

# Centering Ourselves

## African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse

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ONE

## Goals for Emancipatory Communication Research on Black Women

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As this volume demonstrates, communication scholars have begun to add our voices to the chorus of academicians in other disciplines who study the unique perspectives and experiences of African American women.<sup>1</sup> We hope to provide distinctive contributions to research on Black women by viewing them from the field of communication. We believe that Black women's social identities preclude<sup>2</sup> us to enact communicative lives that, in many ways, differ from those of other members of U.S. society. This book illuminates some of these differences by providing a pioneer, full-length treatment of the topic.

From a new angle of vision, we view Black women not as marginal, but as the center of our research. To correct the persistent exclusion and misrepresentation in communication studies of a group of persons who embody a significant segment of Western society, we

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<sup>1</sup>I use African American and Black interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup>I use first-person plural pronouns because I am a Black woman.

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need to specify the goals that guide our efforts. Therefore, in this chapter, I offer an agenda for research on African American women's communication. First, I list and discuss seven goals that can help us to center our research on Black women's communicative lives. Then, I describe challenges to meeting these goals. I conclude by exploring potential outcomes of our endeavors.

## RESEARCH GOALS

A research project encompasses several stages. A scholar usually needs to specify a theoretical viewpoint, develop research question(s), choose method(s), locate participants or other sources of study (e.g., texts), gather data, and analyze findings. A researcher also must write and/or talk about the project, often drawing conclusions, making recommendations for future study, and discussing practical and theoretical implications. As a communication researcher engages in the radical act of placing Black women at the center, she<sup>3</sup> must be especially conscientious of her choices and actions. She may have to challenge traditional, mainstream knowledge, ideas, and approaches. She also may need to rely on and even create alternatives. Consequently, in the following discussion about goals, I frequently address issues related to various aspects of the research process. I intend this discussion to be neither exhaustive nor definitive. I offer the following goals to provide preliminary direction. Often, I cite sources that delve more deeply into issues that I raise. Although I present the goals in a linear fashion, they do not exist independently of one another. Rather, they often overlap.

### GOAL 1: TO EMANCIPATE BLACK WOMEN

Although several interdependent goals guide our mission, our primary purpose is to emancipate African American women. We want our work to improve Black women's lives. This goal is the touchstone and the focal point of our research. It motivates our efforts and it grounds the remaining goals. It also informs every aspect of the research process. Our research strives to illuminate and to fight effects of gendered racism. We hope to release Black women from stereotypical, pejorative notions about us, to liberate Black women

from imposed meanings that members of society have set on us and our ways of communicating, and to free us from the chains of negative labels such as *marginalized* or *stigmatized*.

Thus, our research focuses on Black women, for Black women. We aim to describe, celebrate, and enhance African American women's communicative lives. Moreover, in the tradition of African American feminist and womanist (see Collins, 1991; and Introduction, this volume) thought, we hope that our work also will help to promote social change for all disenfranchised persons.

### GOAL 2: TO CHALLENGE ESSENTIALIST NOTIONS OF BLACK WOMANHOOD

Studies about African American women and communication frequently clump us under general categories, as if we all naturally are alike. As Houston (1996) observed, "one of the most persistent and egregious tendencies in both speech and language studies of African Americans is defining our speech and speakers monolithically" (p. 1; also see Smitherman-Donaldson, 1988). For instance, researchers may presume that the communication behaviors of one group of Black women represent those of all Black women. Or, they may classify Black women with Black men, with White women, or with women of color. This bias neglects to consider the unique position of being both Black and woman. Thus, it renders Black women invisible rather than as distinct persons who experience and resist multiple jeopardy or interlocking oppressions based on their race, their gender, and intersections of these and other aspects of their identity. Moreover, it neglects to recognize differences among Black women.

Therefore, our research should refute essentialist ideas about Black women and communication. The next goal provides guidance for how we might design, conduct, and report research that counteracts views of Black women as indistinguishable from one another.

### GOAL 3: TO STUDY A VARIETY OF BLACK WOMEN

We should conduct research that honors and represents Black women's diversity. Contrary to how the media and studies often characterize us, we embody a variety of aspects of identity (e.g., age,

<sup>3</sup>To refer to researchers, I use the generic "she" or "he."

sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, educational background, religion, physical ability, and ethnicity). We also enact a wide variety of roles, within numerous public and private contexts. In addition, we engage in myriad types of interactions, with numerous types of individuals. Furthermore, we employ various communication behaviors to survive or to thrive in many different situations. Thus, a central goal of our research is to reveal the complexity and heterogeneity of Black women's communicative lives, even as we seek commonalities of experience.

