The Psychology of Black Women: Studying Women’s Lives in Context

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This article provides a critical analysis of a distinctive psychology of Black women, discusses the relevant epistemologies and conceptual framework that can inform such a perspective, and suggests a set of guiding principles for advancing theory and research on Black women within a historically and contextually relevant framework. A discussion of who is best suited to study the lives of Black women is also provided. The article concludes with a charge for a psychology of Black women that will examine previously ignored issues, formulate and test of new (and old) hypotheses, and develop alternative theoretical paradigms that are sensitive to the realities and contextualized lives of this population.

Keywords: Black women; Black feminist theory; feminist psychology; Black psychology

The life experiences of Black women have never fit neatly within the traditional boundaries created within the field of psychology since its emergence as an independent intellectual and academic discipline, usually dated around 1874. In the social and behavioral sciences in general, racism, sexism, and classism traditionally rendered individuals who were not members of the dominant group (i.e., White male) invisible and thus nonexistent for the purposes of understanding and describing human behavior (Brown, 1995). Truly understanding the attitudes, motivators, behaviors, and mental health outcomes of diverse populations continues to pose a formidable challenge for the field. Black women bring uniqueness to psychology stemming from a historical legacy that continues to relegate them to membership in multiple oppressed groups. No other group has been victimized by hegemonic domination and located within the hierarchical power structure as Black women...
have been in American society. Black female scholar and poet Maya Angelou (1989) noted, “Black women whose ancestors were brought to the United States beginning in 1619 have lived through conditions of cruelties so horrible, so bizarre, the women had to reinvent themselves” (p. 8). She further added, “They [Black women] knew the burden of feminine sensibilities suffocated by masculine responsibilities” (p. 8). As a result of Black women’s place in American society, this population has a unique perspective on womanhood, Blackness, and even personhood unknown to any other oppressed groups, including Black men, White women, and other non-Black women.

Despite Black women’s multiple identities, mainstream psychology overlooked critical aspects of Black womanhood in both its theoretical and empirical analyses. Oftentimes, discourse took place in a mutually exclusive fashion such that there was a submergence of gender when ethnicity or culture alone was examined; or, on the other hand, ethnicity was frequently ignored when gender was accepted as a factor (Reid, 2000). The experiences of Black women, however, are clearly intersectional and cannot be adequately explained with an isolated emphasis on either race or gender. For example, whereas racism is a prominent factor in the life experiences of Black women, it is mediated through the interconnections of gender, class, age, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. Similarly, whereas sexism is also a significant aspect of Black women’s realities, it too is mediated through various other types of oppression related to race, class, and sexual stereotyping. Certain dimensions of behavior of Black women in some contexts closely resemble that of Black men, whereas other dimensions of behavior of Black women in different contexts are more consistent with that of White women. And still in other instances, Black women’s behavior stands apart from both White women and Black men. King (1988) described this phenomenon as a “both/or” orientation—that is, the art of being simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing apart from the group. In essence, femaleness and Blackness are articulated differently across various contexts of intersecting marginalizations and interlocking identities such that neither gender nor race has independent centrality in the lives of Black women at all times.

If psychology is indeed the science of behavior (and not just the behavior of some), the neglect of study of certain segments of the population, such as Black women, results in missing bricks of foundational knowledge that yield a psychological knowledge base that is faulty, inadequate, and incomplete. Thus, psychology must recognize Black women’s interlocking identities and more aggressively move toward the development of a “diversity-mindfulness” perspective in its education, training, research, and practice activities. This diversity mindfulness involves, according to Russo and Vaz (2001), the process of perceiving and processing a multiplicity of differences among
individuals, their social contexts, and their cultures. Because Black women, similar to other women of color, live at the interstices or borderlands of various cultures (Sparks & Parker, 2000), it is essential that psychologists offer more complex conceptualizations of gender and new theories of difference that incorporate a fundamental understanding of minority women’s historical, sociocultural, familial, and developmental heterogeneity, as well as their dislocation, fragmentation, diaspora, and journeying (Comas-Diaz, 1991; Greene & Sanchez-Hucles, 1997; Russo & Vaz, 2001; Wyche, 1993). Such work could result in a psychology that recognizes different ways of seeing reality from a positive standpoint and help to forge a greater understanding of Black women’s strengths, resilience, and struggles.

