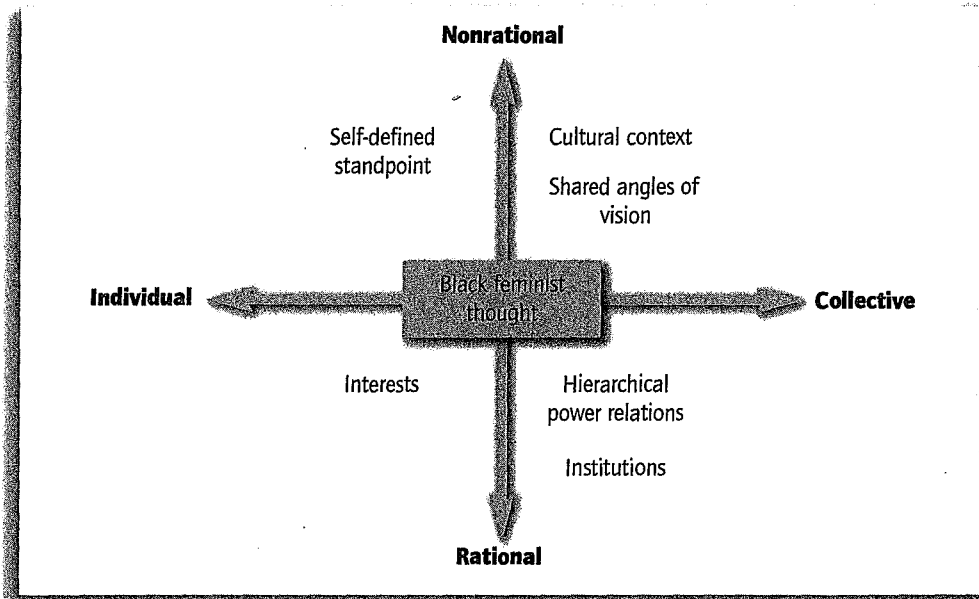


Figure 3.5 Collins's Basic Concepts and Theoretical Orientation

Reading

Introduction to *Black Feminist Thought*

In the following selection from Collins's most highly acclaimed book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins exposes and discusses the tension for black women as agents of knowledge, acknowledging that "Black culture and many of its traditions oppress women" (Collins 1990/2000:230). However, she also warns against portraying black women either "solely as passive, unfortunate recipients of racial and sexual abuses" or as "heroic figures who easily engage in resisting oppression" (ibid.:238). In sum, Collins continually emphasizes the complexity of systems of both domination and resistance.

Black Feminist Thought (1990)

Patricia Hill Collins

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Widely used yet increasingly difficult to define, U.S. Black feminist thought encompasses diverse and often contradictory meanings. . . .

Rather than developing definitions and arguing over naming practices—for example, whether this thought should be called Black feminism, womanism, Afrocentric feminism, Africana womanism, and the like—a more useful approach lies in revisiting the reasons why Black feminist

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thought exists at all. Exploring six distinguishing features that characterize Black feminist thought may provide the common ground that is so sorely needed both among African-American women, and between African-American women and all others whose collective knowledge or thought has a similar purpose. Black feminist thought's distinguishing features need not be unique and may share much with other bodies of knowledge. Rather, it is the *convergence* of these distinguishing features that gives U.S. Black feminist thought its distinctive contours.

Why U.S. Black Feminist Thought?

Black feminism remains important because U.S. Black women constitute an oppressed group. As a collectivity, U.S. Black women participate in a *dialectical* relationship linking African-American women's oppression and activism. Dialectical relationships of this sort mean that two parties are opposed and opposite. As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed.

In a similar fashion, the overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought is also to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it. If intersecting oppressions did not exist, Black feminist thought and similar oppositional knowledges would be unnecessary. As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions. Since Black women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions themselves are eliminated, Black feminist thought supports broad principles of social justice that transcend U.S. Black women's particular needs.

Because so much of U.S. Black feminism has been filtered through the prism of the U.S. context, its contours have been greatly affected by the specificity of American multiculturalism (Takaki 1993). In particular, U.S. Black feminist thought and practice respond to a fundamental contradiction of U.S. society. On the one hand, democratic promises of individual freedom, equality under the law, and social justice are made to all American citizens. Yet on the other

hand, the reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status persists. Groups organized around race, class, and gender in and of themselves are not inherently a problem. However, when African-Americans, poor people, women, and other groups discriminated against see little hope for group-based advancement, this situation constitutes social injustice.