To reach this goal, we might study contemporary Black women (and girls) across the multiplicity of contexts and roles that we grace. We could study everyday interactions and Black women's attitudes toward those interactions. Although we should research exceptional African American women (e.g., individuals who have made inroads in professions that traditionally have not welcomed us), we also should consider Black women in roles that we traditionally have enacted. For example, the rare studies of Black women and organizational communication usually focus on Black women managers (Allen, 1995). We might extend this body of work by researching Black women in numerous roles (e.g., secretary, janitor, receptionist, data processor, and cafeteria worker) within an organization.

We also should study African American women from the past. We should recover and accurately represent the expanse and influences of Black women's communication throughout the history of the United States. This connects with the goal of emancipation, because learning our history can help us to understand our strengths and to refute negative representations of Black women.

Researchers may need to revise what counts as valid sources of data, as feminist scholars Cirkseña and Cuklanz (1992) explained:

It is necessary to redefine "legitimate" texts, "significant" events, and "important" ideas. Because women have been excluded either formally (legally) or informally (ideologically) from areas such as politics, public speaking, military participation, and even higher education and scholarship, scholars interested in studying women have had to search elsewhere for evidence of women's experiences of life. (p. 39)

Scholars may need to study "less public forms of communication such as the diaries, letters, and gossip of ordinary women, because they constitute the record of women's lives throughout most of recorded history" (Cirkseña & Cuklanz, 1992, p. 39). In addition to studying ordinary women from the past, we might investigate renowned Black

women leaders and pioneers. Researchers can analyze narratives, biographies, or autobiographies of Black women. For example, James (1993) provided a compelling discussion about studying autobiographies of revolutionary Black women activists, and Ether-Lewis (1993) analyzed oral narratives of Black professional women. Other potential objects of study include film, art, and artifacts and objects such as quilts.

Similar to the research projects reported in this book, we should study from within various areas of the discipline, including rhetoric, interpersonal, organizational communication, mass media, health communication, and intercultural studies. Moreover, we should observe various modes of communication (e.g., face-to-face, written, small group, public address, and computer-mediated).

To help demonstrate our heterogeneity and complexity, we should contextualize our findings. For instance, we should not report findings as if they could have occurred anywhere, at any time, to any Black woman. Basically, we should acknowledge and assess the situatedness of our research and those whom we have studied. We should recognize and acknowledge sociohistorical factors (e.g., the Black women's club movement or the Civil Rights Movement) as well as local contextual variables (e.g., an organization's history of [not] hiring Black women). We should link findings and the context in which they occurred. In essence, we should offer "sufficiently rich, nuanced, and context-sensitive analyses" (Houston, 1996, p. 2).

#### **GOAL 4: TO STUDY DOMINATION AND OPPRESSION**

Our research needs to meet an important principle of African American feminist and womanist thought: to study domination and oppression. This represents a necessary step toward consciousness raising and emancipation. To emancipate, one first must acknowledge the interlocking oppressions of gendered racism. These oppressions often are compounded by other variables such as class, ability, age, and sexual orientation. Together, they comprise a "matrix of domination" that affects Black women's lives (Collins, 1991). However, our work should conscientiously reject the notion of a Black woman as "victim," and "stigmatized other," even as we illuminate oppression (see Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983).

We must identify or develop theoretical frameworks that authorize us to look for domination and oppression. For instance, scholars might refer to African Womanism (Hudson-Weems, 1993), womanist theology (see Thomas, 1996), or critical feminism (see

Hawkesworth, 1989). I endorse feminist standpoint theory (see Allen, 1996). This perspective uses women's lives as a foundation for constructing knowledge (Longino, 1993). It asks women to speak from and about their views of reality. Moreover, feminist standpoint studies women's everyday lives to expose domination and oppression, and to criticize claims based on the lives of men from dominant cultures. Notably, feminist standpoint theory moves beyond early feminist work that concentrated on White women's lives by encouraging us to listen to voices of many women. It also stresses the importance of the multiplicity of contexts that women encounter (Bazzanell, 1995).