The void in studying the lives of Black women within their own uniqueness calls for a repositioning of scholarship in the field of psychology in ways that make it more contextually responsive to the lived experiences of this population. Initially, this involves widespread recognition of the discipline’s ethnocentrism and its failure to consider the sociocultural validity and generalizability of its research. Sue (1999) refers to this problem as psychology’s selective enforcement of scientific principles with great emphasis on internal validity (i.e., controlling for confounding or extraneous factors) and relatively little attention to the problem of external validity or lack of generalizability to different people and settings. Furthermore, Sue argued that almost exclusive focus on internal validity limits the value that mainstream psychology places on ethnic minority research because the latter inherently has greater challenges to overcome (e.g., difficulties in recruiting ethnic minority study participants, lack of ample validated measures to use, the unknown validity of mainstream theories) to demonstrate internal validity. In a similar vein, Willie Williams (2003), Association of Black Psychologists’ national president, stressed that “the lens of psychology has been dirted and distorted by ethnocentric views that failed to recognize historical contributions of Black people” (p. 1). To continue to ignore the limits to generalizability; the nuances and contexts that are, in fact, psychologically relevant for Black women; and the multiple dimensions of diversity that shape the social and psychological realities of this group will only continue Black women’s marginalization in the field.

This article attempts to provide a critical analysis of a distinctive psychology of Black women. I argue that such a perspective is essential and that it represents the most promising approach for gaining a rich understanding of the lives of Black girls and women within a historical and contextually relevant perspective. Almost a decade ago, Thomas and Miles (1995) discussed the study (or lack thereof) of Black women within the field of psychology in general and within the perspectives offered by feminist psychology and
Black psychology in particular. In this analysis, the authors fell short of articulating a definitive domain of a psychology of Black women, the relevant epistemologies and conceptual frameworks that inform such a perspective, and the guiding principles of such an approach. This article will address these and other issues in an effort to raise a professional consciousness of the psychology of Black women as a unique and viable specialty within the discipline.

THE DOMAIN OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BLACK WOMEN

There has been increased dialogue within the past two decades in feminist psychology about conducting research focusing on Black and other women of color (e.g., Green & Sanchez-Hucles, 1997; Landrine, 1995; Reid & Kelly, 1994; Russo & Vaz, 2001; Thomas & Miles, 1995; Wyche, 1993; Wyche & Crosby, 1996). With this dialogue, we witnessed an increase in work using Black girls and women as study participants. However, much of this work has been applied, focusing on special issues or problems rather than in more traditional areas of psychology (Graham, 1992; Reid & Kelly, 1994; Saris & Johnston-Robledo, 2000). Slightly more than a decade ago, Reid (1993) concluded, based on an examination of abstracts accessed on the PsyLit Database between 1984 and 1991, that poor women, Black women, and other women of color were essentially “shut up” and “shut out” of mainstream psychological theory and research. In a follow-up analysis of PsyLit abstracts found in the 1990s, Saris and Johnston-Robledo (2000) concluded that despite the continued call for an inclusive feminist psychology (e.g., Bing & Reid, 1996; Greene & Sanchez-Hucles, 1997), poor women and women of color remained marginalized in psychological discourse. It is essential that new knowledge acquired in the psychological study of Black women be integrated into the larger body of theory and research within the discipline.

DEFINING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BLACK WOMEN

Obviously, precise definitions are essential to thinking in science. However, there is no clear definition of the psychology of Black women. Several years ago, I conducted a qualitative interview of eight prominent Black female psychologists who had long been studying various aspects of the lives of Black girls and women (Thomas, 1997). When these women were asked to
define, from their perspective, the psychology of Black women, no single definition or description emerged. Some of the interviewees described the psychology of Black women by focusing on very specific issues such as the study of the mental health outcomes and (self and other) images of Black women. Others gave more broad descriptions related to advocacy and the study of social concerns impacting the lives of Black women. From all the Black female psychologists interviewed, however, common themes emerged. These were themes centering on the necessity of attention to context, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identities (ethnic and gender), uniqueness, and resiliency in the psychological study of Black women. Taking into consideration the Black female psychologists’ comments, as well as my own thinking in this area, I am offering the following working definition:

The psychology of Black women is the systematic study of the motivations, cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors of Black women taking into consideration the contextual and interactive effects of history, culture, race, class, gender, and forms of oppression.