Within this overarching contradiction, U.S. Black women encounter a distinctive set of social practices that accompany our particular history within a unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions. Race is far from being the only significant marker of group difference—class, gender, sexuality, religion, and citizenship status all matter greatly in the United States (Andersen and Collins 1998). Yet for African-American women, the effects of institutionalized racism remain visible and palpable. Moreover, the institutionalized racism that African-American women encounter relies heavily on racial segregation and accompanying discriminatory practices designed to deny U.S. Blacks equitable treatment. Despite important strides to desegregate U.S. society since 1970, racial segregation remains deeply entrenched in housing, schooling, and employment (Massey and Denton 1993). For many African-American women, racism is not something that exists in the distance. We encounter racism in everyday situations in workplaces, stores, schools, housing, and daily social interaction (St. Jean and Feagin 1998). Most Black women do not have the opportunity to befriend White women and men as neighbors, nor do their children attend school with White children. Racial segregation remains a fundamental feature of the U.S. social landscape, leaving many African-Americans with the belief that "the more things change, the more they stay the same" (Collins 1998a, 11–43). Overlaying these persisting inequalities is a rhetoric of color blindness designed to render these social inequalities invisible. In a context where many believe that to talk of race fosters racism, equality allegedly lies in treating everyone the same. Yet as Kimberle Crenshaw (1997) points out, "it is fairly obvious that treating different things the same can generate as much inequality as treating the same things differently" (p. 285).

Although racial segregation is now organized differently than in prior eras (Collins 1998a, 11-43), being Black and female in the United States continues to expose African-American women to certain common experiences. U.S. Black women's similar work and family experiences as well as our participation in diverse expressions of African-American culture mean that, overall, U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. For individual women, the particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall. Many African-American women grasp this connection between what one does and how one thinks. Hannah Nelson, an elderly Black domestic worker, discusses how work shapes the perspectives of African-American and White women: "Since I have to work, I don't really have to worry about most of the things that most of the white women I have worked for are worrying about. And if these women did their own work, they would think just like I do—about this, anyway" (Gwaltney 1980, 4). Ruth Shays, a Black inner-city resident, points out how variations in men's and women's experiences lead to differences in perspective. "The mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same" she notes, "but this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don't even have to think about" (Gwaltney 1980, 33).

A recognition of this connection between experience and consciousness that shapes the everyday lives of individual African-American women often pervades the works of Black women activists and scholars. In her autobiography, Ida B. Wells-Barnett describes how the lynching of her friends had such an impact on her worldview that she subsequently devoted much of her life to the anti-lynching cause (Duster 1970). Sociologist Joyce Ladner's discomfort with the disparity between the teachings of mainstream scholarship and her experiences as a young Black woman in the South led her to write *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* (1972), a groundbreaking study of Black female adolescence. Similarly, the transformed consciousness experienced by Janie, the light-skinned heroine of Zora Neale Hurston's (1937) classic *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God, from obedient granddaughter and wife to a self-defined African-American woman, can be directly traced to her experiences with each of her three husbands. In one scene Janie's second husband, angry because she served him a dinner of scorched rice, underdone fish, and soggy bread, hits her. That incident stimulates Janie to stand "where he left her for unmeasured time" and think. And in her thinking "her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. . . . [S]he had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (p. 63).

Overall, these ties between what one does and what one thinks illustrated by *individual* Black women can also characterize Black women's experiences and ideas as a *group*. Historically, racial segregation in housing, education, and employment fostered group commonalities that encouraged the formation of a group-based, collective standpoint. For example, the heavy concentration of U.S. Black women in domestic work coupled with racial segregation in housing and schools meant that U.S. Black women had common organizational networks that enabled them to share experiences and construct a collective body of wisdom. This collective wisdom on how to survive as U.S. Black women constituted a distinctive Black women's standpoint on gender-specific patterns of racial segregation and its accompanying economic penalties.

The presence of Black women's collective wisdom challenges two prevailing interpretations of the consciousness of oppressed groups. One approach claims that subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression. The second assumes the oppressed are less human than their rulers, and are therefore less capable of interpreting their own experiences (Rollins 1985; Scott 1985). Both approaches see any independent consciousness expressed by African-American women and other oppressed groups as being either not of our own making or inferior to that of dominant groups. More importantly, both explanations suggest that the alleged lack of political activism on the part of oppressed groups stems from our flawed consciousness of our own subordination.