In addition, researchers who take this approach assess women's historically shared, group experiences, and they emphasize social conditions that construct oppressed groups (Allen, 2000; Collins, 1991; Harding, 1991; Hennessey, 1993). This corresponds with African American feminist and womanist thought because its roots lie in lived experience rather than abstractions. Thus, feminist standpoint situates women's lived, concrete experiences in local contexts, while also connecting them to broader social and institutional issues. Feminist standpoint theory also directs researchers to highlight acts of resistance, an important element of the next goal.

#### **GOAL 5: TO DISCOVER BLACK WOMEN'S SKILLS AND STRATEGIES**

To facilitate emancipation, researchers should identify Black women's communicative skills and strategies, including acts of resistance. We should discover how Black women presently and previously used communication not only to cope, but also to flourish. In addition, we might illuminate positive effects of Black women's communication (on Black women as well as those with whom they interact). As we accentuate the positive, we will continue to free ourselves from effects of gendered racism because we will have concrete examples to emulate. Furthermore, information about skills and strategies will help us to generate practical wisdom, as I discuss next.

#### **GOAL 6: TO GENERATE PRACTICAL WISDOM**

Consistent with African American feminist epistemology (see Collins, 1991), our research should generate practical wisdom that can help

to emancipate Black women in our various public and private roles. We should analyze and interpret data for insight, information, and resources. We can use our findings to develop positive models that Black women can emulate and embellish. These models can address pressing social issues and promote social change. They also can help Black women to successfully negotiate everyday interactions.

#### **GOAL 7: TO USE PROCEDURES AND METHODS THAT HONOR OUR PRIMARY PURPOSE**

During the various stages of designing and conducting a study, a researcher should make choices and behave in ways that honor the purposes of emancipatory research. She may have to assume nontraditional attitudes, or employ innovative, creative, and even radical strategies that contradict academic training that socializes us to be authoritative, detached, and disinterested (see Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992). For instance, a researcher should resist the urge toward thinking that she knows the answers to research questions. This tendency might be especially pronounced for Black women researchers who identify with those whom they are studying.

In addition, a researcher should take a receptive, cooperation-oriented attitude toward research participants (see Orbe, 1998, who referred to participants as "co-researchers"). She might invite participants to help conceptualize her research project. Where appropriate and feasible, she should ask participants to review and critique her analyses, to see if her interpretations reflect their reality.

She also could use principles of co-inquiry that Denton (1990) used in a study on bonding and supportive relationships among professional Black women. Denton based this approach on a research philosophy (Argyris, 1970) that studies participants and their needs, and allows researchers and participants to engage in dialogue and exchange with one another. The following conditions framed Denton's method of co-inquiry:

- (1) Mutuality of relationship between researcher and participant; . . .
- (2) Serious attention to participants' phenomenal experience and modes of construing themselves and their world; (3) Exploration of experiences in stressful situations with a problem-solving orientation;
- (4) Responsiveness to participants' needs for self-understanding and for skills in coping and self-enhancement; (5) a safe environment and enabling structures for sharing data that can be used by participants; . . . (6) A commitment to sharing with participants

both individual and generalized results in ways that can support their learning and development. (p. 450)

This model seems conducive to achieving our goal of emancipation.

We should recognize that the research process itself can be emancipatory, for researchers as well as participants. Moreover, we should self-consciously reflect on our roles within the research process (see Ohivas, 1997). Our efforts should take a proactive approach that encourages Black women to find their voice. For instance, as we interact with participants, we can help them to empower themselves by altering negative self-conceptions and reinforcing positive ones. As they talk about the oppressions that have faced and resisted, participants may experience "consciousness raising" (D. Smith, 1987). This sharing process might encourage women to engage in acts of resistance (Collins, 1991).

As researchers design projects, they must make decisions about sampling—whom or what to study. Traditional social science research methods call for scientific approaches that permit the researcher to make claims about an entire group based on observations about a percentage of that group (see Babbie, 1992). This type of sampling often will not be feasible because a researcher needs to know how many members comprise the primary group that she intends to study. Such figures may not be available about Black women. Furthermore, this type of sampling may not be appropriate for certain projects. Rather than randomly choosing participants, a researcher might base sampling on her judgment and/or the purpose of the study. Babbie (1992) explained: "it may be appropriate for you to select your sample on the basis of your own knowledge of the population, its elements, and the nature of your research aims" (p. 230). A researcher also might use self-selected, or convenience, samples based on soliciting volunteers to participate in the project (see M. J. Smith, 1988).