The psychology of Black women involves centering the study of Black women—that is, situating theory and research authentically in relation to Black women’s own context and background experiences. The psychology of Black women places high value on the study of Black women because they are important and inherently worthy of scientific attention in their own right and not simply in comparison to Black men or White women. Defining the psychology of Black women as “systematic study” acknowledges that the area should encompass the application of rigorous, yet contextually relevant, paradigms and scientific methods.

The psychology of Black women respects multiple ways of knowing, including those stemming from qualitative, quantitative, and multiplistic or triangulated perspectives. Qualitative methods can offer unique contributions to the emergence of new and unexpected understandings in the psychology of Black women, to cultural and contextual sensitivity in research, and to strengths-based approaches that reverse negative stereotypes about this population. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, are uniquely suited for examinations of large samples, hypothesis testing, and for replication. For some inquiry into the psychology of Black women, neither method, when used alone, will suffice. In these cases, multiplistic inquiry or the combining of qualitative and quantitative methods can build on the strengths of each methodology and offset the inherent weaknesses of each. Using more comprehensive methodological approaches in the study of Black women will
result not only in new questions but also in new ways of approaching old questions.

Psychologists frequently remove the individual from the sociohistorical context, attributing excessive weight to individual factors in explaining social behavior and often interpreting social problems and the resultant behaviors that originate in the structure of the socioeconomic system in intrapsychic terms (Prilletskey, 1997). One of the major goals of the Association of Black Psychologists, since its formation in 1968, is to develop and use an approach to psychology that is consistent with, and not devoid of, the experiences of Black people. Consistent with this overarching goal, the psychology of Black women involves placing the behavior of Black women within an appropriate social and cultural context. Culture is the way of life of a group of people, the configuration of all of the more or less stereotyped patterns of learned behavior that are handed down from one generation to the next through the means of language and imitation (Barnouw, 1973). Culture includes the shared values, norms, traditions, customs, arts, history, folklore, and institutions of a group of people.

More recently, mainstream psychologists have come to recognize that culture is not something that is simply outside individuals, where it influences their behavior, but rather, it is an “intersubjective reality through which worlds are known, created, and experienced” (Miller, 1997, p. 103). Furthermore, given the increasing diversity within American society, the study of culture in the field of psychology cannot continue to be ignored in mainstream psychology and seen as simply a domain of cross-cultural (Bentacourt & Lopez, 1993), ethnic minority, or feminist psychology. Context, a broader term, encompasses the combination of factors (including culture) that might influence individuals’ behaviors, such as geographical location, timing, political and social climate, and economic conditions (Thomas, 2004). Triandis’s (1980) conceptualization of subjective culture (as opposed to physical culture such as roads, buildings, or tools) can be quite instructive when incorporated into the psychological study of Black women. Elements critical to the study of subjective culture include factors such as family roles, communication patterns, affective styles, and values regarding personal control, individualism, collectivism, spirituality, and religiosity. These and other such factors play a significant role in how Black women define and interpret events across space and time.

Consideration of historical factors is also an important issue to attend to when attempting to understand the psychology of Black women. For example, some scholars believe that the savage sexual exploitatons of Black women during slavery still have far-reaching consequences for their psychological adjustment and sexual health (Wyatt, 1997). Historically, as a result of
the mixing of the races and the apparent benefits afforded to mulatto and light-skinned African Americans, there are still psychological and cultural issues around internalized racism and “colorism” within the Black community. Because physical appearance has always been a concern affecting the lives of women to a greater extent than men, the continuing issues of skin color, hair texture, and other facial features (e.g., nose, lips) play a major role in Black girls and women’s conceptualization of their beauty and self-worth. These are just two examples of how sociohistorical factors may influence the existing psychological experiences of African American women.