Historically, Black women's group location in intersecting oppressions produced commonalities

among individual women. At the same time, we can see how these experiences predispose Black women to a group consciousness. Such a consciousness is not a consciousness of women nor that it is a group. As historic links among the types of experiences will have and an understanding concerning those standpoints are situated in unjust power relations (Collins 1998a, 2). These challenges may foster a group knowledge of African-American

Diverse Responses to Challenges With

A second distinctive feminist thought emerges from the experiences and perspectives of African-American women. These challenges that result from their historically and racially specific African descent. Black women face common challenges that means that individual women have all had the same experiences. Thus, on the common challenges encountered as a group, diverse themes characterize their knowledge or standpoint.

Despite differences in social class, region, and women encounter us to inferior housing jobs, and public treatment consideration beliefs about Black habits, and sexuality in turn result in recognition for individual group African-American backgrounds reported. Not every individual need experience be

among individual African-American women. At the same time, while common experiences may predispose Black women to develop a distinctive group consciousness, they guarantee neither that such a consciousness will develop among all women nor that it will be articulated as such by the group. As historical conditions change, so do the links among the types of experiences Black women will have and any ensuing group consciousness concerning those experiences. Because group standpoints are situated in, reflect, and help shape unjust power relations, standpoints are not static (Collins 1998a, 201–28). Thus, common challenges may foster similar angles of vision leading to a group knowledge or standpoint among African-American women. Or they may not.

Diverse Responses to Common Challenges Within Black Feminism

A second distinguishing feature of U.S. Black feminist thought emerges from a tension linking experiences and ideas. On the one hand, all African-American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely derogates women of African descent. Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this neither means that individual African-American women have all had the same experiences nor that we agree on the significance of our varying experiences. Thus, on the other hand, despite the common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women's group knowledge or standpoint.

Despite differences of age, sexual orientation, social class, region, and religion, U.S. Black women encounter societal practices that restrict us to inferior housing, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and public treatment and hide this differential consideration behind an array of common beliefs about Black women's intelligence, work habits, and sexuality. These common challenges in turn result in recurring patterns of experiences for individual group members. For example, African-American women from quite diverse backgrounds report similar treatment in stores. Not every individual Black woman consumer need experience being followed in a store as a

potential shoplifter, ignored while others are waited on first, or seated near restaurant kitchens and rest rooms, for African-American women as a collectivity to recognize that differential group treatment is operating.

Since standpoints refer to group knowledge, recurring patterns of differential treatment such as these suggest that certain themes will characterize U.S. Black women's group knowledge or standpoint. For example, one core theme concerns multifaceted legacies of struggle, especially in response to forms of violence that accompany intersecting oppressions (Collins 1998d). Katie Cannon observes, "[T]hroughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed" (1985, 30). Black women's vulnerability to assaults in the workplace, on the street, at home, and in media representations has been one factor fostering this legacy of struggle.

Despite differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, skin color, or ethnicity, the legacy of struggle against the violence that permeates U.S. social structures is a common thread binding African-American women. Anna Julia Cooper, an educated, nineteenth-century Black woman intellectual, describes Black women's vulnerability to sexual violence:

I would beg . . . to add my plea for the *Colored Girls of the South*:—that large, bright, promising fatally beautiful class . . . so full of promise and possibilities, yet so sure of destruction; often without a father to whom they dare apply the loving term, often without a stronger brother to espouse their cause and defend their honor with his life's blood; in the midst of pitfalls and snares, waylaid by the lower classes of white men, with no shelter, no protection. (Cooper 1892, 240)

Yet during this period Cooper and other middle-class U.S. Black women built a powerful club movement and numerous community organizations (Giddings 1984, 1988; Gilkes 1985).