For research that requires participants, we should be prepared to work harder and differently than usual to identify research participants and to enlist their cooperation. Reporting a comparative study of Black and White women, Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung (1988) observed, "researchers who are committed to incorporating subjects of different races and classes in their qualitative research designs must be prepared to allow more time and money for subject recruitment and data collection" (p. 450). These authors report using labor-intensive recruitment strategies, such as "personal presentations to women's organizations' meetings, snowball techniques of calling individuals to recommend others . . . and identifying special newsletters to receive advertisements" (p. 454).

To place African American women at the center of research, we must move beyond work that looks at race and gender as independent variables. Rather, we need to address race, gender, and other aspects of identity as socially constructed, analytic categories. Therefore, qualitative methods such as narratives, oral histories, interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and ethnographies seem particularly appropriate. However, some research questions will elicit quantitative methods, such as experiments and surveys, which also might be fruitful. Moreover, researchers might use multiple methods or multiple sources of evidence.

Basically, we should employ methods that show respect for the persons whom we study. We should design, conduct, and report research that adheres to the idea that Black women's lives and values often are different than other persons' lives, not negatively deviant or inferior. In addition, as we collect "data," we should be mindful of time constraints that many Black women face, even as we provide time and a safe space for participants to express themselves freely. Cannon et al. (1988) described psychological and structural factors that constrained Black women's cooperative participation in their comparative study. Some of the Black women were skeptical about the purpose of the project. Many of them had less free time than White participants. Many of the Black women asked for additional assurance or guarantees about anonymity.

Therefore, when we report our research, we must be careful to ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity. This may be a challenge in situations where Black women are easy to identify, due to their limited numbers. We also must make informed, sensitive decisions about what to divulge to whom. We need to avoid sharing findings that do not provide positive insight or information.

Where possible, we should conduct face-to-face interviews with individual women or women in groups. This procedure might facilitate emancipatory interactions between co-researchers. It allows researchers to revise questions, to clarify, to probe, and to respond to nonverbal cues. However, to allow for time and/or distance constraints, we also could use telephone interviews or computer-mediated communication (e.g., e-mail or videoconferencing). We also might collaborate with other researchers.

Longitudinal projects could follow a cohort of Black women to study developmental issues. Comparative studies could reveal similarities and differences among and between groups of Black women. Studies that compare teens and elders might not only provide insight, but also create a forum for emancipation as Black women from different generations interact with one another.

These seven goals frame an ambitious agenda that will help us view Black women from a new angle of vision. Although the previous discussion implies or explicitly cites challenges that might confront us, here I highlight a few that seem particularly noteworthy.

## CHALLENGES

The discipline of communication seems slowly to be accepting the idea that socially constructed aspects of identity (e.g., gender and race) influence ways that human beings interact. However, scholars can anticipate numerous challenges from various sources as they conduct research on Black women. For instance, Black men, other women of color, or White women who conduct work on race or gender may view our work as divisive, as counterproductive to scholarship on traditionally disenfranchised persons. Consider forming alliances with some of these scholars. Initiate collaborative research and teaching projects that will allow you and them to concentrate on your specific areas of interest, and to address areas of overlap.

An enduring challenge stems from others' sense of the centrality and importance of our work. Colleagues who evaluate us for tenure and promotion, reviewers of journal articles, students, and convention planners (to name a few specific sources) may view our work and our intellectual capabilities as marginal. Mainstream communication journals seem to publish articles about Black women or other traditionally disenfranchised persons only in special issues. Consequently, communication scholars often submit their work to publications in other disciplines (e.g., Black studies, ethnic studies, or women's studies). Unfortunately, personnel committee members may penalize persons whose work has not been published in mainstream journals.

To positively affect how others evaluate your scholarship, inform your colleagues early and often that your work may not always be published in mainstream journals, and explain why. During hiring and performance review discussions, clarify your research agenda, and specify outlets that typically publish your type of scholarship. As you approach the tenure review process, provide the personnel committee with names of well-reputed scholars whose work aligns with yours, and request that the committee invite them to assess your case. To establish yourself as a communication scholar, explicitly address communication issues (theory and/or practice) in your publications and presentations. That way, reviewers should clearly see the relevance of your work to the discipline of

communication, even if it is not published or presented in mainstream communication venues. Finally, ask established scholars who study African American women and communication for additional advice about how to successfully navigate the tenure track.