RELEVANT THEORIES
AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Sue (1999) indicated that he often encountered colleagues who criticize ethnic minority research as being descriptive in nature, simple in design, and lacking grounding in sophisticated and mature psychological theory. These reasons were often used as justification by journal editors for not accepting manuscripts focusing on ethnic minority populations or rejecting proposals for funding. It is my contention that there is sufficient theory that the psychology of Black women can call on to inform its theory building and research activities. However, still more relevant theoretical paradigms toward a distinctive psychology of Black women must be developed that reflect social and cultural realities and that simultaneously integrate Black women’s belief systems, values, and attitudes. Furthermore, such paradigms must recognize that Black women are not only partly independent agents but, as Dressler (1992) noted regarding Black population in general, are social products stemming from and linked to a descent group that extends back in time and, yet still, are part of the current social fabric.

Traditional psychological theories derived in a predominately Euro-American context are clearly limited in their applicability to Black female populations. Our best understanding of the psychology of Black women calls for theoretical perspectives, knowledge, and methodologies from disciplines outside psychology, in addition to selected areas within traditional psychology. There are few mainstream theories, primarily social, ecological, and cross-cultural, in the field of psychology that can offer perspectives that can inform theory building in the psychology of Black women. One example is Kurt Lewin’s (1946) field theory. His most fundamental construct, field, is considered within the life space of the individual. In this framework, life space consists of the person and the psychological environment as it specifi-
Lewin’s famous formulation of \( B = P(E) \) [Behavior = Person × Environment] has particular relevance in informing an understanding of the psychology of Black women. The challenge, however, is for scholars to adequately assess the multiplicity of factors influencing Black women’s life space in a manner that is contextual and meaningful to these women’s lived experiences. Lewin’s field theory postulates that behavior must be analyzed in terms of the field at the time the behavior occurs, suggesting that the approach is systematic rather than historical in nature, with past events thought, at best, to have only an indirect influence on behavior via their effect on the existing psychological field. In contrast to Lewin’s notion, the psychology of Black women embraces the inclusion of past (as well as present) events more directly in formulations for understanding behavior.

Other epistemologies that can contribute greatly to a deeper understanding of Black women include Black feminist theory, feminist psychology, and Black psychology. Each of these perspectives has a unique contribution to make in shedding light on how we ought to think about the influencers of attitudes, motivators, and behaviors of Black women. A blending of the most relevant elements from the Black feminist theory, feminist psychology, and Black psychology provides a useful grounding for developing a more comprehensive theoretical foundation for the psychology of Black women.

**BLACK FEMINIST THEORY**

A distinctive Afrocentric epistemology makes the case for an Afrocentric consciousness as a result of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid, and other systems of racial domination that resulted in a shared history and experience of oppression of people of African descent. In other words, Black people, irrespective of gender, share a common experience of being Black in a society that denigrates people of African descent. In a similar vein, feminist scholars argue that women in American society share a history of patriarchal oppression through the political economy of the material conditions that transcend divisions among women. Black feminist theory, as an epistemology, is interdisciplinary in nature and encompasses formulating and rearticulating a distinctive, self-defined Black feminist consciousness that embraces both an Afrocentric worldview and a feminist sensibility to better understand the unique Black women’s standpoint (e.g., Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000; Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982; King, 1988). Standpoint epistemologies assert that what we know and how we know it depend on who we are—that is, the knower’s historical locus and his or her position in the social hierarchy (Marecek, 1989). Black feminist theory places Black women at the center of analyses, engaging the macrostructural and microstructural issues that affect
Black women’s lives and taking elements of Black women’s cultures and traditions and infusing them with new meanings created by the multiplicity of race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and other factors forming the basis for oppression.