Stating that a legacy of struggle exists does not mean that all U.S. Black women share its benefits or even recognize it. For example, for

African-American girls, age often offers little protection from assaults. Far too many young Black girls inhabit hazardous and hostile environments (Carroll 1997). In 1975 I received an essay titled "My World" from Sandra, a sixth-grade student who was a resident of one of the most dangerous public housing projects in Boston. Sandra wrote, "My world is full of people getting rape. People shooting on another. Kids and grownups fighting over girlfriends. And people without jobs who can't afford to get a education so they can get a job . . . winos on the streets raping and killing little girls." Her words poignantly express a growing Black feminist sensibility that she may be victimized by racism, misogyny, and poverty. They reveal her awareness that she is vulnerable to rape as a form of sexual violence. Despite her feelings about her neighborhood, Sandra not only walked the streets daily but managed safely to deliver three siblings to school. In doing so she participated in a Black women's legacy of struggle. Sandra prevailed, but at a cost. Unlike Sandra, others simply quit.

This legacy of struggle constitutes one of several core themes of a Black women's standpoint. Efforts to reclaim U.S. Black women's intellectual traditions have revealed Black women's long-standing attention to additional core themes first recorded by Maria W. Stewart (Richardson 1987). Stewart's perspective on intersecting oppressions, her call for replacing derogated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images, her belief in Black women's activism as mothers, teachers, and Black community leaders, and her sensitivity to sexual politics are all core themes advanced by a variety of Black feminist intellectuals.

Despite the common challenges confronting African-American women as a group, individual Black women neither have identical experiences nor interpret experiences in a similar fashion. The existence of core themes does not mean that African-American women respond to these themes in the same way. Differences among individual Black women produce different patterns of experiential knowledge that in turn shape individual reactions to the core themes. For example, when faced with controlling images of Black women as being ugly and unfeminine, some women—such as Sojourner Truth—demand, "Ain't I a woman?"

By deconstructing the conceptual apparatus of the dominant group, they challenge notions of Barbie-doll femininity premised on middle-class White women's experiences (duCille 1996, 8–59). In contrast, other women internalize the controlling images and come to believe that they are the stereotypes (Brown-Collins and Sussewell 1986). Still others aim to transgress the boundaries that frame the images themselves. Jaminica, a 14-year-old Black girl, describes her strategies: "Unless you want to get into a big activist battle, you accept the stereotypes given to you and just try and reshape them along the way. So in a way, this gives me a lot of freedom. I can't be looked at any worse in society than I already am—black and female is pretty high on the list of things not to be" (Carroll 1997, 94–95).

Many factors explain these diverse responses. For example, although all African-American women encounter institutionalized racism, social class differences among African-American women influence patterns of racism in housing, education, and employment. Middle-class Blacks are more likely to encounter a pernicious form of racism that has left many angry and disappointed (Cose 1993; Feagin and Sikes 1994). A young manager who graduated with honors from the University of Maryland describes the specific form racism can take for middle-class Blacks. Before she flew to Cleveland to explain a marketing plan for her company, her manager made her go over it three or four times in front of him so that she would not forget *her* marketing plan. Then he explained how to check luggage at an airport and how to reclaim it. "I just sat at lunch listening to this man talking to me like I was a monkey who could remember but couldn't think," she recalled. When she had had enough, "I asked him if he wanted to tie my money up in a handkerchief and put a note on me saying that I was an employee of this company. In case I got lost I would be picked up by Traveler's Aid, and Traveler's Aid would send me back" (Davis and Watson 1985, 86). Most middle-class Black women do not encounter such blatant incidents, but many working-class Blacks do. Historically, working-class Blacks have struggled with forms of institutionalized racism directly organized by White institutions and by forms mediated by some segments of the Black middle class. Thus,

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while it shares much with middle-class Black women, the legacy of struggle by working-class Blacks (Kelley 1994) and by working-class Black women in particular will express a distinctive character (Fordham 1993).

Sexuality signals another important factor that influences African-American women's varying responses to common challenges. Black lesbians have identified heterosexism as a form of oppression and the issues they face living in homophobic communities as shaping their interpretations of everyday events (Shockley 1974; Lorde 1982, 1984; Clarke et al. 1983; Barbara Smith 1983, 1998; Williams 1997). Beverly Smith describes how being a lesbian affected her perceptions of the wedding of one of her closest friends: "God, I wish I had one friend here. Someone who knew me and would understand how I feel. I am masquerading as a nice, straight, middle-class Black 'girl'" (1983, 172). While the majority of those attending the wedding saw only a festive event, Beverly Smith felt that her friend was being sent into a form of bondage. In a similar fashion, varying ethnic and citizenship statuses within the U.S. nation-state as well also shape differences among Black women in the United States. For example, Black Puerto Ricans constitute a group that combines categories of race, nationality, and ethnicity in distinctive ways. Black Puerto Rican women thus must negotiate a distinctive set of experiences that accrue to being racially Black, holding a special form of American citizenship, and being ethnically Latino.