As we confront these and other challenges, each scholar will have to weigh her options and proceed thoughtfully. However, we can develop effective methods for supporting one another, as I explain in the following discussion on potential outcomes of our research efforts.

## OUTCOMES

We seek to emancipate Black women, and we aim our work toward all Black women. To achieve this primary goal, we hope to build as well as critique theories about Black women's communication. We can draw from the relatively few studies about Black women and communication, but we also will have to rely on other disciplines to establish foundations for our projects. Fortunately, rich resources exist in history, sociology, education, literary criticism, religious studies, psychology, women's studies, African American studies, ethnic studies, organizational behavior, anthropology, and other areas of study. We should mine these for insight and ideas for developing and conducting emancipatory communication research.

Thus, our research can contribute to the burgeoning body of literature on the intellectual tradition of African American women. It can respond to the critical need to ascertain common themes that thread through African American women's lives and histories. Also, we can enhance feminist/women's studies as well as African American/ethnic studies. And, we can advance the general study of human communication. Furthermore, our findings can inform pedagogy within those and other disciplines. For instance, Omolade (1994) outlined a Black feminist pedagogy that a researcher might use to assess African American women teachers' interactions with students.

To disseminate our work, we should seek diverse audiences, and accordingly tailor our reports and presentations. For instance, we can target traditional, mainstream outlets (e.g., publications or conferences) within and outside of the discipline of communication. We also can submit our work to special issues of journals. In addition, we can create opportunities to publish and present our work. For example, we could commission a special edition of a journal, or develop conference panels. This volume evolved from the

editors' vision, and steps toward its completion included a session at a summer conference of the Black caucus of the Speech Communication Association, as well as a National Communication Association panel.

We also can accomplish our goals by broadening our markets to include nonacademic audiences. We could offer insight and guidance for educators (at all levels), service providers, managers, administrators, and health care professionals. I would love to see communication scholars respond to current issues related to or about Black women (e.g., Betty Currie, President Clinton's secretary). We should speak out in forums such as government hearings or television news and talk shows (e.g., *Nightline*, *Larry King Live*).

Finally, we could develop an active, dynamic community of scholars who routinely collaborate on projects (including interdisciplinary studies), synthesize findings from unrelated projects, provide constructive criticism for each other's work, celebrate successes, and develop strategies for achieving our goals. We should mentor graduate students interested in our cause. These types of groups can provide a haven for support and consciousness-raising among academics. We also might forge alliances with community activists as well as professionals engaged in work that can inform our endeavors and vice versa (e.g., diversity trainers, human resources personnel, social workers, and public school teachers).

In conclusion, as we enter the new millennium, we must form more accurate and holistic depictions of Black women's communication, for the purpose of emancipating Black women. Although the task seems formidable, I believe that we can succeed, especially if we ponder the backbreaking and soul-depleting experiences of African American women who preceded us.

While writing a draft of this chapter, I felt frustrated because I could not figure out how to express a thought. Unexpectedly, a picture flashed in my mind of my mother, Thelma L. Allen, leaving home on cold, icy nights to work the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift at the post office (in a windowless building under the watchful eye of a ruthless supervisor). I recalled also several times when she resisted authority, often in defense of her children, whom she raised by herself. I thought also of Ella Josephine Baker, a Black woman whose autobiography I recently read (Grant, 1998). Miss Baker was a quiet, dignified, yet determined activist who played a crucial but unheralded role in the Civil Rights Movement. Her story fascinated, moved, and inspired me.

I paused a few moments to reflect on these two Black women's lives. Although tears blurred my sight, in my mind I saw

clearly what to write. I wiped my eyes and picked up my pen. From my renewed angle of vision, I continued to record my ideas. I hope that my words inspire and guide any researcher whose emancipatory research centers on African American women's communication.

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## TWO

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### Theorizing African American Women's Discourse: The Public and Private Spheres of Experience

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*Our children did not know us  
They were bought and sold.  
Our children did not know us  
For our stories were erased or twisted  
When the truth could not be hidden.  
A people with no history, no stories to tell,  
No rituals to pass along  
Will die unknown.  
But we have never forgotten . . .  
—Farmer (1993a, p. 221)*

Since the enslavement of Africans in North America, African American women have been determined to maintain a culture of survival. Although history attempted to obfuscate our stories, and thus our experiences, the supreme perseverance and heroic resistance of Black women became thoroughly intertwined as themes of survival in the fabric of daily existence. That discourse served to