The central principle of Black feminist theorizing is the simultaneity of oppression, or the understanding of race, gender, and class as simultaneous (not distinctly independent) forces (Brewer, 1994; Hull et al., 1982). Six major propositions of this principle exist in Black feminist thought: (a) recognizing the importance of critiquing dichotomous oppositional thinking by employing both/and rather than either/or categorizations; (b) allowing for the simultaneity of oppression and struggle; (c) eschewing additive analyses (race + class + gender); (d) promoting an understanding of the embeddedness and relationality of race, class, and gender and the multiplicative nature of these relationships (race × class × gender); (e) reconstructing the lived experiences, historical positioning, cultural perceptions, and social construction of Black women who are enmeshed in and whose ideas emerge out of that experience; and (f) developing a feminism rooted in class, culture, gender, and race in interaction as its organizing principle (Brewer, 1994).

Black feminist social scientists have deconstructed existing frameworks in sociology, history, and a range of other disciplines. However, few psychologists have integrated this perspective within their work. Notable exceptions include work by Black feminist psychologists Pamela Reid, Karen Wyche, Beverly Greene, and Hope Landrine. A Black feminist rearticulation of psychology can promote an alternative scholarship that is more contextually valid for Black women and one that considers the degree to which empirical relationships put forth are influenced by the intersection of race, gender, class, cultural norms and stereotypes, historical factors, economic arrangements, structural conditions, and a variety of intrapsychic variables.

**FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY**

In 1968, Naomi Weisstein declared that psychology had nothing to say about what women are really like, what they need, and what they want because psychology did not know. Subsequently, many female (mostly White) psychologists placed much emphasis on correcting the “womanless psychology” (Crawford & Maracek, 1989; Sherif, 1979) that had defined the male subject as generic. These psychologists fiercely criticized psychology’s knowledge base as androcentric or male centered, and they began to rethink psychological constructs, theories, and methods to produce new research with women as the focus of study. In 1969, feminist psychology emerged as a formally organized, distinct community of scholars with the formation of the
Association of Women in Psychology, whose members also urged the creation of Division 35 (now referred to as the Society for the Psychology of Women) of the American Psychological Association. Feminist psychology emphasized a deconstruction of psychology through analyzing the implicit assumptions about women embedded in its theories and research practices and reconstructing psychology to create a more comprehensive and adequate psychology of women (e.g., Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Unger & Crawford, 1996). Additionally, feminist psychology searched for new knowledge that promoted sociopolitical change and personal change congruent with feminist goals (Mednick, 1991).

In the early days of feminist psychology, scholars worked diligently to overturn the use of the male norm, yet considerably little attention was placed on dealing with issues of race and class. In essence, Black women’s concerns were marginalized, keeping them as part of the whole but truly outside of the main body of the early work in feminist psychology. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, some scholars argued that feminist psychologist was guilty of adopting a White, privileged female norm (e.g., Brown, 1990; Hyde, 1991; Yoder & Kahn, 1993). As one White feminist psychologist, Martha Mednick (1991), stated, “It seems that we are aware that we are studying only majority-group middle class women, but we do not know how to get out of the box” (p. 616). More recent formulations in feminist psychology have recognized the diversity of women’s experiences, which result from a variety of factors, including race and ethnicity, culture, language, socioeconomic status, age, and sexual orientation. The psychology of Black women is distinct from feminist psychology through its emphasis on centering the experiences of Black women in its analyses. However, there are conceptual and methodological insights from feminist psychology that have been and can be used to increase the theoretical and empirical knowledge base related to studying the lives of Black women in context.

BLACK PSYCHOLOGY

During the late 1960s, with the rising wave of Black nationalism across the country, many Black psychologists charged the discipline of psychology with routinely using a White, middle-class norm to make judgments about the behaviors of Black people and with failing to direct its scientific and professional energies toward the identification and solution of prominent social issues (e.g., poverty, racism, discrimination). As a result, there was a call for the creation of a Black psychology, which took a revisionist look at cognitive and emotional relationships, personality, social behavior, child development,
and other aspects of human behavior from a Black or Afrocentric perspective. In the text, *Black Psychology*, Guthrie (1991) stated,