Given how these factors influence diverse response to common challenges, it is important to stress that no homogeneous Black woman's standpoint exists. There is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic. An essentialist understanding of a Black woman's standpoint suppresses differences among Black women in search of an elusive group unity. Instead, it may be more accurate to say that a Black women's collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges. Because it both recognizes and aims to incorporate heterogeneity in crafting Black women's oppositional knowledge, this Black women's standpoint eschews essentialism in favor of

democracy. Since Black feminist thought both arises within and aims to articulate a Black women's group standpoint regarding experiences associated with intersecting oppressions, stressing this group standpoint's heterogeneous composition is significant.

Moreover in thinking through the contours of a Black women's standpoint it is equally important to recognize that U.S. Black women also encounter the same challenges (and correspondingly different expressions) as women of African descent within a Black diasporic context. This context in turn is situated within a transnational, global context. The term *diaspora* describes the experiences of people who, through slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and migration, have been forced to leave their native lands (Funani 1998, 417). For U.S. Black women and other people of African descent, a diasporic framework suggests a dispersal from Africa to societies in the Caribbean, South America, North America, and Europe. Understandings of African-American womanhood thus reflect a distinctive pattern of dispersal associated with forced immigration to the United States and subsequent enslavement (Pala 1995). Since a diasporic framework is not normative, it should not be used to assess the authenticity of people of African descent in reference to an assumed African norm. Rather, Black diasporic frameworks center analyses of Black women within the context of common challenges experienced transnationally.

The version of Black feminism that U.S. Black women have developed certainly must be understood in the context of U.S. nation-state politics. At the same time, U.S. Black feminism as a social justice project shares much with comparable social justice projects advanced not only by other U.S. racial/ethnic groups (see, e.g., Takaki 1993), but by women of African descent across quite diverse societies. In the context of an "intercontinental Black women's consciousness movement" (McLaughlin 1995, 73), women of African descent are dispersed globally, yet the issues we face may be similar. Transnationally, women encounter recurring social issues such as poverty, violence, reproductive concerns, lack of education, sex work, and susceptibility to disease (*Rights of Women* 1998). Placing African-American women's experiences, thought, and

practice in a transnational, Black diasporic context reveals these and other commonalities of women of African descent while specifying what is particular to African-American women.

Black Feminist Practice and Black Feminist Thought

A third distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought concerns the connections between U.S. Black women's experiences as a heterogeneous collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or standpoint. . . .

As members of an oppressed group, U.S. Black women have generated alternative practices and knowledges that have been designed to foster U.S. Black women's group empowerment. 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 U.S. Black women as a collectivity, the struggle for a self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another.

U.S. Black feminism itself illustrates this dialogical relationship. On the one hand, there is U.S. Black feminist practice that emerges in the context of lived experience. When organized and visible, such practice has taken the form of overtly Black feminist social movements dedicated to the empowerment of U.S. Black women. Two especially prominent moments characterize Black feminism's visibility. Providing many of the guiding ideas for today, the first occurred at the turn of the century via the Black women's club movement. The second or modern Black feminist movement was stimulated by the antiracist and women's social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s and continues to the present. However, these periods of overt political activism where African-American women lobbied in our own behalf remain unusual. They appear to be unusual when juxtaposed to more typical patterns of quiescence regarding Black women's advocacy.

Given the history of U.S. racial segregation, Black feminist activism demonstrates distinctive patterns. Because African-Americans have long been relegated to racially segregated environments, U.S. Black feminist practice has often occurred within a context of Black community development efforts and other Black nationalist-inspired projects. Black nationalism emerges in conjunction with racial segregation—U.S. Blacks living in a racially integrated society would most likely see less need for Black nationalism. As a political philosophy, Black nationalism is based on the belief that Black people constitute a people or "nation" with a common history and destiny. Black solidarity, the belief that Blacks have common interests and should support one another, has long permeated Black women's political philosophy. Thus, Black women's path to a "feminist" consciousness often occurs within the context of antiracist social justice projects, many of them influenced by Black nationalist ideologies. In describing how this phenomenon affects Black women in global context, Andree Nicola McLaughlin contends, "[A]mong activist Black women, it is generally recognized that nationalist struggle provides a rich arena for developing a woman's consciousness" (McLaughlin 1995, 80). To look for Black feminism by searching for U.S. Black women who self-identify as "Black feminists" misses the complexity of how Black feminist practice actually operates (Collins 1993a). . . .

