Intersections of Race, Spirituality, and Domestic Violence: The Counternarratives of African American Women Survivors

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May 19, 2016
The Problem

- Estimated 1.3 million women are victims of domestic violence (DV) each year.*
  - 1 in 3 women experience DV within their lifetime.*

- African American (AA) woman experience DV at higher rates than White women (43.7% compared to 34.7%).
  - Role of Spirituality
  - Historical significance of oppression

*National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Why is this study important?

• Acknowledges voices of AA women.

• Helps us understand systemic barriers that AA women face in domestic violence relationship.

• Brings clarity on how spirituality serves as a barrier for women (Black Church, pastors, church leaders).

• Expands knowledge on the intersection of race, gender, domestic violence, and spirituality.
Research Questions

• How do AA women narrate their domestic violence experiences?

• How do AA women perceive the role of spirituality in their experience of domestic violence?
Theoretical Framework

CRT:
Permanence of Racism, Intersectionality & Counter-Storytelling

RCT:
Strategies of Disconnection & Relational Images

Critical Race/Relational Theory
Research Design

• Narrative Inquiry
  – Powerful tool for researcher to gather and interpret the stories individuals use to describe their experiences (Hatch, 2012).
  – Centers on the telling of stories
  – Provides perspectives and give voices for marginalized populations.
  – Complements CRT and RCT by explaining inequality and how individuals have experienced it.
  – Source of empowerment for population historically silenced.

• Data Collection
  – Interviews
  – Field Notes
Participant Criteria

– AA women who resided in DV homeless shelter

– Had experienced DV for two years or longer

– At least 25 years of age

– Affiliated with or attended a Black Church
Data Collection

• A flyer was created and placed in shelters and agencies.

• Participants were recruited with assistance of DV shelter staff and DV agency employees.

• Interested participants contacted the researcher or DV shelter staff/agency employee.

• Researcher arranged time to meet with participants to review study details and risks involved.
Data Collection cont’d

• Interviews were held in shelter playroom or library.

• Participants received a $15 Walmart gift card and list of DV resources.

• Upon completion, researcher debriefed with each participant.
Data Analysis

- Develop codebook
- Utilize transcripts and fieldnotes consisted with CRT & RCT
- Continue analysis

A priori

- Sought commonalities and differences among narratives
- Create memo of initial codes

Open

- Assisted with story
- Discover categories
- Selected concepts/themes
- Verified themes

Thematic
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Major Findings for RQ1

• Intersectionality-related discrimination
  – Difficulty accessing resources
  – Challenging the “welfare queen” stereotype

• Strategies of Disconnection for Survival
  – Maladaptive coping
  – Withdrawal from the Black Church

• Relational Images of Abuse
  – Witnessed domestic violence in childhood
  – Experiences with racism and injustice
  – Encounters with the church
Major Findings for RQ2

• **Spirituality as a barrier**
  – Silence of pastors and leaders
  – Church leaders’ persuasion to stay in relationship
  – Religious influence in childhood

• **Spirituality as a source of strength**
  – Prayer and faith
  – Personal relationship with Christ
Research Question One

• How do AA women narrate their DV experiences?

• “With tears in my eyes… I already felt beneath myself going down to social services to ask for help…and she said… you people always want help… you people never pay your bills… do you?”. (Vanessa)

• “When I went to the hospital, I felt no one wanted to help me… I overhead the nurse say… my situation wasn’t that serious and I’m used to abuse”. (Sami)
Research Question One

• How do AA women narrate their DV experiences?

• “I work at a predominately White Institution…graduate of an Ivy League school…I owned my own house and when I mentioned I’m homeless…I was asked how is that possible”. (Sara)

• “When I told the social worker my DV story that lead to no transportation or housing…I was denied Medicaid and told not to take the system for granted”. (Bobbi)
Research Question One

• *How do AA women narrate their DV experiences?*

  • “I medicated myself the street pharmacist way to drown out what was going on.” (Rachel)

  • “It was so stressful…I felt like I was walking on eggshells…and cocaine helped take the pain away.” (Sami)
Research Question One

• How do AA women narrate their DV experiences?