> Traditional academic psychology has strongly defended and literally brainwashed its students as to what a psychologist is, what psychology is all about, its subject matter, and its direction. All of this has occurred through years of less than successful attempts at solving the riddles of human behavior. As a result, traditional academic psychology has evolved into a sterile, pedestrian science which leans heavily upon statistical analyses to the point where calculating, cold, unemotional robots who can perform mathematical manipulations have become authorities. This is especially tragic when one stops to realize that the black life cycle, from conception to death, is strongly influenced by an interplay of environmental and physical factors which create a need for a psychology of African Americans. (p. 34)

At the core of Black psychology are issues related to promoting a constructive understanding of Black people through positive (instead of deficit) approaches, the development of an approach to psychology that is consistent with the experience of Black people, defining mental health in consonance with newly established psychological concepts regarding Black people, addressing issues of racism and discrimination, and assisting in the development of policies for local, state, and national decision makers that impact the Black community (Guthrie, 1991; White, 1991; see the Association of Black Psychologists Web site at http://www.abpsi.org). Similarly, with feminist psychology, Black psychology has fallen short of advancing an adequate understanding of Black women’s unique experiences of social inequalities, strains, and multiple jeopardies of low status and their potential influence on the psychology of this population (Thomas & Miles, 1995). Rarely was there serious consideration of the importance of transcending race-only analysis in understanding the complexities of Black people, their families, their communities, and the daily challenges they faced. However, Black psychology, with its emphasis on collectivity and unity, does provide a solid foundation for countering the negative images and formulations about Black people in general, a foundation that can offer insights to building a more contextual knowledge base in the study of Black women.

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BLACK WOMEN

Clearly, a psychology of Black women embraces multiple purposes and perspectives. As a companion to the definition put forth earlier on the psy-
Guiding Principles of the Psychology of Black Women

Knowledge Development

Advocacy

Dissemination

Diversity and Equity

Collaboration

Connectedness

Contextuality

Informing Theory

Informing Research

Informing Policy

Figure 1: Cap NP

At the most basic level, work in the psychology of Black women must focus on knowledge development that generates a more profound understanding of Black women. Here, knowledge development activities should focus on efforts to develop, revise, expand, and test theories, propositions, and hypotheses about social processes and mechanisms as they occur within the psychology of Black women. I am also recommending a set of guiding principles that would undergird scholarship in this area. The seven principles put forth are not independent, but overlap in many ways. In some circumstances, certain principles will take priority over others in certain areas of theory and research in the psychology of Black women. The seven guiding principles—knowledge development, contextuality, connectedness, collaboration, diversity and equity, dissemination, and advocacy—are depicted in Figure 1.

KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

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the multiple contexts of the lives of Black women. Advancement of knowledge in the psychology of Black women need not only be in applied areas. To date, most of the knowledge base on Black women is applied in nature, with limited basic research being conducted on this population. Also, knowledge development in the psychology of Black women need not be simply comparative in nature. Comparative research, in many respects, has been detrimental to a complete and accurate understanding of Black women because it often simplistically frames questions and discusses outcomes in terms of “apparent” differences between Blacks and Whites, Black men and women, or Black and non-Black women. When comparative research in the psychology of Black women is undertaken, it must begin with the assumption that apparent differences may well be an artifact of social inequalities and power differentials among the groups compared.

CONTEXTUALITY

This guiding principle addresses the necessity of seeking to understand Black women within a contextual framework. Essentially, this involves a recognition that behaviors and interpersonal relationships do not exist in a vacuum but instead are embedded in the larger structures of the community, society, economics, and politics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Work on the psychology of Black women can only advance to the extent that scholars incorporate systems, contextual, and nonlinear conceptualizations in examining and explaining individuals’ attitudes, motivations, values, and behaviors. In other words, psychological work on Black women must be culturally attached rather than devoid of any meaningful influences outside of the individual psyche.