As critical social theory, Black feminist thought encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a group. Such theory recognizes that U.S. Black women constitute one group among many that are differently placed within situations of injustice. What makes critical social theory "critical" is its commitment to justice, for one's own group and for other groups.

Within these parameters, knowledge for knowledge's sake is not enough—Black feminist thought must both be tied to Black women's lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion. When such thought is sufficiently grounded in Black feminist practice, it reflects this dialogical relationship. Black feminist thought encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in,

cope with, and resist. It also includes more investigations of the space of any given period. U.S. Black women among themes that thought and those that everyday lives, it is the strength of this dialogical relationship that it is also reasonable that particular experiences are thought. For example, a theme within Black feminism is the institutionalization of women operated as control. During the 19th century, it worked primarily in countering the sexual domestic workers. Clear connections to content and purpose and important issues.

The potential significance of this thought goes far beyond African-American women. Black feminist practice which it seeks to foster can create collective African-American women at women's standpoint *rearticulation*, Black African-American women and our world. By taking the core standpoint and infusing Black feminist thought with consciousness that utilizes taken-for-granted knowledge to consciousness, Black *rearticulates*, and presents in public a consciousness exists. More important, consciousness aims to women and stimulates

Dialogical Practice and Black Women

A fourth distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought concerns

cope with, and resist our differential treatment. It also includes more specialized knowledge that investigates the specific themes and challenges of any given period of time. Conversely, when U.S. Black women cannot see the connections among themes that permeate Black feminist thought and those that influence Black women's everyday lives, it is appropriate to question the strength of this dialogical relationship. Moreover, it is also reasonable to question the validity of that particular expression of Black feminist thought. For example, during slavery, a special theme within Black feminist thought was how the institutionalized rape of enslaved Black women operated as a mechanism of social control. During the period when Black women worked primarily in agriculture and service, countering the sexual harassment of live-in domestic workers gained special importance. Clear connections could be drawn between the content and purpose of Black feminist thought and important issues in Black women's lives.

The potential significance of Black feminist thought goes far beyond demonstrating that African-American women can be theorists. Like Black feminist practice, which it reflects and which it seeks to foster, Black feminist thought can create collective identity among African-American women about the dimensions of a Black women's standpoint. Through the process of *rearticulation*, Black feminist thought can offer African-American women a different view of ourselves and our worlds (Omi and Winant 1994, 99). By taking the core themes of a Black women's standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black feminist thought can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance. . . .

Dialogical Practices and Black Women Intellectuals

A fourth distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought concerns the essential contributions

of African-American women intellectuals. The existence of a Black women's standpoint does not mean that African-American women, academic or otherwise, appreciate its content, see its significance, or recognize its potential as a catalyst for social change. One key task for Black women intellectuals of diverse ages, social classes, educational backgrounds, and occupations consists of asking the right questions and investigating all dimensions of a Black women's standpoint with and for African-American women. Historically, Black women intellectuals stood in a special relationship to the larger community of African-American women, a relationship that framed Black feminist thought's contours as critical social theory. . . .

This special relationship of Black women intellectuals to the community of African-American women parallels the existence of two interrelated levels of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women growing from our everyday thoughts and actions constitutes a first and most fundamental level of knowledge. The ideas that Black women share with one another on an informal, daily basis about topics such as how to style our hair, characteristics of "good" Black men, strategies for dealing with White folks, and skills of how to "get over" provide the foundations for this taken-for-granted knowledge.

Experts or specialists who participate in and emerge from a group produce a second, more specialized type of knowledge. Whether working-class or middle-class, educated or not, famous or everyday, the range of Black women intellectuals discussed in Chapter 1 are examples of these specialists. Their theories that facilitate the expression of a Black women's standpoint form the specialized knowledge of Black feminist thought. The two types of knowledge are interdependent. While Black feminist thought articulates the often taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women as a group, the consciousness of Black women may be transformed by such thought. Many Black women blues singers have long sung about taken-for-granted situations that affect U.S. Black women. Through their music, they not only depict Black women's realities, they aim to shape them.