• “It hurts, because it gave him more ammunition to feel like he can rule over me. No one ever said [to him] ‘Why don’t you try and talk about this, because you have a good wife and you should treat her better?’ Instead, I was asked, what did I do? So I left.” (Sami)
Research Question Two

• *How do AA women perceive the role of spirituality in their DV experiences?*

  • “They (Pastors) don’t teach it [escape from domestic violence] at all; I hear ‘work on your marriage; God hates divorce,’ those clichés. I hear that, but I don’t hear how to get out of it. I don’t hear how to walk through those things for healing, and if you have children . . . how to deal with it.” (April)
Research Question Two

• **How do AA women perceive the role of spirituality in their DV experiences?**

  • “A pastor told me, ‘Don’t give up on him, don’t burn that bridge, God can do this.’ I felt that if I abandoned this marriage, it was almost like abandoning God himself. Somehow I’ve lost my faith . . . because it’s so entwined and it’s hard to separate what you’ve been told, your belief . . . the abuse, etc.” (Sami)

  • “Wives submit to your husbands and God hates divorce”. (April)
Research Question Two

• *How do AA women perceive the role of spirituality in their DV experiences?*

  • “Pastors say to just focus on the Lord and you do what God has called you to do and your husband will come around….what God put together, let no man put asunder”. (Tina)

  • “Moses wrote the law on marriage and to stay in the marriage”. (Vanessa)
Research Question Two

• *How do AA women perceive the role of spirituality in their DV experiences?*

  • “Calling in the unsaved for help was forbidden, so it blocked me from being able to get out and seek help”. (Carla)

  • “I was taught to save yourself until you get married…so I married him without knowing him and to please my parents and God…I stayed longer that what I should’ve…so my parents could see I was living up to the religious beliefs and things they told me”. (April)
Research Question Two

- **How do AA women perceive the role of spirituality in their DV experiences?**

  - “Just faith, just believing that God can and will change situations and circumstances.” (Carla)

  - “My relationship with Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit, and trusting him that he’s going to take of me and my children, gave me strength and hope.” (April)

  - The fact the someone suffered so much more than I could ever suffer in order for me to exist has given me so much strength.” (Sarah)
Key Findings

• All participants experienced racism and discrimination when they sought assistance for DV.

• All participants experienced spiritual abuse by the Black Church, pastors, and leaders.

• Intersection of race, gender, SES create multiple layers of oppression.
Implications for Practitioners

– Understand that racial discrimination adds another barrier to resources for African American women survivors.

– Recognize that the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status creates multiple oppressions for them.

– Consider the historical cultural context of negative stereotypes and how they hinder African American women survivors’ process of leaving.

– Be mindful of the use of spirituality and religious culture.
Implications for Faith Community/Pastors

- Creating domestic violence ministries
- Supply domestic violence pamphlets in the bathroom, foyer, Purple Sunday
- Collaborate with local shelters, agencies
- Hold programs on healthy relationships
- Link survivors to safety
- Refer survivors to counseling
- Be mindful of how biblical scriptures are quoted
- Avoid bringing perpetrator into counseling with survivor
- Avoid minimizing women; uplifting men
Implications for Shelters

• Culture-specific trainings for staff to prevent revictimization

• Offer more resources (e.g., outside counseling)

• Collaborate with police and health departments
Limitations

- Specific measures taken to reduce limitations
Future Research

• Examine perception of domestic violence among pastors, ministers, and leaders in the Church.

• Explore the readiness of shelter staff workers to work with DV survivors.

• Examine DV experiences of various ethnicities, sexual orientations, religions, and socioeconomic levels.

• Study police departments and other law enforcement agencies, especially DV training programs.
“I wish there was more help for DV; I think in churches we sometimes say one thing and do another...we always say we’re going to love everybody...but if we don’t make the decision that they agree with...then you’re somehow different...you’re sinning differently...I feel like the Black Church can do more, but doesn’t know what to do.” (Sarah)