multiple oppressions, it is reasonable to assert that acute disconnections occur as a result. Within the RCT framework these acute disconnections have the possibility to deepen connections because acute conflict can be an invitation into a deeper level of knowing and a source of growth (Walker 2008). It becomes problematic when these acute disconnections lead to chronic disconnections that "lead to isolation, stagnation, and hopelessness" (Walker 2008: 90). Within the RCT model, the purpose of psychotherapy is movement toward relational healing and it is within this context that African American women must find solace.

RCT provides a response and rationale for the relational dynamics of African American women because it permits that these women's lived experiences are embedded within a culture of chronic disconnection. It permits the prevalence and impact of the matrix of domination, intersection of identities, and controlling and distorted images as culprits responsible for the internalized oppression that women project upon themselves as well as others. RCT permits the notion that African American women have been and continue to be traumatized by their environments. This trauma acts upon these individuals in such a way where it produces neurobiological effects. Banks (2006) exclaims that trauma affects the brain that forms pathways where people under acute stress have either a flight, fight, or freeze response. The center of the human stress response system is the amygdala that responds to any perceived threat. In terms of relational relevance and implications, "it is the reactive firing of the amygdala that causes people to fear any movement in relationship and respond in ways that are disconnecting" (Banks 2006: 29–30).

As a result of the neurobiological impact of trauma, it becomes difficult for African American women to ascertain safety within relationships. The triggering of traumatic experiences can produce chemically induced fight, flight, or freeze responses by an individual, which explains the coping mechanisms and strategies of resistance employed by some African American women. These women dare not relinquish these coping mechanisms because in doing so they realize their desire and need for authentic connection that exposes their vulnerability. These women's extreme opposition to vulnerability is that it literally terrifies them which in turn may trigger a chemical, traumatic reaction (Banks 2006). The oppressive themes and experiences of African American women have had altering and traumatic effects on their personhood and relationships. Placing RCT within the context of African American women's relational dynamics may provide assistance for these women.

Another key aspect of RCT that makes this framework applicable for African American women is the inclusion of focus group discussions to investigate RCT. The relational dynamics of African American women provide a viable rational for implementing this theoretical framework within a group counseling context. Some aspects of RCT are already being implemented within therapeutic groups. Such groups promote the concept of sisterhood that is essential to the preservation of relational connectedness among African American women. Applying RCT within a group process that is interactional and dynamic will allow for a visibility that oftentimes these women do not experience.

Summary and conclusion

In conclusion, coping mechanisms employed by African American women to navigate their lived experiences with a sense of resiliency and vigilance were identified and explicated. Information was provided that also demonstrated what operates parallel and sometimes beneath those strategies. These women have an intense desire to connect, but are traumatized, paralyzed, and stagnated by various oppressions. The therapist must not only

be cognizant, but vigilant in identifying and empathizing with these complexities when counseling African American women. One of the most powerful ways that enable therapists to authentically connect with African American women is to allow them the space to articulate their narratives. It was within the participants' narratives where their souls, hearts, and minds connected to provide voice to their experiences. In order to realize the depth and significance of such stories, the therapist must be willing to research and gain knowledge of the ideological struggles many African American women encounter and in which they are simultaneously embedded.

Some therapists may not have the ability to connect through shared experiences with these women but there is value and appreciation in realizing that at least someone took the time to know and acknowledge the struggle. Knowledge and acknowledgement speak volumes to individuals who have been pushed to the margins, which in turn open the door to deeper connection. The therapist must not be fearful to navigate through this terrain that often entails some moments of discomfort for both individuals and some acute disconnections that may ultimately lead to growth fostering relationships. For instance, White therapists may seek to avoid these discussions because of the fear, shame, guilt, and at times the inability to understand the relevancy of such issues within the counseling context. RCT makes allowances for the authenticity and vulnerability of the therapist and relevancy of these issues to emerge.

Therapists must be willing to acknowledge the positions of power and privilege from which they are situated that inform the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. They must be willing to acknowledge and covey these notions with transparency and genuineness so that unfiltered dialogue and authentic disclosure emerges. Therapists must realize that it is within these connections that both of them may fear, that ultimately their healing and restoration resides.

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