Because they have had greater opportunities to achieve literacy, middle-class Black women have also had greater access to the resources to engage in Black feminist scholarship. Education need not mean alienation from this dialogical relationship. The actions of educated Black women within the Black women's club movement typify this special relationship between one segment of Black women intellectuals and the wider community of African-American women:

It is important to recognize that black women like Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells were not isolated figures of intellectual genius; they were shaped by and helped to shape a wider movement of Afro-American women. This is not to claim that they were representative of all black women; they and their counterparts formed an educated, intellectual elite, but an elite that tried to develop a cultural and historical perspective that was organic to the wider condition of black womanhood. (Carby 1987, 115)

The work of these women is important because it illustrates a tradition of joining scholarship and activism. Because they often lived in the same neighborhoods as working-class Blacks, turn-of-the-century club women lived in a Black civil society where this dialogical relationship was easier to establish. They saw the problems. They participated in social institutions that encouraged solutions. They fostered the development of a "cultural and historical perspective that was organic to the wider condition of black womanhood." Contemporary Black women intellectuals face similar challenges of fostering dialogues, but do so under greatly changed social conditions. Whereas racial segregation was designed to keep U.S. Blacks oppressed, it fostered a form of racial solidarity that flourished in all-Black neighborhoods. In contrast, now that Blacks live in economically heterogeneous neighborhoods, achieving the same racial solidarity raises new challenges. . . .

Black Feminism as Dynamic and Changing

A fifth distinguishing feature of U.S. Black feminist thought concerns the significance of change. In order for Black feminist thought to

operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic. Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be static; as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them. For example, stressing the importance of Black women's centrality to Black feminist thought does not mean that all African-American women desire, are positioned, or are qualified to exert this type of intellectual leadership. Under current conditions, some Black women thinkers have lost contact with Black feminist practice. Conversely, the changed social conditions under which U.S. Black women now come to womanhood—class-segregated neighborhoods, some integrated, far more not—place Black women of different social classes in entirely new relationships with one another. . . .

The changing social conditions that confront African-American women stimulate the need for new Black feminist analyses of the common differences that characterize U.S. Black womanhood. Some Black women thinkers are already engaged in this process. Take, for example, Barbara Omolade's (1994) insightful analysis of Black women's historical and contemporary participation in mammy work. Most can understand mammy work's historical context, one where Black women were confined to domestic service, with Aunt Jemima created as a controlling image designed to hide Black women's exploitation. Understanding the limitations of domestic service, much of Black women's progress in the labor market has been measured by the move out of domestic service. Currently, few U.S. Black women work in domestic service in private homes. Instead, a good deal of this work in private homes is now done by undocumented immigrant women of color who lack U.S. citizenship; their exploitation resembles that long visited upon African-American women (Chang 1994). But, as Omolade points out, these changes do not mean that U.S. Black women have escaped mammy work. Even though few Aunt Jemimas exist today, and those that do have been cosmetically altered, leading to the impression that mammy work has disappeared, Omolade reminds us that mammy work has assumed new forms. Within each segment of the labor market—the

low-paid jobs at failing homes, day-ca that characterize th taries and clerical tier sector, or the te and administrators sector—U.S. Black share of the emotio after other people, context the task for thought lies in ex tionships and deve commonalities are

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low-paid jobs at fast-food establishments, nursing homes, day-care centers, and dry cleaners that characterize the secondary sector, the secretaries and clerical workers of the primary lower tier sector, or the teachers, social workers, nurses, and administrators of the primary upper tier sector—U.S. Black women still do a remarkable share of the emotional nurturing and cleaning up after other people, often for lower pay. In this context the task for contemporary Black feminist thought lies in explicating these changing relationships and developing analyses of how these commonalities are experienced differently.

The changing conditions of Black women's work overall has important implications for Black women's intellectual work. Historically, the suppression of Black feminist thought has meant that Black women intellectuals have traditionally relied on alternative institutional locations to produce specialized knowledge about a Black women's standpoint. Many Black women scholars, writers, and artists have worked either alone, as was the case with Maria W. Stewart, or within African-American community organizations, the case for Black women in the club movement and in Black churches. The grudging incorporation of work on Black women into curricular offerings of historically White colleges and universities, coupled with the creation of a critical mass of African-American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor within these institutional locations, means that Black women intellectuals can now find employment within academia. Black women's history and Black feminist literary criticism constitute two focal points of this renaissance in Black women's intellectual work (Carby 1987). Moreover, U.S. Black women's access to the media remains unprecedented, as talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey's long-running television show and forays into film production suggest.