CONNECTEDNESS

This guiding principle stresses the necessity of linking and connecting theory and research with the ever-changing reality of Black women. The psychology of Black women must promote an approach to studying the lives of Black women that connects this population’s motivations, attitudes, and behaviors to individual characteristics as well as microfeatures and macrofeatures of the environment. Furthermore, past work should be connected with current work such that future work evolves and becomes self-adjusting. The mark of a science is its self-adjusting nature through theory (re)development, empirical research, replication, and refinement.
COLLABORATION AND CROSS-FERTILIZATION

As discussed earlier, some perspectives both within and outside psychology can meaningfully inform the psychology of Black women. Therefore, another guiding principle is the importance of transcending disciplinary boundaries in studying the lives of Black women in context. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior, attention to the dynamics of individuals’ attitudes, motivations, and behaviors can no longer be thought of as primarily the exclusive province of psychology. Truly understanding these dynamics, particularly in relation to Black women, must be informed by the insights and scholarship of multiple disciplines such as psychiatry, anthropology, sociology, economics, Black and African studies, women’s studies, and health. Only through multidisciplinary perspectives can the intellectual scope of the psychology of Black women be strengthened.

DIVERSITY AND EQUITY

Traditional Western psychological theory and practice serve to reproduce and sustain the social status quo, characterized by economic inequality and other forms of oppression (i.e., sexism, racism), rather than to transform social relations. In contrast, the promotion of a more inclusive psychology, through the advancement of diversity and equity, is another guiding principle for work in the study of Black women. Diversity has become a concept that encompasses the complexities of dealing with effects of multiple and interacting social categories (Russo & Vaz, 2001). Initially, efforts to incorporate diversity into psychological perspectives focused solely on the categories of gender, race, and class. More current perspectives integrate a host of other social dimensions, including ethnicity, sexual orientation, power, and privilege (Comas-Diaz, 1997; Greene, 1997). The psychology of Black women should foster conceptual and methodological orientations that justly and respectfully view Black women in all their diversity, valuing the enormous strength of this population rather than considering them as a monolithic group with problems that need solving.

DISSEMINATION

An important guiding principle for advancing the psychology of Black women relates to the promotion of ongoing efforts to disseminate scholarly inquiry from the study of Black women in mainstream and specialized psychology journals and texts, as well as through other forums (e.g., presenta-
tions at professional meetings). Although significant progress has been made in this area during the past two decades, it is still the case that too little work is being published in the psychological literature on the lives of Black women. When disseminating work in this area, scholars should make clear how their conceptualizations, methodologies, and conclusions were contextually grounded in appropriate ways that attended to the duality and multiplicity of the lives of Black women.

ADVOCACY

By including advocacy as a guiding principle, this calls for constant and sustained support and attention to issues directly affecting Black women. In many respects, scholarship in the psychology of Black women promotes the interdependence of knowledge and activism. Advocacy should serve as a catalyst to advance work to improve the quality of life for Black women. Scholarship in the psychology of Black women should represent social justice and critical enterprises whereby scholars advocate change and are ever willing to speak out against theories, research paradigms, and social policies that have oppressive effects on the lives of Black women and men. In an article that appeared in a 1984 issue of the *American Psychologist*, Black female psychologist Carolyn Payton eloquently stated that “psychology as a science void of social implications or responsibilities will not advance our profession but will rather lead to its demise” (p. 394), and she urged her fellow psychologists to “place our talents, our expertise, and our energy in the service of our conscience as well as our discipline” (p. 395). This captures the spirit of the advocacy guiding principle.

These seven guiding principles—knowledge development, contextuality, connectedness, collaboration, diversity and equity, dissemination, and advocacy—either individually or collectively, push us toward what I see as the overarching goals of the psychology of Black women: informing theory, informing research, and informing practice in ways that center the experiences of Black women (see Figure 1).

WHO WILL STUDY BLACK WOMEN?