The visibility provided U.S. Black women and our ideas via these new institutional locations has been immense. However, one danger facing African-American women intellectuals working in these new locations concerns the potential isolation of individual thinkers from Black women's collective experiences—lack of access to other U.S. Black women and to Black women's communities. Another is the pressure

to separate thought from action—particularly political activism—that typically accompanies training in standard academic disciplines or participating in allegedly neutral spheres like the “free” press. Yet another involves the inability of some Black women “superstars” to critique the terms of their own participation in these new relations. Blinded by their self-proclaimed Black feminist diva aspirations, they feel that they owe no one, especially other Black women. Instead, they become trapped within their own impoverished Black feminist universes. Despite these dangers, these new institutional locations provide a multitude of opportunities for enhancing Black feminist thought's visibility. In this new context, the challenge lies in remaining dynamic, all the while keeping in mind that a moving target is more difficult to hit.

U.S. Black Feminism and Other Social Justice Projects

A final distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought concerns its relationship to other projects for social justice. A broad range of African-American women intellectuals have advanced the view that Black women's struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice. In an 1893 speech to women, Anna Julia Cooper cogently expressed this worldview:

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. . . . The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that . . . not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won—not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. (Loewenberg and Bogin 1976, 330–31)

Like Cooper, many African-American women intellectuals embrace this perspective regardless

of particular political solutions we propose, our educational backgrounds, our fields of study, or our historical periods. Whether we advocate working through autonomous Black women's organizations, becoming part of women's organizations, running for political office, or supporting Black community institutions, African-American women intellectuals repeatedly identify political actions such as these as a *means* for human empowerment rather than ends in and of themselves. Thus

one important guiding principle of Black feminism is a recurring humanist vision (Steady 1981, 1987). . . .

Perhaps the most succinct version of the humanist vision in U.S. Black feminist thought is offered by Fannie Lou Hamer, the daughter of sharecroppers and a Mississippi civil rights activist. While sitting on her porch, Ms. Hamer observed, "Ain' no such thing as I can hate anybody and hope to see God's face" (Jordan 1981, xi).

Discussion Questions

1. Given the first generation critical theorists' reservations regarding the scientific pursuit of knowledge, how might a sociologist conduct valid research? If the scientific method is rejected, what criteria can be used to assess a researcher's findings? More generally, if not science, what might serve as a basis for accepting anyone's claim to speak the "truth"?

2. Select 5–10 advertisements for everyday products from TV or other sources. What product is being advertised? What types of promises or images are connected to the product? Do you think the product delivers on the claims that are being made? How might you connect the images associated with these products to a broader view or understanding of what it means to live in a modern, industrial society?

3. While the earlier critical theorists deride mass culture and technology for corrupting our ability to reason, what role, if any, might education play in promoting a "totally administered society"? As a form of technology, do you consider the Internet a potential source of liberation or of domination? Why or why not?

4. According to the first generation of critical theorists, how, in modern industrial societies, does rationality lead to the oppression or alienation of the individual? Do you agree that the United States is a totalitarian society in which individuality is liquidated? Why or why not? How does

Habermas critique the earlier critical theorists' view of rationality?

5. Many musical groups express in their songs a discontent with existing social conditions and a mistrust of those in positions of authority. What effect, if any, does such music have on the broader society? How might such protest songs paradoxically reinforce the very social order they aim to criticize?

6. For Habermas, the strength and vibrancy of democracy rest in the public sphere—that is, spaces where ideas and reasoned arguments can be freely debated. What role do you think the mass media play in shaping the public sphere? How might the corporate consolidation of media outlets and growing use of the Internet affect public debate?

7. According to Collins (1990/2000: 228), "A matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives." Give concrete examples of moments or situations in which you have found yourself a "victim" and concrete examples of moments or situations in which you found yourself an "oppressor." Explain how your examples reflect the matrix of domination at the level of personal biography, the community, and the systemic level of social institutions.

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George C. Homans



Peter M. Blau



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