If the scientific method was truly objective and value free, the issue of who should or will advance scholarship in the psychology of Black women would be irrelevant. However, because it is clear that the scientific method is not value free (e.g., Campbell, 1983), this issue represents a critical concern
(Thomas & Miles, 1995). Undoubtedly, it is the case that Black female psychologists are those individuals most likely to express interest and pursue scholarship in the psychology of Black women. In fact, because of Black female psychologists’ direct experiences with interlocking identities and multiple oppressions, they are often in a better position to study Black female populations. Black women, in contrast to other groups of psychologists, have histories and experiences that may enable them, as researchers, to develop theory, conduct research, and draw conclusions that are more contextually valid for the life experiences of this population. The shared racial and gender background of the Black female researcher and Black female study participants also increases the researcher’s ability to engage the participant in authentic ways and to better understand the sociocultural, individual, and other nuance factors that influence the behaviors observed. In other words, Black women can bring to traditional psychology, feminist psychology, and Black Psychology another consciousness, one specific to their own social, cultural, and historical experiences.

The pipeline of individuals (most likely Black women) interested in the psychological study of Black women is a major factor influencing the future production of scholarship in the area. Although the numbers of Black women pursuing degrees in psychology have steadily increased during the last few decades, their proportion of degree recipients is still quite low. For example, data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics during the past three decades indicate that the proportion of Black women earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology nearly doubled from 4.5% in 1976 to 1977 to 8.9% in 2000 to 2001. The proportion of Black women earning master’s degrees in psychology nearly tripled from 3.6% in 1976 to 1977 to 9.5% in 2000-2001. Black female doctorate degree recipients rose from a low of 1.9% in 1976 to 1977 to 4% in 2000 to 2001 (see Table 1 for greater details).

Given the small numbers of Black women in the psychology pipeline and the fact that many of these women may not pursue research careers, there will likely not be enough Black female theorists and researchers to address the many research questions that must be raised in the study of Black women. Thus, it will become necessary for scholars of other genders and ethnicities to focus attention on the psychology of Black women. Non-Black female psychologists must increase their understanding of the experiences and points of view of Black women in all their diversity and they must value pluralistic worldviews, ways of knowing, organizing, functioning, and standpoints. To the extent that this is accomplished and non-Black female psychologists have a genuine interest and commitment to the development of gender-relevant, culture-relevant, and ethnic-relevant theoretical perspectives and methodologies, they too can contribute to a deeper understanding of the lives of Black
women. Furthermore, non–Black female researchers can benefit immensely from collaboration with Black female researchers who have expertise in working with Black female populations.

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, psychology has found itself in the paradoxical position of talking a lot about diversity and knowing less what to do about it (Priletensky, 1997). This is made difficult by a long-standing tradition of psychological theorizing and research that are products of an American society with deeply racialized and gender-stratified roots. In studying the lives of Black women in context, there remains an urgent need for psychologists to

TABLE 1
Psychology Degrees Earned by Black (non-Hispanic) Women, Selected Years Between 1977 and 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Bachelor’s n</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Master’s n</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Doctorate n</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976 to 1977</td>
<td>2,124</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>53</td>
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NOTE: Doctorate degrees include Ph.D. and Ed.D. and comparable degrees at the doctoral level.
learn how to center in another’s experience and to judge it by its own standards. Almost 10 years ago, Landrine (1995) noted that a major challenge for psychologists is to develop an explicit, theoretical framework through which sociocultural variables and differences will be rendered coherent and that relationships between culture and behavior will not be romanticized nor considered deviant. This challenge remains unmet as we move further into the new millennium, and it is even more relevant today given our increasingly diverse society.

Black and other ethnic minority psychologists have been studying diversity concerns for decades. Only in recent years, however, has the diversity issue taken more center stage within the context of mainstream psychological work. Within the last few years in particular, a movement toward a global-community psychology gained momentum with its emphasis on multicultural, multidisciplinary, multisectoral, and multinational foundations (Marsella, 1998; Mays, Rubin, Sabourin, & Walker, 1996). The psychology of Black women raises another major call for an examination of previously ignored issues, formulation and testing of new (and old) hypotheses, and development of alternative theoretical paradigms that are relevant to the realities and contextualized lives of Black women. The integration of the knowledge base of Black feminist theory, feminist psychology, Black psychology, and selected paradigms from social, cross-cultural, and ecological psychology could be instrumental in moving this agenda forward.

REFERENCES


Hull, G. T., Bell-Scott-Pope, P., & Smith, B. (1982). *All the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press.


